

Conflict, Democratization, *and the Kurds in* the Middle East

Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria

Edited by
David Romano
and Mehmet Gurses



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Introduction: The Kurds as Barrier or Key to Democratization

David Romano and Mehmet Gurses

This edited volume contains a collection of essays from many of the most well-known, accomplished scholars working on the Kurdish issue and questions of democratization. It is divided into four sections. Section I focuses on the Kurds and barriers to democratization and democratic deficits in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Section II, “Democracy in Divided Societies,” turns to existing academic literature, theories, and examples of multiethnic societies and democratic transitions for guidance. Section III, “The Kurds and Democratization,” attempts to place more emphasis on Kurdish demands and the possibilities for democratization in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The final, fourth section of the volume draws readers’ attention to the transborder nature of the Kurdish issue and how events in South, North, West, and East Kurdistan all impact each other.

Contributors to the first section of the volume, “Authoritarianism and the Kurds,” were asked to focus on the ways in which the Kurdish issue in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, or Syria was securitized and served to hinder democratization. All four contributors to this section were thus asked to focus a bit more on the negative side of a complex, multifaceted issue. Chapter 1, by Michael Gunter, therefore concentrates on the “deep state” in Turkey, and how until quite recently an unelected shadow state of elites in that country prevented any democratic reforms that might recognize the Kurds, return to them their rights, and truly incorporate them into the political system. Chapter 2, by Ozum Yesiltas, focuses on how Arab nationalists there viewed any compromise with the Kurds as the beginning of a slippery slope toward Kurdish secession, leading to a long history of authoritarian repression and

even genocidal policies from Baghdad. Chapter 3, by Gareth Stansfield, examines the difficult history of Kurds in Iran, struggling against the construction of a Persian “dominant nation” and seeing their attempts to carve out a separate space of their own crushed. Chapter 4 of this section, by Eva Savelsberg, explains how Kurds in Syria remained largely peripheral to the main political dynamic there. Although the ongoing civil war in Syria offered Syrian Kurds the opportunity to seize some measure of freedom from central authorities, Savelsberg offers a pessimistic outlook regarding the extent to which the dominant Kurdish political parties there currently offer a democratic alternative.

The contributors to Section II, “Democracy in Divided Societies,” were each asked to do something different. David Mason (chapter 5) applies his considerable theoretical knowledge of civil wars, insurgencies, and post-conflict democratization to the Kurdish issue. As an experienced scholar whose work has until now not focused on the Kurds, he looks at the issue from a more general, comparative perspective, drawing our attention to the forest rather than the trees. In the same vein, John Booth (chapter 6) utilizes his expertise on insurgencies and democratization in Latin America to build a comparison to the Kurdish issue in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Despite important differences between Latin America and the Middle East, civil conflict in many Latin American states involved disenfranchised minorities. These minorities, depending on their size and cohesion, can play and have played a constructive role in democratization and the eventual settlement of these conflicts; Booth provides examples of how. Chapter 7 of this section, by Nicole F. Watts, focuses on the Kurdistan Autonomous Region of Iraq. The first to attain significant levels of self-determination, the Iraqi Kurds offer a fascinating example of what used to be an imaginary scenario. Watts investigates the extent to which autonomous Kurdish rule is translating into democracy for the people of South Kurdistan, given that autonomy, self-rule, and even independent statehood are by no means synonymous with “freedom” or “democratization.”

The contributors to Section III of the volume, “The Kurds and Democratization,” were asked to take a more optimistic view. Specifically, they were tasked with examining Kurdish demands in their respective states, how these might be accommodated, and how these demands might fit into or even promote democratization in general. Gunes Murat Tezcur (chapter 8) thus examines the ebb and flow of armed conflict between Kurdish insurgents and the Turkish state, offering insights into the ways such conflict might end in democratic accommodation. David Romano (chapter 9) focuses on the Iraqi Kurds’ key role in drawing up the country’s 2005 Constitution and argues that Kurdish demands for extensive decentralization and power

sharing offer the best way to keep Iraq together and democratic. Nader Entessar (chapter 10) examines the complex place of the Kurds and other minorities in the Iranian political system, questioning the extent to which the Kurds and others might find common cause with Iranian reformists and successfully democratize Iran in the face of opposition from hardliners in the country. Robert Lowe (chapter 11) looks at Kurdish gains in the midst of the civil war raging in Syria. Although he too draws our attention to the questionable democratic credentials of the leading Syrian Kurdish party, he argues that events in Syria at least offer the first serious possibility of democratic change there—which he concludes cannot occur without accommodating Kurdish identity and demands in some way.

The final, fourth part of this volume, “Regional Issues,” looks at the transnational nature of the Kurdish issue. No state’s “Kurdish issue” exists in a vacuum. The borders dividing Kurdistan were always witness to unauthorized movements of people, goods, and ideas. In today’s increasingly globalized world, that movement seems only to have increased. So just as the Arab Spring revolution in Tunisia led to strong reverberations across the Arab world, Kurdish gains in one part of Kurdistan (South/Iraqi Kurdistan in particular) can greatly impact Kurdish communities in neighboring states. When appropriate, the contributors to this section examine this “contagion effect.” In the case of chapter 12 by Mehmet Gurses, the focus revolves around the role Iraqi Kurds play in a resolution of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. Gurses begins by offering robust evidence for the positive role that the Iraqi Kurdish autonomous region can play in helping to democratize neighboring states with significant Kurdish minorities. He does so by providing statistical evidence about what kinds of balances of power lead to enduring conflict resolution, and then showing how the existence of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq affects the balance of power in Turkey. Ofra Bengio (chapter 13) then concludes the volume’s collection of essays with a look at how recent changes in the Middle East created a truly revolutionary situation for the Kurds. Although the full extent of the changes remains indeterminate, Bengio analyzes the direction events seem to be taking the Kurds and the states in which they reside.

The Background and Context of the Kurdish Issue in the Middle East

In Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, central governments historically pursued mono-nationalist ideologies and hence a state policy of repressing Kurdish identity. The official, constructed national identities of all four states were based on Turkish, Persian, or Arab national ethnicity. This in itself is not

particularly surprising, since similar approaches underpinned even supposedly “civic” states in the West. Most states, in fact, developed a *staatsvolk*—a dominant national group that largely controlled the state and determined the state’s identity as a reflection of itself. How this dominant nation related to others varied across time and space, however.¹ The French Republic based itself on a national identity derived from the French language and culture, or, broadly speaking, the identity of the Franks (originally from the Loire and Parisian regions). The United States and Australia were based on white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant ethnicities, while Canada eventually built itself on two official founding nations—English and French. Those hailing from other ethnic groups could eventually gain citizenship in these states (hence the designation of “civic nationalism”), but they would remain outsiders to the extent that they failed to fully adopt the language, culture, religion, and other context-dependent characteristics of the official, more recognized nation. State policy would also support, glorify, and commemorate the official-dominant ethnic group’s symbols, history, culture, and language while ignoring others.

France, the archetype of the “civic” nationalism, also became the most well-known example of state-led, aggressive assimilation policies. At the time of the French Revolution in 1789, less than half of all “Frenchmen” spoke French.² Today, virtually all of France’s population speaks French and identifies as French, although significant outsiders remain among the Basques, Bretons, and Corsicans. While the official rhetoric of France and most other modern states today insists that anyone born within the confines of the state’s borders belongs to the nation, some clearly belong more than others.³

The immediate post-World War I period saw the emergence of the modern Turkish and Persian states out of the ashes of the Ottoman and Safavid empires. It also witnessed the colonial creation of the completely new states of Iraq and Syria. The new state elites of all four countries attempted, to varying degrees, to follow what can be described as the national strategy of the French Republic. Whether basing the new state upon the language, culture, and constructed history of the Turkish, Persian, or Arab (in the case of both Iraq and Syria) national identities, they all pursued similar assimilationist policies toward other ethnic groups that found themselves within their new borders after World War I. For Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, the Kurds stood out as the only significant ethnic minority to be assimilated. In more multiethnic Iran, the size of the Kurds placed them second (after Azeris) in the line-up of “others.” Azeris have largely maintained a peaceful coexistence with the Iranian regime, whereas the Kurds’ relations with the Iranian state have been characterized by numerous violent uprisings dating back to the early 1920s.

That all four states failed in their quest to assimilate “their” Kurds stands out as one of the puzzles social scientists seek to piece together and explain.⁴ Twentieth-century Kurdish uprisings in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria bear witness to the refusal of many Kurds to be erased from history. A partial listing of the biggest revolts includes the following: The 1919 Kucgiri revolt (Turkey), the Simko rebellion of the 1920s (Iran), the Barzanji revolts of the 1920s (Iraq), the 1937–1938 Dersim uprising (Turkey), the 1946 Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan (Iran), the Barzani-led revolts of the 1960s and 1970s (Iraq), Iranian Kurdish unrest under the Shah (1960s) and the attempts to break away from the new Islamic Republic between 1979 and 1982 (Iran), Iraqi Kurdish collaboration with Iran from 1980 to 1988 (Iraq), the post-1984 PKK insurgency (Turkey), the 1991 Desert Storm Kurdish uprising (Iraq), the 2004 Serhildan (Syria), and the post-2004 PJAK guerrilla war against Iranian forces (Iran). As with all large political undertakings, each uprising stemmed from a number of causes and motivations. Enemies of the Kurds unfailingly tried to discount the Kurdish nationalist component of each uprising, however, labeling them as “feudal attempts to resist government authority,” “banditry,” “opportunism,” “results of foreign meddling,” or other pejorative classifications. Many of the revolts may have been these things and more, but denying the Kurdish nationalist component of the rebellions probably has to do with politics more than an honest attempt to understand the episodes in question.

Repressive and assimilationist policies of the states in which the Kurds found themselves as minorities went to extreme lengths. There is a “Kurdish issue” today because first, the Kurds failed to achieve even a single state in the post-World War I period, which saw Kurdistan divided between four states dominated by other nations. Given the nationalism of ethnic Arabs, Turks, and Persians in the region, it would have been more puzzling had Kurdish nationalism failed to emerge. Its emergence led to fears of secessionism in Ankara, Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus. Fragile new states, or the Turkish and Persian-Turkic traumatized remnants of forcibly dismembered empires, immediately viewed Kurdish secession as a mortal danger. Their response to the danger was to deny the Kurds space to be Kurds within their new states. Kurdish education, writing, theater, and even music were banned to varying degrees in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. As Gunter recounts in Section I, Turkey went the furthest in this regard, even denying the existence of a Kurdish minority within the country until 1991 (when Kurds formed some 20 percent of the population). As Lowe discusses in Section III, Syria summarily removed the citizenship of over 100,000 of “its” Kurds in 1963, only returning it in 2012 in order to encourage them not to take part in the mostly Sunni-Arab uprising against the regime. Both

Stansfield and Entessar also examine how in Iran, after a brief period of relaxing the restrictions under Presidents Khatami and Rafsanjani in the 1990s, the regime once again banned Kurdish-language publications and Kurdish cultural and linguistic initiatives. Education in and official recognition of the Kurdish language never occurred. Yesiltas also explains how in Iraq the British initially flirted with the idea of Kurdish autonomy, and after that at least local administration of Kurdish areas by Kurds and education in Kurdish. The Iraqi monarchy quickly witnessed the rise of Arab nationalist sentiment in Baghdad, however, accompanied by increasing efforts to exert tighter control over restive Kurds in the north. The republican regimes that followed it offered only forced assimilation and repression, culminating in the genocidal *Anfal* campaigns of 1987–1988 and the use of chemical weapons on the Iraqi Kurds.

Unfortunately, states that acquired the means to severely repress their Kurdish minorities did not stop with the Kurds. Governments used the threat of Kurdish revolts or secessionism to help justify the creation of the “security state” (or *mukhabaraat* state in Arabic). The security state requires mechanisms of repression, authoritarianism, and intelligence gathering that readily get transferred from one issue (containment of the Kurds in this case) to others, such as suppression of dissidence in general. Government offices and organizations ostensibly created to deal with a specific threat and operating outside the normal rule of law—whether military tribunals and emergency courts, or special counterinsurgency forces and “para-state” militias—have a way of creeping into new areas of society and compromising democracy and the rule of law in general. Laws that restrict the free speech and freedom of assembly of Kurds restrict these rights for everyone in society. Economic resources devoted to counterinsurgency and repression get siphoned off from other uses, such as investment and economic development. Popular passions directed against Kurdish “others” find it difficult to focus simultaneously on government shortcomings. The “Kurdish issue” and how it was dealt with in all four countries—Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria—thus compromised democracy for everyone in those countries. The civil wars that resulted at least in part from aggressive attempts to assimilate the Kurds, and Kurdish resistance to such efforts, cast a blight on generations of Kurds and non-Kurds.⁵

The Kurds as Key to Democratization

Civil war can potentially create strong incentives for a more inclusive and democratic system in the aftermath of the conflict. Inconclusive and costly wars in particular can lead warring parties to seek a negotiated settlement

from which a more inclusive and democratic system can emerge.⁶ During the war, involved parties get a better sense of each other's actual strength or weakness. Once they are able to more realistically assess their own prospects for victory or defeat, they may become more amenable to political compromise. Thus, just as the Kurdish issue has often served as a barrier to meaningful democratization, the same issue may also offer a key to genuine democratic improvements in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Section III offers readers a more optimistic take on the most recent developments in Turkey and Iraq, in addition to hypothesizing about how Kurdish demands in Iran and Syria could serve the democratic interests of all Iranians and Syrians. Thus, just as Kurdish rebellions might have helped justify the securitization of the state as described in Section I, they might conversely serve as a check upon the power of the states they oppose. As some of the chapters in Section II make clear, a more balanced distribution of power among various contenders within a state can encourage more enduring, democratic ways to accommodate differences.

The chapters in Section III thus focus on Kurdish demands within Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Genuine individual rights, from freedom of speech and assembly to due process and security of persons, obviously benefit average citizens in a political system regardless of their ethnicity. Even group demands such as recognition, language rights, decentralization, and local governance can prove beneficial to a wide spectrum of society as government becomes more reflective of, accountable to, and in touch with its citizens.

It is also the contention of the contributions in this section of the book that meaningful democratization in any of the four states under consideration cannot occur without a fundamental change vis-à-vis their policies toward their Kurdish minorities. In this sense, accommodation of the Kurds within Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria represents a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for further democratization. Repressing Kurdish rights in any of these states, no matter what the justifications are, places limits on how much they can democratize. When it comes to substantive democracy (a working definition of which is discussed below), paranoia toward Kurdish identity and demands compromises the democratization journey for all citizens of a state.

At the same time, few states even in today's world appear willing to cede substantial territory to secessionist movements. The implicit position of all the contributors to this volume is that if states with a substantial Kurdish minority wish to maintain their current territorial integrity and also pursue long-term stability, they must find ways to democratically incorporate the Kurds. Some Kurdish nationalists may not be satisfied with anything

short of their own Kurdish state, however, similarly to how some Basque nationalist remain committed to creating their own state despite significant levels of Basque autonomy within Spain. Depending on the circumstances, Kurdish secession and statehood could be considered. In Iraq, a recent op-ed by the editor of a prominent pro-central government newspaper went so far as to discuss this possibility as a legitimate “Plan B” option if the Kurds and Baghdad fail to resolve their differences.⁷ The problem with a Kurdish Plan B in Iraq or elsewhere centers on territorial borders, however. It seems highly unlikely that even in hypothetical scenarios wherein current states might accept Kurdish secession, all parties could agree on the boundaries of the territory Kurds would leave with. The resulting high likelihood of violent conflict over territory hardly makes Plan B more appealing than repressive state policies aimed at keeping the Kurds within the fold. All of which takes us back to the question under consideration in this volume: How to democratically incorporate the Kurds within their current state boundaries?

The Journey of Democratization

What do we mean by “democracy?” Surely Turkey has been democratic since the advent of a multiparty electoral system in 1950. Iraq and Iran also hold hotly contested elections nowadays; yet, Freedom House’s 2013 ratings for both countries were “not free” (rated “6” out of “7” on the freedom index, civil liberties index, and political rights index, with “7” being the worst-possible rating).⁸ On a general level, we rely on the notion of democracy as a continuum rather than an absolute, and find a definition of substantive democracy offered by Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino a useful point of departure: Diamond and Morlino identify eight dimensions on which democracies can vary in quality:

The rule of law, participation, competition, and vertical plus horizontal accountability are content-relevant but mainly procedural, concerned mainly with rules and practices. The next two dimensions are substantive: respect for civil and political freedoms, and the progressive implementation of greater political (and underlying it, social and economic) equality. Our last dimension, responsiveness, bridges procedure and substance by providing a basis for measuring how much or little public policies (including laws, institutions, and expenditures) correspond to citizen demands and preferences as aggregated through political process.⁹

In this definition, democracies of comparable sum quality may place varying relative emphases on different factors. A government may prove

responsive to its ethnic majority, for instance, but if that ethnic majority wishes to circumscribe the rights of a minority, this negatively impacts respect for civil and political freedoms. Assessing and judging the varying levels of democratization or potential democratization in different states thus becomes a daunting task. This volume presents the admittedly subjective assessments of different scholars for the Turkish, Iraqi, Syrian, and Iranian states, all of whom share the view that at some point on the democratic road, forcibly stymieing Kurdish aspirations stops the journey's forward momentum.

The contributions in Section II do more than just theorize about democratic governance, however. Written by scholars with a broad familiarity of theories and cases from across the world, these chapters explain the current state of knowledge about democratic transitions and managing multiethnic states. Because other states have managed to emerge from the trauma of sectarian conflict and civil war to form genuinely more inclusive, better governed polities, these chapters summarize the wisdom of these experiences so that they may help shed light on future possibilities for addressing "the Kurdish issue." We contend that Turkey, Iran, and Iraq do not really suffer from a "Kurdish problem" or "issue," but rather from a "democracy problem." Addressing the latter offers the best, but by no means certain, path out of the current impasse. These chapters offer us an account of what has worked and what has not in other multiethnic states, and chapter 7 (by Watts) assesses the democratization progress of the autonomous Kurdistan Region now that Iraq may have finally found a way to accommodate its Kurdish population.

A wide array of mechanisms exist to try to democratically accommodate Kurdish minorities, of course, and the contributors to this volume largely remain agnostic regarding specific policy prescriptions. The closest thing to a specific policy prescription appears in chapter 9 (by David Romano) on Iraq in Section III, regarding the kind of federalism Iraqis enshrined in the 2005 Constitution. There exists a large body of inconclusive literature about whether or not federalism offers a democratic method of accommodating ethnic minorities, or if the strengthening of individual (rather than group) rights presents a preferable alternative.¹⁰ A majority of the literature expresses the belief that federal systems do help to democratically manage sectarian conflict, however. David Romano concurs with Liam Anderson's view that "...in societies with long histories of inter-ethnic tensions and powerful secessionist sentiments, a federation may be the *only* way to sustain democracy while maintaining the territorial integrity of the state."¹¹

Although Savelsberg in Section I of this volume does not view federalism as necessarily democratic in the Syrian case (should it emerge there one day), others argue that federalism cannot function in the absence of

a constitutional regime.¹² Federalism can take different forms and involve different institutional arrangements, of course, the range of which remain beyond the scope of the discussion here. A common dichotomy, however, juxtaposes “ethnic federalism” with “territorial federalism.” In ethnic federalism, borders are drawn to give solid majorities to communities with numerical concentrations in different regions of a state. The communities can thus become “masters in their own home,” to use a popular phrase from the Québécois context, and separation between different communities breeds good neighborliness. Such a system risks enshrining sectarian differences and promoting competition and even conflict rather than cooperation and compromise, however. In the Iraqi context, this would correspond to “soft partition” of the state into a Kurdistan, “Sunnistan,” and “Shiastan.”

Alternately, territorial federalism consciously sets out to divide and mix different sectarian groups so that none controls a distinct administrative unit or subnational government. The system hopes to thereby lessen “in group vs. out group” competition and rivalries and promote cooperation and bridge building alongside an over-arching national identity. Such a system does nothing to protect minority identities, however, and gets typically viewed as an assimilationist program that threatened groups resist strenuously.

The promise of simply “extending equal democratic rights to all Turks, Iranians, Syrians or Iraqis” is also typically viewed as insufficient and even insincere by the Kurds. Especially in Turkey, which has been officially democratic since 1950, this meant giving everyone the equal right to view themselves as Turks and denying anyone the right to be a Kurd. The supposed granting of equal rights may thus still involve denying the right to education in Kurdish, naming things in Kurdish, publishing in Kurdish, and a host of other things that a *staatsvolk* so often denies less powerful ethnic groups within the state. The editors of this volume therefore feel that individual rights, if brandished in lieu of group rights, do not offer a democratic way forward to incorporate the Kurds within existing states in the Middle East. In the final analysis, the most suitable democratic policies may vary by time and place. Opening political systems to real participation of Kurds, as Kurds, will allow affected communities to arrive at their own choices.

Conclusion

The revolutionary wave that swept through the Arab world, collectively referred to as the “Arab Spring,” has upended secular dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, resulting in first-ever free elections in which a plethora of political parties competed for power. Authoritarian regimes in Morocco, Algeria, and Jordan announced a series of constitutional reforms,

lifted emergency rule, and shuffled cabinets in response to pro-democracy protests. Despite uncertainties over the course and outcome of the ongoing struggle in Syria, pressure on Bashar al-Assad to either step down or undertake democratic reforms remains. The Arab Spring thus has not only exposed the untenable and corrupt nature of authoritarian regimes in the region but also pointed to the need for a significant change in the region. The new Middle East may look very different from the Middle East of the twentieth century. While many commentators on the region are consumed by continuing violence in Syria along with tensions and concerns over the nature of infant democracies in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, or stress resolving the Arab–Israeli dispute for achieving “peace in the Middle East,” this book asks whether or not the often-overlooked Kurdish issue may constitute a more important fulcrum for change in key states of the region. The editors of this book thus believe that the phrase “peace in the Middle East” should not only refer to the Arab–Israeli conflict. A truly more peaceful and stable Middle East can simply no longer ignore the Kurds, their past suffering, their present problems, and their future aspirations. The Kurdish conflict is arguably one of the most intractable ethnic conflicts in the contemporary world. The Kurds are geographically concentrated; they hold serious grievances against the states that rule over them; they have already engaged in many armed rebellions against “their” states; and they are spread across international boundaries of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The size and geographical dispersion of the Kurds, numbering between 35 and 40 million¹³ and comprising roughly 20 percent of the total population in Turkey and Iraq and 10 percent of the total population in Iran and Syria, coupled with decades-long violent struggle for a better status, calls for an urgent need to resolve the issue. This seems especially true given the geostrategic importance of the states with Kurdish minorities and the monumental changes now affecting the region. With increasing globalization, growing diaspora communities, and multiplying means of communication outside government control, suppressing an identity, language, culture, and history, has become an even less viable state strategy. Domestically, the emergence of a nationalist urban Kurdish intelligentsia, the capability of the Kurdish groups to amass widespread popular support and to mobilize both human and material resources, and the existence of millions of politicized Kurds render the status quo untenable. The Kurdish issue has become more complicated with the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq and the prospects of a similar entity in northern Syria. The Kurdish issue not only is therefore rapidly becoming an issue for the countries that have significant Kurdish minorities (i.e., Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria) but also impacts the relationship between these countries and the rest of the

world. Turkish relations with neighboring countries, the United States, and Europe, for instance, have been influenced, if not shaped, by the Kurdish issue. In the words of former US ambassador to Turkey Morton Abramowitz and Jessica Sims, “the Kurdish issue in Turkey has now become an American problem as well... for the first time, the United States will need a region-wide Kurdish policy.”¹⁴

We believe that the Kurds are a part of the solution, not the problem. During the long journey toward further democratization, the Kurds, as one of the largest ethnic groups in the Middle East, can play a vital role to bring about stability and democracy. As the region is undergoing monumental changes, failure to address Kurdish demands for recognition and representation can have far-reaching consequences, strengthening authoritarian tendencies and deteriorating the status of other smaller ethnic and religious minorities in these four key Middle Eastern states. The Kurdish issue of the twenty-first century may also turn out to revolve around matured Kurdish nationalist movements and rectifying the injustices suffered by the Kurds in the previous century. There exists a growing sense that the Kurds’ time has come, an idea captured in the title of Michael Gunter’s 2011 book on recent changes in the region: *The Kurds Ascending*.¹⁵ If more democratic state systems do not work out in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran—if they fail to produce sociopolitical systems where the majority of Kurds and other groups in these states wish to continue living together—then these states in their current form should not be considered sacred. As a result of their painful history living under Turkish-, Persian-, and Arab-dominated regimes, it may even prove too late to offer the Kurds meaningful minority rights and liberal governance. For the sake of peace and stability in the region, many of us hope that it is not too late to successfully incorporate Kurds, as Kurds, into the Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian states. This forms part of our motivation for preparing this book. The only alternative to successful democratic inclusion or dangerous, likely violent territorial revisions would be the return of, or continuation of, authoritarian and repressive forms of government designed to keep the Kurds and other groups in their place. We do not view such an option as ideal or feasible.

Notes

1. Brendan O’Leary, John McGarry, and Khaled Salih (eds.) *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), pp. 61–62.
2. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 60–61.

3. As late as 1960 in the United States, for instance, intense debate surrounded the election of President John F. Kennedy because he was a catholic. The clear implication was that a catholic was not as much a “true” American as a protestant. It took another half century before someone with one African-American parent could be received as a sufficiently genuine American to become president, and even this was accompanied by no small amount of controversy.
4. See, for instance, Christine Allison and Phillip G. Kreyenbroek, (eds.) *Kurdish Culture and Identity* (London: Zed Books, 1996); Ismail Besikci, *Kurdistan and Turkish Colonialism* (London: Kurdistan Solidarity Committee and Kurdistan Information Centre, 1991); Philippe Boulanger, *Le Destin Des Kurdes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998); Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State* (London: Zed Books, 1992); Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Politics in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010); David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997); Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion: 1880–1925* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1989); and David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
5. The role of both inter- and intra-state conflicts in strengthening authoritarianism is not limited to the states with a Kurdish minority, of course. Brynen, Moore, Salloukh, and Zahar (2012, p. 262) discuss how this was the trend in the entire Arab world, for instance: “Armed conflict creates not just threats to state and regime security; it also creates conditions that increase the state’s capacity to maintain a monopoly on the means of coercion and survival, even in the face of growing popular illegitimacy and discontent.” When the threat comes from an outside group, such as Israel, the Kurds, imperialism or colonialism, it becomes that much easier to rally people around the state and get them to forgive its authoritarian transgressions. See Rex Brynen, Pete W. Moore, Bassel F. Salloukh, and Marie-Joelle Zahar, *Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism and Democratization in the Arab World* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012).
6. For more on this, see Elisabeth J. Wood, “An Insurgent Path to Democracy: Popular Mobilization, Economic Interests, and Regime Transition in South Africa and El Salvador,” *Comparative Political Studies* 34.8 (2001), pp. 862–888; Leonard Wantchekon, “The Paradox of ‘Warlord’ Democracy: A Theoretical Investigation,” *American Political Science Review* 9.1 (2004), pp. 17–33; Mehmet Gurses and T. David Mason, “Democracy Out of Anarchy: How Do Features of A Civil War Influence the Likelihood of Post-Civil War Democracy?” *Social Science Quarterly* 89.2 (2008), pp. 315–336; Madhav Joshi, “Post-Civil War Democratization: Promotion of Democracy in Post-Civil War States, 1946–2005,” *Democratization* 17.5 (2010), pp. 826–855. For a counter-argument, see Page V. Fortna and Reyko Huang, “Democratization after Civil War: A Brush Clearing Exercise,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56.4 (2012), pp. 801–808.

7. Abd al-Jabbar Shabbout, "Plan B at the Kurdish Level," *al Sabah*, December 4, 2012. This op-ed only appeared in Arabic. For a discussion in English of the op-ed, see David Hirst, "A Kurdish State Is Being Established, and Baghdad May Accept It," *The Daily Star*, December 24, 2012, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2012/Dec-24/199715-a-kurdish-state-is-being-established-and-baghdad-may-accept-it.ashx#axzz2G1NAQe2I>
8. Freedom in the World 2013, "Freedom House," <http://www.freedomhouse.org>, accessed on January 21, 2014.
9. Diamond, Larry Jay, and Leonardo Morlino, "The Quality of Democracy: An Overview," *Journal of Democracy* 15.4 (2004), p. 22.
10. For a recent summary of the literature, see Jan Erk and Lawrence Anderson, "The Paradox of Federalism: Does Self-Rule Accommodate or Exacerbate Ethnic Divisions?" *Regional and Federal Studies* 19 (May 2009), pp. 191–202.
11. Liam Anderson, "The Non-Ethnic Regional Model of Federalism: Some Comparative Perspectives," in Reidar Visser and Gareth Stansfield (eds.) *An Iraq of Its Regions: Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy?* (London: Hurst and Company, 2007), p. 209.
12. David Cameron, "Inching Forward: Iraqi Federalism at Year Four," in Lamani Mokhtar and Bessma Momani (eds.) *From Desolation to Reconstruction: Iraq's Troubled Journey* (Waterloo, Ontario: Center for International Governance Innovation, 2010), p. 36.
13. The various contributors to this volume do not all provide exactly the figures regarding the Kurdish population in the Middle East, although all of them agree on a range between 25 and 40 million. The truth is that no one really knows the real figure because Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria have not permitted any census that could provide it. As one might expect, the question is politically sensitive in all these states. In any case, a general sense of how large the Kurdish population is in the region serves the purposes of this volume adequately well.
14. Morton Abramowitz and Jessica Sims, "Erdogan's Kurdish Issues," January 28, 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/erdogans-kurdish-issues-8024>, accessed on January 8, 2014.
15. Michael Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011).

SECTION I

Authoritarianism and the Kurds

CHAPTER 1

Turkey, Kemalism, and the “Deep State”*

Michael M. Gunter

Introduction

A strong case can be made that ever since the Sheikh Said rebellion was crushed in 1925,¹ the Kurdish question in Turkey has been one of the main factors preventing it from becoming a complete democracy. Instead, the Kurds have been viewed as threatening the very foundational rationale for Turkey’s existence as a unitary state in which ethnicity is supposedly an irrelevant criterion in the public and political spheres.² As a result, Turkey has largely opted for “securitization”³ rather than democratization to deal with the problem. In other words, the Kurdish question has impeded the development of democracy in Turkey itself. Accordingly, a democratic resolution of the Kurdish problem could open the door to the full development of democracy in Turkey and would go a long way toward making Turkey eligible for admission into the European Union (EU).

The Kemalist Republic of Turkey was established out of the ashes of defeat in World War I by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923 based on the concept of an exclusive Turkish national identity that, among such other factors as secularism and statism, proved hostile to any expression of Kurdish identity.⁴ Since it would be a contradiction in terms to maintain such a situation in a true republic, an arcane or Deep State (*Derin Devlet*) developed alongside or parallel to the official State to enforce the ultimate principles of the Kemalist Republic. This Deep State became “an omnipotent force

with tentacle-like hands reaching everywhere . . . a state within the legitimate state.”⁵ The colorful but enigmatic phrase Deep State referred to how this secret “other” state had penetrated deeply into the political, security, and economic structures of the official State, which as the *Baba Devlet* (Daddy State) claimed a special reverence from the people instead of being their mere servant.

Today, however, Turkey is seeking to join the EU, a candidacy supported by a large majority of its population and an initiative that promises to help solve Turkey’s long-standing Kurdish problem.⁶ Clearly, a Republic of Turkey that is truly a pluralistic democracy cannot be constituted along the lines of the Copenhagen Criteria⁷ necessary for Turkey to join the EU until the Deep State is dismantled. The process, however, will prove tortuous at best.⁸ For example, recent Turkish reforms to meet EU-mandated criteria sometimes appear to be merely paper concessions. Others argued that the ultimate problem was more to do with the inherent ethnic Turkish inability to accept the fact that Turkey should be considered a multiethnic state in which the Kurds have similar constitutional rights as co-stakeholders with the Turks. Moreover, during 2011 and 2012, many leading intellectuals were rounded up for alleged affiliations with the *Koma Civaken Kurdistan* (KCK) or Kurdistan Communities Union, which is said to be the urban arm of the *Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan* (PKK),⁹ whose proposals for democratic autonomy seem to suggest an alternative government. Many of those arrested were also affiliated with the pro-Kurdish *Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi* (BDP) or Peace and Democracy Party.

Those arrested included a well-known publisher, Ragıp Zarakolu, who has been a key figure in human rights advocacy in Turkey for decades and has suffered from political repression under successive governments for his efforts. Zarakolu was in ill health, so there was the fear that imprisonment would threaten his life. In April 2012, he was suddenly released from prison. Also among those arrested was Busra Ersanli, a political scientist whose original work on early Turkish nationalism continues to be consulted by scholars throughout the world.

Even more recently, Leyla Zana, a famous female Kurdish leader and BDP member of parliament, was once again sentenced to prison on May 24, 2012, for “spreading propaganda” on behalf of the PKK. The charges concerned nine speeches she had made over the years during which she had argued for recognition of the Kurdish identity, called Öcalan a Kurdish leader, and urged the reopening of peace negotiations between Turkey and the PKK. Previously in 1994, Zana had been stripped of her membership in parliament and imprisoned for ten years on similar charges. Such Turkish

actions reminded one of what the French used to say about the Bourbons: “They learned nothing and they forgot nothing.”

What Is the Deep State?

Many observers dismiss the idea of the Deep State as simply a conspiracy theory.¹⁰ However, Turkish citizens (both ethnic Turks and Kurds alike) seem particularly susceptible to such theories. For them, nothing is as it seems. There is always some deeper, usually more cynical explanation for what is occurring. Only the naïve fail to understand this.

Nevertheless, historical evidence indicates that even in the days of the Ottoman Empire (Turkey’s predecessor), covert organizations existed to defend state security. In an awkward attempt to illustrate the Ottomans’ benevolent attitude toward rebellious Kurds during the nineteenth century, for example, Metin Heper writes about how “Kor Ahmed Pasha of Revanduz...surrendered on conditions of honourable treatment... [and how] the Ottoman government kept its word and sent him and his family and tribesmen to no other place than Istanbul.”¹¹ Heper neglects to tell his readers, however, that during his return from Istanbul Kor Ahmed Pasha (also known as *Mire Kor* or the blind *mir* because of an eye affliction) simply disappeared, probably treacherously executed on the orders of the Sultan. Moreover, many would argue that the fate of the Armenians during World War I was largely the result of confidential government orders to turn loose a secret killing organization known as the *Teskilat-i Mahsusa* (Special Organization).¹²

More recently, who can doubt that there is more to be known about the motives that drove Mehmet Ali Ağca, supposedly a right-wing Turkish nationalist possibly working for the Soviet Union, to attempt to assassinate Pope John Paul II on May 13, 1981, or to murder Abdi İpekçi, the chief editor of the liberal daily *Milliyet*, in 1979 and then escape from prison and make the attempt on the pope?¹³ More recently, what mysterious court decision temporarily freed Ağca in January 2006 before a public outcry led to his return to prison? As one recent analysis concluded: “Somebody with omnipresent tentacle-like hands that can extend to anywhere—from judiciary to army or security forces or any other institution—within the state makes a plan to kill a journalist, or to kill young students whose ideas they deem to be a threat to the state and that same somebody skillfully protects its bloody pawns from justice.”¹⁴ When the author of this chapter visited Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK),¹⁵ in March 1998 Öcalan spoke often of the “hidden games” all sides in the Kurdish struggle were playing.¹⁶

Although it usually would be judicious to avoid accepting conspiracy theories, one must also remember that even paranoids have enemies.

A useful recent definition found the Deep State to be “made up of elements from the military, security and judicial establishments wedded to a fiercely nationalist, statist ideology who, if need be, are ready to block or even oust a government that does not share their vision.”¹⁷ Military and security elements determined to preserve the Kemalist vision of a Turkish nationalist and secular state are the key elements of the Deep State. To some extent, all of these ingredients have long been institutionalized in the *Milli Güvenlik Kurulu* (MGK) or National Security Council. The official job of the MGK was, and still is, to advise the elected government on matters of internal and external security. Until the recent EU reforms mandated by Turkey’s EU candidacy and the enormous AKP electoral victory over determined military opposition in July 2007 gave civilian authorities more control,¹⁸ the MGK also often served as the ultimate source of authority in Turkey.

Before these recent reforms the MGK was clearly under the control of the military. It consisted of ten members: the president and the prime minister of the Republic of Turkey, the chief of the general staff and the four military service chiefs, and the defense, foreign affairs, and interior ministers. The modern Republic of Turkey, of course, was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, whose power originally stemmed from his position in the military. Thus, from the beginning, the military played a very important and, it should be noted, very popular role in the defense and, therefore, the politics of Turkey. One could probably date the beginning of the military’s preeminent political role and the solidifying of the Deep State to the Kurdish uprising of 1925 and the emergency rule powers that were invoked as a result. Both the Kurdish revolt and liberal democratic elements in the new Turkish Republic were squashed in this period. Following the military coup of May 1960, the new constitution, which went into effect in 1961, provided a constitutional role for the military for the first time by establishing the MGK. Over the years, the MGK has gradually extended its power over governmental policy, at times replacing the civilian government as the ultimate center of power over issues of national security. After the “coup by memorandum” in March 1971, for example, the MGK was given the power to give binding, unsolicited advice to the cabinet. After the military coup of September 1980, for a while all power was concentrated in the MGK, chaired by the chief of staff, General Kenan Evren, who later became president from 1982 to 1989. Although the MGK greatly reduced the rampant terrorism in Turkey at that time, a major price was paid in terms of human rights for all Turkish citizens, not just those who happened to be ethnic Kurds.

During the 1990s, the MGK began to exercise virtually total authority over security matters dealing with the Kurdish problem. In his role as chief of staff, General Doğan Güreş held a particularly strong influence over the elected Turkish government headed by Prime Minister Tansu Çiller to the extent that the phrase “as good as thirty men” was reportedly used to describe her.¹⁹ The “postmodern coup” in June 1997 that toppled Turkey’s first Islamist government was sanctioned by an MGK edict issued a few months earlier.

One important way the MGK exercised its control behind the scenes was through issuing a rather lengthy, and until recently top-secret, National Security Policy Document (MGSB) once every four years and updated every two years.²⁰ The MGSB defined and ranked Turkey’s priorities in domestic and international security and outlined the national strategy to be followed. The precise content of the document was revealed only to the top generals and highest-ranking state administrators. Thus, some referred to the MGSB as “the ‘state’s secret constitution’ or the ‘red book’ on the basis of which the State is run.” In other words, “the real responsibility of running the State is not upon the Cabinet, but actually lies elsewhere [in]... the military [and] other dubious and secret formations involving people either directly from within the institutions of the state or those who are very close to this establishment... defined as ‘the Deep State.’”

The MGSB, approved on October 24, 2005, by an MGK expanded to include more civilian members, was issued only after a dispute between the Turkish military and the new civilian officials of the ruling moderate Islamic AKP had been settled. This disagreement reportedly dealt with Islamic fundamentalism, especially over women wearing the *turban* or the Islamic headscarf as well as the usage of military force versus diplomacy in foreign policy. Separatist terror (the PKK) and radical Islam (Osama bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda and Hizbullah) were ranked as the top terrorist threats. Other specific issues included water, minorities, and extreme leftist movements. The issue of Greece extending its territorial waters to 12 miles around Greek islands in the Aegean Sea and thus largely shutting it off to Turkey was still referred to as a *casus belli*. An article from the MGSB issued in 1997 concerning the threat of extreme right-wing groups attempting to turn Turkish nationalism into racism and the ultranationalist mafia attempting to exploit the situation was dropped in the most recent MGSB. Also deleted, as domestic security concerns, were national education, science, technology, and public administration. In foreign matters, statements on northern Iraq and the Iraqi Kurdish parties as well as Syria were also eliminated from the latest document.

In addition to the MGSB, an MGK Secretariat General bylaw also held great importance in the past, but has now been discontinued due to the

EU reforms. This MGK bylaw supposedly had recently defined the Turkish public as “a threat to itself” and spoke of “psychological military operations” against the public to protect the country from that threat. The fact that the contents of these MGK documents recently have been publicized indicates that they are no longer as important due to the recent formal reforms required by Turkey’s EU candidacy and other AKP initiatives.

In addition to the MGK, other Turkish state security organs that helped institutionalize the Deep State include the *Milli Istihbarat Teskilati* (MIT) or National Intelligence Organization, the *Devlet Guvenlik Mahkemesi* (DGM) or State Security Courts, and the shadowy *Jandarma Istihbarat ve Terorle Mucadele* (JITEM)²¹ or the Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counter Terrorist Service. Officially established in 1965, the MIT combines the functions of internal and external intelligence services. Although in theory reporting to the prime minister, until the recent reforms, the MIT in practice remained close to the military. Over the years, the MIT has been accused of using extreme rightists to infiltrate and destroy extreme leftist and Kurdish groups. For example, it appears that it was involved in the notorious Susurluk scandal that, among other actions, illegally used criminals to try to destroy the PKK. Indeed, criminals carrying out various illegal activities including drug smuggling, murders, and assassinations are also elements of the Deep State. JITEM, for example, reportedly became involved in such extralegal activities as arms and drug smuggling during the war against the PKK.²² Avni Ozgurel, a journalist well known for his supposed insider knowledge of the Deep State, has argued that “if the PKK conflict granted you unlimited access to confidential funds of the State...and if the Southeast had become a heaven for revenues from the drug trade that would mean that there would certainly be balances supported by all this dirty money.”²³

In 2007–2008, six letters totaling 287 pages were forwarded by anonymous authors to the MIT. They revealed illegal actions of groups within the Turkish military and events from the state’s past concerning coups, unsolved tragedies, massacres, and assassinations.²⁴ Specific groups—all within the military’s General Staff—included the Special Warfare Department (OHD), Tactical Mobilization Group (STK), Special Forces Command (OKK), and Wartime Search and Rescue Unit (MAK). Recently these letters were forwarded to the Coup and Memorandum Investigation Commission of the Turkish parliament for scrutiny. They illustrated that in addition to its official duty fighting against the PKK, the MAK was also involved in a large number of killings in eastern and southeastern Anatolia, including such provocations as the massacre of 11 pro-government village guards during 1996 in Sirnak’s Guclukonak district. The letters to the MIT also contained

data about the activities of the OKK, which is said to have prepared an action plan containing 26 articles to undermine the democratically elected government.

In addition, the letters claimed that the STK was behind a number of assassinations that destabilized the state in the past, including an armed attack on the Council of State in 2006, and the murder of the Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink in 2007 (see below), as well as of three Christian missionaries in Malatya in 2007. The STK branch in Trabzon was responsible for the Dink assassination as well as that of Father Andrea Santoro, a Catholic priest, in order to arouse the nationalist feelings of the people living in the Black Sea region. Furthermore, the STK branch in Hatay sought to stoke conflict and instability among Turkey's Turkish, Armenian, and Syriac communities so that the military would have an excuse to launch a coup. Finally in Malatya, the STK tried to turn some religious groups into terrorist organizations. The STK was also said to have buried military equipment in various places around the country.²⁵

Each one of the 18 State Security Courts (DGMs) consisted of two civilian judges, one military judge, and two prosecutors. These courts had legal jurisdiction over civilian cases involving the Anti-Terrorist Law of 1991. This law contained the notorious Article 8 covering membership in illegal organizations and the propagation of ideas banned by law as damaging the indivisible unity of the state. The State Security Courts played a leading role in trying to stifle violent and nonviolent Kurdish activists and in so doing provided a veneer of legality to the state's campaign against Kurdish nationalist demands. Thus, these courts closed down newspapers and narrowly interpreted the right of free speech. Nurset Demiral, the former head of the Ankara State Security Court, became both the symbol and reality of the problem these courts presented to democratic freedoms. For example, Demiral demanded the death penalty for Leyla Zana and the other pro-Kurdish Democracy Party (DEP) members of parliament who were accused of supporting the PKK. In June 1999, a partial reform removed the military judge from the DGMs. Then as part of a package of constitutional reforms instituted in June 2004, these Courts were formally abolished. Their place was taken by Heavy Penal Courts authorized to hear only cases involving crime and terrorism. In practice, these new Courts mainly try cases involving political prisoners.

During the late 1970s, Alparslan Türkeş' notorious *Ulkuçus* (Idealists) or Gray Wolves played a leading role in the sectarian violence that raged throughout Turkey. Observers commented on how many members of the gendarmerie's counter-guerrilla special teams or *Ozel Tim* seemed to be associated with Türkeş' party. Their attire served to identify them. The

three-crescent flag of the Ottoman Empire, a symbol of ultra-Turkish nationalism, decorated the barrels of their guns. Pictures of gray wolves, another ultranationalist symbol, were etched on their muzzles. An additional touch was their mustache, which ran down from the corner of their lips. Seemingly contradictory, the Deep State also apparently used extremist Islamic groups in these violent campaigns.²⁶

Origins of the Deep State

During the early years of the Cold War, the United States apparently established secret resistance groups within a number of its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies that were intended to fight back against any Soviet occupation. Called Gladio (Latin for sword), stay-behind organizations, or Special War Department,²⁷ they were small paramilitary units that would supposedly employ guerrilla tactics behind the lines against a Soviet occupation. Working through the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Pentagon, such units were apparently formed in Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, West Germany, and Turkey. The United States continued to fund these organizations into the 1970s.

In Turkey, the secret force worked out of the Joint US Military Aid Team headquarters. It was first known as the Tactical Mobilization Group and, following the military “coup by memorandum” in 1971, the counter-guerrilla force or Special Warfare Bureau (*ozel tim* [special team]). When the leftist, but nationalist Bülent Ecevit was prime minister in 1974, Chief of Staff General Semih Sancar asked Ecevit for credits from a secret emergency fund. When Ecevit inquired about the nature of this organization he had never heard about, he was told that the United States was terminating its funding and that he should not look too closely at the situation. “There are a certain number of volunteer patriots whose names are kept secret and are engaged for life in this special department. They have hidden arms caches in various parts of the country.”²⁸

It was apparently around the time that the United States ceased its financing of the Gladio organization in the mid-1970s that it began to be used increasingly against perceived domestic leftist opposition to the Turkish government. Uğur Mumcu, the famous leftist journalist whose assassination in 1993 still remains unsolved, wrote how, when he was arrested after the coup in 1971, his torturers told him: “We are the counter guerrilla. Even the president of the republic cannot touch us.”²⁹ A report by the Turkish Parliament’s Commission for the Investigation of the Uğur Mumcu assassination suggested that the Deep State might have killed him because of his work on the possible MIT–PKK connection he supposedly was working

on at the time of his untimely death and then tried to blame it on Iranian-backed Islamists.³⁰

During Turkey’s domestic, leftist–rightist violence of the 1970s,³¹ Türkeş’ ultra-rightist Gray Wolves operated with the encouragement and even protection of the *özel tim* or special forces. Some speculate that the Gladio or stay-behind organization was behind the notorious 1977 May Day massacre at Taksim Square in Istanbul, when snipers on surrounding rooftops suddenly began firing into a crowd of some 200,000 protesters supporting the radical leftist labor organization Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (DISK).

From the mid-1980s on, the counter-guerrillas were apparently given a new target, the PKK. During the early 1990s, a series of mysterious killings of civilian Kurdish leaders by apparently right-wing government-hit squads began. Depending on how one counts, at least 1,000 and probably a lot more died. Not a single one of the slayings of Kurdish leaders or sympathizers resulted in an arrest: “Many of the individual killings still go unexplained amid local claims that certain officials prefer not to pursue such cases.”³² Prominent victims included Musa Anter, 74, one of the most famous Kurdish intellectuals and authors of the twentieth century, and Mehmet Sincar, an ethnic Kurdish member of the Turkish parliament. Also murdered, it should be noted, however, was Major Ahmet Cem Ersever, a leading Turkish nationalist and supposedly a former JITEM or gendarmerie intelligence officer who was an expert on PKK activities. “Executions without verdict” was an expression often used to explain what was occurring.

At the time many argued that the killings were being perpetrated by groups associated with the Islamic Hizbullah (Party of God) and secretly encouraged by the state to protect the unity of the Muslim Turkish state the PKK was threatening to divide.³³ A Turkish parliamentary committee established in 1993 to investigate these murders even concluded: “The state is spawning criminal gangs. The village guards—pro-government Kurds armed by the government to battle the PKK—are involved in many murky events. . . . It must be said that the Gendarmerie Intelligence Organisation (JITEM) is too.”³⁴ For a long time, the government refused to admit that such an organization as Hizbullah even existed. Early in 2000, however, the police began to discover gruesomely tortured bodies buried at hideouts used by the organization.³⁵

Susurluk

Although thousands of people are killed each year on Turkey’s highways, a fatal car accident near the Turkish city of Susurluk on November 3, 1996,

proved unique because of its victims:³⁶ (1) Huseyin Kocadag, the director of the Istanbul Police Academy and former deputy director of the National Security Police in Istanbul, who had been driving the speeding Mercedes when it crashed into a truck that had pulled out onto the highway; (2) Abdullah Çatlı, a notorious international criminal “on the lam” and wanted for multiple murders, drug trafficking, and prison escape; (3) Gonca Us, a gangster’s “moll”; and (4) the accident’s lone survivor, Sedat Bucak, a member of parliament and the leader of a pro-government Kurdish tribe, who headed a 2,000-strong militia which was deputized as village guards and received more than \$1 million a month to battle Kurdish separatists. The obvious question was what was so unlikely an association doing together in the same car? Clearly, Susurluk revealed striking insights into the Deep State and the connections it fostered between the Turkish government’s intelligence community and internationally organized criminal activity involving political assassinations, drug trafficking, and political corruption at the highest levels.

What is more, the car’s trunk contained a veritable arsenal of five large caliber revolvers, two submachine guns, two silencers, and an abundant quantity of ammunition, as well as a case stuffed with bank notes. Investigators also found on Çatlı’s body a police chief’s identity card in the name of Mehmet Ozbay, and a green passport reserved for senior civil servants exempted from visa requirements. Clearly, Çatlı had been receiving official protection despite being officially sentenced to death in absentia for this role in the massacre of seven leftists in Bahcelievler, Ankara in 1978. During this unstable period of leftist–rightist violence in Turkey, Çatlı had been a member of Alparslan Türkeş’ extreme nationalist National Action Party and its violent Idealists (*Ulkucus*) militia (see above). In addition, the Turkish police were supposedly seeking Çatlı for his role in the high-profile murder of the widely known leftist Turkish journalist Abdi İpekçi in 1979 (a crime for which the Pope’s would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Ağca, was later sentenced) and for organizing Ağca’s prison escape and the flight to Europe that led to his attempt on the Pope’s life (see above). Çatlı was also wanted by Interpol for drug trafficking and having escaped from a Swiss prison.

Mehmet Ağar, the Turkish minister of the interior and earlier minister of justice, at first tried to explain Susurluk away by claiming that the police chief, Kocadag, had probably “arrested” Çatlı and was bringing him into custody. After it became clear that all four occupants of the car had been staying at the same hotel together the previous three nights—where “coincidentally” Ağar himself had also been staying—Ağar was forced to resign. In the days that immediately followed, Ağar virtually admitted his

involvement in an illegal, secret organization when he declared: “We have undertaken a thousand operations, but they cannot be explained. Their result was the security of the people. Whatever I did, I did for the nation.”³⁷ Both he and Bucak, the crash’s lone survivor, who was conveniently suffering from partial amnesia in regards to the accident, then claimed parliamentary immunity.

Turkish President Suleyman Demirel seemed to signal the desire of most of the nation’s officials to cover up Susurluk’s ultimate meaning when he declared that “the incident should be viewed within its limits. . . . Take it as far as it goes. . . . but do not make a sweeping judgment for Turkey.”³⁸ Tansu Çiller (the former prime minister from June 1993 to March 1996 and serving as the deputy prime minister when the Susurluk crash occurred) was already up to her neck in accusations about scandals revolving around her and her husband’s finances. Çiller signaled even greater official reluctance to pursue Susurluk when she publicly praised the deceased Çatlı by saying: “those who fire shots for the state are, for us, as respectable as those who get shot for it.”³⁹ More forthrightly, Alparslan Türkeş—known by his extreme right-wing followers as the *Basbug* (chief of chieftains or fuhrer) and a former deputy prime minister in the 1970s—admitted knowing that Çatlı and the other men traveling in the doomed car had been working with Turkey’s intelligence services: “On the basis of my state experience, I admit that Çatlı has been used by the state in the framework of a secret service working for the good of the state.”⁴⁰ Türkeş’ comments constituted a good partial definition of the Deep State itself.

On November 12, 1996, the four main parties in the Turkish parliament established a special nine-man commission to investigate the circumstances surrounding Susurluk. Mehmet Elkatmis, a member of the senior governing Refah (Islamist) Party, was elected as its chairman. Early in April 1997, the commission produced a stunted and deeply compromised report that failed to identify any important names.⁴¹ Although it conceded that crimes may have been committed by the state, the report rejected allegations that the state had established the criminal organizations, and dealt with only some of Çatlı’s activities. Nothing was said about the web of other gangs that had spread across the country; nor was there mention of any crimes committed in the war against the PKK in the southeast or anything about alleged links to gangs in the senior military command. In presenting the report, Elkatmis specifically declared that his commission had been denied access to many government documents on the grounds that they contained state or commercial secrets. The commission also failed to obtain any useful information from Mehmet Ağar or Sedat Bucak who continued to claim parliamentary immunity.

In January 1998, Kutlu Savas, the chairman of the prime ministerial investigative committee, handed over the final draft of his report on Susurluk to Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz. Savas had been working on it as a special prosecutor since shortly after the parliamentary committee investigating the situation had been dissolved in April 1997, and had interviewed the heads of a number of departments in the ministry of the interior as well as the intelligence and security services.

The Savas Report reiterated earlier findings that the special teams had been established with the original duty of fighting the PKK.⁴² In time, however, certain individuals working in various organs of the state had formed gangs within the state and, along with figures in organized crime, begun to kill businessmen, such as Behcet Canturk and Savas Buldan, suspected of financing the PKK in 1994. These gangs also diverged from their official duties and began to work for their own personal profit, sharing the spoils of drug trafficking and black market operations.

New revelations concerned gangs taking over state banks to finance illegal operations and reap windfall profits. Eyes turned toward former Prime Minister Tansu Çiller and her husband as being among those who might have directed this foray into criminal banking. In addition, İlhan Akuzum and Abdulkadir Ates, two former ministers of tourism, were accused of issuing illegal casino licenses. The Savas Report also concluded that arguments over control of illegal activities became so intense that various security organizations even began to kill each other's agents. The death toll from this interservice rivalry reached 15, several of whom were senior officers.

In addition, \$50 million had been taken from the prime ministerial slush fund to fight the PKK, but much of it was unaccounted for. The Report also charged that a certain Mahmut Yildirim—code named “Yesil” (Green) and an extreme nationalist right-winger—had been one of the main figures used by the MIT in covert operations, and the man who had attacked Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz himself in a hotel lobby in Budapest in November 1996 for wanting to investigate Susurluk in the first place.

Savas suggested that in the future all security personnel involved in illegal activities be dismissed and the activities of Mehmet Eymür, the former head of counterterrorist operations, be investigated. The special prosecutor further recommended that all the operations of the MIT and the department of security be placed under tighter control, and that the competition between the latter two be ended. Finally, he argued for a tough campaign against drug trafficking and recommended that the Istanbul judicial administration be reorganized. In his television address to the nation concerning the Savas Report, Prime Minister Yilmaz added that immunities should be

lifted to permit the prosecution of politicians and public employees and a repentance law enacted to help expose the guilty.

The military, however, was not implicated in any of these matters. Instead, “Yesil,” Çatlı, Açar, Bucak, and the Çillers were blamed for most of them, to the extent that many began to believe that “Yesil” was merely notional,⁴³ while the remaining five would become convenient scapegoats for others in the military and government who would remain free. Despite his earlier calls for revealing all information regarding Susurluk, Prime Minister Yılmaz now argued that, in the interests of the nation, certain sections of the Savas Report would have to remain secret. These included information about the repression that had followed the military coup of 1980, assassinations of suspected pro-PKK businessmen in the 1990s, and Turkey’s role in the failed military coup against Azerbaijan’s President Heydar Aliyev in 1995.⁴⁴

Although Çiller and Açar afterwards resigned, no one ever received any punitive sentence. Indeed, Açar was subsequently reelected to parliament as the leader of the True Path Party (DYP), while Çiller’s corruption files were covered up by the government’s decision in 1998. She continued on in politics until her overwhelming electoral defeat at the hands of the AKP in November 2002 led to her retirement. Essentially, Susurluk’s perpetrators, escaped justice, and it seems very unlikely that the affair will ever be brought to a satisfactory conclusion. Considering the likelihood that so many higher officials were actually involved, and that the judiciary was so heavily influenced by political forces, this is not surprising. As Husmettin Cindoruk, the leader of one of the smaller parties in Yılmaz’s coalition government at that time observed: “the state itself is Susurluk.”⁴⁵ Thus, the Susurluk affair remains one of the best-documented examples of the existence of the Deep State in Turkey. The “Kurdish threat” in particular served to justify the Deep State’s existence, and the Deep State’s corrosive effects on democracy in Turkey appear self-evident.

Semdinli

On November 9, 2005, the small city of Semdinli in the extreme southeastern Turkish province of Hakkâri became another excellent example of the Deep State when the Umit (Hope) bookstore owned by Seferi Yılmaz, a former PKK member who had served a 15-year term in prison, was bombed.⁴⁶ The explosion killed Zahir Korkmaz, a patron of the bookstore, and wounded his brother Metin Korkmaz. Although the bombing was staged to make it appear the work of the PKK exacting revenge for Seferi Yılmaz having left

the organization, it instead appears to have been the result of a botched provocation by the Deep State.

Bystanders who had witnessed the attack pursued the bombers and surrounded their car, which turned out to be registered to a gendarmerie unit bearing civilian plates. Two non-commissioned officers of a paramilitary anti-terror intelligence squad (Ali Kaya and Ozcan Ildeniz) and a former Kurdish PKK member turned government informer (Veysel Ates) were arrested, but not before one of them had opened fire, killing one bystander and wounding others. The investigating prosecutor found hand grenades, rifles, materials that could be used to make or defuse bombs, a blueprint of the bookstore, a list of 105 other potential targets, and additional evidence.

All three members of the anti-terror squad were arrested and held for trial. Turkish Land Forces Commander General Yasar Büyükanıt, scheduled to become the new chief of staff in August 2006, strongly rejected any official connections by stating he knew one of the suspects and then praised him as a “good guy.”⁴⁷ Büyükanıt’s ludicrous comment appeared to be a warning that the official State should not pursue the matter any further.

Angry citizens protesting what had happened, however, began rioting in several cities throughout the southeast and later in Istanbul itself. Although reform-minded Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan promised to get to the bottom of the matter quickly, he soon backed down before military criticism. It was clear that “dark and illegitimate forces with access to legitimate state power were clearly at work again” and that what had occurred “is no conspiracy theory in Turkey.”⁴⁸ Indeed, the Semdinli bombing was only one of several other unexplained bombing incidents—apparently perpetrated by *cetes* or gangs that many believed were linked to the Turkish military—that had plagued the southeast Kurdish areas of Turkey during the fall of 2005.

When the Van public prosecutor Ferhat Sarikaya sought to indict Büyükanıt for setting up an illegal force to create unrest among the Kurds that would undermine Turkey’s application to join the EU as well as trying to influence the courts by praising one of the Non-commissioned officers (NCOs) charged in the Semdinli bombing, the Supreme Board of Prosecutors and Judges (HSYK) sacked him on the grounds of “breach of authority” and the “inclusion of irrelevant claims in the indictment in contravention of the Law on Trial.”⁴⁹ The government also removed Sabri Uzun, the chief of the Intelligence Department of the General Directorate of Security, who had sought to support Sarikaya. Uzun had told the parliamentary committee investigating Semdinli that it was an insider affair, arguing that there was “no use locking the doors when the thief is indoors.”⁵⁰ This, of course, implied that the suspected culprits were really in the higher ranks of the

military. Seeking to curry favor with the military, Deniz Baykal, the leader of the main opposition Republican Peoples Party (CHP), declared that there was a “coup attempt against the military.”⁵¹

In July 2006, the Van Third High Criminal Court sentenced Ali Kaya and Ozcan Ildeniz to 39 years and 5 months in prison. The court also concluded that the two had not acted alone, but must have been following the directives of an organization and carried out their actions with the support of and contributions from the heads of this organization. The court recommended, therefore, that a further investigation should be opened.⁵² Following the lead of EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Commission Co-chair Joost Lagendijk’s “Turkey Report,” the European Commission also asked that the Semdinli “hierarchy” (i.e., those leading the convicted officers) be identified.⁵³ However, no further action was taken. The rapid conviction of the two bombers suggested a deep-state cover-up.

Given all the theoretical reforms that had occurred as part of Turkey’s EU candidacy, Semdinli was a great disappointment and called into question whether Turkey was ready to pursue EU membership. Thus, the official State’s ability to solve the Semdinli case might have proved that Turkey could control its Deep State and was fit for EU membership. Indeed, the EU Commission’s representative to Turkey, Hans Jorg Kretschmer, said as much when he declared that “shedding light on the Hakkâri [Semdinli] events is a test case for Turkey.”⁵⁴ Instead, concluded one respected source: the “government *prosecuted the prosecutor* and sacked an intelligence officer whose findings supported the prosecutor; and in doing so dismissing a historic chance to shed light on covert and behind-the-scenes operations which for many decades have been the biggest obstacle for the truly democratic Turkey of tomorrow.”⁵⁵

For its part, the Parliamentary commission investigating the Semdinli affair concluded that the accusations against the military were “legal fantasy” and that “our commission has come up with no evidence pointing to such an illegal set up within the gendarmerie.”⁵⁶ Instead, the commission’s report even irrelevantly warned that the Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani was trying to gain influence in the region and that he could be more dangerous than the PKK itself. The report also exonerated the ruling AKP government from any blame.

In an interview on NTV television shortly after the Semdinli bombing, Suleyman Demirel, the former president (1993–2000) and several times prime minister of Turkey, declared that “there are two states. There is the state and there is the deep state. . . . When a small difficulty occurs, the civilian state steps back and the deep state becomes the generator [of decisions].”⁵⁷ Several months earlier, Demirel, who had been removed as prime minister

twice in the past by military coups, had replied to the query “What do you mean by ‘deep state?’” that it was the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK).⁵⁸ The general who had headed the coup that removed Demirel the second time and succeeded him as president from 1982 to 1989, Kenan Evren, agreed: “Demirel tells the truth. When the state is weakened we take it over. We are the deep state.”⁵⁹ Bülent Ecevit, another frequent former prime minister, also concurred with these sentiments.⁶⁰

Hrant Dink’s Assassination

On January 19, 2007, Hrant Dink, a prominent Armenian-Turkish spokesman for official Turkish recognition of the Armenian massacres in 1915, was assassinated outside the Istanbul office of the bilingual newspaper he edited. Eventually, Ogun Samast, 17, was sentenced to prison for the murder along with Yasin Hayal, a militant Turkish ultranationalist, for instigating the deed. However, the Turkish Heavy Penal Court acquitted 18 other defendants on charges that they were part of a larger conspiracy by an illegal network behind the assassination.

This failure to get to the bottom of the murder has led the surviving Dink family to issue an open letter to the Turkish public and international audience declaring that “since the slaying... the system in Turkey—with its judiciary, security forces, military and civilian bureaucracy, and political institutions—has all but mocked us.” The open letter went on to charge that “while pretending to pursue justice, the criminal alliance called the state re-committed the murder day by day,” concluding that “this alliance is the very crime syndicate that planned the murder and then covered it up... No effective investigation was conducted at any stage of this case. The biggest insult, however, came from the court when it ruled that no organization was involved in the murder.”⁶¹ Although senior members of the ruling AKP government including Turkish president Abdullah Gül expressed disappointment at the ruling and prosecutors filed an appeal, Dink’s case seemed to many yet another example of the Deep State’s continuity and the lack of a genuine commitment to curtail it.⁶²

Ergenekon

During 2013, the continuing Ergenekon⁶³ trials of ultranationalist and retired military officers charged with planning violent campaigns to destabilize the AKP government in Turkey continued.⁶⁴ Indeed, the massive indictment of 2,455 pages described an incredible plot connecting some 86 military, mafia, ultranationalists, lawyers, and academic figures supposedly

attempting to weaken the state’s administration and justify an illegal intervention against the official AKP government. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself was said to be on the alleged hit list, while former president and now more than 90 years old Kenan Evren was briefly placed in the docket. Further arrests of active and retired military officers occurred in February 2010 as a result of the related *Balyoz* (Sledgehammer) Operation. Although critics accused the AKP of simply trying to take revenge on its Kemalist opponents with all these charges, there can be no doubt that the Ergenekon trials represented a powerful blow against elements of the original Deep State. How far this process would go, whether it signified the end of the Deep State, and would further democratization of the state result, remained to be seen.

Indeed, the Ergenekon case has led some observers to claim that the original Deep State has been replaced by a “new civil-Islamist . . . deep state.”⁶⁵ The harsh sentences handed down by the court—including the life sentence against former chief of the general staff General İlker Basbug for supposedly leading the conspiracy—were especially revealing and possibly constituted evidence of this situation. As Nuray Mert’s opinion column in the August 12, 2013 issue of the Turkish daily *Hurriyet* put it: “The ‘deep state’ is dead! Long live the new deep state!”

Conclusion

The Deep State is *not* a specific organization with a specific leader, both of which can be identified. Rather, it is a *mentality* concerning what Kemalist Turkey should be, namely strongly nationalist, statist, secular, and right-wing; not Islamist, multiethnic, reformist, and/or a member of the EU. Members of the military and intelligence branches of the Turkish government in particular, but also those from any other agencies of the government such as the cabinet, parliament, judiciary, bureaucracy, etc., or for that matter outside the government such as business interests, and even religious figures or criminals—anyone who would be motivated by the vision of an ultranationalist state and the need to protect it even at the cost of violating the technical laws of the official State can become a member of the Deep State for particular purposes. Indeed, sometimes someone who might be motivated mostly by pure financial gain such as criminals can become a member. Then when the purpose is completed, that person simply returns to working for the official State or whatever other organization he previously served. Or one could simultaneously “serve” the Deep State for a particular purpose, while at the same time work for the official State in other more mundane capacities.

In this sense of being a subjective, psychological mentality rather than an objective organization that can be specifically identified, the Deep State is even deeper than many have thought because it is in the minds of people. Thus, the only way to dismantle the Deep State would be to convince or reeducate its “members” that Turkey is not the object of some imperialist conspiracy plot to control and even dismember it, that the vision of a genuinely pluralistic democratic Turkey for all its citizens is legitimate and should be defended and promoted according to the laws of the official State. When such a pluralistic democratic mentality genuinely pervades the official Turkish State, the Deep State will have been weakened, the Kurdish problem will more likely have to be solved, and Turkey will become a fit candidate for membership in the EU. This is proving a difficult task, but, as analyzed above, progress toward achieving these goals has been irresistibly set in motion.

Notes

* Portions of this chapter are adapted from Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending*, chapter 6, published in 2011 by Palgrave Macmillan and are reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

1. See Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880–1925* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1989). I published an earlier version of this paper as “Deep State: The Arcane Parallel State in Turkey,” *Orient* 47.3 (2006), pp. 334–348.
2. On this point and its consequences, see Asa Lundgren, *The Unwelcome Neighbour: Turkey’s Kurdish Policy* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007).
3. For further analysis of this situation, see Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997); Michael M. Gunter, “The Connection between Turkey’s Intelligence Community and Organized Crime,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 11 (Summer 1998), pp. 119–141.
4. On the development of the modern Republic of Turkey, see Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 2nd edn. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Erik Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 2nd edn. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997).
5. “Government and Opposition United over the Semdinli Affair,” *Briefing* (Ankara), November 28, 2005, p. 2.
6. For background, see the proceedings of the ninth annual international conference of the EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC), “The Kurdish Question in Turkey: Time to Renew the Dialogue and Resume Direct Negotiations,” December 5–6, 2012, European Parliament, Brussels, Belgium. For some of these proceedings, see <http://www.mesop.de>

7. The Copenhagen Criteria require that EU candidates should have achieved “the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities... as well as a functioning market economy.” Copenhagen European Council, “Conclusions of the Presidency,” June 21–22, 1993.
8. For a recent background analysis, see Michael M. Gunter, “Turkey’s Floundering EU Candidacy and Its Kurdish Problem,” *Middle East Policy* 14 (Spring 2007), pp. 117–123.
9. The following discussion and citations are taken from Howard Eissenstat, “A War on Dissent in Turkey,” Human Right Now, <http://blog.amnestyusa.org/waronterror> . . . , November 4, 2011, accessed on November 13, 2011.
10. For an analysis of conspiracy theories in the Middle East, see Daniel Pipes, *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).
11. Metin Heper, *The State and Kurds in Turkey: The Question of Assimilation* (Houndmills, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 50–51.
12. Ronald Grigor Suny, “Writing Genocide: The Fate of the Ottoman Armenians,” in Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Muge Gocek, and Norman M. Naimark (eds.) *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 37 and Taner Akcam, *The Young Turks’ Crime against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
13. On Agca’s attempt to assassinate the Pope and the supposed Soviet hand behind it, see Claire Sterling, *The Time of the Assassins: Anatomy of an Investigation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983) and Paul B. Henze, *The Plot to Assassinate the Pope* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1985). For a conflicting opinion, see Edward S. Herman and Frank Brodhead, *The Rise and Fall of the Bulgarian Connection* (New York: Sheridan Square Publications, 1986). Stephen E. Tabachnick has written an insightful critique of all three of these books in “Redefining Reality,” *American Book Review* (January/February 1987), pp. 9–10. Some even see the hand of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) working surreptitiously to blacken the Soviet image.
14. Cited in “The Man Who Shot [the] Pope and Other Men Who Shot Other Men,” *Briefing*, January 23, 2006, p. 4.
15. For recent background on the Kurdish problem in Turkey and the PKK, see Mustafa Cosar Unal, *Counterterrorism in Turkey: Policy Choices and Policy Effects toward the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012); Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden (eds.) *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey*, 2nd edn. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

16. Michael M. Gunter, "We Are Fighting Turks Everywhere," *Middle East Quarterly* 5 (June 1998), pp. 79–85. Some have even argued that the PKK itself is part of the Deep State. See, for example, "Dark Forces Hidden Behind the State?" *Briefing*, November 21, 2005, p. 9. Although it is likely that the Turkish State and PKK have had to bargain indirectly over the years, given the bitterness of their conflict and the strict way Öcalan has been imprisoned since his capture in February 1999, the present author finds suggestions of Deep State–PKK cooperation misleading and highly unlikely.
17. Gareth Jones, "Bombing Throws Spotlight on Turkey," *Turkish Daily News*, November 20, 2005.
18. See, for example, Michael M. Gunter and M. Hakan Yavuz, "Turkish Paradox: Progressive Islamists versus Reactionary Secularists," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 16 (Fall 2007), pp. 289–301.
19. Cited in "Government Adopts Military Thinking Despite Spattering of Appeals for Common Sense," *Briefing* (Turkey), November 15, 1993, p. 6.
20. The following discussion and citations are taken from "Turkey's National Security Policy under Debate," *Briefing*, October 31–November 7, 2005, pp. 9–11.
21. Although JITEM was supposedly established in the mid-1970s to implement covert operations against terrorist organizations, the Turkish government still officially denies its existence. A court in Diyarbakir, Turkey, however, recently mentioned JITEM in relationship to ten ex-PKK informers and thus seemingly confirmed its existence. Former Gendarmerie commander, General Teoman Koman, however, claimed that certain people simply use JITEM as a cover for their illegal activities. "Judiciary Say 'JITEM' Aloud for the First Time," *New Anatolian* (Turkey), February 18, 2006.
22. See Martin van Bruinessen, "Turkey's Death Squads," *Middle East Report* 199 (April–June 1996), p. 22.
23. See the interview with Avni Ozgurel, *Radikal* (Turkey), October 27, 2003.
24. The following discussion is largely based on "Letters to MIT Reveal Illegal Activities of Criminal Networks in Turkish Military," *Today's Zaman*, January 13, 2013, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-303865-letters-to>, accessed on January 23, 2013.
25. The most recent (2012) Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, as provided for by the US International Religious Freedom Act, also expressed concern regarding religious minorities in Turkey. This report reclassified Turkey from its "Watch List" to its worst category as being a "Country of Particular Concern" based on what it viewed as the deteriorating conditions of religious freedom in Turkey. US Commission on International Religious Freedom, *International Religious Freedom Annual Report 2012*, pp. 205ff., <http://www.uscirf.gov>, accessed on February 15, 2013.
26. For background, see Ismet G. Imset, "News Analysis: Who Really Controls the Kurdish Hezbollah?" *Turkish Daily News*, September 7, 1993 and Ismet G. Imset, "Is There a 'Nationalist' Connection to the Killings?" *Turkish Daily News*, September 8, 1993.

27. The following discussion is largely based on Lucy Komisar, "Turkey's Terrorists: A CIA Legacy Lives On," *The Progressive*, April 1997, pp. 24–27; an editorial published in the Turkish daily *Milliyet* (Turkey), November 8, 1996; and "Government and Opposition United over the Semdinli Affair," *Briefing*, November 28, 2005, p. 3.
28. Cited in Komisar, "CIA Legacy Lives On."
29. Cited in Komisar, "CIA Legacy Lives On."
30. "Semdinli: The Burning Flame of Suspicion," *Briefing*, November 14, 2005, p. 11.
31. For background, see Michael M. Gunter, "Political Instability in Turkey during the 1970s," *Conflict Quarterly* 9 (Winter 1989), pp. 63–77.
32. Ismet G. Imset, "Terrorist Acts in Southeast Detailed," *Turkish Daily News*, May 27, 1992.
33. In addition to the two Imset articles cited in note 26 above, see Martin van Bruinessen, "Turkey's Death Squads," *Middle East Report* 199 (April–June 1996), pp. 20–23.
34. Cited in "The Southeast on a Hidden Agenda," *Briefing*, November 25, 1996, p. 8.
35. Stephen Kinzer, "Turkey Accused of Arming Terrorist Group," *New York Times*, February 15, 2000 and Yahya Kocoglu, "Hizbullah: The Susurluk of the Southeast," *Turkish Daily News*, January 27, 2000.
36. For a fuller analysis of Susurluk, see Michael M. Gunter, "The Connection between Turkey's Intelligence Community and Organized Crime," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 11 (Summer 1998), pp. 119–141. The following, much briefer discussion is largely based on this earlier source.
37. Cited in "Susurluk: A Year of Fading Dreams," *Briefing*, October 27, 1997, p. 5.
38. Cited in "Demirel: Probe Links but Go Easy on State," *Turkish Daily News*, November 8, 1996.
39. Cited in Kelly Couturier, "Turkish Scandal Exposes Links between Crime, State Officials," *Washington Post*, January 1, 1997, p. A21.
40. Cited in Stephen Kinzer, "Turkish Car Crash Yields Debris of Death and Terror," *New York Times*, December 10, 1996, p. A1. In April 1997, Türkeş died of a stroke at the age of 80.
41. The following data are largely based on "Susurluk Back on the Street," *Briefing*, April 7, 1997, pp. 1, 3; M. Akif Beki, "Whose Report Is This?" *Turkish Daily News*, April 4, 1997; and Stephen Kinzer, "Turkish Panel Links Killings to Authorities," *New York Times*, April 8, 1997.
42. The following data were largely taken from "Susurluk Report Set to Protect Not Reveal," *Briefing*, January 19, 1998, pp. 7–8; Kemal Bal, "Gangs Almost Got Hold of State," *Turkish Daily News*, January 24, 1998; and Stephen Kinzer, "Former Turkish Governments Linked to Assassinations," *New York Times*, January 26, 1998.
43. However, a subsequent report indicated that "Yesil" might still be alive and that his son, Murat Yildirim, had been apprehended. "Bearded," "Terminator,"

- and “Mehmet Kirmizi” were other names “Yesil” supposedly used. “Police Say ‘Yesil’ Still Alive,” *New Anatolian*, February 19, 2006.
44. Heydar Aliyev, a former member of the politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was reputedly targeted by Çatlı and his associates because he opposed a drug smuggling route through Baku to the West. The coup against Aliyev was foiled only when Turkish President Suleyman Demirel tipped him off. Hugh Pope, “Turkish Probe Links Old Government to Death Squads,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 26, 1998.
 45. Cited in “Susurluk: Yilmaz Hopes Not Reflected,” *Briefing*, October 20, 1997, p. 4.
 46. For some of the following details, see Jon Gorvett, “Turkey’s ‘Deep State’ Surfaces in Former President’s Words, Deeds in Kurdish Town,” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* MRMEA, February 7, 2006.
 47. Cited in “Semdinli Proves Tougher Than Meets the Eye,” *Briefing*, December 5, 2005, p. 11. Büyükanıt had served as the chief commander in the region from 1997 to 2000.
 48. “Government and Opposition United over the Semdinli Affair,” *Briefing*, November 28, 2005, p. 2.
 49. “Semdinli Investigation Leads to Nowhere,” *Briefing*, April 3, 2006, p. 10. Also see Pelin Turgut, “Senior General Stoked Kurdish Conflict To Keep Turkey Out of EU,” *The Independent* (UK), March 8, 2006.
 50. Cited in “Government Suffers Humiliating Defeat in Putting the Semdinli Probe on the Right Course,” *Briefing*, March 27, 2006, p. 2.
 51. Cited in *Hurriyet* (Turkey), March 8, 2006.
 52. The following data were taken from Sitki Yildiz, “Semdinli Gang Protected by Top Officers,” <zaman.com>, July 20, 2006.
 53. “European Commission Hints at ‘Semdinli Hierarchy,’” *Briefing*, June 26, 2006, p. 4.
 54. “EU on Turkey’s Case in Semdinli,” *Briefing*, November 28, 2005, p. 8.
 55. Cited in “Semdinli Investigation Leads to Nowhere.”
 56. Cited in “Semdinli Commission’s Report on the Turkish 9/11 Aims to Shelve the Case for the Time Being,” *Briefing*, April 17, 2006, p. 2.
 57. Cited in Gareth Jones, “Bombing Throws Spotlight on Turkey’s ‘Deep State,’” *L’Express Outlook*, November 22, 2005.
 58. “My Name Is State, Deep State,” *New Anatolian*, April 19, 2005. Demirel repeated his claim in Yusuf Kanli and Goksel Bozkurt, “Demirel: Deep State Is the Military,” *Turkish Daily News*, February 12, 2007.
 59. Cited in “Former President Says There Are Two States in Turkey,” *Guncel* (Turkey), November 16, 2005.
 60. “Government and Opposition United over the Semdinli Affair,” *Briefing*, November 28, 2005, p. 2.
 61. Cited in Yavuz Baydar, “Family Boycotts Retrial for Murder of Turkish-Armenian Journalist,” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, September 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/family-slain>, accessed September 27, 2013.

62. Sebnem Arsu, “Thousands in Turkey Protest Verdict in Journalist’s Murder,” *New York Times*, January 19, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/20/world/europe/in-turkey-thousands>, accessed on February 13, 2013.
63. The term “Ergenekon” refers to the Turks’ legendary ancestral homeland in Asia.
64. For background, see Frank Hyland, “Investigation of Turkey’s ‘Deep State’ Ergenekon Plot Spreads to Military,” *Terrorism Focus* 5.26 (Jamestown Foundation), July 16, 2008 and Gareth Jenkins, “Murky Past of Turkey’s Gendarmerie Intelligence Emerges in Ergenekon Investigation,” *Terrorism Monitor* 6.17 (Jamestown Foundation), September 4, 2008.
65. The following data were taken from Arad Nir, “Turkish-Israeli Military Ties Damaged by Ergenekon Trial,” *Al-Monitor Israel Pulse*, August 22, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/turkish-general-prison-israel.html>, accessed on August 25, 2013.

CHAPTER 2

Iraq, Arab Nationalism, and Obstacles to Democratic Transition

Ozum Yesiltas

Introduction

Ten years after the forcible removal of Saddam Hussein's regime, there is still a lot of controversy over the prospects for democracy in Iraq. Although the twentieth century witnessed several periods of democratic experiment in Iraq under the administration of both the monarchical and republican governments, the focus on a unified sense of Iraqi nationalism built around a distinctly Arab narrative remained largely unchanged. In the context of the multiethnic character of Iraqi society, the predominance of the Arab nationalist discourse led to the establishment of a contentious relationship between the state and non-Arab minorities, particularly the Kurds, who form the second largest ethnic group in the country after the Arabs.

The three-way population split between the Kurdish north, Sunni center, and Shia south persisted as one of the most important characteristics of Iraq since the forcible amalgamation of three Ottoman provinces—Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra—after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.¹ The multiethnic and multi-sect structure of the newly created Iraqi state in the wake of World War I played a significant role in laying the foundations of authoritarian rule in the country. Favored by the British mandatory authorities, the Sunni minority found repression as the most effective strategy for maintaining political power over larger Shia and Kurdish populations.²

Although both the Shia and Kurdish groups were exposed to oppressive government treatment particularly during the Baathist regime, given the

fact that Arab nationalism was defined as the primary pillar of the regime's ideological legitimacy, the distinction between Kurds and Arabs appeared more intractable than the divide between Sunni and Shia sectarian groups.³ From the early beginnings of the Iraqi state, both the ruling Arab Sunni elites and their British patrons recognized the fragmented nature of Iraqi society. Therefore, promotion of an all-encompassing nationalism that would narrow the dislocations between the disparate communities of Iraq became a critical task to ensure stability and effective governance. Hard-pressed to rule Iraq without sparking the resentment of at least one of the two other major constituting groups, the Sunni minority promoted Arab nationalism as the main principle of national unity. This policy inevitably implied the recognition of Shia Iraqis—who shared Arab identification with Sunni Arabs—as representing the next rung on the social ladder, thus pushing the Kurds down to the bottom of the hierarchy.⁴

The inclination of the authorities in Baghdad to see any compromise with the Kurds as the beginning of a perilous process, which will culminate in eventual Kurdish secession, resulted in the constant perception of the Kurdish question as a national security threat by successive Iraqi governments. The enduring capacity of the Kurdish movement to revive and challenge the regime through armed struggle at various times throughout the twentieth century has only hardened this perspective. Furthermore, the suspicious view of the Kurds gradually provoked determination to eradicate all non-Arab presence in the north that was perceived to be an unstable area that threatens the territorial integrity of the country. The end result was that the Iraqi state's dealings with the Kurdish question took its toll not only on the attempts at moving toward democratic ideals and practices, but also on the rights of other minorities through the extension of discriminatory practices to other non-Arab groups in the country.

The Legacy of Mandatory Iraq

The mandatory period was a defining era for Iraq in many ways. The British idea of the state was mainly based upon the processes of state formation embedded in the Western European political developments from the nineteenth century onwards. The inhabitants of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul had to contend with this idea after these three provinces were occupied by the British by the end of 1918, which laid the foundations for the establishment of the state of Iraq. In his account of state making in Europe, Charles Tilly emphasizes the central place of force in governmental activity as a strategy to eliminate potential local rivals and popular resistance to authority. In this

respect, Tilly underscores the use of two effective strategies by the European governments for state consolidation: (1) extending their officialdom to the local community and (2) encouraging the creation of the police forces that were subordinate to the government rather than to individual patrons.⁵

Within this framework, in the early years of the Iraqi state, creation of an Iraqi army to protect the monarchy and maintain internal order during the lengthy process of institution building became of paramount importance for the British. However, it was also recognized that coercion alone might not guarantee state endurance in the long run and the acceptance by the populace of state governing structures was crucial to preserve survival and stability. Therefore, building consensus and unity within Iraq and particularly ensuring the integration of the Kurdish north and the Shia south into the national project formed the other main pillar of the state formation strategy adopted by the British and the Sunni ruling elite.

The nation-building project in Iraq was initially founded upon the construction of civic institutions and representative governance for the incorporation of disparate groups into one body politic through constitutional design. However, the problem arose when the primary driving force ordering the discussions regarding the creation of modern Iraq turned out to reflect not the domestic concerns and issues of the peoples of Iraq, but rather the concerns over the protection of Britain's post-war economic and political interests. The British agenda was preoccupied by the management of Britain's imperial territories in a time of severe financial and military weakness following World War I and the difficulties involved in administering troublesome territories, such as Mesopotamia and Kurdistan.⁶ Under these conditions, establishment of an Arab government capable of protecting Britain's interests at the least possible cost to the British taxpayer was viewed as the most viable strategy.⁷

To this end, the Hashemite Emir Faisal was offered the job of ruling Iraq due to the good relations he enjoyed with the British officials based on the experience of the Arab revolt against the Ottomans during World War I. Furthermore, because of his history of leading the Arab resistance toward Ottoman rule, he was regarded as a popular figure with authority in the Arab world and expected to foster unity between Sunni and Shia. Nonetheless, the choice of Faisal was not met with the unanimous approval that the British hoped for. The Shia and the Kurds were distinctly unimpressed by a non-Iraqi Sunni monarch. Aware of his limited support base in Iraq, Faisal had little choice but to staff his government with the predominantly Sunni Arab nationalists who had served under him during the Arab revolt. This situation marked the beginning in the Iraqi state of the

prevalence of Arab Sunnis in key positions of legislative, executive, judicial, and military affairs.⁸

The reestablishment of the old Sunni-dominated order of Ottoman times in the new state of Iraq was hardly surprising. The Shia-dominated revolt of 1920 against the British rule in Iraq put the Shia Arabs largely at odds with the British desire to maintain internal stability through a centralizing political authority that was amenable to British demands and dictates. The Kurds, who comprised the bulk of the population of the Mosul province, were even more troublesome for the state-building process and the British policy of Arabizing the regime. While the sectarian question in Iraq was mainly a problem of underrepresentation of the Shia within the organs of the state, the ethnic question was creating a larger problem because of the competing claims of the Kurds to a nation-state of their own. The Shia were encouraged to subscribe to the notion of being “Iraqis” through the establishment of a monarchy that is Arab in composition and orientation. The same cannot be said for the Kurds whose grievance was the creation of the state of Iraq itself, which undermined Kurdish attempts to secure autonomy or independence after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

In their attempt to resolve the position of the Kurds in Mosul, the British initially considered establishing autonomous provinces in the Kurdish areas that could be loosely attached to the Arab administration.⁹ However, it soon became clear that Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji, a Kurdish tribal leader who was appointed as the governor of Sulaymaniyah, had larger ambitions for the Kurds in the region more generally than the British authorities were willing to countenance.¹⁰ Sheikh Mahmud’s attempts to extend his authority beyond the territorial limits set by the British resulted in a Kurdish revolt in 1919 that was quickly suppressed by the British. However, this was only the beginning of the outbursts of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq that would remain a perennial problem for successive Iraqi governments throughout the twentieth century.

What further complicated the Kurdish problem was the status of the Mosul province that had substantial oil deposits. After World War I, Turkey, Britain, and the Kurds had conflicting claims over Mosul. King Faisal was determined to achieve unification in Iraq and build a strong state and he did not believe that was possible without having control of Mosul. The British, in general, were more sensitive to the Kurdish cultural and political demands than the Arab government. However, they were primarily motivated by oil concessions and the economic importance of the Kurdish areas to the future of Iraq they created. The British, therefore, perceived the Kurds as a disintegrative force in the context of the more important goal of attaching Mosul to the newly emerging Iraqi state.¹¹

The settlement of the Mosul question in 1926 eventually marked the incorporation of the Kurdish inhabitants of this province into the new Iraqi state. Since then, the unrest in the Kurdish areas was perceived as a direct threat to the successive governments' objective of consolidating state control over valuable oil resources that were seen as imperative to the stability and prosperity of Iraq. From the 1920s onwards, this perception paved the way for the development of policies of forced displacement and Arabization of northern Iraq that affected not only the Kurds but also the other non-Arab inhabitants of the region.

The mandatory period made a lasting impact on the political development in Iraq particularly in two respects. The first was to put into effect the project to create a nation-state that would amalgamate the country's diverse peoples into a coherent whole. The second was the Arabization of the government that manifested itself as the strategy of favoring Sunni Arabs as the main shareholders of administrative power. Thus, the British strategy of integrating the peoples of the new state paradoxically resulted in the deepening of the societal divisions along ethno-sectarian lines because of the empowerment of one group over the others. This situation generated a state structure that was less a system of government than a means of control and resulted in the continued communalization of political life. As the dominant Sunni elite failed to integrate the Shia south and especially the Kurdish north into the main body politic, the determination of the center to dominate the provinces increasingly required the threat of superior force. A strong army was seen as vital for a strong central state that led to the rise of the military in the political life of Iraq and laid the foundations for authoritarian rule in the country in the decades to come.

Monarchical Period and the Consolidation of Arab Nationalism

Throughout the monarchical rule, and into the first years of the republican period, the ethno-sectarian societal structure and the idea of democracy were bound to clash in Iraq. The problem was that the project of building a strong central government in order to maintain unity in a socially fractured society remained in conflict with the goal of creating representative institutions which was vital for legitimizing the order in the eyes of the existing communities, but by definition would constrain governmental action.¹² The Hashemite monarchical government succeeded in building a strong central government, but failed, for the most part, in ensuring legitimacy because of the reluctance of the governing elite to cede power in a truly meaningful way that would assure the diverse communities that their identities and interests were fully respected. Accordingly, the belief in the need for coercion

to achieve the discipline and unity required was consistently strengthened. Over reliance on coercion in turn further undermined legitimacy, creating a sort of vicious cycle between the holders of state power and the diverse society they ruled over.

After Iraq gained its independence in 1932, two major phenomena became prominent in Iraqi politics throughout the monarchical period: (1) the rise of nationalist and anti-British political unrest, characterized by a pan-Arab orientation among the members of the modern middle stratum, and (2) transformation of this unrest into a central element of the political arena that led to successive coups by army officers that continued into the early years of the republic.¹³ The consequence was the intertwining of pan-Arab nationalist trends with a great admiration for the army that became the symbol of national power and unity and constituted the mainstay of the Iraqi state against the tribal and ethnic threat from within.¹⁴

After Iraq became an independent state, Arab nationalism provided a response to both the tensions regarding the relations with the mandatory colonial powers as well as the acute identity distresses in society. Controversies over pan-Arabism versus Iraqi patriotism, republicanism versus monarchism led to instability and a number of attempted coups within the monarchy. By the mid-1950s, Arab nationalism emerged triumphant from its competition with other ideologies and became an important ideological force that was bringing Sunnis and Shias together. Although the Shia grievances concerning the Sunni domination of Iraqi politics prevailed, by the end of the 1950s, the Shia were gradually getting integrated into Iraq's body politics and beginning to come to terms with the idea of functioning Iraqi citizens.

What was enabling the Iraqi state to strive for breaking down the sectarian barriers was the same ideological force that was deepening the Arab-Kurdish divide. As a group alienated ethnically from the rest of the society, the Kurds continued to stage revolts against the central authorities under the monarchy that strengthened the pan-Arabists' perception of the Kurds as an impediment to their political objectives.

The most important development of the monarchical period was undoubtedly the foundation and rise to maturity of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Iraq.¹⁵ The 1930s marked the awakening of national consciousness among the first generation of secular educated and urban Kurds in Iraq who began to develop ideas of how best to secure specifically Kurdish identity and interests within the given framework of the Iraqi state.¹⁶ These new urban and intellectual nationalists challenged the dominance of traditional notables of Kurdistan, yet were aware of the power of tribal leaders in Kurdish society. When the British and the Hashemite attempted to penetrate Kurdistan with modern direct rule and replace tribal governance

with more bureaucratic but Arabized administration, some of the tribal notables, determined to defend their privileges, made common cause with the new urbanized and professionalized Kurds who had different grievances and agendas.¹⁷ This model led to the emergence of the KDP, under the leadership of a traditional notable, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, and a range of urban intellectuals, notably Ibrahim Ahmed and Jalal Talabani.

Barzani was expelled from Iraq to Iran in October 1945 after the collapse of the negotiations between the KDP and the Iraqi state in the aftermath of the Kurdish revolt of 1943. The failure of the Iraqi army to suppress the 1943 revolt, however, reinforced the view that a strong army is vital in order to hold the Kurds in check. Barzani played a significant role in the establishment of the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in Iran in 1945–1946. After the fall of the Mahabad Republic in December 1946, Barzani went to the Soviet Union and stayed there until the collapse of the monarchy in Iraq in 1958.

Revolutionary Iraq and Attempts to Find a Democratic Solution to the Kurdish Problem

The revolution of July 14, 1958 and Iraq's transition to a republican state made many believe that the new government would establish a truly democratic regime. The revolution also promised a more hopeful era for the Kurds who welcomed the new government in the belief that it would be sympathetic to their cause. However, an almost schizophrenic attitude toward democracy in general and the Kurdish question in particular continued to exist among Iraq's rulers. This was evident from the revolutionary government's uneven march toward establishing a democratic republic where Kurdish nationalism and cultural rights are recognized, only to deny Kurdish identity again and employ new strategies of assimilation and control due to concerns for personal status and Arab nationalist influences.

The new Iraqi president, General Abd al-Karim Qasim, legalized the KDP, welcomed Mulla Mustafa Barzani on his return from the Soviet Union, and authorized the publication of 14 Kurdish journals.¹⁸ Qasim and his leftist supporters promoted an Iraqi-first identity tied to *wataniyya* nationalism and tried to create a sense of Iraqiness based on Kurdish–Arab fraternity. The new constitution stated that “Arabs and Kurds are partners in the Iraqi homeland and their national rights are recognized within the Iraqi state.”¹⁹ These inclusive discourses and policies of the government gave the Kurdish nationalist leaders and organizations influence in Iraqi politics, and encouraged a constructive relationship between the Kurds and the state elite.²⁰

Rising Kurdish nationalist sentiment, however, coupled with the growing salience of the communist movement in Iraq, quickly intensified the power struggle between Qasim and his supporters and opponents. Within a year after the 1958 revolution, the brief political opening, and the left-leaning, pro-Kurdish agenda of Qasim were under attack by the US-led noncommunist bloc, pan-Arab military factions, and regional Arab states. Upon pressures coming from the Arab nationalists and the military, the strategies of assimilation and control resumed in the form of arrests and closing down of Kurdish organizations and replacement of the Iraqi-first discourse with a renewed emphasis on Arab nationalism.

In these circumstances, relations between the Kurds and the state rapidly deteriorated. Fighting broke out in 1961 that was to be the start of a prolonged conflict that continued intermittently until 1975. KDP forces achieved notable successes against the Iraqi army that had little chance of winning in the mountainous terrain of Kurdistan. Yet, it was equally difficult for the Kurds to achieve a decisive victory. As the war in the north became protracted, Qasim's government became increasingly viewed as weak and ineffective and he was held responsible by the Arab nationalists for allowing Mulla Mustafa to return to Iraq and destabilize Kurdistan again.

Qasim's government was overthrown by the Baathists and Arab nationalist military figures on February 8, 1963. For the Baathists, no agreement with Mulla Mustafa or recognition of Kurdish nationalist demands was possible. Like Qasim, they initially reaffirmed the partnership between Kurds and Arabs in Iraq, only to buy time needed to prepare the army for another round and launch a new offensive in Kurdistan as soon as June 1963. However, the first Baathist government did not last long. On November 18, 1963, President Marshal Abdul Salam Arif announced that the military would take control of the country and dismissed the Baathists from their posts that put Iraq under military rule for the next five years.²¹

Before the Baathists made their ultimate comeback in 1968 to rule Iraq for the next 35 years, the last window of opportunity to find a democratic solution to the Kurdish question emerged in 1966 under the leadership of Abd al-Rahman al-Bazzaz, the first civilian prime minister of Iraq since the collapse of monarchy in 1958. While the military officers still held the more powerful presidency and other important government posts, the appointment of Bazzaz appeared as a move from the military-ruled regime to devolve some power to civilians.²² Bazzaz himself was an Arab nationalist ideologue, but he recognized the centrality of the Kurdish question to the country's progress and attempted to initiate negotiations for a peaceful

solution. On June 29, 1966, Bazzaz declared a 12-point offer to the Kurds that was accepted by Mulla Mustafa as the declaration fulfilled nearly all Kurdish demands. It recognized the binational character of the Iraqi state with full acknowledgment of Kurdish nationality. The Kurdish language was accepted as an official language along with Arabic in the provinces that were predominantly Kurdish. The declaration also promised decentralization with freely elected administrative councils and proportional representation for Kurds in central government as well as establishment of a parliamentary system of government in Iraq within a year.²³

The Bazzaz Declaration was a crucial initiative in terms of fulfilling the twin requirements whereby the Kurdish question in Iraq could be resolved: establishment of autonomy for the Kurds and an electoral parliamentary democracy for all of Iraq.²⁴ Nonetheless, the triumph of Bazzaz was short lived given the military rulers' rejection of any concession to Kurdish demands and the fears that peace with the Kurds would remove justification for current military expenditure and open the way for al-Bazzaz to cut the military budget.²⁵ As considerable hostility toward the Bazzaz government grew among the officer corps, President Arif felt obliged to dismiss Bazzaz in August 1966. With his departure, the best chance for both the Kurds and a democratic republican Iraq disappeared.

The Rise of the Baathists and Forced Displacement and Arabization of Northern Iraq

The rapid turnover of governments in Iraq since independence suggested that although the successive coups have always taken place through an alliance between the military and various political groupings, it would always be the military that would ultimately monopolize power in the state. As was the case with the coup in 1963, the coup of July 17, 1968 again arose from cooperation between a diverse group of military officers and the Baath Party. This time, however, the Baath Party leadership took measures to secure the new regime from the threat of military coups by incorporating the officers into the state patronage system and turning the army into an expanded party militia. The new regime, then, turned to the task of eliminating other challenges it faced in the internal field, foremost among which was the Kurdish question.

The Baath Party offered the Kurds in March 1970 the most far-reaching autonomy agreement yet seen in Iraq, which was the direct result of the long struggle waged by the Kurdish armed forces in Kurdistan. As the military campaigns had gone badly for the Iraqi army, the government in Baghdad

had decided, as Abd al-Rahman al-Bazzaz had before them, that for Iraq to become strong, the Kurds had to be accommodated and decisively brought into the national fold.²⁶ The Kurds were troublesome particularly in the context of the Baath determination to take “full” control of the country as well as the concerns that the war in the north would undoubtedly strengthen the hand of the non-Baathist officers in the armed forces, who still constituted a potential source of threat to the regime.²⁷

The 1970 agreement, however, was never implemented and the fighting resumed in 1974 following the government’s unilateral declaration of an autonomy decree that did not include the proposals put forward by the KDP. The main friction during the negotiations derived from concerns over the territorial extent of the Kurdish autonomous area which was to be determined through a population census according to the Article 14 of the March 1970 Agreement.²⁸ Baghdad was determined to ensure that the major oil-producing areas of Kirkuk and Mosul remained outside Kurdish control. For the Iraqi government, Kurdish control over oil fields will give the Kurds the economic power to expand their autonomy to actual independence, which would, in turn, threaten the territorial integrity of Iraq. The government’s failure to implement this part of the agreement aggravated the Kurds’ mistrust of the government which was further deepened by a number of assassination attempts against Barzani during 1971 and the government’s deliberate efforts to change the ethnic composition of the Kirkuk area by encouraging Arab families to move to the north.

One of the important characteristics of the Kurdish–Baath negotiation period during 1970–1974 was the intensification of the government’s “Arabization” policy. The regime was in fact attempting to make demographic changes in the north by moving Arabs to Kirkuk as early as May 1971. In the wake of the 1974 autonomy decree, many Kurdish villages in Kirkuk were bulldozed, and new Arab settlements were built nearby.²⁹ Kurdish government officials were transferred to areas outside the Kirkuk Governorate and replaced with Arab civil servants and workers and Arabic names were given to Kurdish neighborhoods, schools, streets and markets.³⁰

The Arabization policy of the government primarily targeted the Kurds, but was not limited to them. When the regime felt satisfied that it had rid itself of the Kurds, it turned to Turkoman and Assyrian populations in Kirkuk in an effort to wipe out all non-Arab presence in the north. The policy of oppression and discrimination extended even to the long-time Arab inhabitants of the region, that is, those who had been living there before the migration of the “Arab new-comers.”³¹ Over a ten-year period between 1976 and 1986, an estimated 4,500 villages in Iraqi Kurdistan were systematically razed with several hundred thousands of their inhabitants becoming

internally displaced with the purpose of ensuring an Arab majority in key oil-rich areas and creating a buffer zone between government-controlled areas and those controlled by Kurdish opposition forces.³²

The fighting of 1974–1975 resulted in the collapse of the Kurdish revolt in March 1975 following the Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq which put an end to direct Iranian military assistance to Barzani and the KDP. However, the outbreak of Iran–Iraq war in 1980 reestablished the Kurdish–Iranian alliance and provided the Kurds with a renewed opportunity to consolidate their hold in Kurdistan after the defeat in 1975. By early 1987, the military successes of the Kurds in alliance with Iran greatly alarmed Saddam Hussein who feared for the survival of the regime. The government’s response to the Kurdish threat led to the most notorious policy in the modern history of Iraq during 1987–1989, known as the al-Anfal campaign, which resulted in the death of likely well over 100,000 civilians in Kurdistan through the use of chemical and neurological weapons.³³

The Anfal campaign represented a shift in the governmental measures to deal with dissent from forced displacement and Arabization to genocidal actions. During the village clearances of 1987–1988, the inhabitants of the north who took refuge in the Kurdish-controlled areas were all at risk of summary execution by government forces.³⁴ Furthermore, the national census of October 17, 1987, which was conducted specifically to determine the target group for destruction, offered only two options for the registration of nationality: Arab or Kurdish. This was particularly problematic for the minorities who were largely based in Kurdistan such as the Assyrians, the Chaldean Christians, Turkomans, and Yezidis. Those who refused to register as Arabs were automatically designated as Kurds. When the Anfal campaign was launched several months later, these minorities suffered the same fate as their Kurdish neighbors.

The Anfal campaign was essentially a manifestation of Baathist rule’s perfection of the machine of authoritarianism in Iraq that was already established and consolidated by previous regimes to varying degrees.³⁵ Nonetheless, the relationship between the Kurds and the state took a different turn when the Kurds gained *de facto* autonomy following Saddam’s defeat in the 1991 Gulf War and the subsequent unilateral declaration by the United States, United Kingdom and France to create a “no-fly zone” over northern Iraq in April 1991. The campaign to wipe out all the non-Arab characteristics of the Kirkuk region, however, continued right up to the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime in April 2003. Between 1991 and up to May 2002, an estimated 120,000 Kurds, Turkomans, and Assyrians have been expelled to the Kurdish-controlled northern provinces, although other estimates place the figure closer to 140,000.³⁶

The American Occupation, Regime Change, and Its Aftermath

From 1991 to 2003, the de facto autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Iraq developed strong economic and administrative capacity. Following the American invasion of Iraq and toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, the Kurdish north experienced relative stability and certain levels of development.³⁷ In the context of the new power-sharing system established in Iraq following the approval of 2005 constitution, this asymmetrical growth largely influenced center–periphery relations by strengthening the Kurdistan Region's political power in relation to the state and increasing leverage on the central government to accommodate Kurdish demands.³⁸ This situation inevitably revitalized the Arab–Kurdish animosity and the perception of the Kurds as a threat to the stability and territorial integrity of the country.

The constitution that was adopted in Iraq in 2005, besides recognizing the legal status of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), set up a decentralized federation and put forward a very progressive framework of democratic governance, civil rights, and freedoms. However, the question of how to structure a federation that can alleviate rather than exacerbate ethnic and religious divisions remained to be a challenging task. In this respect, the Kurdish–Arab divide came into the open once more as a major problem facing Iraq and the future of its stability and democratic development. Deep divisions between the two sides regarding the future shape of Iraq and the composition of the new government soon became apparent after the first parliamentary elections in January 2005. While the Kurds desired a loose federation, many Shia and most Sunni Arabs called for a tight-knit Arab Iraq with a strong central government.³⁹ The end result was that the ethnic struggle between the Arabs and the Kurds transformed into a struggle that pits “centralists” against “regionalists” in a confrontation to determine how power is to be structured in Iraq.⁴⁰

Much of the contention arises from the status of Kirkuk and other disputed territories and the KRG's desire to be autonomous in managing its own internal affairs, particularly the management of its own oil resources. Baghdad believes that annexation of Kirkuk to the Kurdistan Region and allowing the Kurds to make separate oil deals would threaten Iraq's territorial integrity and pave the way for the partition of the country. These concerns increasingly crystallized the discrepancy between the centralization policy of the Baghdad government, headed by Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, and the autonomy aspirations of the Kurdish region in the aftermath of the 2010 parliamentary elections. Maliki has become increasingly critical of the constitution and advocates that the constitution needs to be amended to diminish the power of the KRG and to resurrect the centralized authority

of Baghdad.⁴¹ This crisis between Baghdad and Erbil put the fragile democracy in Iraq under threat and revealed worrying signs that the country may be sliding back to authoritarian rule.

Prime Minister Maliki's authoritarian policies were in fact slowly unfolding since the beginning of his first term in office in 2006, particularly his attempts to fill the ranks of the security and intelligence services with his loyalists and to create constitutionally unregulated structures to bypass the parliamentary approval requirements for the selection of top officers. The parliament's failure to dispose of or check him through the constitution's provisions for parliamentary oversight of executive actions has a crucial role in paving the way for Iraq's drift back toward authoritarian rule. By the second parliamentary election in March 2010, the Iraqi leaders in the parliament were in a position to apply a legislative check on the growing power of the executive and unseat the prime minister and stop authoritarianism. Numerically, the Kurds, the Sunni-based al-Iraqiyya (Iraqi National Movement) and the Shia bloc National Iraqi Alliance had the power to form a grand coalition that is capable of approving a new prime minister. However, the Kurds refrained mainly because of their reluctance to support a prime ministerial nominee from al-Iraqiyya which had a strong anti-Kurd sentiment. Thus, despite their desire for change in leadership in Baghdad, the Kurds chose to allow Maliki's reelection for the sake of advancing issues central to the Kurdish Region.

The Kurdish–Arab relations deteriorated markedly after the withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq at the end of 2011. The Baghdad–Erbil crisis deepened due to Maliki's continued attempts to consolidate his power and marginalize the autonomy aspirations of the Kurds. Within the Kurdistan Region, on the other hand, increased competition between the KDP and PUK and the emergence of a new, more vigorous Kurdish opposition, the Gorran movement, make it much more risky for any Kurdish leader to appear “soft” on Kurdish claims to disputed territories or other Kurdish concerns over oil and autonomy.⁴² In this context, the possibility of a Kurdish–Arab compromise seems weak and the future of democracy in Iraq looks perilous.

Conclusion

Fundamental questions about the future of Iraq, such as the process of democratic transition, whether it will become a truly federal state and the stability of the new regime itself have much to do with the Kurdish–Arab divide in the country that is still characterized largely by suspicion and animosity. The prospects of Kurdish–Arab reconciliation do not look very promising in

the short to medium term given the long history of ethnic expulsion, coercive assimilation and genocidal action toward the Kurds. It is a considerably difficult task to change the way the Kurdish question is codified in Iraq's political culture which, throughout the twentieth century, identified the Kurds directly with concerns over national security and territorial integrity. The most brutal manifestation of these concerns was the Anfal campaign which was aimed at the annihilation of not only the Kurds, but also anyone who refuses to accept the regime's authority or definition of the national identity.

The introduction of a power-sharing system in Iraq, so far, contributed little to narrowing the ethnic gap in the country given the absence of a political process that develops across ethnic and religious lines. The 2005 constitution, in fact, provides the legal framework to define subunits that transcend ethnic boundaries and focus on regional identity, with varying degrees of ethnic and religious homogeneity and heterogeneity.⁴³ However, in the absence of a political culture that promotes "political trust," "social tolerance," and "demonstration of respect," the building blocks of the federation will be constantly viewed in ethnic and sectarian terms, which, in turn, will lead to resurfacing of authoritarian tendencies.⁴⁴ As the borders of the Kurdistan Region are predominantly perceived to be ethnically defined as well, the disputes over autonomy, management of oil resources, and the status of Kirkuk and other oil-rich areas are likely to continue to derail the post-Saddam democratization process in the country.

In the long term, Iraq is capable of slowly evolving into a sustainable democracy. Overcoming the Kurdish–Arab tension is one of the primary conditions for this to be accomplished. If the management of this division is successful and results in a durable set of political compromises, then Iraq may gradually progress toward successful democratization. If, however, the divide worsens, or if Baghdad attempts to impose a "solution" on Erbil, a possible violent reaction might unravel the fragile political consensus that underpins Iraq's nascent political order and the very territorial integrity of Iraq will be threatened.⁴⁵

Notes

1. Adeer Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 4–5.
2. Lisa Blaydes, "Compliance and Resistance in Iraq under Saddam Hussein: Evidence from the Files of the Ba'th Party," Comparative Politics Workshop, Department of Political Science, Stanford University, March 1, 2013.
3. Dawisha, 2009, p. 143.

4. As far as the ethnic question in Iraq is concerned, the repression faced by the Kurds also applies to the other non-Arab groups such as the Assyrians, Turkomans, and Yezidis. However, since these groups' much smaller numbers make them less politically significant, I focus mainly on the Arab–Kurdish divide that marks the primary ethnic fault line in Iraq.
5. Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in Peter Evans, Dietrich Reuschmeyer, and Theda Skocpol (eds.) *Bringing the State Back* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 175.
6. Gareth Stansfield, *Iraq: People, History, Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 44.
7. Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), p. 29.
8. Stansfield, 2007, p. 45.
9. Marr, 1985, p. 40.
10. Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 34.
11. Interestingly, the American view of Iraq in post-Saddam era appears remarkably similar to the concerns of the British during mandatory period. Although the Kurds acted as strategic partners of the United States during the 2003 invasion and played an important role in ousting Saddam Hussein from power, it soon became apparent that this role was a transient one. Despite supporting the creation of a federal government that represents the right of all peoples of Iraq, the US policy toward post-Saddam Iraq remained fixated on the international commitment to Iraq's territorial integrity that pushed the US policy makers toward favoring recentralization.
12. Dawisha, 2009, p. 6.
13. Michael Eppel, *Iraq from Monarchy to Tyranny: From the Hashemites to the Rise of Saddam* (Gainesville: Florida: University Press of Florida, 2004), p. 38.
14. Eppel, 2004, p. 40.
15. Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), p. 29.
16. Tripp, 2007, p. 62.
17. Brendan O'Leary and Khaled Salih, “The Denial, Resurrection, and Affirmation of Kurdistan,” in Brendan O'Leary, John McGarry, and Khaled Salih (eds.) *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 21.
18. Ismet Sheriff Vanly, “Kurdistan in Iraq,” in Gerard Chaliand (ed.) *A People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1993), p. 150.
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20. Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005), p. 50.
21. Stansfield, 2007, p. 94.

22. Ibrahim Al-Marashi and Sammy Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytical History* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 100.
23. Edith Penrose and Ernest Francis Penrose, *Iraq: International Relations and National Development* (London: Westview Press, 1978), pp. 338–340.
24. David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), p. 318.
25. Tripp, 2007, p. 181.
26. David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 192.
27. Sluglett and Sluglett, 2001, pp. 130–131.
28. The Full text of the 1970 Autonomy Agreement is given in Majid Khadduri, *Socialist Iraq: A Study in Iraqi Politics since 1968* (Washington: Middle East Institute, 1978), pp. 231–240.
29. Human Rights Watch, *Claims in Conflict: Reversing Ethnic Cleansing in Northern Iraq*, 16.4 (August 2004), p. 8.
30. Nouri Talabany, *Iraq's Policy of Ethnic Cleansing: Onslaught to Change National Demographic Characteristics of the Kirkuk Region* (London, 1999), p. 20. <http://www.krg-kagb.org/securadmin/pdf/demographic%20characteristics%20of%20the%20kirkuk%20region.pdf>
31. Talabany, 1999, p. 37.
32. Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Forcible Expulsion of Ethnic Minorities*, 15.3 (March 2003), pp. 9–10.
33. The numbers regarding the mass killing and disappearances during the Anfal Campaign are uncertain and disputed. Human Rights Watch proposes a death toll of 50,000 by most conservative estimate, and possibly twice that number. Joost R. Hiltermann provides a range of 70,000–80,000. According to the Iraqi prosecutors, as many as 182,000 people were killed. For detailed accounts, see Human Rights Watch, “Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds,” July 1993; Joost R. Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq and the Gassing of Halabja* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Ahmed Rasheed, “Saddam and Cousin Discussed Killing Thousands: Tapes,” *Reuters*, January 8, 2007.
34. Human Rights Watch, 1993, p. 15.
35. For a detailed account of the experience of Baathism in Iraq, see Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1998).
36. Human Rights Watch, 2003, p. 4.
37. Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010), p. xix.
38. Natali, 2010, p. xx.
39. Mohammed M. A. Ahmed, “Laying the Foundation for a Kurdistan State in Iraq: 1991–2006” in Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter (eds.), *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2007), p. 158.

40. Gareth Stansfield and Liam Anderson, "Kurds in Iraq: The Struggle between Baghdad and Erbil," *Middle East Policy* 16.1 (Spring 2009), p. 136.
41. Stansfield, 2009, p. 141.
42. David Romano, "Iraqi Kurdistan: Challenges of Autonomy in the Wake of US Withdrawal," *International Affairs* 86.6 (2010), p. 1352.
43. Article 113 of the constitution recognizes the Kurdistan Region as one of the subunits of the federation. According to article 120, the Baghdad governorate constitutes its own region. According to Article 115, each of the remaining 14 of the country's 18 governorates has the right either to form its own region, to join with others to form a larger region, or to maintain its status as a governorate. Full text is accessible at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/12/AR2005101201450.html>
44. The political leadership of the Kurdistan Region has in fact sought to distance itself, at least nominally, from being seen to be overtly "Kurdish" in an effort to promote the idea that the "Kurdistan Region" is a geographic construct to which peoples of any ethnicity can subscribe. In doing so, the Iraqi Kurdish leaders seek to balance the political realities of existence in post-Saddam Iraq with the expectations of the Kurds in the north. For a detailed account of the promotion of "Kurdistani" as a regional identity in northern Iraq, see Gareth Stansfield and Hashem Ahmadzadeh, "Kurdish or Kurdistanis: Conceptualizing Regionalism in the North of Iraq," in Reidar Visse and Gareth Stansfield (eds.), *An Iraq of Its Regions: Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 123–149.
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CHAPTER 3

Kurds, Persian Nationalism, and Shi'i Rule: Surviving Dominant Nationhood in Iran

Gareth Stansfield

Introduction

By the end of 2013, Iran was being cautiously embraced by Western powers, if not by Arab Gulf states and Israel, due to the progress made by the new Iranian President Rouhani—referred to by some excitable observers as perhaps being the “Iranian Gorbachev,” such was the rapidity with which developments occurred concerning the Iranian nuclear program in the aftermath of his surprise election victory in June 2013.¹ However, within Iran, significant segments of the population had little cause to share in the optimism of the international community. Indeed, for those opposed to the regime—whether in its more moderate incarnation or otherwise—and particularly for those peoples who were not as deeply tied to the Persian-dominated national project that has underpinned the narrative of the Iranian state since the 1920s, the heavy hand of the regime was being felt as restrictively as ever before.

Since Rouhani took office in August, up until the end of 2013, Iran has reportedly executed more than 200 people, with a significant number of these being Kurdish activists. At first, these executions were viewed by human rights monitors as being illustrative either of Rouhani, while being a new moderate face, still being cut from the same cloth as his peers in the political elite, or of the judiciary and security apparatus of the state needing

to show all potential threats that the status quo very much remained intact, whomever happened to be president.²

The executions up until the end of October were conducted with alarming regularity, which was to only increase following the killing of 14 Iranian soldiers by the Baluchi insurgent organization *Jaish ul-Adl* (Army of Justice)—which claims to fight against the persecution of the Sunni Baluch in Iran—near Saravan on Iran’s southeastern border with Pakistan, on October 25.³ The wrath of the regime was keenly felt not only in Baluchistan but across the entirety of the country. The government embarked upon a wave of executions across the state, carrying out death sentences on individuals who were, more often than not, usually of Baluchi or Kurdish origin. The day after the attack, 16 Baluchi men were executed in the southeastern city of Zahedan.⁴ In what can only then be described as a macabre and equitable distribution of executions designed to deter not only the recalcitrant Baluchis, but any grouping, from challenging the status quo, the period from the end of October saw executions become commonplace across the country, with the Kurdistan province being second only to Baluchistan province in terms of the numbers killed. Three Kurdish political prisoners were executed in the Kurdish-dominated city of Saqqez, in Kurdistan province, with three others scheduled for execution thereafter.

This chapter focuses upon the situation of the Kurdish population of Iran, with a particular focus upon the dialectical relationship between a Persian-dominated Iranian nationalist project, with its origins in the early twentieth century, and the transformation of Kurdish tribal agendas into a broader nationalist movement.⁵ In so doing, I find common cause with the Iranian Kurdish academician Abbas Vali, who forcefully contends that “Kurdish nationalism in Iran is a modern phenomenon, an outcome of the socio-economic and cultural dislocations caused by the blighted and perverse modernity that followed the advent of Pahlavi absolutism after the First World War.”⁶

Vali’s position is developed in subsequent paragraphs of this chapter, but the notion of the Kurds of Iran reacting to events around them is one that has some traction today. For the Kurds of Iran, who number nearly 7 million and constitute approximately 10 percent of the total population,⁷ the events of the Arab Spring, the success of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the beginnings of a peace process in Turkey between the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (the Justice and Development Party, or AKP) government and the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK), and even the tentative establishment of a Kurdish autonomous region in war-torn Syria by the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (the (Kurdish) Democratic Union

Party, or PYD) must be tantalizing examples of what Kurds in other parts of divided Kurdistan can achieve, while also emphasizing their own relative impotence to improve their collective situation in the Islamic Republic. But could the situation, in what the Kurds refer to as *Rojhelat* (eastern, or Iranian Kurdistan), be susceptible to change as Iran itself haltingly moves into a new round of engagements with the international community?

Of course, the developments of 2013 that have seen progress made in discussing the Iranian nuclear program may unravel for any number of reasons; yet, they may also strengthen and mature, bringing to the fore the possibility of changes occurring that see limited liberalization and democratization.⁸ If this were to happen, and it is admittedly highly speculative at this moment in time, then issues of ethnicity and identity would likely become very prominent in political discourses. Equally, if these events were not to happen, then it would seem to be reasonable to assert that the current Baluchi insurgency, Kurdish demonstrations, *Partiya Jiyana Azada Kurdistanê* (The Free Life Party of Kurdistan—otherwise referred to as PJAK) mobilization, and inter-ethnic disharmony, such as between Kurds and Azeris in Mahabad, would continue and grow. Either way, the ethnic dimension of Iranian politics should be considered an issue of significant importance for the leadership of the Islamic Republic and for those members of the international community keen to see Iran make some form of transition away from authoritarianism. Presciently applying the lessons Gorbachev and the West had to learn when opening up the Soviet Union, the Reuters journalist Brenda Shaffer noted that “it quickly became clear that the Soviet Union was not only composed of Russians... [and] it became clear that what the West had considered to be ‘Yugoslavians’ or ‘Czechoslovakians’ were, in fact, many different ethnic groups.” She concludes by warning that “[t]he rising ethnic activity in Iran will likely lead to increased demands for policy responses from the United States and Europe. These governments should be prepared. It is best not to wait until people are marching in public squares to understand their aspirations.”⁹

Yet issues concerning ethnicity and identity have had little prominence in the contemporary debate concerning the democratization of Iran and the normalizing of its relations with the international community. Indeed, while there exists a sizeable and very sophisticated literature on the subjects of Iranian nationalism, twentieth-century political development, and democratization, it is a rare occurrence to find in this literature any overt focus on the role played by ethnicity and communalism in any of these facets of Iran’s development.¹⁰ This is not to say that research on the status and situation of the Kurds in Iran is nonexistent—there is a highly focused,

if limited, literature that tends to address some very tightly defined aspects of the subject matter.¹¹ However, what seem to be missing are materials that overtly bridge the intellectual gap between the political development (in a broad sense) of Iran on the one hand and the particularities of Kurdish existence in Iran on the other. It is this bridge that this chapter attempts to build and it does so with a view firmly set in the modern era, following the emergence of a Persian-dominated nationalist project. The chapter then charts the interaction of a narrative of Persian-dominated nationalism through the monarchical period through to the rule of the Shi'i religious establishment of the Islamic Republic as expressed by the doctrine of the *vilayet-e faqih* (realm of the jurispudent) on the one hand, and the tortured, often reactive, emergence of Kurdish national identity with its associated political mobilizations on the other.

The Emergence of Dominant Nationhood in Iran

How long has there been a “Kurdish issue” in Iran? It is a pertinent question to pose, as a common understanding of the nature of the Iranian state, and “Iran” as a concept, would suggest that they are not comparable to their neighbors to the West—namely Iraq, Syria, and also Turkey. This line of argumentation focuses upon the fact that “Iran” has enjoyed a long history as a multiethnic entity, with various incarnations of the Iranian state/empire being roughly coterminous with present-day borders (although the Persian Empire of antiquity was vastly bigger). Adherents of this view would then postulate that within the borders of what is then presented almost as a “natural” or “organic” political order, compared to the artificial constructs imposed on the Arab world after World War I, peoples of differing identities have managed to coexist under a shared Iranian national project that was, until the twentieth century at least, seen to be more of a cultural, civic, concept rather than one dominated by a particular nationhood.¹²

This transition from what Nader Entessar refers to as the “long established cultural construct” of Iranian nationalism to a “land-based, territorially focused, and Persianized concept of nationhood” began in the nineteenth century.¹³ Both the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran pursued policies of extensive modernization, in response to, and emulating, the advancements made by Western and Russian powers. Central to these policies of modernization was the centralization of administrative authority—bringing the country under one, unified, administrative order that would therefore serve to facilitate increased efficiencies in the agricultural sector through the reform of land ownership and promote the development of industry and the expansion of economic activities.¹⁴

For those peoples with a semi-nomadic way of life, and those who were located in the provincial areas, the changes were transformational. For the regions in the west of Iran—bordering Ottoman territories—a system of semi-independent Kurdish emirates had enjoyed significant amounts of autonomy, with varying degrees of success, and the principal form of social organization was tribal.¹⁵ Both of these structures would be targeted by the reforming zeal of the Qajars, with the last of the powerful Kurdish princes, of Ardelan, being stripped of his powers in 1865.¹⁶ But if the overt structures of Kurdish independent life were weakened, the memories of them would prove more durable with their *memes* surviving as powerful constructs underpinning both the behavior (with reference to tribalism) and aspirations (with reference to the autonomy of the emirates) into the twentieth century.¹⁷

The abilities of the Qajar reformists to build a central government capable of enforcing their writ across the entirety of the country were sorely taxed, however, with feudalism and tribalism proving to be durable features especially in the more inaccessible areas of the periphery. In Kurdistan in particular, a *de facto* arrangement was in existence, with the central government recognizing local tribal leadership over areas deemed to be within the sphere of influence of a particular tribal grouping, and outside the capacities of the central government to control.¹⁸ A situation was thus emerging in Iran of rising tribal sentiment that was increasingly colored with an ethnic consciousness in the periphery, and centralizing tendencies in the core that had become dominated by an increasingly exclusivist Persianized narrative of Iranian nationhood. At least in these formative moments of state modernization, even up until the events of the mid-twentieth century and what was the consolidation of a Kurdish nationalist project as evidenced by the establishment of the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in 1946, the issues were mainly in the domain of center–periphery relations, rather than contested nationhood, with Ali Ansari suggesting that:

[t]his [core-periphery relations] was at heart a problem of governance and the establishment of a harmonious balance between the growing power of the center and the rights of the periphery. This dialectical relationship had to be properly balanced as otherwise the tendency would be for the center to reinforce its power by encouraging the fragmentation of the periphery.¹⁹

For many Kurdish elites at the turn of the century, the reforms of 1906, otherwise known as the Constitutional Revolution, failed to achieve this balance. Seen as a great victory for the urban intelligentsia who were keen to promote Iran as a secular, democratic state modeled upon those of Western

Europe, the revolution failed to establish a democratic political system encompassing all of Iran and was opposed by the agrarian-based and tribally organized Kurds who were, as Denise Natali notes, “more interested in protecting tribal, religious, and landowning interests . . . than in manifesting Kurdish nationalism.”²⁰ This mixture of core–periphery (im)balance, tribal legacies, and slowly emergent nationalism among the Kurds continued to ferment in the years before and after World War I. With Iran being a theater of Great Power contestation, with the British and Russians advancing in the north and south of country and dividing the country into spheres of influence, the consolidation of tribal autonomy in the Kurdish-dominated parts of the country proceeded apace as the capacity of the central state to exercise its dominion over these regions weakened.²¹

Engagement with the West proved to be a profoundly powerful and double-edged experience for those Iranian nationalists keen to modernize the state. On the one hand, they had admired the achievements of Western powers, to the point of trying to emulate their practices and achieve their levels of development and modernism; on the other hand, however, they had seen Iran subordinated by these very same powers and even had their territory unceremoniously carved up. A reaction to the meddling of Western powers was therefore an upsurge in this new form of Iranian nationalism, closely identified with what was, by now, a national project dominated by Persianism, controlling an increasingly effective and capable machinery of state. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet tellingly notes that “[t]he Iranian homeland, though still formally the birthplace of Armenians, Kurds, and Baluchis, as well as Farsis [Persians] and others, increasingly came to represent the *vatan* [country] of Shi’a Persians through the persistent efforts of the state to extirpate competing cultures.”²² Taking advantage of this febrile environment was Reza Shah who emerged as Minister of War in 1921 and was then elevated to being King, with his coronation as the first shah of the Pahlavi dynasty taking place in 1926.²³

Under Reza Shah, the balance between the center and periphery, and the accommodation of locally powerful tribal elites existed no more. Instead, he initiated a series of military expeditions into the provinces of the country in an attempt to impose the central government’s writ in what had become regions that existed beyond the purview of Tehran. Reza Shah’s policy would not only enforce upon the entirety of Iran a new model of nationalism, it would accelerate among the Kurds their own processes of cohesive national identity formation, as a response, or reaction, to the threats posed to them by the powerful centralizing forces now being deployed by the new Shah.²⁴ Ethnic conflict in Iran, or more accurately conflict between the Persian-dominated state and its non-Persian opponents, intensified in the 1920s,

with the Kurdish tribal leader Ismail Agha Simko exemplifying the Kurds' innate inability to acquiesce to the new dominant nationhood, while also displaying the strains of their own transition from disparate tribal interest groups to a more unified Kurdish nationalist agenda.

A Theory of Kurdish Political Development in the Twentieth Century

A theoretical framework that has considerable explanatory value for explaining the nature of Kurdish political development in the twentieth century is one that builds upon notions of pathological homogenization of peoples as a means of state building, combined with the politicization of ethnicity by state builders and the consolidation of “dominant ethnies.”²⁵ These are two overlapping theoretical approaches that have much to offer to the study of Middle East states and their peoples and require more focused effort than a chapter can accommodate. However, the theoretical framework presented here combines an understanding of what Heather Rae refers to as “pathological homogenization of peoples,” by which she means “the methods state-builders have used to define the state as a normative order and to cultivate identification through targeting those designated as outsiders for discriminatory and often violent treatment,” with a theory that explains the rise of a “dominant ethnicity” within states, presented most notably by Andreas Wimmer. Together, these theories constitute a framework for understanding the Kurdish situation in Iran of how elites in the most powerful ethnic group of a “new” state (such as post-Qajar Iran) take over, or inherit, the state apparatus at the end of empire, with subordinated groups remaining on the margins. The nation-building project then proceeds with the assimilation of these groups—minorities—thus realizing the vision of a unified, mono-ethnic, citizenry.²⁶ Heather Rae considers these “strategies of pathological homogenization,” in terms of “attempts to legally exclude minority groups from citizenship rights, to strategies of forced conversion or assimilation, expulsion, or extermination.”²⁷

To provide some empirical color and texture to how these theories may apply to the case of the Kurds, my framework presents Kurdish identity formation (or “Kurdism”) in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire in particular, and the Qajar Empire to a lesser degree as a process of self/group awareness in the face of modernizing dynamics.²⁸ This stage presented the building blocks of later nationalist movements, without yet being nationalist—in terms of the politicization of these identities—and with them existing within a set of wider sociopolitical and political economy milieus dominated by more traditional modes of organization, usually grouped

together under a broadly and ambiguously defined “tribal” moniker. Then, centralizing administrative strategies implemented by elites imbued with western notions of the Westphalian state, industrialized economies, and state-controlled nationalist projects (whether by accident or design) sought to reconstruct the state, or new states, in a prescriptive manner that was ostensibly ethnicity/communal-group blind, but in practice heavily exclusionist. This imposition of a “dominant nationhood” would then see the state have little, if any, “space” within it—whether ideological, intellectual, economic, social, political or, at its logical extreme, territorial—that could accommodate the aspirations and activities of those who could not subscribe to, nor could be forced to assimilate under, the new realities. Repressing the activities of minorities who refused to subscribe to the new state’s principles would in turn require varying degrees of authoritarianism from the center.

These new realities of state created a disharmonious counterpoint—one of reactivity from those not covered by the narrative of the “dominant nation,” and one that would see these peoples whose identities had been disenfranchised in the new state respond, often in a chaotic, unplanned, and disjointed fashion, at least in the first instance, by the nurturing of their own nationalist project. These projects would, however, have several points of genesis that would then converge into more cohesive movements in processes that would span decades and would see as many setbacks as advances. Two key points of genesis that can be identified from the case of the Kurds, along with a range of other peoples in the Middle East and elsewhere, are the traditional structures of tribalism on the one hand, with the reaction of once-powerful tribal elites to the new realities of the ethnically defined centralized state being a key element, and the emergence of new associations of interest defined by a mixture of egalitarianism and nationalism on the other, with the motivations of what would become a combination of nonfeudal/tribal, nationalist, and leftist groupings being as much about combating the forces of traditional (i.e., the tribal landlords) as it was promoting their people’s right to self-determination.²⁹

This framework, with permutations, could be applied to the history of the political development of the Kurds in both Iran and Iraq. Both situations now have distinctly “modern” myths of nationhood, with leaders from the earlier decades of the twentieth century who, in contemporary discourse, are now viewed as founding nationalist figures in the narratives of these two communities of Kurds. Both of these figures—Mulla Mustafa Barzani in Iraq and Ismail Agha (Simko) in Iran—existed and operated at the temporal and ideological watershed of Kurdish political development, as the often-imperceptible transition occurred between the Kurdish nationalist movement being less than the sum of its tribal parts, to moving toward

being greater than the sum, and even moving beyond the tribal frameworks. Mulla Mustafa Barzani's role in the development of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq is well documented and, deservedly so, is also covered in chapters in this volume in considerable detail. For the purposes of illustrating the salient moments and individuals involved in the emergence of Kurdish nationalism in Iran, Simko remains a mercurial figure—caught between the worlds of tribalism and wider nationalism, or perhaps exploiting them both.

Ismail Agha Simko: From Tribal Leader to Nationalist Hero

Ismail Agha, otherwise known as “Simko,” rose to be the leader of the large Shakak tribal confederacy in Iran in the 1920s.³⁰ With a reputation as a “daring warrior and bold raider,”³¹ and having personally suffered at the hands of the Persian authorities, Simko had positioned himself carefully in the unstable environment of early-twentieth-century Iran, gaining himself a position of prominence and notoriety.³² In the period immediately before World War I, Simko built alliances of convenience with both pro-Ottoman forces and the Russians, continually consolidating his position in the tribal confederacy and also exposing him to broader Kurdish nationalist currents. It is this interaction of the two that positions Simko as an individual leader who could exploit, or be exploited by, the currents of tribal advancement and nationalist consolidation, with van Bruinessen again noting that, by 1913, “[n]ationalist and private ambitions went together in him [Simko] and cannot be separated.”³³ By the end of the war, with the Ottoman Empire defeated and the Iranian government weak and dysfunctional, Simko and the Shakak confederacy stood out as being the principal power holders in Kurdistan and Western Azerbaijan. Replete with weapons captured from the Russians, including artillery pieces, Simko had de facto control over his core tribal territory, with the government of Iran simply unable to contain the expansion of his domains beyond the traditional realms of the Shakak confederacy.

At what point did broader conceptions of “the Kurdish nation” begin to color Simko's thoughts, rather than the more parochial concerns of promoting his tribe? Or, perhaps the reality is more nuanced and complex, with Simko viewing nationalism as a vehicle of advancement for his tribe—a notion that has also been discussed in reference to the interaction of the Barzani tribe with Kurdish nationalism in Iraq.³⁴ These questions could give rise to a range of opinions, but, whatever his motivations, Simko began to prepare for the establishment of an independent entity from 1919 onwards. Bringing together other prominent Kurdish tribal leaders in a plan to engage

in an insurrection against the Iranian state, Simko and his collaborators also reached out to the British Civil Commissioner in Iraq, A. T. Wilson, for support for his plan to establish an independent Kurdish state.³⁵ Even though they received no response, the fact that they were operating in such a way gives credence to the notion that Simko, in mind at least, if not in practice, had made the transition to embracing a nationalist agenda.

From mid-1919 onwards, Simko's forces pried huge areas of northeastern Iran away from the control of Tehran, with him then placing loyalists in key positions, including governorships, and levying taxes on those towns and villages in his domain. By 1921, Simko controlled the area west of Lake Urmiyeh, south to the cities of Baneh and Sardasht, and even into parts of northwestern Iraq. In addition to this territorial expanse, Simko was also, by now, acting as the first among equals among the Kurds' tribal leaders, with him securing the loyalty of many of the most powerful tribes of Iran and Iraq. Upon capturing Mahabad in October 1921, Simko made the city his capital and, by July 22, his territory had reached its greatest extent, reaching Sain Qaleh in the east and Saqqez in the south.

In keeping with the analytical framework presented earlier, Farideh Koochi-Kamali reinforces the view that the emergence of Kurdish nationalist agendas could be correlated closely with the actions of the "dominant nation," by now led by Reza Shah, noting that "[i]n Iran, Kurdish aspirations for independence, economic progress, and cultural expression began to develop as a consequence of the political and economic processes of changing the lifestyle of tribes and nomads implemented by the central government of Reza Shah."³⁶ It seems, therefore, that Simko was riding a wave of opportunities. He did so by harnessing the capabilities presented by tribal cooperation and exploiting the fertile ground provided among the broader Kurdish population—tribal and nontribal alike—by the policies of Reza Shah himself.

With his links now developing impressively outside Iran, with the Kurdish tribes of Turkey and Iraq, Simko had brought the Kurds to the threshold of being able to exercise their rights of self-determination, at least in terms of securing autonomy (as the Iranian government had proved itself unable to contain his aspirations and his forces) and maybe in terms of winning independence, if his fortune had continued. However, this was not to be. While, on paper, Simko's successes suggest that he and his Kurdish followers had made the transition from tribal one-upmanship to collaborating for the greater national good, the mechanisms and structures that underpinned Simko's rebellion, and the aggrandizement of territory and resources, were wholly tribal—and thus what appeared as an edifice of Kurdish national unity was in fact riven with age-old tribal cleavages that could be cracked

open, if pressure were applied. Reza Khan—who would become Reza Shah in 1926—was the figure who would apply this pressure, and he would do so by applying the lessons of western modernization to his government and his military, and using newly instilled discipline and order in his national army to bring Simko's insurrection to an end. By August 1922, Simko's forces had been defeated, forcing him to escape into exile to Iraq via Turkey. Over the next four years, he would attempt to recapture the successes of previous years, but to no avail, with him again being forced to flee to Iraq. By 1929, the Iranian government, angered by Simko's rebellious nature and, in all likelihood, fearful of the example he gave to Kurds and other non-Persians of a nationalist orientation, succeeded in luring him to Ushnuvیه by offering him the governorship of the city. The offer was in fact a trap, and the rebellious leader of the agitating Kurds was assassinated while en route by Iranian forces.³⁷

The Rise of Kurdish Intellectualism

Reza Shah's policies of centralization and modernization continued unabated, and the homogenization of the Iranian state around a Persian-dominated narrative had succeeded in cowering the rebellious Kurds. However, the ability of the center to maintain order in the peripheries would again diminish due to the commencement of World War II. Once again caught between the agendas of warring European powers, Iran would find itself being subjected to differing influences that would again give Kurdish political actors the territorial space and opportunity to reassert the right to self-determination. With Reza Shah's abdication in 1941 brought about by his perceived sympathies for the Axis powers and the occupation of Iran by Soviet forces, the peripheries of the country, and especially the Kurdish-populated areas of the west and northwest, experienced a power vacuum into which those forces best placed to project their political, military, and economic power would emerge. This time, however, it was not the tribal forces of the "first" point of genesis of the Kurdish nationalist movement, mentioned earlier, that would seize the moment; instead, it would be the urban, nonfeudal, forces of the left and the intelligentsia that would emerge, taking the Kurds not only to the threshold of independence, but, all too fleetingly, to independence itself.

By the beginning of World War II, Reza Shah's policies of centralization and the promotion of a strategy of dominant nationhood within Iran had two noticeable effects of relevance to understanding the relationship between the Kurds and the state. The first of these was the disestablishment of the great tribal confederacies that had caused so much trouble for Reza Shah

and his predecessors. With Simko no more, and other tribal leaders removed from the scene, the Kurdish communities of Iran had become largely sedentarized.³⁸ As such, they were also more familiar with, and accessible by, political and intellectual forces in the expanding urban environments. The second noticeable effect was with regard to these intellectual forces in the cities and towns. As happened in Turkey, at the end of the Ottoman Empire, a Kurdish intellectual life became more apparent in the towns of Iran, populated by figures educated in the ways of the modernized state, more often than not with some degree of tribal pedigree, and fully exposed to the very concepts of nationalism that they had been reacting against.³⁹ This intellectual movement in Iran would be the spring from which the Kurds not only from Iran would drink as they formed their nationalist agendas. Events that would happen, ideas that would form, and ideologues that would emerge in Iran, primarily in the city of Mahabad—long held as a center of culture and intellectualism in Kurdistan—would also then be formative elements in the development of the Kurdish nationalist movement of Iraq, to a great extent, and in Syria and Turkey to a lesser degree.

Qazi Mohammed and the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad

With Reza Shah no more, the heavy weight of state authority weakened across the country, and especially in the once-troublesome peripheral areas such as Kurdistan. Throughout World War II, various challenges took place against central Iranian authority, such as in Urmiyeh in 1942, which saw Persian forces forced out of the city, only to return following mediation led by Kurdish leaders from Mahabad, including Qazi Mohammed. Long seen, according to Koochi-Kamali, as “the core of the Kurdish movement for independence,” Mahabad had been effectively under the control of Qazi Mohammed and his brother, Sadr-i Qazi, since the Soviet occupation of the city in 1941.⁴⁰ For several years, therefore, Qazi Mohammed and Mahabad had been synonymous with Kurdish autonomy, Kurdish nationalism, and de facto Kurdish independence.⁴¹

Mahabad, in the early 1940s, therefore enjoyed the physical freedoms that would allow its intellectual groupings and nascent political organizations to explore notions of nationalism that would facilitate broader and more coherent Kurdish nationalist thinking. In this setting, the very first organization to form, which would prove to be the most influential in the establishment of the Mahabad Republic, was the *Komalay Jiyanaaway Kurd/Kurdistan* (the Society for the Revival of the Kurds/Kurdistan).⁴² Known by its abbreviated form “JK,” the society was founded in 1942 by 18 intellectuals and was, from the outset, overtly nationalist in its rhetoric and symbolism, with a flag

of three colors—red at the top symbolizing the bloody past of the Kurds; white in the middle indicating the good nature of the Kurdish people; and green at the bottom, symbolizing the fertility of Kurdistan. With a sun at its center, the flag alone was a clear manifestation of Kurdish nationalist sentiment—to a degree not seen before but that would be replicated many times in the future.⁴³ Alongside the symbol-laden flag, JK also published a journal called *Nishtiman* (Motherland). If the title was not an obvious enough indicator of Kurdish nationalist thought, then the declaration in the first issue of the aim of JK being the creation of a greater Kurdistan left no room for doubt.⁴⁴ JK quickly spread throughout Kurdistan's urban environs, and its members also reached out to ensure the cooperation, at least, of the remaining tribes. Qazi Mohammed, however, was never a member of committee, but instead enjoyed a close, guiding, relationship with its members.

By 1945, the Kurdish movement in Iran had grown beyond the capabilities of the largely underground JK, and, possibly under pressure from the Soviet occupiers, was disbanded in November in a meeting led by Qazi Mohammed himself in the newly opened Cultural Relations Centre opened in September by the Soviets in Mahabad. In its place, the meeting agreed to change the name of JK and for it to then operate as a political party in the open. This new party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), saw Qazi Mohammed remain in his role of figurehead and mentor, in effect dominating the political scene.⁴⁵

By the beginning of 1946, nationalist sentiment in Mahabad had reached new highs and, on January 22, crowds gathered in Chwar-Chara Square (Four Lanterns Square) to hear Qazi Mohammed proclaim the founding of the Republic of Kurdistan of which he would be president. Within days, ministers were appointed who were taken mainly from the old JK organization, with key tribal leaders who commanded the bulk of the military forces available to the Republic, including Mulla Mustafa Barzani, being critical in what was seen as an interim period before the formation of a National Assembly.⁴⁶ However, while the internal situation of the Republic was, on the whole, positive, with attempts made to build an army, reform education, and to manage the economy effectively, the Republic still existed in a dangerously unstable wider regional and international setting. Caught in disputes with the Soviet-supported nascent Azerbaijan government based in Tabriz, and still being reliant upon the engagement of Iran for economic survival, it was only a matter of time before Iranian control was reestablished over Kurdistan. This time frame was dictated by realities external to Iran. With the end of World War II and beginnings of the Cold War between East and West, the Soviet-supported Kurdish Republic found itself caught in the political moves that would rebalance the international system. The

United States and United Kingdom, keen to see the Soviets leave Iranian territory, lobbied so forcefully for this to happen that several observers consider the US pressure on the Soviet Union to evacuate Iran as constituting, in the words of James Clark, a “stepping stone, though a major one, leading down the road towards the full unfolding of the cold war that came with the announcement of the Truman Doctrine in 1947.”⁴⁷ The instrumentalism of the Soviet position was readily apparent, however, with them then abandoning their Kurdish and Azeri creations and shifting their efforts to rebuild relations with Iran in the economic sphere.

With the political landscape clearly changing, Kurdish cohesion began to weaken. Some Kurdish tribes sought bilateral reconciliations with the Iranian government, leaving the Republic without any meaningful military defense against Tehran. On December 17, nearly a year after the declaration of the Republic, the Iranian army entered Mahabad, ending the first experience the Kurds had of self-rule. Qazi Mohammed, along with some 29 other leaders, were arrested, with Qazi, his brother Sadr-i Qazi, and his cousin Seif-i Qazi being hanged on March 31, 1947 after a drawn-out process that emphasized Tehran’s uncertainty when dealing with Kurdistan in general and Qazi Mohammed in particular, in the same Chwar Chara Square that had, not too long before, witnessed the establishment of the Republic.

Even though the Republic had a short lifespan and its leaders were executed or exiled by Iranian forces when the guardianship provided by the Soviet Union had been removed, it had succeeded in several noteworthy ways. Perhaps most impressively, the Republic and its leaders had shown that Kurdish self-rule, within the setting of an Iranian state, could work effectively and Kurds could administer their own affairs. Contrary to what had happened in the territory of the Azerbaijan government, which succumb to authoritarian governance, the Kurdish Republic proved to be free, forward looking, responsible, and with every indication of being democratic in the future. For the Kurds of Iran, and elsewhere, the “myth” of Mahabad understandably became a powerful motif in the narrative of the Kurdish nation, and of the suffering of the Kurds at the hands of the “dominant nations.” But, while the symbolic aspects of Mahabad were profound, the warning provided by Mahabad was perhaps even more salient—that, ultimately, the Kurds could not rely on their non-Persian neighbors, or the international community, for support when anomalous situations, caused by World War II in this case, became normalized. Abbas Vali articulates this point as perhaps only a Kurd from Iran can:

To the Kurds... the collapse of the Republic offers more than just a historical lesson. For them it is not only an event that has taken place in

the past, but also one that is living in the present, animating not only memories but also the discourses and practices that shape the present. Through this event they think about their past, encounter their present and imagine their future.⁴⁸

This lesson, perhaps, is one that continues to weigh heavy on the minds of today's assembly of Kurdish leaders as they once again operate at the threshold of autonomy and secession.

Fictionalization and the Marginalization of the Kurds of Iran

The period following the collapse of Mahabad until the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 proved to be difficult and divisive. With the KDP organizationally devastated and its leaders exiled (mainly to Iraq), the remnants of the KDP operated covertly, trying not to attract the attentions of the increasingly oppressive state security organizations of the Iranian government. But these difficulties were compounded by what would become a dynamic of Kurdish political life across the region, from Syria to Iran—factionalism and internal disputes. Perhaps the tribal origins of Kurdish life had created a tendency toward fissiparous behavior, or maybe the removal of the inspirational Qazi Mohammed had proved impossible to rectify. Whatever the reason, by the 1960s, the divisions that had opened up within the ranks of the KDP had become so serious that the party could no longer maintain its cohesion as a unified entity, with a Revolutionary Committee forming in 1967, under Ahmad Tofiq, only to be wiped out by the Iranian military a few years later.⁴⁹ The Iranian Kurds also now had to contend with the fact that center of gravity, the focal point, of the Kurdish national movement had moved away from Mahabad and Iran and was now firmly based in Iraq, around Qazi Mohammed's one-time military leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani. With his own need to build and maintain a strong relationship with Iran, in order to support the Kurds' struggle in Iraq with the military and Ba'athist governments of the day, Mulla Mustafa banned Iranian KDP operations against the Iranian government. With the Iranian KDP then being feted by Baghdad, to be used against Tehran, the scene was set for not only division among the Kurds, but internecine conflict in the future.⁵⁰

Back in Iran, opposition to the Pahlavi monarchy was growing throughout the 1970s, with the Iranian KDP working as part of the opposition and organizing extensive public demonstrations. However, the Iranian KDP was still disorganized, weak, and lacking the capabilities to carve out a formative role as the Islamic Revolution unfolded. While initially welcoming of the change of regime—as they had suffered greatly at the hands of the

monarchy—the Kurds would soon find that living in the Islamic Republic brought with it all of the pressures of the Persian-dominant nationhood state, along with the new tribulations of existing under a regime that forcefully imposed across the country its additional narrative of political, Shi'i, Islam.

Subjects of the Islamic Republic

In a pattern that been replicated several times since the early twentieth century, administrative authority had once again been assumed by the local powers in Kurdistan in the confused months preceding and following the fall of the Shah. During this time, the Iranian KDP of Dr. Abdul Rahman Qasimlu had once again secured a degree of hegemony in Kurdistan, keeping the region largely protected from the quick imposition of new government offices of the Islamic Republic that had been rolled out across the rest of the country. For the Kurds, hoping that the new government would simply recognize their rights and allow them to exist as an autonomous entity in the new Republic, the situation was not to last. At first, the government was simply not strong enough to reassert their authority in the Kurdish-dominated regions. During this early period, the Kurdish leaders even engaged with the new regime, with Qasimlu being elected to the Assembly of Experts in August 1979—the day before Ayatollah Khomeini declared a *jihad* against the Kurds, as a means of reinvigorating Iranian military forces following the Revolution. Unlike in 1946, however, the Kurdish forces were able to withstand the Iranian army's attack, inflicting upon them heavy casualties and forcing Khomeini into offering a negotiated settlement of the Kurdish problem. A committee was established among the several Kurdish parties that now existed that drafted a proposal of 26 articles to act as the basis for a negotiation with the Iranian government that, in effect, formulated the establishment of an autonomous region for the Kurds. However, Khomeini was merely playing for time. Negotiations did not take place and no solution was found, but the Kurds certainly benefited from the opportunity to close their ranks, reorganize their parties, and to strengthen their social bases. The only problem was that Iran was also using the time very effectively by reorganizing, reequipping, and reinvigorating its military forces.

The trigger for the government to finally curtail the Kurds was provided by the elections of March 14, 1980. Unsurprisingly, the Kurdish cities returned almost wholly Kurdish representatives to the parliament. Equally unsurprisingly, the Iranian government declared the results from the Kurdish-populated regions to be void. Throughout that summer, clashes regularly broke out between mobilizing Kurdish militias and increasingly

capable government forces, with the government's attacks intensifying following Iraq's invasion of Iran in September. Aware of the Iranian KDP's approaches to Baghdad in the past, Tehran in effect treated the Kurdish regions as part of the warzone, subjecting the people of these areas to the full force of the now capable, determined, Iranian army. By 1983, the Iranian KDP leadership had been pushed out of Iran and into bases in Iraq, with the leaderships of the Iraqi KDP and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) conversely finding safe haven in Iranian territory. With these two Kurdish groupings of Iraq and Iran—that were both heirs to the legacy of Qazi Mohammed—now being the proxies of Tehran and Baghdad respectively, conflict between them, in the mountainous border area, only served to factionalize and weaken the Kurdish cause further. If this were not debilitating enough, the Iranian Kurds also showed their inability to maintain any semblance of internal unity, with the Iranian KDP coming into conflict with the Marxist *Komala* organization in 1984, and with the KDP itself splitting into two in 1988.⁵¹ The end of the Iran–Iraq War itself provided no respite for the Kurds either. With the existential threat posed by Saddam's Iraq now removed, Tehran could now, once again, turn its attention to reinforcing the regime and targeting those who continued to challenge the hegemony of the Islamic Republic. On July 13, 1989 the leader of the KDP, Dr. Abdul Rahman Qasimlu, was assassinated in Vienna by agents of the Iranian government, with his successor, Dr. Sadiq Sharafkandi, sharing the same fate in Berlin in September 1992.

Between the Reformists and the Hard-Liners

By the 1990s, Iran was firmly under the control of the clerics of the religious establishment, while the Iranian Kurdish political parties were still factionalized. The Iranian KDP (KDPI) appointed Mustafa Hejri following the assassination of Sharafkandi; yet, he was ultimately unable to find common ground with the increasingly weakened *Komala*, led by Abdulla Mohtadi, and the KDPI saw internal division, with a faction led by Abdullah Hassanzadeh splitting off in December 2006. Fractiousness was not only the bane of the KDPI, however. *Komala* too has experienced spectacular division among its ranks. Having split itself from the Iranian Communist Party (ICP) in 2000, Abdulla Mohtadi reorganized the “original” *Komala*, on a broadly leftist-nationalist platform. Further cleavages then occurred, with the Kurdistan Organization of the ICP-*Komalah* forming under the leadership of Ibrahim Alizadeh, the Organization of Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan led by Omar Ilkhanizadeh, and the *Komalay Shorshgeri Zahmatkeshani Kurdistani Eran—Rewti Yekgrtnewe* (Revolutionary Organization of Toilers of Iranian

Kurdistan—Reunification Faction) of Abdulla Konaposhi, all illustrating through their confusing range of names the fissiparous, fragmented, and weakened nature of the Kurdish political parties in Iran.⁵²

Even though lacking cohesion, the Islamic Republic still targeted members of Kurdish political factions, with Kurdish sources suggesting that some 200 Iranian Kurdish figures were assassinated in Iraqi Kurdistan alone in the early 1990s; the middle of the decade saw changes take hold in Iran that would once again provide opportunities for the Kurds to express their right to self-determination.⁵³ The election of Muhammad Khatami as president of Iran in 1997 illustrated the changes that had been taking place in Iran in the 18 years following the Islamic Revolution. As an openly moderate figure, relatively speaking, Khatami's policies opened up cultural and political space in a way that many Kurds could not remember in their own lifetimes. Khatami's language—although not reflected upon greatly in literature that focuses on “Iran” in general—was redolent with an understanding of the challenges posed by the multiethnic state and the pursuance of dominant nationhood, regularly noting from the beginning of his presidency the notion of inclusiveness, or an “Iran for all Iranians.”⁵⁴ Further inspired by the limited successes of the Iraqi Kurds over the border, who had managed to maintain their autonomy and self-government in Iraq since 1991, and the escalation of PKK activities in Turkey, the Kurds of Iran promoted unprecedented cultural activities, including the publishing of journals, the organizing of literary and cultural societies, and the engaging in political and social debates at all levels of Iranian society.⁵⁵ Critically, these new discourses and dialectics were very much different to the style of rhetoric and argumentation of the established KDPI and *Komala*, suggesting that the grassroots of the Kurdish movement in Iran had quite different intellectual views and outlooks than the leadership of these parties, still based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.⁵⁶ But Khatami's support base was weak and, with absolute power not residing in the office of the president but in the network of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamanei, the mid-ranking cleric-turned president proved unable to implement the reforms that would have seen further internal democratization, the promotion of civil society organizations, and press and media freedoms, in anything other than a limited way.⁵⁷

For the Kurds, Khatami's defeat at the hands of conservative forces would have serious implications. Having embraced the reform program, Kurds were now subjected to arbitrary arrest, even with Khatami in office, and Khatami supporters were singled out for special attention. In a crackdown of pro-Khatami Kurdish officials, the Governor of Kurdistan, Abdullah Ramezanzadeh, was summoned to the Special Court for Public Officials in April 2001 and charged with the “dissemination of lies” by the Guardian

Council (*Shura-e Negabban-e Qanun-e Assasi*) —an office selected by the Supreme Leader, Parliament, and the Judiciary, which has authority greater than that of the president.⁵⁸

The recapturing of the Presidency by the hard-liners in 2005, by Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, would return the Kurdish position in Iran to once again being subjected to what Heather Rae has defined, in theoretical terms, as “[the] strategies of pathological homogenization [of peoples] and state formation.”⁵⁹ In other words, Kurdistan witnessed the return of the heavy imposition of Persian-dominant nationhood that was given extra weight by the increasingly sectarian (Shi'i-Sunni) agenda now being adopted by the Islamic Republic. With sectarian cleavages becoming a more apparent aspect of the regional political landscape, across the Middle East, following the invasion of Iraq and the beginnings of sectarian struggle there in 2004, Iran had become, by 2005, sensitized not only to the struggles in places such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain, but also closer to home.⁶⁰ In a worrying congruence of ethnicity and sect, Iran's minority populations of Kurds, Baluchis, and a small percentage of the Arab community are largely of Sunni orientation and hence “double minorities,” therefore giving Iran's “pathological homogenization” strategies, including the widespread arrest and execution of Kurds, pursued with great energy by President Ahmadinejad, even greater importance.⁶¹

It should not be surprising, then, that the mid-2000s saw the emergence of a new militancy in Iranian Kurdistan, a militancy that ironically had its origins in the “cultural” approach to promoting Kurdistan's cause that had emerged in the Khatami era. During this time, some Kurdish activists viewed the approach of their counterparts as being inadequate, and ultimately playing according to the rules of the political game dictated to them by Tehran. For these figures, the model to emulate was one that would fight force with force, and that would be the PKK of Turkey. Having fought a successful, widespread, and publicized campaign against the technologically advanced and capable Turkish military in the 1990s, the PKK was viewed by many young Kurds as being the flag bearers of Kurdish nationalism, particularly as the Kurdish leadership in Iraq had become increasingly unwilling to support the Kurds of Iran if it meant destabilizing their own relationship with Tehran. Following a decision to change the structure of the PKK in the early 2000s, to reflect the origins of the guerrilla forces, the Iranian contingent was organized into the PJAK.⁶² With its close links to the highly effective and well-organized PKK, PJAK proved to be a dangerous enemy for the Iranian security services. During 2005 alone, it has been speculated that some 120 members of the Iranian security services were killed by PJAK operations, with PJAK operations being commonplace over

subsequent years. Since August 2011, the Iranian security forces intensified their offenses against PJAK strongholds, with the PJAK headquarters in Janosan being captured with heavy losses on both sides in September. Since then, the situation has been one of a status quo of skirmishing and retaliations.

It is in this setting that the tragic events that now occur in Iranian Kurdistan, which were used to open this chapter, now unfold with alarming regularity. Recent reports suggest that the Kurdish region of Iran now exists under heightened security measures and suffers from the imposition of arbitrary justice for crimes as limited as individuals expressing themselves against the regime.⁶³ Even under President Rouhani, the drumbeat of oppression, arrest, and executions has remained persistent, suggesting that Rouhani, just like his moderate predecessor Khatami, is unable to rein in the devastating realities that strategies that enshrine dominant, Persianized, nationhood create.

Conclusion

Being a people existing in the geographical periphery of the country, identifying with a Kurdish rather than Persian ethnicity, and largely adhering to Sunnism rather than Shi'ism in their religious association, the Kurds of Iran have found themselves marginalized, suppressed, and oppressed to varying degrees since the consolidation of the early Iranian state and the rise of a Persianized nationalist project that was pursued with vigor by Reza Shah and subsequent elites. Yet the Kurds showed themselves capable, as evidenced by the activities of Simko and Qazi Mohammed, to show unity (whether enforced or voluntary) and to challenge the model of dominant nationhood by emphasizing their own ethnic and communal distinctiveness. Tragically for the Kurds, circumstances conspired against them—whether of their own making, or of the Iranian government's, or of the wider international community—rendering down their brief moments of success to chaos and defeat.

It would be logical to assume that episodes of Kurdish restlessness contribute to the building of a cumulative orthodoxy in Tehran regarding Kurdish aspirations and the threat that Kurdish nationalism could pose to the status quo of Iran, if circumstances changed and opportunities arose that would see the Kurds prosecute their cause more sustainably than in the past. For central government authorities in Teheran, the lesson of Simko, Mahabad, the Revolution and the Iran–Iraq war might be that any lessening of central authoritarian controls spawns unrest of the sort that may undermine the status quo of the state (of Persian-dominant nationhood, of the

Islamic Republic, and of the political interests that have become entrenched particularly since 1979) or even, at a very unlikely extreme, the territorial integrity of the country. If this is the case, the situation risks enduring as a particularly destructive catch-22: authoritarianism from the Persian-dominated center heightens Kurdish disaffection, creating unrest, which, in turn, reinforces central authorities' perceived need for authoritarian control of the state's peripheries, which exacerbates peripheral dissatisfaction. This is a simple, negative, symbiotic relationship to explain, but an extremely difficult one to resolve in the current circumstances.

Writing a chapter reflecting on the political development of Iran from the perspective of the situation of the Kurds exposes how critical the ethnic question has been in Iran's journey over the last century. Yet it is striking that knowledge of the situation of the Kurds of Iran is extremely limited indeed. It is equally surprising that academics, with a few notable exceptions, who engage in the study of Iran or the study of the Kurds, are more often than not blind to the status of the Kurds in that state. This is a peculiar state of affairs for several reasons. Most significantly, perhaps, is the fact that Iran is multiethnic par excellence and, at a certain level, revels in the acclaim such a status generates in the post-modern world. Yet the Islamic Republic shows that being a multiethnic *country* is one thing; being a multiethnic *state*—tightly defined—is quite another. Also apparent is the fact that the modern Kurdish nationalist movement, whether in the vibrant and successful Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the tense and changeable Kurdish-dominated southeast Anatolia of Turkey, or the increasingly crystallizing Kurdish region of Syria, had its ideological roots firmly in the Kurdish territories of Iran. Long recognized as an intellectual center of Kurdish culture, intellectualism, and Kurdism, *Rojhelat* has given the Kurdish nationalist movement a considerable legacy of national foundations; yet, it seems that this spiritual home of Kurdish nationalism is now, at a time when “Kurdistan” may indeed be challenging the tortured state system established in the aftermath of World War I,⁶⁴ subdued—with Kurdish self-determination aspirations firmly held in abeyance by the overwhelming weight of the Persian-dominant nationhood that stands to remain without equal in Iran.

Notes

1. See, for example, Jochen Bittner, “Is Rouhani an Iranian Gorbachev,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/06/opinion/bittner-is-rouhani-an-iranian-gorbachev.html?hpw&rref=opinion&_r=0, accessed on December 9, 2013.

2. See Alexandra Hudson, "Iranian Kurd Leader Says West Shouldn't Be Fooled by Rouhani," *Reuters*, November 1, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/01/us-iran-kurds-idUSBRE9A00TE20131101>, accessed on December 9, 2013; Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, "Iranian Government Official Dismayed at Rise in Executions," *ICHRI Press Release*, November 6, 2013, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/11/executions-kurdistan/>, accessed on December 9, 2013; and Umar Farooq, "The Battle for Sistan-Baluchistan," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2013, <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2013/12/05/the-battle-for-sistan-baluchistan/>, accessed on December 9, 2013.
3. Farooq, 2013; Monish Gulati, "Balochistan: The New Regional Tinderbox? Analysis," *Eurasia Review: News and Analysis*, November 13, 2013, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/13112013-balochistan-new-regional-tinderbox-analysis/>, accessed on December 9, 2013.
4. Agence France Presse (AFP), "Iran Hangs 16 in Reprisal for Pakistan Border Killings," October 26, 2013, published in in New Straits Times, <http://www.nst.com.my/world/iran-hangs-16-in-reprisal-for-pakistan-border-killings-1.427139>, accessed on December 9, 2013.
5. Ali Ansari argues convincingly that the origins of a modernist tendency and the rise of a Persian-associated form of Iranian nationalism had roots that reached back into the nineteenth century. See Ali Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 40–41.
6. Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 1–2.
7. According to the 2006 census of Iran, the Kurdish-inhabited provinces are populated as follows: West Azerbaijan: 2,873,459; Kermanshah: 1,879,385; Kurdistan: 1,440,156; and Ilam: 545,787, making a total of 6,738,787 people. Source presented at <http://www.statoids.com/ulr.html>, accessed on December 12, 2013. Also see Central Intelligence Agency, "Iran," in *The World Fact Book*, 2013, <http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>, accessed on December 12, 2013.
8. For an initial presentation of the possible trajectories Iran may take in future scenarios, see the Saban Center at the Brookings Institute conference proceedings, *The United States and the Middle East: Avoiding Miscalculation and Preparing for Conflict* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institute, September 11, 2013).
9. Brenda Shaffer, "Iran: More than Persia," *The Great Debate: Reuters*, December 16, 2013, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2013/12/16/iran-more-than-persia/>, accessed on December 19, 2013.
10. Some of the most insightful books in these areas include Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London: Routledge, 1995); Ali Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change*, 2nd edn. (London: Chatham House, 2006); Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic* (London: Hurst, 2007);

- Fakhreddin Azimi, *The Quest for Democracy in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Ali Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
11. See, for instance, Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Tribes and the State of Iran: The Case of Simko's Revolt," in Richard Tapper (ed.) *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 364–400; Farideh Koochi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran: Pastoral Nationalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005); David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Kerim Yildiz and Tanyel Taysi, *The Kurds in Iran: The Past, Present and Future* (London: Pluto Press, 2007); Charles MacDonald and Carole O'Leary (eds.) *Kurdish Identity: Human Rights and Political Status* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007); Hashem Ahmadzadeh and Gareth Stansfield, "The Political, Cultural, and Military Re-Awakening of the Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Iran," *Middle East Journal* 64 (Winter 2010), pp. 11–27; Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011); Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
 12. See Nader Entessar, "Competing National Identities: The Kurdish Conundrum in Iran," in McDonald and O'Leary (eds.), 2007, pp. 188–201, 189.
 13. Entessar, 2007.
 14. See Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 12.
 15. See Hakan Özüglü, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Loyalties, Competing Identities, and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2004); Sabah Ghalib, *The Emergence of Kurdisim with Special Reference to the Three Kurdish Emirates within the Ottoman Empire*, Unpublished PhD dissertation (University of Exeter: Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, 2011).
 16. Koochi-Kamali, 2003, p. 39.
 17. The term "meme" was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who used the term (which is a play on the word "gene") to describe a unit of cultural transmission. For a full account of the term, see Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).
 18. Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 12.
 19. Ansari, 2002, p. 120.
 20. Natali, 2005, p. 119.
 21. Koochi-Kamali, 2003, p. 40; Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010 p. 12.
 22. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804–1946* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 5, quoted in Entessar, 2007, p. 189.
 23. Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 12; Entessar, 2007.

24. See Abbas Vali, "The Making of Kurdish Identity in Iran," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 4 (Fall 1995), pp. 1–22; Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 1–24; Abbas Vali, "The Kurds and Their 'Others': Fragmented Identity and Fragmented Politics," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 18.2 (1998), pp. 82–95.
25. For the definition and discussion of "ethnies," see Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).
26. Andreas Wimmer, "Dominant Ethnicity and Dominant Nationhood," in Eric Kaufmann (ed.) *Rethinking Ethnicity: Majority Groups and Dominant Minorities* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 40–58, 45. For an extended presentation of the concept of dominant nationhood, see Andreas Wimmer, *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
27. Heather Rae, *State Identities and the Homogenisation of Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 5.
28. See Özüglü, 2004.
29. It is admittedly misleading to refer to these leftist, nontribal associations, as "new" because, as Martin van Bruinessen notes, "[i]t should not be assumed that at any period in the past all Kurds were 'tribal'. There have always been large numbers of Kurdish 'non-tribal' cultivators (variously called kurmanj, guran, rayat, misken), with no autonomous social organization beyond shallow lineages." The "new" aspect referred to in my analysis above refers to the politicization of these nontribally aligned clusters and their articulation of non-feudal positions, nationalist narratives, and leftist discourses. See Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Tribes and the State of Iran: The Case of Simko's Revolt," in Richard Tapper (ed.) *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 374.
30. For a detailed account of Simko, the Shakak confederacy, and "Simko's revolt," see Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Tribes and the State of Iran: The Case of Simko's Revolt," in Richard Tapper (ed.), 1983, pp. 364–400.
31. Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Tribes and the State of Iran: The Case of Simko's Revolt," in Richard Tapper (ed.), 1983.
32. Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Tribes and the State of Iran: The Case of Simko's Revolt," in Richard Tapper (ed.), 1983. Simko, in earlier years, had witnessed the murder of his older brother, Jafar Agha, by Persian forces, who cut his body into pieces and hung them from the gates of army garrisons. See Farideh Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 82.
33. Farideh Koohi-Kamali, 2003, pp. 383–384.
34. See Romano, 2006, pp. 188–192.
35. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 386.
36. Farideh Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 66.
37. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, pp. 388–389.
38. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 90.

39. Özüglü, 2004.
40. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 94.
41. For a comprehensive, empirically rich, account of the events that surrounded the emergence of the Kurdish Republic centered on Mahabad, see William Eagleton, *The Kurdish Republic of 1946* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963). For a fascinating eye-witness account written by an American military attaché to Tehran, see Archie Roosevelt, "The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad," *Middle East Journal* 1 (July 1947), pp. 247–269.
42. See Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 14; Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 100; and Vali, 2011, pp. 20–24.
43. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 100. The flag of Mahabad is now used across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and is a regular feature of most Kurdish national movements across the region.
44. Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 14.
45. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 104.
46. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 109.
47. James Clark, "Oil, The Cold War, and The Crisis in Azerbaijan of March 1946," *Oriente Moderno*, Nuova Serie 23 (3, 2004), pp. 557–574, 557. Also see Mark Lytle, *The Origins of the Iranian–American Alliance, 1941–1953* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1987).
48. Vali, 2011, p. 137.
49. Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, pp. 15–16.
50. See Martin van Bruinessen, "The Kurds between Iran and Iraq," *Middle East Report* 141 (July–August 1986), pp. 14–27.
51. This chapter does not address in great detail the chronology of political events vis-à-vis the Kurds and Iran occurred in 1980s as they tended to be more of an internal ordering of Kurdish affairs, within a context of limited political space that was the norm in this period. Writings that cover this period in more detail include Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Politics in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), Chapter 2 and Romano, 2006, Chapter 7.
52. See Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 23.
53. For details of Iran's targeting of Iranian Kurds based in Iraqi Kurdistan, see Jalil Gadani, *Penja Sal Khabat [Fifty Years of Struggle]*, Vol. 2. Raniya (Kurdistan Region of Iraq) (Hiwa Press, 2004), pp. 273–277, quoted in Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 21.
54. Nader Entessar, 2010, p. 56.
55. There is a significant literature on the emergence and development of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which endured a difficult and violent 1990s before consolidating into a stable and increasingly influential federal region of Iraq in the period following the removal of the Ba'th government in March 2003. For works specifically on the development of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, see Michael Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergency Democracy* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003);

- Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010); and Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2012).
56. Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, pp. 21–22.
 57. For a detailed account of the Khatami period, see Ali Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change*, 2nd edn. (London: Chatham House, 2006).
 58. Entessar, 2010, p. 56.
 59. Rae, 2002, p. 14.
 60. See Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013) and Frederic Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
 61. Of particular tragic note is the fate of Kurdish activist Shivaneh Qaderi, who was shot by Iranian security forces on July 11, 2005. He was then reportedly dragged through the streets tied behind a jeep. Photos of his mutilated body ignited demonstrations in Kurdish cities of Iran, which saw the Iranian government crackdown further by closing Kurdish journals and arresting prominent and known activists across the country.
 62. Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 25.
 63. See Danish Refugee Council, *Iranian Kurds: On Conditions for Iranian Kurdish Parties in Iran and KRI, Activities in the Kurdish Area of Iran, Conditions in Border Area and Situation of Returnees from KRI to Iran: 30 May to 9 June 2013* (Copenhagen: Udlændingestyrelsen (Danish Immigration Service), 2013).
 64. See Gareth Stansfield, "The Unravelling of the Post-First World War State System? The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Transformation of the Middle East," *International Affairs* 89 (March 2013), pp. 259–282.

CHAPTER 4

The Syrian-Kurdish Movements: Obstacles Rather Than Driving Forces for Democratization

Eva Savelsberg

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the question of to what extent the Syrian Kurds or their different movements functioned as an obstacle to the democratization of the Syrian state. Did their activities hinder the development of more democratic structures in Syria? Did their (nationalist) requests initiate repressions from Arab nationalist groups or the central authority that otherwise would not have come into existence and that had repercussions for other parts of the country? Have the different Kurdish actors been at all interested in a democratization of Syria—or did they rather focus on the Kurdish issue? If so, did they at least manage to create democratic political and social structures in their own sphere of influence?

I will argue that, first of all, the Kurdish question in Syria has not been central enough and Kurdish stakeholders have not exercised sufficient influence to effectively hinder democratic developments had they arisen. Nor were the Syrian Kurds powerful enough to initiate democratic developments in the country on their own. Compared to states such as Turkey or Iraq, the number of Kurds in Syria is not only comparably low—an estimated 2 million, within a total population of around 20 million¹—but at the same time, Syrian-Kurdish party leaders and activists have mostly not been very

interested in Syria as a whole. They rather tried to secure specific “Kurdish” rights from those in power—be it Bashar al-Assad or the French High Commissioner. Moreover, too often they have not even been interested in the Kurdish parts of Syria, but followed the agenda of Kurdish parties from Turkey or Iraq.

Secondly, the Syrian-Kurdish parties and activists were also not successful in creating more participatory structures in their own sphere of influence. Their political parties are in many ways a mirror picture of the Baʿth party, and the current Kurdish administration in the northeast of the country, to which many observers mistakenly refer to as “liberated areas,” reproduces the authoritarianism of the Baʿth system—under a Kurdish nationalist cover. Developments in the Kurdish areas thus will not have positive effects on other parts of Syria, but will rather strengthen anti-democratic structures and help to hinder the fall of the regime. Moreover, they will not serve to check and balance the rise of Islamist groups—at least thus far the dominating Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) and its militia rather provoked Islamist attacks on the Kurdish territories.

To illustrate these assumptions, I will analyze three different historical occasions of Kurdish mass protest in Syria: the Kurdish-Christian autonomous movement in the Jazirah between 1936 and 1939, under the French Mandate; the al-Qamishli uprising of 2004; and the Syrian revolution starting in 2011.

The Kurds-Christian Autonomous Movement under French Mandate

For the Ottoman Empire, World War I ended on October 31, 1918. With the signing of the Armistice of Mudros a day earlier, the government was forced to accept occupation by Allied troops. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between Great Britain and France had already established the spheres of influence of these two Great Powers. At the Conference of San Remo in the spring of 1920, the boundaries between French and British territories were finalized, with France receiving the mandate for Syria and Lebanon.

The attitude of the Kurds living in Syrian territory toward the mandate power varied from region to region. The first segment of the Kurdish population to come into contact with the French were the Kurds from ‘Afrin—a region that had been taken over with relative ease in 1919. The Kurdish population of Damascus likewise proved loyal to the French. The leading Kurdish families, al-Yusiv and Shamdin, were critical of Arab nationalism, which threatened their ethnic and clan-based networks. In contrast, the

Kurdish tribes in the Jarabulus region and in the Jazirah cooperated in part with the French and in part with Mustafa Kemal's Turkish troops.²

After 1920, Kurdish tribes fled progressively from the Turkish army to the mandated territory. The use of this escape route was intensified particularly after the defeat of the Shaikh-Said Rebellion (1925) in Turkey and the deportation of Kurdish tribes from the border region of eastern Turkey. With French support, many of these tribes settled in the Jazirah. The agricultural development of this fertile region took place during the military occupation of northern Syria in the decade from 1920 to 1930. The development required extensive settlement of the region, including the founding of new trade centers: as of 1919, the traditional marketplaces of the region were on Turkish territory. The cities of al-Hasakah and al-Qamishli, which developed into the commercial centers of the region, were newly founded by the French military administration. By 1932, the majority of the Kurdish population had settled in the Upper Jazirah.³

The members of the first Kurdish national association, which had been established under Ottoman rule, fled along with tribal leaders, aghas, and shaykhs to the territory under French Mandate. Among them were members of the Bedir-Khan family. In 1927, this nationalistic Kurdish elite founded the organization Khoybun ("be oneself") in Lebanon.⁴ Khoybun's support for the anti-Kemalist Ararat Uprising, which continued until its defeat (1930), was both diplomatic and military. On the diplomatic level, its members attempted to convince one of the Great Powers to support the Kurdish struggle. On the military level, their efforts in August 1930 to assist the partisans on Ararat by mounting a second front remained unsuccessful.

As a result, Khoybun turned its attention to promoting cultural activities, focusing on the development of the Kurdish language and the revival of Kurdish literature. With French support, several newspapers were published, and in 1941, a Kurdish-speaking radio program went on air.⁵

One of the difficulties France faced during its mandate was the growing influence of Syrian nationalists, who demanded that France grant Syria its independence. Meanwhile, the French governments of this period wanted, to varying degrees, to preserve their influence in the region. During the "great revolt" (1925) against the mandate power, France recruited countless minorities—Kurds, Circassians, and Armenians—in order to quell the rebellion. In addition, minorities were accepted into the regional army, *Les Troupes Spéciales du Levant*.⁶

In the spring of 1924, the mandate power received a series of petitions in which Kurdish activists demanded forms of administrative autonomy for the Kurdish-settled regions of the mandated territory. They pointed to the

Druze and 'Alawi regions, as well as to the Sanjak of Alexandretta, all of which had been granted a certain degree of autonomy. In April 1924, for instance, Mustafa Shahin appealed to the mandate power in the name of all Kurdish Berazi tribes living between Jarabulus and Nusaybin, suggesting the creation of a Kurdish state. It was to include, among others, the Kurds of the Jazirah and Jabal-al-Akrad. Such a state could serve as a buffer against Turkey and curtail Arab nationalist ambitions.⁷

The character of the petitions to the mandate power changed when Kurdish intellectuals from Turkey established themselves in Syrian mandated territory. After 1928, petitions related to Khoybun not only contained general demands for autonomy, but also calls for the introduction of Kurdish as the language of instruction in Kurdish regions, the establishment of Kurdish as the second official national language, and the administration of Kurdish regions by local Kurdish officials.⁸

Only a few years later evidence of yet another change to the petitions became apparent, both in terms of content and of authors. After 1932, and especially between 1936 and 1939, a Kurdish-Christian autonomy movement emerged in the Jazirah. Its goal was an autonomous status for the Jazirah. The decision to restrict demands to this region can be traced back to the French official Pierre Terrier. Terrier was stationed in the Jazirah from 1924 to 1927 and, by order of the High Commissioner, subsequently responsible for all issues pertaining to Kurdish–French relations in Syria. Terrier, recognizing the central role that Kurdish refugees could play in both the development of the Jazirah and the border dispute with Turkey, established close ties with their tribal leaders. In view of the geographic fragmentation of the Kurdish areas into three separate regions, he saw the creation of an autonomous province that includes all three regions as unattainable and thus advised the Kurdish leaders to focus on the Jazirah.⁹

The core demands of the movement were an autonomous status comparable to that of the 'Alawi and Druze or the Sanjak of Alexandretta, the protection of French troops, and the appointment of a French governor accountable to the League of Nations. Cultural and administrative demands, such as the advancement of the Kurdish language in schools and the hiring of Kurdish officials, were also crucial.¹⁰ The autonomists pursued these goals by signing petitions and sending them to the French government and the League of Nations, by organizing public protests, by closing the bazaar, and by developing identity markers as for example a flag for the Jazirah.

On the Kurdish side, the autonomy movement was led by Hajo Agha of Haverkan, who had gathered a significant section of the Jazirah Kurdish tribes behind him. Others joined the Syrian nationalists, who had assembled

a coalition of landowners and urban notables in the National Bloc. The Syrian-Catholic patriarchal vicar, Bishop Hanna Hebbé, and the mayor of al-Qamishli, Michel Dôme, were the dominant figures on the Christian side. The majority of the Arab tribes in the Jazirah were torn between both camps. This is evident, for instance, in the example of the Shammar. While Daham al-Hadi was promoted to local leader of the National Bloc, other tribal leaders sided with the autonomists.¹¹

It is no coincidence that the autonomy movement came alive in 1936. Three years earlier, the negotiations between France and Syria for a gradual implementation of Syrian independence had come to a halt. The successful general strike by Syrian nationalists in April 1936 led to their resumption.¹² The French–Syrian Treaty was signed in the same year. Its terms allowed the National Bloc, which had also won the parliamentary elections of 1936, to dominate Syrian politics until 1939. During this period, the National Bloc sought to consolidate the Arab character of the country and pursued an aggressive policy toward the autonomists. Only when pressured by France did the National Bloc recognize the autonomists' electoral victory in the Jazirah. The governor, appointed by the Syrian government in al-Hasakah in early 1937, was given the explicit task of strengthening the Sunni Arab population by encouraging farmers from Aleppo, Homs, and Hamah to settle in the region. In addition, officials who argued for the autonomy of the Jazirah were dismissed and replaced with others who took a positive stance toward Damascus.¹³

Against this background little provocation was needed for the situation to escalate. When Syrian police tried to arrest a leader of the independence movement on July 5, 1937, they were met with gunshots. Several days of armed conflict between rebels and the Syrian police followed, and the bazaars of the major cities of the Jazirah were closed. Ultimately, the governor appointed by Damascus and numerous high officials, as well as a large portion of the police force, took to their heels and fled. The autonomists established an alternative local administration in the Jazirah.¹⁴ French officers of the *Services Spéciaux* supported the so-called Revolt of 1937. After the signing of the French–Syrian Treaty they feared a loss of influence in Syria. However, the Syrian nationalist faction soon took revenge by attacking the Christians of 'Amuda in August 1937.¹⁵ Prior to the attack, they had carried out a pan-Islamic campaign among the Kurds of the Jazirah. Accordingly, Kurdish tribes were also involved in the attack on the Christian quarter of 'Amuda, which was quelled by the French Air Force. In the aftermath, the participation of Kurdish tribes in the attack led to tension within the Kurdish–Christian alliance. Representatives of the mandate power made it

clear to the Christian leaders of the autonomy movement that they would only survive in Syria if they made peace with the Arab-Muslim majority.¹⁶

In 1939, the rise of the National Bloc came to an end, at least for the time being. On December 31, 1938, the Syrian parliament rejected the French–Syrian Treaty negotiated in 1936, as it included additional agreements that, among other things, provided for the strengthening of minority rights.¹⁷ The government in Damascus resigned in February of 1939. At the beginning of July, the Syrian Parliament was dismissed, the Syrian Constitution suspended, and the Jazirah placed under the immediate control of the French.¹⁸

With the beginning of World War II, Turkey, which had already declared itself an opponent of any sort of Kurdish autonomy, became an increasingly important coalition partner for the Allies. Furthermore, the British had gained in influence. In contrast to the French, they were in favor of Syrian independence. At the beginning of June 1941, Great Britain, along with Free France, occupied Syria and Lebanon, where as a result of the Vichy government's ascent to power, a representative of this regime had been appointed High Commissioner. The invasion was accompanied by an explanation, in the course of which de Gaulle promised Syria and Lebanon independence.¹⁹ While France remained responsible for the administration of Syria, Great Britain took responsibility for the military protection of the region. In the Syrian parliamentary elections of July 1943, the Syrian nationalists and the National Bloc once again emerged victorious.²⁰ The new government insisted that the French immediately relinquish their authority²¹—a demand the mandate power was not prepared to meet. In May 1945, an Arab revolt broke out against the French. Great Britain eventually intervened on the side of Syria. As a result of these events, France withdrew from Syria entirely in the spring of 1946.²² The country became politically independent, but neither an independent status for the Jazirah nor minority rights had been secured.

The Kurdish-Christian autonomous movement—even though never asking for separation from Syria—had rather concentrated on its otherness with regard to the Arab majority and on gaining specific rights for the Kurdish-Christian population than on influencing the development of the country as a whole. Moreover, most Kurdish autonomists felt much closer to their “brothers” in eastern Turkey than to the new central authority in distant Damascus.²³ In this regard, developments in the 1930s are very similar to developments in 2004 or since 2011, as will be shown below. However, at the time, when Arab nationalism was the dominant ideology, the chance to enforce minority rights was minimal.

After discussing the time of the French Mandate, I will now jump to the year 2004, which is obviously a large leap in time. However, this leap in time is justified. First of all, within Syrian independence and the turn of the millennium, no Kurdish mass protest took place. With the foundation of the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (*Partiya Yekîti ya Kurdî li Sûriyê, Yekîti*) in 1992, Kurdish requests became more visible and a mobilization of the Kurdish arena started—albeit to a very limited scale and without consequences for the overall situation in Syria.²⁴ At the same time, the suppression of the Kurds during this period of time—for example, the expatriation and dispossession of about 120,000 Kurds in al-Hassakah province in 1962 and the implementation of an Arab belt along the Iraqi and Turkish borders in the 1970s—did not influence the level of authoritarianism generally applied in Syria, but rather stood out as symptom of that authoritarianism. The persecution of the Kurds centered on a comparably small ethnic group in a comparably small and remote part of the country, hardly affecting Syria's political system as a whole.

The “al-Qamishli Uprising” of 2004

Violent demonstrations in the northern Syrian-Kurdish enclaves and the Kurdish areas of Aleppo and Damascus marked the eruption of Kurdish anti-establishment protests on the Syrian political scene in March 2004. Most media sources reported that on March 12, 2004 during a football match between the local team and Dayr az-Zaur in the town of al-Qamishli, insults between the fans of the two sides escalated into a riot that spilled out into the streets. Other sources reported that the riot was started by the provocations of the fans from Dayr az-Zaur, a town traditionally associated with the Sunni Arab tribes who sympathized with the Iraqi regime. Riding around the town in a bus, the fans of that team allegedly chanted slogans insulting the Iraqi Kurdish leaders, Barzani and Talabani, while flaunting portraits of Saddam Hussein. When fans of the local team responded with chants praising President George Bush (“We will sacrifice our lives for Bush”), the battle between the “Dayri,” armed with knives, stones, and sticks, and the Kurdish supporters, erupted inside the stadium, which turned out to be to a disadvantage for the latter.²⁵

The governor of al-Hasakah, Salim Kabul, gave the order to the security forces to open fire, resulting in six dead, all Kurds, three of whom were children. This sparked rioting throughout al-Qamishli where residents burned grain warehouses and destroyed scores of public buses and private vehicles.²⁶ The same evening, Kurdish students from the University of Damascus

attempted to approach the United Nations (UN) building as a sign of protest against the inaction of the UN in defense of the Kurds. Later that night, some Kurdish parties decided to assemble a group, by means of placards and communication by portable phones, to protest against the actions of the security forces, capitalizing on the funerals planned for the victims.²⁷

The next day, the Kurdish political parties' expectations for a turnout were greatly surpassed. Thousands of people joined the procession accompanying the coffins to the cemetery of Qudurbag, in the traditional Kurdish quarter of the town. That day, Christians, and Arabs of al-Qamishli, although less numerous than Kurdish protestors, also took part in the protests. Security forces, supported by armed militias from Arab tribes, countered this demonstration by again firing into the crowd, triggering violence that culminated in the destruction of statues of Hafez al-Assad. Rumors of a real massacre quickly circulated and thousands of people demonstrated in the main Kurdish towns, and in Arab cities with a strong concentration of Kurds, like Hamah, ar-Raqqah, Aleppo, and Damascus. Soon, however, protesters in al-Qamishli brandished Kurdish flags and chanted Kurdish slogans. Consequently, Christians and local Arabs withdrew from the protest movement, which then became entirely Kurdish.

The reaction of the security forces between March 12 and 25 was surprising in its brutality. By late March, the final count was 43 dead (seven were Arabs), hundreds wounded, around 2,500 arrests, and more than 40 Kurdish students dismissed from Syrian universities. Before the protests, the Syrian government had been unaware of the Kurdish capacity for action and was surprised by the scale of dissent. The visibility of the "Kurdish problem" in Syria was heightened by worldwide media coverage.

In several ways, the al-Qamishli revolt (*serhildan*) is different from earlier protests in the Kurdish areas of Syria. First of all, for the first time thousands of Kurds openly defied the Ba'athist regime by mobilizations and various repertoires of collective action such as marches, commemorations, cultural festivals, and demonstrations. For the first time in the history of contemporary Syria, the protest movement touched all Kurdish territories, thus reinforcing the symbolic unity of the Syrian-Kurdish arena—"Syrian Kurdistan."

However, young men, mostly from lower social classes,²⁸ were the driving force behind the unrest of 2004, not the Kurdish political parties. As early as March 14, 2004, a coalition formed by these parties had called for an end to the protests and rallies and three days of mourning for those who had been killed. Additionally, they agreed to cancel the celebrations for the Newroz Festival on March 21 in order to prevent further protests. Instead of public celebrations, solidarity with the "martyrs" of al-Qamishli was to be

symbolized by wearing black badges and hanging black flags on houses. The PYD was the only party to break from this consensus and hold an official celebration.²⁹

Secondly, after 2004 the Kurdish parties have been approached by other Syrian opposition groups. Abroad, the National Salvation Front (NSF), established in early 2006, and the Reform party of Syria, led by Farid Ghadri and based in the United States, were said to be on the verge of offering a “democratic” solution to the Kurdish problem in Syria. Inside the country, intellectuals, human rights activists, and the secular opposition established connections with Kurdish organizations.

However, these new contacts did not result in any longer lasting, trusting cooperation between the Kurdish and the Arab opposition. Instead, in the aftermath of the al-Qamishli revolt, Syrian-Kurdish parties sought a new balance with the regime or, in other words, a new accommodation between the regime and the Kurdish movement in Syria. The Syrian regime would be more likely to allow a flexible approach with respect to public expressions of Kurdish identity (language, music, cultural festivals, and publications), while the Kurdish movement would not embrace the goal of overturning the government of Bashar al-Assad.

Thus, the “al-Qamishli uprising” illustrates strikingly that anti-regime protests in the Kurdish regions did not have the power to initiate anti-regime protests in other parts of the country, or rather among non-Kurdish segments of the population. For the people in Homs or Hamah, protests in the Kurdish regions—if they were noticed at all—were rather perceived as “separatist threat” than as a protest against an authoritarian regime one could possibly join. At the same time, the Kurdish political parties were not able to include the non-Kurdish population of the majority Kurdish regions in the protests. Moreover, they early decided to rather contain the protest than to try to broaden it. One may interpret this as the realistic assessment that they were too weak to negotiate meaningful concessions through exercising pressure—or as the naive assumption that the regime would grant them certain (ethnic) rights—as the re-naturalization of those Kurds stripped of their citizenship in the 1960s—if they would cooperate with them and not become openly disloyal.

As will be shown below, we will find this same reservation among Kurdish party leaders when analyzing their participation in the Syrian revolution.

The Kurdish Factor in the Syrian Revolution

When the 2011 uprising started, many observers believed that the Syrian Kurds would play a major role in the overturning of the regime. However,

as during the al-Qamishli uprising in 2004, it was not the political parties, but predominantly young people who supported the protests in the spring of 2011. Only the Kurdish Future Movement in Syria (Şepêla Pêşrojê ya Kurdî li Sûriyê) publicly positioned itself on the side of the protestors from the very beginning of the revolution.³⁰ A split subsequently arose between the Future Movement and the other Kurdish Parties: The Future Movement is the only party aside from the PYD, the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK),³¹ that is not a part of the Kurdish National Council.

There is no sound evidence of organizational ties between the young people who were active in 2004 and those who began organizing demonstrations in spring 2011. In fact, local coordinating committees in the Arab parts of the country were the model for the development of similar groups in the Kurdish regions.³² Initially these Kurdish committees discussed and shared the weekly demonstration slogans with their Arab allies.³³ At the end of March 2012, however, Kurdish activists began using their own slogans—slogans that often made reference to specific Kurdish issues and had not previously been accepted as general slogans.³⁴ Aside from the question of providing for specific Kurdish issues in the slogans, the use of religious mottos also became a point of contention.³⁵ In addition to the difficulties with the Arab opposition, the Kurdish parties played a significant role in the “Kurdification” of the protest discourse, as was also reflected in the progressive disappearance of the Syrian independence flag of 1948—the symbol of the Syrian revolution—at demonstrations in cities like al-Qamishli. From the beginning, most party representatives were not really interested in the protests and distanced themselves from the Arab opposition, especially from the part that advocated for an overthrow of the regime. For example, party members were critical that “the Arabs” had abandoned the Kurds in their fight against the Syrian regime in 2004, and thus they saw no reason to support an “Arab revolution” now. Initially local coordinating committees and youth groups were very attractive to young people, but over the past three years, their influence has gradually diminished. One reason for this is that it is difficult to continually develop activities given the scarcity of resources, limited support from the outside, and scant organizational skills. Another aspect seems to be even more important, as the activist ‘Abdussalam ‘Uthman explains in an interview:

The coordinating groups were initially very popular. After a while their popularity decreased. The people saw that the coordinating groups were behaving more and more like our parties. At the moment they are very weak; they cannot change society.³⁶

Indeed, many of the early youth groups have disbanded; others have split or have merged together only to split again shortly thereafter. Currently, most youth groups have close ties to one of the Kurdish parties and/or are members of the Kurdish National Council.³⁷

The Kurdish National Council, a federation of most Kurdish political parties (see above), was founded in October 2011 with the goals of profiting from the popularity of the youth groups, unifying the Kurdish political parties programmatically,³⁸ and more effectively representing Kurdish demands. Thus far, none of these goals have been realized.

Although the Kurdish National Council has managed to co-opt the youth groups, this has not led to an increase in popularity or legitimacy, but only to the suppression of potential rivals.

Programmatically, the Kurdish National Council has hardly anything new to offer. Ideas for the political future of the Kurds in a Syria post-al-Assad are nothing more than buzzwords. With regard to a solution to the Kurdish issue, the Kurdish National Council's first declaration on October 26, 2011 stated:

The conference was of the opinion that the Kurdish people are an original component of Syria. They are living on their historic, ancestral land and represent a crucial part of the national fabric of peoples in Syria. This makes both the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish people as an essential part of the Syrian people and as the second largest ethnicity necessary, a just and democratic solution to the Kurdish question that secures the people's right to self-determination within a still-existing Syrian nation-state. Further the conference was of the opinion that a solution to the Kurdish question represents, on the one hand, the beginning of true democracy and, on the other hand, a test for the Syrian opposition, which is striving for a better future for Syria on the basis of the principle that Syria belongs to all Syrians.³⁹

In April 2012, the Kurdish National Council formulated a new political program that differs from the original program in that it no longer explicitly calls for the right of self-determination for the Kurds and for political decentralization. Isma'îl Hamî, secretary of the Yekîti and member of the Kurdish National Council, emphasized in a press release that the demand for self-determination nevertheless remains a part of the program. According to Hamî, this demand is echoed in the call to seek the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish people and its national identity, as well as the call for the recognition of the Kurdish language as an official language and the recognition

of the legitimate national rights of the Kurdish people in accordance with international norms and conventions.⁴⁰ Finally, in December 2012, Faisal Yusuf, then chairman of the Kurdish National Council, summarized the Kurdish demands as follows:

Our requirements are the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish people and its identity as well as the guarantee of its legitimate national rights in accordance with international norms and conventions. In addition, in accordance with its share of the total population of Syria, the Kurds should have approximately a fifteen percent share of representation in the Coalition [for more on this body, see below] and its committees. All discriminatory practices and decrees affecting the Kurds must be repealed, the victims must be compensated, and the status quo ante must be reinstated. Moreover, Syria should officially be called the Republic of Syria, not the Syrian Arab Republic. Furthermore, we demand that the Coalition commit itself to supporting all national armed groups, not only the Free Syrian Army.⁴¹

With regard to its stance toward the Syrian revolution and an overthrow of the regime, initially there were two factions in the Kurdish National Council on these issues. One wanted to support the revolution more clearly. The most important representatives of this faction were the Yekîtî, both factions of the Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria (Partiya Azadî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê, Azadî), and ‘Abdulahkim Bashar’s Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (el-Partî) [Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (el-Partî)]. These parties, which were united in the Kurdish Democratic Political Union—Syria (Yekîtiya Siyasî ya Demokrata Kurd—Sûriyê), founded on December 15, 2012,⁴² had close ties to Massoud Barzani’s Iraqi-Kurdish Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The KDP-Iraq supports—if sometimes cautiously—the Syrian revolution. The second faction consists primarily of ‘Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish’s Kurdish Progressive Party in Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Pêşverû ya Kurdî li Sûriyê) and Muhiyuddin Shaykh Ali’s Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria (Yekîtî) [Partiya Yekîtî ya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (Yekîtî)]. The Progressive Party maintains close ties to Jalal Talabani’s Iraqi-Kurdish Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which has been hesitant about the Syrian revolution thus far. For its part, the Democratic Yekîtî, which is largely strong in ‘Afrin, traditionally has good relations with the PYD and its mother party, the PKK. This faction generally rejected closer cooperation with those parts of the Syrian opposition that clearly advocate an overthrow of the regime.

This discord contributed significantly to the fact that the Kurdish National Council has never been a member of the Syrian National Council, and it first decided in September 2013 to join what at this time is the most important oppositional union, the National Coalition, founded on November 11, 2012. This decision was motivated by the consideration that at that time a possible US military strike would have given the Syrian opposition and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) specifically the upper hand. In this case, it would have been a mistake not to be part of the opposition.

However, as the military strike was not carried out, the Kurdish National Council's enthusiasm to work with the Syrian opposition declined. In the peace negotiations in Geneva in January and February 2014, the Kurdish National Council as well as the PYD requested to be represented with an independent Kurdish delegation, as a "third party" in addition to the National Coalition and the Syrian government—even though the Kurdish National Council was a member of the National Coalition. As the request was turned down, a representative of the Kurdish National Council participated in the Geneva conference as part of the opposition, whereas the PYD was excluded.

At the same time, loyalties or rather coalitions seem to be in transition. The Yekîti, previously one of the few pro-revolution parties, left the alliance with the el-Parti of Abdulhakim Bashar and the two Azadîs.⁴³ Whilst the aforementioned parties, pressured by Iraqi-Kurdish president Massoud Barzani and his Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iraq, dissolved and merged in the beginning of April 2014 to become the Kurdistan Democratic Party–Syria (Partiya Demokrata Kurdistan–Sûriye), the Yekîti did not join them. It is currently siding with Jalal Talabani's PUK. Allegedly, the Yekîti is dissatisfied with the preferential relationship the el-Parti enjoyed with the KDP-Iraq, in particular regarding financial support, and therefore changed alliances.

Besides the youth groups and the Kurdish National Council, the third and most important actor in the Kurdish regions is currently the PYD, founded in 2003. After the deportation of PKK-leader Abdullah Öcalan from Syria in October 1998,⁴⁴ numerous high-ranking PKK cadres were successively extradited to Turkey and PKK supporters in Syria were arrested and detained long term. The PYD was established in order to further bind PKK members and sympathizers living in Syria to the party. At the same time, the party's refounding was intended to help evade state repression. The latter was hardly successful: Until the beginning of the protests in 2011, the PYD was not only the party with the most people in Syrian prisons, its members were also, as a rule, sentenced to longer prison terms

than the members of other parties and were systematically subjected to torture. Since then, the balance of power has shifted in favor of the PYD, and the PYD/PKK has once again entered a strategic alliance with the Syrian government. The Iraqi president and chairman of the PUK allegedly played a key role in initiating contact between the Syrian government, the PKK, and, as a third partner, the Iranian government.⁴⁵ During Saddam Hussein's rule, Talabani spent many years in asylum in Damascus—his good relations with the al-Assad family stem from this time. There are also no reservations regarding the Iranian government and the PKK: During the intra-Kurdish civil war in the mid-1990s in Iraq, both supported the PUK against its (then) political opponent, Massoud Barzani's KDP. Against this background, Talabani was able to negotiate the following deal: In September 2011, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, PJAK), the Iranian arm of the PKK, ended its armed fight against Iran. This was not only in the interest of Iran, but also in the interest of the PUK, as armed attacks by the PJAK regularly led to Iranian retaliation on PUK-controlled Iraqi territory. At about the same time, the PYD in Syria was reinvigorated. According to information from various activists, as many as 200 PKK militiamen from Turkey and Iraq as well as weapons of Iranian origin were smuggled into Syria at that time. Thus armed, the PYD began to prevent the Kurdish population from effectively participating in the revolution. The Syrian government clearly profited from this arrangement as its own security forces did not need to take action against the Kurdish population. It could thus avert a situation in which massive violence would prompt the Kurdish political parties to abandon their wait-and-see approach to the Syrian revolution. At the same time, the government could focus its powers on the main centers of uprising. In addition, any weakening of the Syrian revolution is also in the interest of Iran: The fall of the Ba'ath regime and the potential for (extremist) Sunnis in Syria to seize power would mean the loss of an important regional ally for Iran and would impede direct access to Hizbullah in Lebanon.

The PYD and its militia, the People's Defense Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), currently exercise state-like power in Syria's Kurdish regions. The Syrian regime has ceded the administration of several cities and villages to the PYD. These cities were taken over by the PYD without notable armed conflicts, a fact that points to agreements—whether official or unofficial—between the PYD/PKK and the Syrian regime.⁴⁶ In April 2014, the PYD fully controlled most towns in the province of al-Hasakah with the exception of al-Qamishli and al-Hasakah, the two largest and strategically most important cities. The towns of 'Afrin and 'Ayn al-'Arab (Kobani) were also completely under PYD control. Surrounding villages

were partly controlled by the PYD and partly by Islamists groups, in particular around Ayn al-Arab. In mixed cities like al-Qamshli, government structures exist parallel to PYD-structures, whereas in cities with a large Kurdish majority, government structures have completely dissolved.

On the one hand, the PYD's initial financial position as a branch of the PKK is already considerably better than that of all other Syrian-Kurdish parties; on the other hand, the PYD knows how to economically use its control over vast parts of Syria's Kurdish regions: Customs duties and protection money, for example, for the military protection of the oil fields in Rumailan,⁴⁷ guarantee high revenues for the PYD. These revenues are a significant reason why controlling the Syrian-Kurdish regions is attractive for the PYD or rather the PKK. Another reason is that the border region to Turkey can be used not only as a refuge, but also as a place for recruiting and training new fighters. For the Syrian regime, the cooperation with the PYD is also beneficial: Like his father, Bashar al-Assad utilizes the PKK to put pressure on Turkey. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which deeply upset the Syrian regime when it positioned itself on the side of the Syrian opposition, can neither politically nor militarily afford to let the PKK/PYD permanently establish itself in Syria's Kurdish regions. At the same time, it is not in the AKP's interest to resolve the conflict militarily. A Turkish invasion of Syria would allow the PKK and its Kurdish critics to close ranks and would also seriously disrupt the peace process that has just begun in Turkey. Since the FSA began operating in the Kurdish regions, the transfer of control to the PYD offers the Syrian government another advantage: Instead of government troops, the PYD provides the armed response to the FSA there. Ultimately, the Syrian regime may also willingly cede control to the PYD because it assumes that this control will be comparatively easy to regain, should the government survive the protests and the civil war. When PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was deported from Syria in 1998 and the PKK lost its bases in Syria and in Lebanon, the PKK responded with neither protests nor (armed) attacks against the Syrian government.

The strength of the PYD compared to all of the other parties in Syria's Kurdish regions is due to the fact that it has a core of militarily well-trained cadres and commands enough resources to get potential sympathizers to commit to it for the long term. The number of armed PYD members is estimated to be 10,000–20,000.⁴⁸ Other Kurdish parties, for example, the Yekîti or the Azadî, have only several dozen fighters.⁴⁹ They are not in a position to prevent the PYD with its YPG militiamen from kidnapping, interrogating, torturing, and even killing activists as well as members of the parties of the Kurdish National Council at will.⁵⁰

On June 27, 2013, the largest PYD attack to date took place in ‘Amuda: When demonstrators demanded the release of activists kidnapped by the YPG⁵¹, threw stones at YPG vehicles, and berated the YPG as “Shabbihah” (a militia loyal to the regime), YPG fighters began firing into the crowd. At least eight people were killed, including an eight-year-old child who was run over by a YPG vehicle. YPG fighters erected checkpoints in the city and carried out raids; several dozen people were abducted. Moreover, the YPG closed off the city and prevented doctors from al-Qamishli from treating the injured in ‘Amuda. A curfew was also imposed. Aras Ahmad Bango, an armed guard for the Yekîtu party office, was killed by a gunshot to the head on the roof of the party office. YPG fighters then stormed the party office and brought all those present—between 50 and 70 people, mostly party supporters—under its control. All of the office equipment were destroyed. In addition, the party office of Mustafa J’uma’s Azadî and the hunger strikers’ tent⁵² in the center of ‘Amuda were burned down. In order to prevent the funeral marches for those killed from turning into mass demonstrations against the PYD, the relatives of the deceased were forced to bury them with only the immediate family present.⁵³ For the first time since the beginning of the protests in the Kurdish regions in the spring of 2011, there were no dissident demonstrations in ‘Amuda on the Friday after the attacks. With the exception of al-Qamishli, the youth movements also cancelled their protests in other Kurdish cities. Officially, this was to protect social peace and prevent intra-Kurdish bloodshed, but in fact, it was out of fear.

The attack in ‘Amuda not only put an end to the cautious attempts to denounce PYD politics at demonstrations and protest against them with a hunger strike, but the PYD was also able to end the political activities of others for several months. Only since November 2013, isolated protests supported by a limited number of activists take place again.⁵⁴ Remaining criticism was silenced by the PYD’s allegation that they were the only power to check and balance Islamists in the Kurdish areas. However, in skirmishes between the YPG and Islamist units such as the Jabhat an-Nusrah, it is not always clear what can be traced back to attacks by the Islamists and what was provoked by the YPG. For example, in mid-June 2013, the YPG drove the Jabhat an-Nusrah out of Ra’s al-‘Ayn, after its chairman Salih Muslim Muhammad had claimed in late March 2013 that they were no longer present there.⁵⁵ There is much to suggest that the fighting did not flare up again because of pressing problems, but rather because the YPG had intentionally chosen this moment to distract people from the conflicts in ‘Amuda and win back sympathy from the Kurdish population by fighting against the Islamists. Moreover, at the end of December 2013 units of the YPG, the National Defense Army (a regime militia) and the Syrian Army started a

joint offensive against Islamist units near Tall Hamis (40 kilometers south of al-Qamishli) and Tall Brak (30 kilometers west of Tall Hamis). Both cities are situated outside the Kurdish areas that the PYD is pretending to protect against Islamists. In the end, the YPG had to withdraw after major losses.⁵⁶ It is reasonable to argue that such “offensives” rather provoke counterattacks by Islamists than to weaken them and that the reason behind the YPG joining the offensive was loyalty toward the regime rather than responsibility for the safety of the Kurds.

PYD propaganda describes its rule as “democratic self-governing collective self-administration from below,” based on the organization of the people into civil institutions.⁵⁷ However, the “social contract” the PYD refers to when asked to explain this concept has never been officially published.⁵⁸ Comparably nebulous is the question of who participated in the establishment of a local administration in the Jazirah, ‘Afrin and ‘Ayn al-‘Arab on November 12, 2013.⁵⁹ No comprehensive list of signatories has ever been published. Moreover, those participants known are either affiliated with the PYD—such as the PYD’s women’s organization Yekîtiya Star—or are entirely unknown—such as the Liberal Kurdish Union (Yekîtiya Liberalî ya Kurdistanî), the Kurdish Democratic Peace Party in Syria (Partiya Aştî ya Demokrata Kurdî li Sûriyê) or the Communist Kurdistanian Party (Partiya Komoîst ya Kurdistanî). Neither are the Kurdish National Council or any of its senior political parties such as the Yekîtî or ‘Abdullhakim Bashar’s el-Partî participating in these local administrations. This lack of transparency and accountability was not exceptional, as the PYD alone promoted the declaration of a local administration, followed by the appointment of three governments in the “cantons” of the Jazirah, Kobanî and ‘Afrin on January 21, 27 and 29, 2014.

It is obvious, thus, that the policies of mediation and containment advanced by the Iraqi-Kurdish president and chairman of the KDP, Massoud Barzani, against the PYD have failed. In summer 2012, Barzani invited the Kurdish National Council and the People’s Council of Western Kurdistan to Erbil multiple times for mediation sessions. In July 2012, the Supreme Kurdish Committee (Desteya Bilind a Kurd) was formed, with both sides assigned 50 percent representation.⁶⁰ However, this Committee has never been functioning. As analyzed above, a joint administration only exists on paper and there is little to suggest that this will change.

In the beginning of the revolution, thus, Kurdish youth has played a relevant role in the setting of an agenda in which “democracy” and “dignity” became keywords. Soon, however, traditional political parties and powers like the Kurdish National Council and the PYD/PKK became again dominant. While the Kurdish National Council has successfully assimilated

and marginalized the majority of the youth groups, the PYD and its militia, the YPG, dominate all other Kurdish parties. Both have been acting as obstacles, not as driving forces for democratization. Five decades of Ba'athist rule in Syria as well as the fact that most of the Kurdish political parties depend on Kurdish parties in Iraq and Turkey—financially as well as ideologically—have severely undermined their significance as an alternative to the existing political system and their capacity to offer concrete solutions to their people.

The Kurds as a Motor of Democratization?

Having analyzed three occasions when the Syrian Kurds participated in public mass protest, one has to admit that the Kurdish opposition is not—and has never been—in a position to initiate a “democratization” of Syria. Moreover, analyzing the current political situation, there is no evidence that this state of affairs may change in the near future: The PYD, on the one hand, limits itself to pure power politics dressed up as Kurdish nationalism. Their politics are a telling example for what Vincent Geisser calls the “authoritarianism of the dominated.”⁶¹ As argued in a forthcoming article with Jordi Tejel, we should analyze authoritarianism as a “relationship” between different actors, including the “subordinated,” rather than as a given, an instrument in the hands of governments. The Kurdish National Council as well as its individual parties, on the other hand, have no means to successfully compete with the PYD and therefore most of the time try to deny that the relationship between them and the PYD is profoundly imbalanced and highly problematic. Moreover, they dramatically failed to develop ideas for the future of the Kurdish population in Syria beyond buzzwords like “federalism” and “democracy.”

However, federalism does not necessarily mean participation or representation and federal systems can be as undemocratic as central ones. If federalism solely means that power is shifted from an authoritarian president in the center to authoritarian governors in the provinces, nothing is won. At the same time, also in many nonfederal states a certain measure of self-administration is or can be granted to provinces and municipalities, for example through a decentralized administration and the designation of specific areas with final decision-making authority. Thus regional or municipal authorities can, for example, have a certain measure of autonomy in questions of city and regional planning, economic investments, and in the area of education. In addition, they can be granted authority to supervise security personnel (police, intelligence service, border personnel) at the municipal

or regional level. In light of this, it would be necessary to develop a concept of administrative decentralization and self-government, including electoral procedures, that could be established in the Kurdish region but—and this is important—also in all other Syrian provinces. Such a concept needs, above all, to be based on two principals: a) political decisions of all kinds should be taken on the lowest administrative level possible and b) institutions should be structured from the bottom-up, which means for example replacing nomination from above by election from below. If the Kurdish parties were willing and capable of developing—together with the Syrian opposition—such concepts for all of Syria, they might gain meaningful decision making competences for the provinces and regions where Kurds are the majority without risking being labeled as separatist. Parallel to such advancements they could develop a concept of self-administration or self-government within the Syrian state in order to also enjoy certain rights not covered by a general decentralization—e. g. language rights.⁶² Such initiatives would not stop the PYD's/PKK's authoritarian approach—an approach that may well be ultimately asking for a military answer. However, they would actively support a meaningful democratization of Syria, and thus a development the Kurdish population would also benefit from. Moreover, the Syrian Kurds would finally be more than puppets of the KDP and PUK, or victims of the PYD/PKK respectively.

To hope, on the other hand, that the Kurds could play a leading role in securing minority rights in Syria and, starting from this point, support the development of a more democratic regime, is misleading—not only due to the circumstances on the ground, but also for theoretical considerations. Minority rights are usually granted if a state has already achieved a certain democratic standard—which is obviously not the case in Syria. Moreover, neither the Kurds in Syria nor those in Turkey or Iraq define themselves as minorities, but rather as second *staatsvolk*.

However, and as this chapter has shown, it is currently unrealistic to think that the Kurds will play any meaningful role in democratizing Syria—or even their own society.

Notes

1. The figure of 2 million is extrapolated from information provided by the French mandate power in January 1943 and reflects the general population growth in Syria.
2. Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 11–12.

3. Nelida Fuccaro, "Die Kurden Syriens. Anfänge der nationalen Mobilisierung unter französischer Herrschaft," in Carsten Borck, Eva Savelsberg, and Siamend Hajo (eds.) *Ethnizität, Nationalismus, Religion und Politik in Kurdistan* (Münster: Lit, 1997), pp. 303–304.
4. Tejel, 2009, p. 17.
5. Tejel, 2009, pp. 20–23.
6. David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), p. 7.
7. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds Mandat Syrie et Liban, Cabinet Politique 1054: Á S. E. le Général Billotte, Commandant la 2^e D, I., Délégué du H.-C. á Alep, [s. l.], le 3 avril 1924.
8. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds Mandat Syrie et Liban, Cabinet Politique 571: Pétition á Son Excellence le Haut-Commissaire de la République Française en Syrie et en Liban, le 15 avril 1930.
9. Tejel, 2009, pp. 28–29.
10. For more on the demands of the autonomists, see, for example, Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds Mandat Syrie et Liban, Cabinet Politique 413: Á Son Excellence Monsieur Étienne Flandin, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères (Paris); á Son Excellence le Comte de Martel, Haut-Commissaire de la République Française des États du Levant sous Mandat Français (Paris); and á Son Excellence Monsieur Avenol, Secrétaire Général de la Société des Nations (Genève); á Son Excellence Monsieur le Général Commandant Supérieur des Troupes Françaises du Levant (Beyrouth), Haute-Djézireh, Kamechlié, le 5 avril 1936.
11. Tejel, 2009, pp. 30–31.
12. Phillip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 458–469.
13. Khoury, 1987, p. 529; Fuccaro, 1997, p. 318.
14. For more on the revolt in the Jazirah, see Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, Vincenne (SHAT), 4H 448, Dossier 8: De l'Inspection des Services Spéciaux de Djézireh Janvier–Avril 1943, "La Révolution de la Djézireh: Juillet–Août 1937"; Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds Mandat Syrie et Liban, Cabinet Politique 503: "Mon Crime", angehängt an: Le Capitaine Thomas, Inspecteur Adjoint du Mohafazat de Djézireh á Monsieur le Colonel Délégué Adjoint du Haut-Commissaire pour les Territoires de l'Euphrate (Deir-ez-Zor), Hassaché, le 16 septembre 1937.
15. For more on the events in 'Amudah, see Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds Mandat Syrie et Liban, Cabinet Politique 503: Rapport du Colonel Sarrade, Commandant des Troupes du Territoire de l'Euphrate et Délégué Adjoint du Haut-Commissaire pour le Territoire de l'Euphrate, sur la Rébellion d'Amouda et sa Répression, Deir-ez-Zor, le 30 août 1937 and Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, Vincenne (SHAT), 4H 448, Dossier 8: De l'Inspection des Services Spéciaux de Djézireh Janvier–Avril 1943, "La Révolution de la Djézireh: Juillet–Août 1937".

16. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds Mandat Syrie et Liban, Cabinet Politique 503: Le Délégué P. I. du Haut-Commissaire auprès de la République Syrienne à Monsieur Meyrier, Délégué Général du Haut-Commissaire, Cabinet P. (Beyrouth), Damas, le 6 septembre 1937.
17. Khoury, 1987, pp. 490–491.
18. Khoury, 1987, pp. 584, 534.
19. Khoury, 1987, pp. 591–592.
20. Khoury, 1987, p. 604.
21. Khoury, 1987, p. 613.
22. Khoury, 1987, pp. 616–617.
23. Economically, Nusaybin had been the point of reference for the population in the Jazirah, not Aleppo or even Damascus.
24. Eva Savelsberg and Jordi Tejel, “The Syrian Kurds in Transition to Somewhere,” in Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter (eds.) *The Kurdish Spring. Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2013), pp. 196–197.
25. Danish Refugee Council, “Syria: Kurds, Honor-Killings and Illegal Departure” (Copenhagen: Danish Immigration Service, 2007), p. 6.
26. Gary C. Gambill, “The Kurdish Reawakening in Syria,” *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 21.1 (2004), p. 4.
27. Interview with an eyewitness, al-Qamishli, February 2007.
28. KurdWatch, “The al-Qamishli Uprising, the Beginning of a ‘New Era’ for Syrian Kurds?” 4 (December 2009), pp. 12–13, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_qamishli_en.pdf>
29. KurdWatch, 2009, pp. 15–16.
30. In addition, some of the early youth activists were members of the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Partiya Yekîti ya Kurdi li Sûriyê).
31. For more about the affiliation between PYD and PKK, see KurdWatch, “What Does the Syrian-Kurdish Opposition Want? Politics between Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Damascus, and Qandil,” September 2013, pp. 15–16, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch_A009_en_Parteien2.pdf>
32. Interview with ‘Abdussalam ‘Uthman, Politician and Activist, January 10, 2013.
33. KurdWatch, “Who Is the Syrian-Kurdish Opposition? The Development of Kurdish Parties, 1956–2011,” December 2011, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_parteien_en.pdf>
34. KurdWatch, “Al-Qamishli: For the First Time, Kurdish Activists Demonstrate under Their Own Slogan,” April 2012, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2497&z=en&cure=245>
35. KurdWatch, “Al-Qamishli: Demonstrators Criticize Islamic Slogans,” May 16, 2012, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2533&z=en&cure=245>.
36. KurdWatch, “Abdulsalam ‘Uthman, Politician and Activist: Khabat Derki Kidnapped Me, He Held a Gun to My Head,” December 25, 2012, http://www.kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2719&z=en&cure=240.

37. When the policymakers within these parties realized that the youth groups were gaining more and more supporters, they founded their own youth organizations; see also Adib Abdulmajid, "Kurdish Youth Forces in Syria Accuse Parties of Squeezing Them Out," *Rûdaw*, January 14, 2013, <<http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/5656.html>>.
38. Previously there were numerous short-lived coalitions of Kurdish political parties; see KurdWatch, 2011, pp. 19–21.
39. See "Closing Statement of the Kurdish Patriotic Conference in Syria," http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch_D029_en_ar.pdf.
40. KurdWatch, "Al-Qamishli: Kurdish National Council Drafts New Political Program," May 2, 2012, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2519&z=en&cure=245>.
41. KurdWatch, "Faisal Yusuf, Chairman of the Kurdish National Council: Sometimes Things Are Demanded of the Council That Only a Government Could Accomplish," December 28, 2012, http://www.kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2721&z=en&cure=240.
42. KurdWatch, "Al-Qamishli: Kurdish Democratic Political Union-Syria Established," January 7, 2013, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2727&z=en&cure=1009>>.
43. See KurdWatch, "Al-Qamishli: Yekitî Leaves Political Union," July 2, 2013, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2871&z=en&cure=1009>>.
44. For more on cooperation between the PKK and the Syrian regime in the 1980s and 1990s, see Savelsberg et al., 2013, pp. 192–195.
45. A PUK member in Berlin confirmed that Talabani facilitated contact between the PKK/PYD, the Iranian regime, and the Syrian government; private conversation, Berlin, December 2012.
46. See, for example, KurdWatch, December 1, 2012, "Amudah/ad-Darbasiyah: Syrian regime cedes additional cities to the PYD," <http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2702&z=en&cure=245>.
47. Negotiations between the PKK and representatives of the regime, including the head of the Political Security Directorate in al-Hasakah, preceded the takeover of the oil field; see KurdWatch, "Rumailan: PKK and Syrian Regime Cooperate in Rumailan," June 8, 2013, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2849&z=en&cure=1009>>.
48. Kurd Press, "6 Kurds Killed in Clash with al-Nusra," July 26, 2013, <<http://www.kurdpress.com/En/NSite/FullStory/News/?Id=4984>>.
49. This militarization of the Kurdish conflict in Syria is a new phenomenon. Over the course of the Syrian revolution, Syrian-Kurdish parties have begun to form armed units for the first time.
50. For examples of more recent cases, see KurdWatch, "Al-Qamishli: PYD Is Accused of Brutal Torture," December 29, 2013, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2992&z=en&cure=1009>>; KurdWatch, "Ayn al-Arab: Activist Arrested by PYD," December 8, 2013, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2979&z=en&cure=1009>>; KurdWatch, "Afrin: Azadî

- member shot and killed following torture,” October 9, 2013, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2942&z=en&cure=1009>>; and KurdWatch, “Afrin: YPG Kidnaps Leading Azadî Member,” October 5, 2013, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2938&z=en&cure=1009>>.
51. KurdWatch, “Amudah: YPG Kidnaps Activists,” June 20, 2013, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2859&z=en&cure=1009>>.
 52. KurdWatch, “Amudah: Hunger Strike against PYD-Attacks,” June 27, 2013, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2866&z=en&cure=1009>>.
 53. KurdWatch, “Amudah: Situation Escalates Following YPG Attack on Demonstration,” July 3, 2013, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2873&z=en&cure=1009>>. Various institutions were also attacked in al-Qamishli; see KurdWatch, “Al-Qamishli: PYD Attacks Civic Institutions and el-Parti Offices,” July 5, 2013, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2875&z=en&cure=1009>>.
 54. KurdWatch, “Ayn al-‘Arab: PYD Closes Private Schools,” December 12, 2013, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=2981&z=en&cure=1009>>.
 55. KurdWatch, “Ra’s al-‘Ayn: YPG Expels Islamic Units from the City,” July 23, 2013, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2887&z=en&cure=1009>>.
 56. KurdWatch, “Tall Hamis/Tall Brak: PYD and Syrian Regime Start Joint Offensive,” January 7, 2014, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=3000&z=en&cure=1016>> and KurdWatch, “Tall Hamis/Tall Brak: PYD Withdraws after Major Losses,” January 11, 2014, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=3004&z=en&cure=1016>>.
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SECTION II

Democracy in Divided Societies

CHAPTER 5

Democracy, Civil War, and the Kurdish People Divided between Them

T. David Mason

Introduction

The Kurdish people represent the largest territorially concentrated ethnic group in the world that does not have its own nation-state. Thirty to forty million Kurds live in a territory that is divided between Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. They constitute between roughly a fifth of the population in Turkey and Iraq and roughly 10 percent of the population in Iran and Syria (see Introduction—The Kurds as Barrier or Key to Democratization). They are classified by the Minorities at Risk project as an “at risk minority” in all four of these nations, subject to varying forms and degrees of discrimination and violent repression.¹ Efforts at forced assimilation in all four countries have engendered among Kurds a strong sense of shared ethnic identity that has served as the basis for mobilizing collective resistance against policies that the Kurds see as a threat to their identity and their cultural survival.

In all four of these nations, this collective resistance has taken the form of multiple armed rebellions across the region by the Kurdish population prior to and since the end of World War II. None of these rebellions have been successful, at least in the sense that in none of these cases were the Kurds able to secede from the host nation and establish an independent Kurdish state. Nor have they been able to secure any constitutionally or otherwise legally sanctioned degree of autonomy as a result of armed rebellion. Only in Iraq, after the 1991 Gulf War and culminating with the overthrow of the

Hussein regime in 2003, have Kurds been able to establish some measure of territorial autonomy, and that came as a result of two interstate wars, not as a direct outcome of their own armed rebellion.

The failure of armed rebellion—and the low probability of it succeeding in the future—to secure autonomy for the Kurdish people presents them with a grim dilemma. On the one hand, they remain subject to varying degrees of ethnic discrimination and repression in each of the four nations. Armed rebellion has not succeeded in gaining for them any degree of autonomy that would protect them against the fear of ethnic extinction. On the other hand, with the possible exception of Iraq, they have not succeeded in gaining any degree of autonomy or security against repression and discrimination through peaceful means either.

In Turkey and Iraq, the two countries that host the largest portions of the Kurdish population, Kurds remain caught in the struggle between civil war and democracy. Turkey has a democratic regime, but the Kurds are still officially in a state of rebellion, even though the level of violence has remained low since 1999 (see chapter 8). Kurds in Turkey are geographically concentrated in the southeastern region of Turkey. Their size and their geographic concentration should work to their advantage, both in mounting and sustaining an armed insurgency and in competing peacefully for seats in a democratically elected parliament. Iraq has a fragile democratic regime, but the level of violence there remains persistently high enough to pass most thresholds for what is or is not a civil war.

In Iran, despite the absence of a full-blown civil war, the lack of democratic channels by which Kurds can pursue redress of their grievances lowers the chances of a peaceful solution. While Iran has an elected president and an elected legislature, it does not qualify as a fully functioning democracy because the (unelected) Supreme Leader and Guardian Council exercise ultimate authority over the elected bodies.

Syria is currently in a state of civil war, a conflict that erupted when the pro-democracy demonstrations in the Middle East and North Africa, referred to as the Arab Spring movement, were met with brutal repression by the Syrian regime. This was not an armed conflict initiated by Syria's Kurdish population, nor is Kurdish autonomy in a post-Assad Syria (democratic or otherwise) one of the rebellion's primary goals. Instead, Syrian Kurds appear to be caught in the crossfire between multiple competing rebel factions, some of which are putatively pro-democracy while others with al Qaeda affiliation seek some other nondemocratic regime type. Autonomy for the Kurdish population is not a goal for any of these warring factions (other than the Kurds themselves). There was no democracy in Syria before

the uprising of 2011, and the prospects for democracy emerging in the aftermath of the civil war are remote at best.

In this chapter, I will offer an assessment of the prospects for the Kurdish population across all four nations by analyzing their status in each in terms of current theories on the domestic democratic peace and democracy in ethnically divided societies. I will devote more attention to Turkey and Iraq because the democratic option is not currently available in Iran and Syria. Kurds have long-standing grievances in all four nations. How they pursue redress of those grievances and whether they can gain some measure of regional and cultural autonomy are, to some degree, a choice between resorting to armed violence or pursuing those interests peacefully through existing channels of government. In both Turkey and Iraq, democratic institutions are present, and they do offer an alternative to armed violence as a means for the Kurdish population to seek redress of their grievances. The question is then “do the democratic rules of the game in each nation offer them a reasonable chance of securing their interests?” The causes and dynamics of the several Kurdish rebellions across the region have been explained by others as well (see, for instance, Romano 2006). What I hope to do in this chapter is to offer a theoretical framework within which the status of the Kurds in each of the four nations and their prospects for the future can be assessed and compared across nations. That framework is grounded in theories of democracy in ethnically divided societies and the domestic democratic peace. I then use this framework to explore the question of whether the presence of democratic institutions in Turkey and Iraq offers the Kurds a viable alternative to armed violence as a means of securing their interests. Given the absence of democratic institutions in Iran and Syria and the presence of a bloody civil war in Syria, I will conclude by briefly considering the prospects for the Kurds in those two nations.

The Domestic Democratic Peace in Ethnically Divided Societies

The Kurdish regions of all four nations are contiguous to each other, making the movement of population across national borders relatively easy. Because they are a geographically concentrated minority with each nation, separatist movements have been easier to mobilize than would be the case were Kurds geographically dispersed and living intermixed among the majority ethnic groups in each nation. Geographically concentrated ethnic groups are more likely to engage in armed conflict, in part because geographic concentration facilitates mobilization for all forms of collective action, including violent forms.² Geographically concentrated ethnic minorities also fare better under

most forms of democracy because their votes are not diluted across multiple electoral districts.

The democratization of two of the four nations that are host to large Kurdish populations presents an alternative to rebellion as a path to resolving their grievances and securing their identity against the threat of ethnic extinction. Gurses highlights the expectations implicit or explicit in much of the literature on democratic transitions: “Democracy as a political system is uniquely suited to incorporate ethnic minority demands by building institutions capable of channeling these demands into nonviolent forms of participation and competition.”³ Thus, democracy is an alternative to violence as a means for ethnic minorities to pursue their interests, especially their interest in preserving their identity and their cultural autonomy. This prescriptive role for democracy is implicit in the domestic version of the democratic peace proposition: Just as democracies do not go to war with other democracies, the domestic democratic peace proposition holds that democracies should be less likely to experience civil war because aggrieved groups—including minorities that have been subject to discrimination and repression—can pursue redress of their grievances peacefully, through the institutional channels of democratic processes.⁴ The adoption of democratic institutions and the emergence of democratic norms are supposed to enable opposition groups to organize for collective action to express their preferences and their grievances. They are free to pursue those interests through nonviolent forms of protest without fear of repression. Elections provide government leaders with incentives to accommodate those demands through policy reforms; failure to do so can cost them at the polls. Likewise, elections provide state officials with incentives to refrain from repression because repression can also be costly at the polls. Indeed, there is a substantial body of research that shows a robust relationship between the adoption of democratic institutions and improvements in a nation’s human rights performance.⁵ Thus, grievances that might otherwise fuel revolutionary violence or secessionist revolts in nondemocracies can be addressed through nonviolent means in a democratic state because the leaders are subject to the discipline of the ballot box.

Fears of ethnic extinction or domination are what generate the ethnic security dilemmas that motivate ethnic minorities to resort to armed rebellion by ethnic minorities.⁶ An ethnic security dilemma can arise when an ethnic group fears that a rival ethnic group will gain control over the government and use the machinery of the state to discriminate against, repress, subordinate, or even eliminate rival ethnic groups. Based on that fear, threatened ethnic groups arm themselves defensively. That mobilization then induces fears on the part of the group that controls the state.

The dominant group then arms in response to this perceived threat as well. Eventually, one or both groups may resort to violence out of fear that the other will attack first.⁷

Democracy is supposed to reduce fears of ethnic extinction or domination by giving all ethnic groups peaceful institutional channels to pursue their interests and constitutional protections against ethnic domination or cultural genocide. Ethnic minorities will feel more secure—and, therefore, less likely to resort to armed conflict—if they have institutionalized access to government decision makers and policymaking institutions; if they can block government policies that threaten their ethnic identity, autonomy, or cultural survival; and if they have the institutional means to veto decisions that might threaten their identity, their culture, and their group interests. For an ethnic minority to buy into democracy—especially a minority that has been subject to severe discrimination and repression and that has engaged in armed rebellion in the past—the payoffs from sustaining their participation in a democratic state have to exceed their expected payoffs from their next best alternative strategy, which in many cases is a return to armed conflict.

However, the competitive nature of democratic institutions can generate ethnic fears as well as ameliorate them. Political entrepreneurs who seek elective office are tempted to engage in ethnic outbidding. They present themselves as the best defender of their own ethnic group and exaggerate the threat posed by rival ethnic groups.⁸ Horowitz makes the case that in ethnically divided democracies, political parties and candidates have an incentive to “play the ethnic card” and confine their appeal to one ethnic group while demonizing rival ethnic groups.⁹ Parties that try to reach out across ethnic lines face the risk of being outflanked by rivals from within their own ethnic group who “play the ethnic card” in an effort to outbid them for votes among their shared ethnic base constituency. As a result, candidates and parties that reach out across ethnic lines risk losing more votes from within their own ethnic group than they can gain from other ethnic groups. Hence, whatever their own policy preferences, candidates who want to get elected and the parties they represent face strong pressures to behave as ethnic parties, with the danger (depending on election rules) that elections become little more than an ethnic census.¹⁰

A new democracy can defuse ethnic tensions that otherwise might fuel ethnic conflict only if the institutional design of that democracy provides minorities with (institutionalized) assurances against the threat of ethnic domination and, in the extreme, ethnic extinction. In ethnically divided societies, the palliative effect of democratic institutions and processes will vary depending on specific institutional features of that democracy. Among these are whether it is a presidential or parliamentary system, whether the

legislative body is chosen by proportional representation (PR) or plurality “first past the post” elections, and whether there are federal elements to the territorial distribution of power and policymaking responsibilities.¹¹

For a minority at risk to prefer democracy to rebellion, the institutional design of that democracy must provide a minority at risk with some assurance that

- (1) they have some reasonable chance of being included in the governing coalition at some point; that is, their minority status does not relegate them to permanent opposition status and
- (2) as a minority, they will not be subject to a “tyranny of the majority,” whereby an ethnic majority uses its legislative majority to enact, through perfectly democratic processes, discriminatory policies that disadvantage that ethnic group in the political, social, and economic arenas.

The answers to these questions are largely a function of (1) the structure of inter-ethnic relations in the nation and (2) the institutional rules of the democratic game in that nation. With respect to the former, the structure of inter-ethnic relations is largely a function of (1) the number and relative size of each ethnic group in the nation (i.e., the extent of ethnic fragmentation), (2) the extent to which the ethnic minority is concentrated geographically or, alternatively, dispersed among the majority ethnic group, and (3) the strength of the ethnic markers that identify an individual as a member of one ethnic group as opposed to another one. Several scholars have proposed that the relationship between ethnic fragmentation and the risk of ethnic conflict is an inverted U: Where there is a large number of relatively small ethnic groups, the risk of violence is low because no one group is large enough to pose a threat of ethnic domination over the other groups.¹² Collier and Hoeffler¹³ add that in highly fragmented societies, coordination problems and credible commitment problems between ethnic groups impede the ability of multiple small ethnic groups to collaborate in mounting an ethnic rebellion. Consequently, ethnic security dilemmas are less likely to emerge. If one group attempts to assert its dominance over the others, a coalition of other groups is likely to arise to check the group with hegemonic ambitions. At the other end of the ethnic fragmentation scale, ethnic conflict is less likely to arise under conditions of ethnic homogeneity (i.e., the absence of ethnic fragmentation) and under conditions of ethnic hegemony, where one ethnic majority group is so large relative to the others that no one minority group or coalition of minority groups is sufficiently strong to challenge the dominant group. Ethnic conflict, then, becomes more likely with

“moderate” levels of ethnic fragmentation. Specifically, several studies have found that the most conflict-prone configuration is one where there is a relative small number of relatively large ethnic groups, such that it is possible for one or more of these groups to assert dominance over the others, and there is at least one ethnic minority that is large enough to resist effectively—with violence—the efforts toward ethnic dominance of any one group.¹⁴

All four nations with significant Kurdish populations are marked by a small number of ethnic groups, with the Kurds being a large enough minority in each to be capable of armed rebellion. The Kurds represent the largest ethnic minority in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria.¹⁵ In Iran they are a smaller share of the total population but are still large enough to be perceived as a threat by the incumbent regime.

The second dimension of ethnic politics that is relevant to the choice between democracy and violence is the extent to which ethnic groups are geographically concentrated. Geographic concentration facilitates mobilization for collective action of any sort, be it in peaceful protest, violent conflict, or voting in elections. Ethnic minorities that are concentrated in their own territorial enclaves are less subject to monitoring and repression by rival ethnic groups than are groups that are dispersed among other ethnic groups, including a dominant ethnic group.¹⁶ For the purpose of organizing and sustaining armed violence, geographic concentration makes it easier for an ethnic rebel group to establish secure base camps from which to launch combat operations and sustain an insurgency. For the purpose of democratic elections, geographic concentration makes it easier for an ethnic party to mobilize voters and translate votes into seats, no matter what the electoral rules may be.

Kurds have been territorially concentrated in each of the four nations, and those four homelands are largely contiguous to each other. This allows cross-border movement of Kurds from one nation to another. During episodes of armed conflict, the geographic concentration of Kurds in a territory that spans national boundaries has enabled PKK (the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, *Partiya Karkerane Kurdistan*) insurgents to operate from cross-border base camps in Iraq and Syria. However, in all four nations, the extent to which the Kurdish population is concentrated in their traditional homeland has diminished in recent decades. Forced relocations in Turkey have contributed to this process there. Migration to urban areas in search of jobs and educational opportunities has contributed to this dilution of territorial concentration in all four nations. The dispersion of the Kurds is significant for the future of the Kurdish nationalist movement because the ethnic markers that distinguish Kurds from other ethnic and sectarian groups in these nations are not very strong. Horowitz¹⁷ describes a spectrum of

the strength of ethnic markers, ranging from physical, visible, and birth-determined features to nonvisible and non-birth-determined markers. On the strong end of the scale would be aspects of one's physical appearance such as skin and hair color, body type, and other features of a group's appearance that distinguish its members from members of other groups. At the weak end of the spectrum are markers such as language and name, which are not always readily observable and are more easily altered than stronger markers. Among these are language, family name, cultural practices, and conventions of dress. Kurds are distinguished from other ethnic groups in the four nations largely on the basis of language, cultural practices, and family name, all of which are easily concealed or altered. As a consequence, it is easier for Kurds to assimilate into the majority ethnic group than would be the case were the ethnic markers that distinguish them from other ethnic groups markers that are on the stronger end of the spectrum. Kurds who have migrated (willingly or not) out of their homeland to urban areas of Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria can assimilate into the dominant ethnic group more easily than those who migrate to Western Europe can assimilate into those cultures. For this reason, the dispersion of Kurds out of their homeland in each nation could, over the long term, erode the ability of movement leaders to mobilize supporters.

Strength of ethnic markers also facilitates recruitment, for both elections and insurgent violence. Dissident leaders and candidates from ethnic parties can target their recruitment appeals more efficiently if they choose to build a movement that is explicitly grounded in shared ethnic identity and ethnic grievances. And potential recruits are easier to identify the stronger the ethnic markers are that distinguish them from other ethnic groups. To the extent that both rebel leaders and candidates for election from an ethnic group have to overcome collective action problems, shared ethnic identity and stronger ethnic markers facilitate the identification and sanctioning of free riders and defectors.

Democratic Rules of the Game

The role that the democratic "rules of the game" play in an ethnic minority's choice between sustaining democracy or resorting to armed violence is a matter of, first, whether the rules of the game will leave that group vulnerable to the tyranny of the majority and, second, whether the electoral rules hold out any promise of that minority ever having a chance of being included in the governing coalition. How an ethnic minority assesses its prospects along these two dimensions is a function of, first, whether the nation is a presidential or parliamentary system and, second, the electoral rules that

translate votes into seats in the legislature. For an ethnically divided society, the conventional wisdom is that a parliamentary system is likely to be more stable than a presidential one. Juan Linz¹⁸ has outlined the “perils of presidentialism” for any new democracy. While acknowledging the legitimacy of some counterarguments to his thesis,¹⁹ these “perils” seem especially relevant for an ethnically divided democracy. First, a presidential system concentrates certain powers in the hands of a chief executive who is far less constrained by the legislature than the prime minister in a parliamentary system. Presidential elections become high-stakes zero-sum contests in which losing parties (and ethnic groups) are excluded from executive power for the full term of the presidency. Members of an ethnic minority are likely to view the chances of one of their numbers ever competing effectively for, much less winning, the presidency as near zero. Therefore, they are likely to see their chances of ever being included in any sort of governing coalition as being lower than they would be in a parliamentary system.

For the Kurds, Iraq and Turkey are both parliamentary systems. Thus, they have more incentive to sustain those democracies and refrain from a return to violence than would be the case were those two nations presidential systems, *ceteris paribus*. Iran and Syria do not qualify as democracies; to the extent that they have a thin veneer of electoral democracy overlaying a fundamentally authoritarian regime, it is worth noting that both nations have presidencies. While there is a competitive election for Iran’s presidency (subject to the Guardian Council’s control over which candidates are allowed on the ballot), Iranian Kurds have no reason to expect that a Kurdish candidate would ever be a viable competitor for that office, and certainly not if that candidate advocated greater autonomy for the Kurdish population. Such a candidate would almost certainly be excluded from the ballot by the Guardian Council.

The second salient aspect of the democratic rules of the game facing Kurds in Iraq and Turkey is the set of electoral rules that determine how votes are translated into seats in the legislature. The two general options for legislative elections are variants of plurality or “first past the post” systems and PR systems. In the former, each seat is chosen from a separate electoral district, and the seat is awarded to the candidate with the largest number of votes.²⁰ Under PR rules, seats are chosen from multi-member districts, with seats apportioned among parties as a function of the share of the total vote each party receives. PR systems are more likely to produce multiparty systems (i.e., more than two parties). The threshold that a party must clear to win any seats is lower under PR rules than under plurality rules, with the threshold being roughly the inverse of the number of seats in a district (i.e., 1 divided by the number of seats). Thus, for example, in a five-seat district, a

party needs to win one-fifth of the vote to get one seat, whereas one-fifth of the vote would not likely win that party a seat in a plurality election system with single member districts. The larger the district size in a PR system (i.e., the more seats that are at stake in a given district), the lower the threshold a party has to clear to win a seat and the more proportionate the distribution of seats will be between parties; that is, the larger the district size, the more nearly a party's share of seats will approach its share of the total vote. Clearly, PR systems are preferred by ethnic minorities because their representation in the legislature will more nearly approach their share of the total votes. In a plurality electoral system, ethnic minorities are likely to be underrepresented in the legislature (i.e., their share of seats will be lower than their share of the total vote) because they are likely to win seats only in districts where their population is heavily concentrated, constituting at least a plurality of the electorate. The better option for the Kurds, then, is a PR election system with larger electoral districts.

Finally, in evaluating whether democratization can reduce the risk of further armed conflict, we should consider a reverse causal arrow: does the persistence of Kurdish ethnic mobilization pose a risk to the survival of democracy in Iraq and Turkey? Both nations remain in a state of civil war, although the conflict in Iraq is mainly between Sunnis and Shi'ites and in Turkey the level of violence has been low since 1999.²¹ Nonetheless, an escalation of armed conflict in Turkey might revive tensions between the military and the civilian government, though the prospects of those tensions escalating to a coup are remote today. And the persistence of sectarian violence in Iraq could lead to a similar suspension of democratic processes there. Similarly, the civil war in Syria could intensify Kurdish ethnic mobilization there in ways that might impede a peaceful resolution of that conflict. Democratization in Iraq and Turkey and the protracted civil war in Syria confront us with two fundamental questions regarding the prospects for the Kurdish population partitioned among these nations. First, can democratization in each of these nations defuse the risk of a return to armed conflict on the part of the Kurds? Second, does the persistence of Kurdish ethnic mobilization pose a risk to the survival of democracy in each of these nations?

The Choice between Democracy and Violence: Turkey

Of the four nations that have a substantial Kurdish population, Turkey has the longest standing democracy. However, Turkey's democratic history has been punctuated by several military coups since 1960. This history of democratic failure and relapse into military rule make Turkey's democracy

somewhat fragile. Given the history of coups, any escalation of Kurdish violence increases the risk of another relapse into military rule.

Turkish Kurds' history of violent uprisings against the Turkish regime predates Turkey's transition to democracy. The most recent revolt began in 1984 as a series of cross-border raids by the PKK from northern Iraq and Syria. The Turkish military responded with a strategy of forcing Kurdish citizens to evacuate their villages, a "draining the sea" approach to counter-insurgency. The Turkish military also recruited local tribesmen to serve as "village guards" to provide information on PKK movements and operations and to police the local population to ensure they did not provide support to PKK guerrillas. Turkish military operations culminated in the arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999.²²

If the choice facing the Kurdish minority in Turkey is between armed violence and participating in the democratic process, the answer to that question is a matter of whether violence can ever succeed in achieving their goals and, conversely, whether they can achieve those goals through democratic processes. Gurses²³ concludes that since the last insurgency, the goals of the PKK have evolved from secession and the establishment of an independent state to "institutionally protected autonomy" within the Turkish state. "The fundamental objective of the Kurdish political party is to bring Kurdish identity into the scope of legal and democratic protection," including preserving ethnic identity by being allowed to educate Kurdish children in the Kurdish language. If that is the case, then what are the prospects for Kurds achieving these goals under Turkey's current democratic institutions? More specifically, to what extent are Turkish Kurds subject to the tyranny of the majority and, given the structure of Turkey's democracy, do Kurds have any prospect of ever being in a governing majority in the Turkish government or, at the very least, having enough power to protect their interests against a tyranny of the majority?

Turkey is a parliamentary system. The Grand National Assembly is a body of 550 members elected for four-year terms from closed-list PR districts using the d'Hondt method of allocating marginal seats in a district. The fact that it is a parliamentary system is preferable for Kurds, and the fact that seats are allocated by PR is also preferable for Kurds. Under these rules, even an ethnic minority can expect to gain a nontrivial number of seats in the legislature. Moreover, PR rules should create pressures toward party fragmentation among the majority Turkish ethnic group, making it more likely that a Kurdish party could at some point be invited to join a governing coalition.

However, several features of the Turkish system work against the Kurds. First, the primary Kurdish party, the Democratic Society Party, was shut

down by the constitutional court in 2009 because of its ties to the PKK.²⁴ It changed its name to the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) but still refused to renounce the PKK as a terrorist organization and, therefore, has faced restrictions on its ability to run candidates for office. Nevertheless, the Peace and Democracy Party won overwhelming support in Kurdish regions of Turkey in the 2009 elections, prevailing in some districts with as much as 80 percent of the vote.²⁵

Second, Turkey has a 10 percent threshold for a party to win any seats in the legislature: a party must win a minimum of 10 percent of the vote nationwide to get any seats in the legislature. Thus, even if the BDP won enough votes in individual districts to claim a share of that district's seats, it would be denied those seats if it did not win the required 10 percent of the total national vote. Electoral thresholds are a mechanism to reduce the number of small parties in a parliament, thereby making it easier to form and sustain governing majorities by reducing the number of parties required to form a majority and reducing the number of veto players in the governing coalition. However, a 10 percent threshold is unusually high among nations that use this device. It is an especially onerous burden for parties whose electoral base is grounded in an ethnic minority. Indeed, the burden is so onerous that in the last election Kurdish candidates ran as independents rather than as members of a party in order to get around this threshold requirement. One major reform on the Kurdish agenda is elimination or at least reduction of the 10 percent threshold. Without that reform, Kurds will be disadvantaged at the polls and the chances of a Kurdish party winning enough seats to become a viable candidate for inclusion in a governing coalition will be restricted by this rule. This makes the alternative of a return to violence at least marginally more attractive; conversely, the simple act of eliminating the threshold would make sustaining democracy more attractive.

The results of the last elections did not bode well for Kurds' prospects of having their grievances addressed through peaceful democratic means. The AKP (Justice and Development Party) won a clear majority of 327 seats, obviating the need for them to form a coalition with any other party, much less a Kurdish party. The center-left CHP (Republican People's Party) won 135 seats while the Turkish nationalist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) won 53 seats. Members of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), running as independents, managed to win 35 seats in the legislature. One can reasonably expect that, without the 10 percent threshold, BDP candidates could have run under their party banner and probably won more than 35 seats nationwide.

To what extent are Kurds subject to a tyranny of the majority under Turkey's democratic rules? Beginning in 2009, the Turkish government

began a “Kurdish initiative” aimed at resolving the Kurdish issue by taking some steps to accommodate Kurdish demands related to issues of cultural autonomy. First, the ban on the use of the Kurdish language has been relaxed, at least partially. Kurdish language newspapers are now allowed, and the government launched one 24-hour Kurdish language television station. At the same time, however, the Turkish government has carefully monitored the content of the media and has not hesitated to take steps against those publishing or broadcasting material that the state considers subversive. The government agreed to relax partially the ban on using the Kurdish language in schools. However, state-supported public schools are still required to use Turkish as the language of instruction. Kurdish language can be offered as an elective course in secondary schools. Otherwise, instruction in the Kurdish languages is largely confined to after school programs, not funded by the government. Several universities in the Kurdish region of Turkey are allowed to offer a master’s degree program in Kurdish language and culture (see chapter 12). With respect to the 10 percent threshold for parties to win seats in the legislature, the government has proposed lowering that threshold but at the same time proposes reducing the size of electoral districts (i.e., the number of seats chosen from a given electoral district), which would have the effect of offsetting some, if not all, of the gains for Kurdish parties from reducing the 10 percent threshold.²⁶

Many see these reforms as largely cosmetic, marginally reducing but by no means eliminating the erosion of Kurdish culture and identity.²⁷ And the state’s commitment to reform is questioned on the grounds that these proposed reforms may be motivated more by the government’s desire to gain admission to the European Union (EU) than by any commitment to a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question.

Between Democracy and Civil War: Iraq

In Iraq, Kurds have been subject to the most brutal episodes of repression that they have experienced in any of the four nations. Saddam Hussein’s Al Anfal campaign that began in 1987 resulted in the deaths of 150,000–200,000 Kurds, the forced relocation of tens of thousands more, and the destruction of over 3,000 Kurdish villages.²⁸ The Halabja massacre alone resulted in over 5,000 deaths and included the use of chemical weapons by the Iraqi security forces against Iraq’s own (Kurdish) citizens.

Nevertheless, since the fall of the Hussein regime in 2003, Kurds in Iraq have been able to achieve a greater degree of autonomy than their ethnic kin in any of the other three nations with significant Kurdish

populations. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq has significant constitutionally sanctioned autonomy from the government in Baghdad. Kurdish parties have significant representation in the Iraqi central government. Kurds have a de facto veto over any constitutional changes that might diminish their autonomy. The KRG maintains its own security forces, the *Peshmerga*, and the region is rich in oil resources. In short, Iraqi Kurdistan has most of the elements of an independent sovereign state, much like Somaliland in Somalia. Their autonomy is further enhanced by the persistent sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shi'ites in Iraq's Arab population.

Compared to Turkey and to nondemocratic Iran and Syria, Kurds in Iraq are less subject to a tyranny of the majority. Not only do they have a reasonable chance of participating in a governing coalition; they are a part of the governing coalition in Baghdad. In addition, the rules of the game in Iraq's democratic regime give the Kurds enough seats in parliament and positions of power in the executive to confer on them a crucial role as broker between the Sunni minority and Shiite majority among Iraq's Arab population. Kurdish parties control about 19 percent of the seats in Iraq's 325 seat legislative body, the Council of Representatives. The president (head of state) is Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party. Several provisions of the constitution and the power-sharing arrangements in the government make the Kurds a veto player in the legislative process: In most instances they have power in both the legislative and executive branches to prevent the enactment of legislation they consider detrimental to their interests. Moreover, the constitution grants them a de facto veto power over any constitutional changes. Iraqi Kurdistan has its own Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that governs the region under a formally federal relationship with Baghdad. In practice, it is evolving into the government of a de facto autonomous state.

Finally, the Kurds' position in Iraq is bolstered by the fact that the provinces that make up the Kurdish homeland in Iraq include oil-rich regions that the regional government has been able to exploit, using the revenues from oil to stimulate economic growth and levels of prosperity that exceed on average what has been achieved in Arab provinces of Iraq. While the Kurds' status in Iraq is more favorable than that of their ethnic kin elsewhere, their prospects for the future are clouded not only by the ongoing sectarian violence in Arab Iraq but by the history of brutal repression to which they have been subjected under previous authoritarian regimes in Iraq. Should Iraq's democracy fail—which is a very real possibility—that history of repression offers a grim picture of what they might face under an authoritarian Iraq.²⁹

Iran and Syria

The prospects for the Kurdish populations in both Iran and Syria are not as favorable as they are in Iraq and Turkey. In Iran and Syria, Kurds are a much smaller minority (about 10 percent of the population). Neither Iran nor Syria has democratic institutions that would allow the Kurdish minority to pursue its interests, seek autonomy, seek legal protection against repression, or prevent the enactment of policies that threaten to erode their ethnic identity and cultural autonomy. While there have been armed uprisings by Iranian Kurds, all were put down relatively quickly. Unlike their Turkish and Iraqi counterparts, Iranian Kurds have not developed the capacity to sustain an insurgency of sufficient magnitude to use even as a means to bargain with Tehran for policy concessions and the granting of even limited degrees of autonomy. Historically, Iran's Kurds have more often found themselves caught in the crossfire between more powerful factions fighting for power in Iran. That was the case when the struggle between the Shah versus Mossadegh played out in the early 1950s, when the Shah was overthrown by the revolution of 1979, and during the Iran–Iraq war of 1980–1988.

In Syria, Kurds have been subject to varying forms of discrimination and have been the target of state-sponsored “Arabization” programs aimed at forced assimilation. In 1963 Syria stripped 100,000 Kurds of all citizenship rights. Those rights were not restored until 2012, in an effort by the Assad regime to induce Kurds to refrain from supporting the Arab Spring pro-democracy movement. There is no clear path at present for Kurds to secure any measure of autonomy. The democratic option has never been present in Syria, and even if it were, Kurds represent only about 10 percent of the electorate and, therefore, would not likely be able to win as many seats in an elected legislature as they are able to win in either Turkey or Iraq. The civil war in Syria presents few attractive options for the Kurds. Even though the conflict grew out of pro-democracy protests in 2011, Kurds were not central players either in the Arab Spring protests or in the armed opposition that emerged in response to the Assad regime's brutal repression of that movement. Their best option in Syria would seem to be to secure pockets of territory on or near the Turkish border that are populated predominantly by Kurds, which is exactly what Syrian-Kurdish groups have done to date. Given the strength of the incumbent regime and the several rebel factions leading the fight to overthrow it, Kurds are not likely to be a major player in any negotiations to end the war or in any post-war regime established by a military victory by either side.

Conclusions

The Kurdish population remains a minority at risk across all four nations, subject to varying degrees of discrimination and repression. The extent of their victimization and, arguably, their prospects for resolving their grievances and securing their identity and autonomy are a function of the extent to which each nation offers a democratic path for conflict resolution. Democracy has reduced the risk of the resort to violence by Kurds in Turkey. Further progress there will depend on whether reforms of Turkey's democracy, especially reforms of those aspects of the election system that disadvantage Kurds, see sincere enactment. In Iraq, Kurds have achieved a degree of autonomy and prosperity that is unmatched across the other three nations. Their autonomy over Iraqi Kurdistan and their influence and power in the government in Baghdad are a function of democratic institutions that provide them with assurances against being subject to a tyranny of the Arab majority and that assure them a place in the governing coalition. The greatest risk to their status in Iraq is the threat that continued sectarian violence between the Sunni and Shiite communities will escalate and engulf the Kurdish region and that Iraq's fragile democracy will fail from the cumulative effects of more than a decade of low-level insurgent violence. The result of democratic failure in Iraq would likely be a return to an authoritarian state that might seek to curb Kurdish autonomy by force. In Syria and Iran, the prospects for the Kurdish population give less cause for optimism, in large part because a democratic option is not available as a means for them to secure their autonomy and cultural survival. The ongoing civil war in Syria threatens the physical security of the Kurdish population. They have been dragged into the fighting just to secure themselves against the danger of being caught in the crossfire between multiple warring factions, none of which have Kurdish autonomy and security as a goal.

The variation across countries in the Kurds' prospects is in part a function of the availability of democratic options for them to pursue redress of long-standing grievances. The danger to Kurds in all four nations at this time would be that the Syrian civil war will have spillover effects in Iraq and Turkey that could undermine the gains they have made there. Resolving that conflict may be the most urgent priority for enhancing the prospects for Kurdish autonomy across all four nations.

Notes

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13. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56.4 (2004), pp. 563–595.
14. Marta Reynol-Querol, "Ethnicity, Political Systems, and Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46.1 (2002), pp. 29–54 and Erika Forsberg, "Polarization and Ethnic Conflict in a Widened Strategic Setting," *Journal of Peace Research* 45.2 (2008), pp. 283–300.
15. In Syria, they are the largest non-Arab group. Alawis, whose numbers are about the same as Kurds, are viewed as a religious minority rather than an ethnic one.
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CHAPTER 6

Communal Groups, Civil Conflict, and Democratization in Latin America

John A. Booth

Introduction

The notable shift of Latin America toward democracy after the 1970s transformed most of the region's political systems, although some partial backsliding began to occur after 2000. Democratization involves a change in which a very broad coalition of actors who agree to play by democratic rules replaces in governing power a narrow coalition of actors playing by non-democratic rules. Democratization is, therefore, a *regime change*. A *political regime* is a system of rule over population established among a nation's dominant political actors.¹ A regime change takes place when alteration occurs in both the fundamental rules of politics and the makeup of the ruling coalition. Compared to authoritarian regimes, democratic regimes are broadly inclusive; they provide access to the political space to a very wide array of coalition members who agree to compete following constitutional democratic rules.

The amount of conflict involved in regime change may vary from very little in some elite-led processes, to revolutionary violence and protracted civil war when incumbent elites dig in to resist change. Minority populations can play varying roles in regime change that range from minority interest groups seeking inclusion into the national political space to militantly mobilized populations aiming at full separation or subnational autonomy.²

Communal Groups in Regime Change

Ted R. Gurr defines communal groups as “cultural and religious identity groups” that do not have recognized states or institutionalized political status.³ Communal groups share two characteristics—discrimination against or in favor of them within a nation-state and political mobilization around their collective interests.⁴ For the purposes of this discussion, such identity groups may include populations that share a culture, race, language, or religious identification or all of these. What roles may such identity populations play in regime change? On one end of a continuum, a mobilized communal minority might embrace *ethnic or religious nationalism*—demanding or creating a new regime centered on ethnic nationhood. An example is the successful 1971 movement to create the nation of Bangladesh by separating the Bengali-speaking population—ethnically and geographically distinct from Pakistan as established in the 1947 partition of the British colonial territories of the Indian subcontinent. Spanish and French Basque separatists provide another example of separatist nationalism, albeit so far unsuccessful. On the other end of the continuum is a minority population that is not mobilized—inactive within the politics of the nation within which it resides.

In between the poles of ethnic nationalism and passivity are several other expressions of politicized communal interest: *Ethnic interest groups* seek to maximize their population’s access to benefits within an established political system (e.g., Lebanon’s Christian and Muslim populations). *Ethnic rights movements* seek to gain equal treatment and end legal and de facto discrimination within a political system (e.g., the US civil rights movement). *Ethnic nationalist autonomy movements* seek federal governance arrangements within a nation-state dominated by other ethnic groups (e.g., Spain’s regional language minorities such as the Gallegos). In some cases, minority populations and their movements alternate over time between ethnic nationalist preferences (separatism—e.g., Sri Lanka’s Tamil nationalists) and ethnic autonomy (federalism—e.g., Canada’s Québécois and Great Britain’s Scots).

Communal Group Characteristics and Tactics

A critically important trait shaping the capacity of a minority population to affect the political system(s) it dwells within is its size proportionate to the larger national population. Compared to large communities, tiny minorities experience severe constraints on their goals and the tactics they may employ pursuing their interests. They may necessarily have to remain passive or engage the political system with a minority civil rights effort or as a communal interest group. Relatively large and cohesive communal groups,

in contrast, may undertake bolder initiatives by acting as an ethnoclass, communal contender, or ethnic nationalist movement. Other factors held constant; however, a mobilized community's relative size increases the likely perceived threat to other communities or to the nation-state, especially depending on expressed goals. A mobilized ethnoclass may threaten capitalist sectors included in the incumbent regime that depend upon the community for a labor supply. Ethnic nationalist separatism threatens the very integrity of the nation-state and therefore of the incumbent political regime that controls it. The greater the threat to the regime represented by the interaction of the communal group's size and the reach of its objectives, the more likely it is that regime reaction will be repressive. The intensity of the Iraqi Sunni regime's repression of the majority Shi'i prior to the 2003 US invasion illustrates how much violent repression a threatened regime's actors may deploy. Another example comes from the Syrian Assad regime's repression of various minority communities, including the Kurdish population.

For any potential politically active groups or populations, other important factors necessarily shaping their goals and tactics include the strength of group cohesiveness, the intensity of discrimination experienced and resulting sense of grievance, group geographic concentration, material resources, social capital, and external support. The larger, more cohesive, more aggrieved, wealthier, and better internally organized an ethnic population is, and the more external allies it can draw upon, the stronger it is likely to be vis-à-vis the nation-state within which it exists and the regime governing it. In particular, group cohesion and deep grievances "provide highly combustible material that fuels spontaneous action whenever external control weakens."⁵ The size, resources, and demands of mobilized minorities also affect the tactics and the intensity of the response of the majority population and state to minority community demands. It is generally true that the greater the parity of resources between litigants in a civil conflict, the greater will be the violence.

Latin America's Indigenous Populations

To assess the potential for engagement in the democratization of the region, let us consider the relative size and nature of the indigenous communities in Latin America. A critical point of departure for this discussion was the holocaust of indigenous people in the Americas that occurred within a few decades of the conquest of the Americas, from European diseases to which there were no local immunities. This killed an estimated 90 percent of the extant fifteenth-century population. Their numbers have yet not recovered to pre-conquest levels. The larger native populations that

survived depopulation were mainly Mayas in Mesoamerica, and Aymaras and Quechuas in the Andean region. The hundreds of other indigenous communities that survive, culturally intact, across contemporary Latin America mostly remained geographically isolated from Iberian conquerors and colonizers. This isolation avoided their enslavement, extermination, or assimilation into the mixed-race and culturally Hispanic populace.

Estimating indigenous community size in the region is difficult for several methodological reasons. Survey-based estimates (self-defined ethnicity as “indigenous”) produce a median *self-identified* indigenous population of 4 percent (an unweighted mean of 6 percent) as of 2012.⁶ Guatemala today has the largest self-identified indigenous population at 40 percent, followed by Bolivia (16 percent), Panama (8 percent), Mexico and Peru (7 percent). *Census-based* indigenous estimates vary dramatically from those based on the survey. They place Bolivia (55 percent) and Peru (45 percent) at the top of the distribution, followed by Guatemala (40 percent) and Mexico (30 percent). Indigenous community cohesion in Latin America varies from country to country and group to group. Some indigenous communities have remained distinct and cohesive with their own population centers, dress, and languages. Others have assimilated into the dominant *mestizolladino* culture by urbanizing, adopting western dress, and shifting to speaking the dominant national language.⁷

Another situation common in Latin America is that indigenous populations may be relatively large (numerous), yet not cohesive in linguistic or communal terms. Examples include Guatemala’s and Mexico’s Mayans, who speak many locally concentrated dialects from common inherited roots, but the groups do not identify with each other and their dialects may be mutually unintelligible. The Aymara people of South America presently live mainly in Peru and Bolivia in the region surrounding Lake Titicaca and northern Chile; Aymara is mutually intelligible among all its speakers. The Quechua people are much more broadly distributed among the South American nations of Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile, Colombia, and Argentina. The extended range and very difficult terrain they inhabit has left them divided by dialect differentiation, so their cohesion is lower than that of the Aymara.

These Latin American indigenous populations can be further subdivided according to whether they are larger or equal to or smaller than the median self-identified percent (4 percent). This provides a list of nine countries by which indigenous community might matter for democratization by size alone, if other helpful conditions were also met. These are Guatemala, Bolivia, Panama, Peru, Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Honduras.

One important condition of these nine cases is linguistic cohesion, that is, whether or not indigenous groups speak a mutually intelligible version of their shared language family, or various different languages. Sharing a language increases the chance of cultural cohesion, mutually perceived discrimination, and shared grievances. Only four of the nine countries meet this condition well or for a very large indigenous community: Bolivia, Panama, Ecuador, and Nicaragua.

A third condition is that a large share of the population be geographically concentrated or proximate, to facilitate integration and sharing of experiences. Among these larger or middling-sized minority community countries, those meeting the population concentration criterion for most or a large share minority sub-community are Bolivia, Peru, and Nicaragua. Thus, conditions appear to have been more propitious for an indigenous role in democratization (in descending order based on a combination of population size, linguistic cohesion, and population concentration) in Bolivia, Panama, Nicaragua, Peru, and Ecuador. In contrast, Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, and Honduras appear to lack any propitious conditions other than overall ethnic minority size.

Indigenous Community Participation in Democratization

What roles did the mobilization of indigenous populations play in democratization? The answer depends on the conditions for minority mobilization discussed above. The factors involved a combination of the percentage of indigenous people in a country, minority community cohesion, and population concentration. The greater each of these, the greater would be the likelihood of indigenous community mobilization into the political arena.

The overall size of Latin America's minority communities measured as a portion of the population depends on the criterion involved. The clearest and most conservative criterion is the indigenous population's self-identification, with a national median indigenous population of 4 percent as of 2012. This low percentage of indigenous already suggests an answer to the question of how much indigenous involvement in democratization processes the region experienced. The involvement was, in regional terms, quite low and idiosyncratic. This relative size criterion captures the four cases in which indigenous actors indeed played the greatest roles in regime change toward democratization—Guatemala, Peru, Mexico, and Nicaragua. In each of these countries, indigenous populations became involved in violent civil conflict, two mainly against the incumbent regime (Nicaragua and Mexico) and two with indigenous elements participating both against and for the regime (Peru and Guatemala). In no case, however, did indigenous participation primarily

determine the outcome of the civil conflict or regime change. However, in each case the indigenous mobilization against the incumbent regime helped undermine the regime's supporting coalition and motivated other actors to embrace the regime realignment.⁸

- Nicaragua (4 percent indigenous) adopted a political autonomy scheme to placate the Miskito population (linguistically cohesive and territorially concentrated in a zone of strategic military importance during the contra war, the Atlantic coastal lowlands). The autonomous regions created by the Nicaraguan revolutionary regime established local governmental structures, which persist as part of the political infrastructure to the present. The autonomous zones allowed considerable self-rule to the Miskito and other Atlantic region peoples. This quickly helped settle the conflict with the Miskito. Miskito contra groups formed ethnic-based parties and quickly incorporated themselves as legal political actors after 1990.
- Guatemala (40 percent indigenous) adopted constitutional reforms to recognize indigenous rights as a consequence of the peace accord of the mid-1990s. Indigenous communities and leaders advised the constitutional revision process along with other interest groups. Indigenous participation in governance increased under the democratic regime, but still remains far from parity. Constitutional reforms to increase indigenous participation failed to pass referenda following the regime transition.⁹ Indigenous Guatemalans nevertheless today support the political system and participate as citizens at rates similar to the dominant Ladino population.
- In Mexico (7 percent indigenous), the Chiapas uprising in 1994 involved the participation of both Mayan and mestizo peasants angered by economic crisis in peasant agriculture. Despite being linguistically diverse and dispersed across southern Mexico, the Mayan populations had increased their cohesion and sense of shared indigenous identity through a lengthy period of promotion of indigenous consciousness under the aegis of the Chiapas Archdiocese of the Catholic Church, and organization by rural labor unions and leftist parties. The rebellion of the leftist Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN—urban led but with indigenous participation) was small and poorly armed. The Mexican army might have crushed the insurgency were it not for intense international scrutiny of Mexico at the time. A key potential creditor for a critical debt bailout and co-signatory of the North American Free Trade Agreement, attention by the United States helped dissuade strong military action. A

quick EZLN move toward negotiations with the government brought notoriety, and protection far greater than the insurgents' numerical strength alone would have provided. Peace talks with the government soon became essentially permanent and continue well into a second decade.

- Peru's indigenous people, linguistically diverse but concentrated across large swathes of the country, were recruited with some success during the 1970s and early 1980s by the guerrillas of the Communist Party of Peru (also known as the Shining Path—SP). Abuses of indigenous communities by the SP, however, eventually led to indigenous resistance to the SP and greater indigenous community cooperation with the national armed forces' counterinsurgency measures. The SP's decline and the return to a civilian, constitutional regime in 2001 after President Fujimori's departure restored order to many indigenous areas. Since then indigenous communities have participated in national indigenous organizations as communal interest groups, but they remain politically weak on the national stage.

In contrast to these cases, there are five other relatively larger indigenous population countries in which indigenous communities did not play a role in democratic regime change—Bolivia, Panama, Colombia, Honduras, and Ecuador. This demonstrates that the mere existence of middling-to-large indigenous population is not a sufficient condition for a minority community to contribute to democratization. Thus, we must consider other conditions along with relative size. The first is community cohesion (for our purposes linguistic cohesion in the form of a mutually intelligible language or community of dialects). The second is population concentration in a relatively compact or contiguous geographical area that allows communication and organization.

In four countries, the absence of at least one of the cohesion conditions appears to have prevented a role in democratization—indeed, much of a role in national politics—for indigenous communities.

- Panama's indigenous population, while relatively numerous (8 percent), is linguistically diverse and geographically dispersed. Indigenous Panamanians have exerted little effect on national politics, which tends to be concentrated in cities in this highly urbanized country.
- Ecuador's modest indigenous population (four percent) is linguistically cohesive but dispersed geographically. The diverse indigenous communities are organized through national council of indigenous Ecuadorans, which lobbies on behalf of indigenous interests.

- Colombia's and Honduras's indigenous populations (5 and 4 percent, respectively) are small, linguistically diverse, and geographically dispersed. These conditions have prevented the indigenous people of either country from exerting much effect on national politics.

Finally, Bolivia presents an anomaly. Its Aymara indigenous population (large at 16 percent) also met both the linguistic and geographic cohesion conditions for potential mobilization; yet, the indigenous people did not participate significantly in the process of formal democratization. A relative security of landholdings among the highlands indigenous and low persecution by the incumbent regime had left this population with low grievances.¹⁰ The 1983 regime change toward democratization was elite led as the armed forces abandoned their previous efforts to rule the country and allowed civilian elections. Bolivia's indigenous later emerged as a powerful ethnoclass and minority civil rights movement within a broader movement of social protest over the repercussions of coca suppression programs, economic nationalizations, and inflation occurring under subsequent administrations. A populist leftist labor and indigenous leader, Evo Morales of the coca growers union, during the 1990s and early 2000s increasingly attracted support from disgruntled working-class elements, many of indigenous background. His Movement toward Socialism (MAS) political party won him the presidency in 2005 and reelection in 2009. His cabinet has included many ministers of indigenous background, and the constitution was revised to recognize limited political autonomy for indigenous communities.

Discussion and Implications

The Latin American cases of democratization and indigenous communities' roles in them provide a few clues that speak to the situation of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. What have we learned? First, large minority communities have an advantage in shaping transitions to democracy by their size alone. Second, both geographic and cultural-linguistic cohesion contribute importantly, especially if there is a majority community or regime that abuses the minority community. Taking these criteria together, we found that most indigenous communities in Latin America were either small numerically and also divided culturally linguistically or geographically. Most thus took little role in democratization, whether by an elite-led or violent path. Most also have subsequently tended toward inactivity in national political life or have worked through indigenous coalition associations to exert influence in pursuit of narrow interests or civil rights. Finally,

motivation in the form of shared grievances matters considerably in mobilizing political activism by indigenous communities. Low motivation prevented Bolivia's indigenous Aymara populations from mobilizing against a government that had not discriminated against them very much. As various grievances—few related to indigeneity—grew post-democratization, indigenous mobilization grew quickly along with other rural and working-class citizens.

In Latin America, modestly sized indigenous communities in Nicaragua and Mexico and the large one in Guatemala mobilized violently. Their struggles contributed to national democratization processes as parts of larger movements.

- Heavy discrimination and exploitation of the very large but dispersed and linguistically heterogeneous Maya population of Guatemala generated violent repression when they sought to take advantage of democracy and economic reforms in 1945–1954. Some indigenous joined leftist rebels in a lengthy, multistage insurgency that elicited even more violent repression from 1960 to the mid-1990s. The armed forces (encouraged by the United States, United Nations, and neighboring countries) decided to negotiate a regime transition to end the stagnated conflict. Indigenous representatives then joined opposition parties, rebel groups, and civil society in shaping the resulting constitution.
- In Nicaragua, the Miskitos' geographic position (strategic for the greater contra-movement), and their cohesion, and opposition to the Sandinista government gave them a larger role in democratization than their size alone warranted. The FSLN implemented a regional government autonomy provision that formed part of a broader ongoing democratization program that effectively neutralized Miskito opposition by co-opting them into the emerging new regime.
- In Mexico, dispersed and divided Mayan indigenous had sharp grievances with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) regime based on economic problems and land losses. Efforts to unify them by Catholic activists overcame these disadvantages in Chiapas. After a small military action in 1994, the EZLN and its indigenous participants and sympathizers slipped under the protection of a truce arranged because of international pro-democracy/human rights vigilance at a moment when the Mexican government could not afford a strongly repressive response. The insurrection became one of many problems for the PRI regime that led the government to enact electoral reforms that in turn broke its dominance over the political system in 2000.

In addressing questions of the Kurds and how Latin American cases might speak to their situations, I wish to note my lack of expertise on the region, its peoples, and political systems. That said, Kurds are distributed across four nations with different approximate relative strengths—Turkey and Iraq (roughly 20 percent), and Iran and Syria (about 10 percent). In Iran they are somewhat dispersed geographically and have historically and under the current Islamic regime experienced somewhat lower levels of persecution than the region's other Kurdish populations. Based on the criteria discussed in this chapter, Iran's Kurds appear to present the weakest set of conditions to mobilize them into a prodemocracy or nationalist project, despite the country's lack of democracy. The next smallest Kurdish population is in Syria, in the midst of a nasty civil war. Repression of Syrian Kurds has been intense. At the outset of anti-Assad resistance, the Kurds' location along the border with Turkey presented them with an opportunity to take up arms and with allies across the border. Syrian Kurds appear to occupy a situation somewhat resembling Nicaragua's Miskitos in that their strategic position may allow them to negotiate for a regional autonomy arrangement in order to bring them into a democratization or peace negotiation to resolve the war. An Assad regime victory, however, could deeply imperil Syria's Kurds.

The two larger Kurdish populations of Turkey and Iraq have great advantages over Syria's Kurds based on relative size alone, but also in their location within structurally democratic regimes. Persecuted by a succession of regimes in Baghdad, Iraq's Kurds rebelled on numerous occasions since 1920 and were brutally suppressed. After the 1990–1991 Gulf War, they benefited from an autonomous safe haven and established a *de facto* Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Iraq's Kurds mobilized quickly to cooperate with the US invasion in 2003. Iraq's new constitution in 2005 recognized and incorporated the KRG into Iraq, and it offers a democratic national framework within which Iraqi Kurds can pursue their interests. Kurdish Iraq also provides a sympathetic population and resource base for Turkey's Kurds.

The Turkish government's suppression of Kurdish culture and community across the twentieth century brought Kurdish rebellions, relocations of population, and eventually a separatist ethnic nationalist rebel movement, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK rebellion in the 1980s and the Turkish government's efforts to repress it took many tens of thousands of lives and renewed efforts to suppress Kurdish culture. The capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 and Turkey's bid to enter the European Community reduced subsequent conflict levels. The anti-Assad rebellion in Syria presents Turkey with the delicate situation of responding to the Syrian Kurds' rebellion without antagonizing its own Kurdish population or

undermining Erdogan's Justice and Development Party's hold on power. The combination of a Kurdish government in northern Iraq and the Syrian civil war presents a strategically complex situation for the Turkish government. This situation may present Kurds opportunities to expand their political space and freedom. This will allow Kurdish organizations to pursue ethnic civil rights and perhaps function also as an ethnoclass as the indigenous people have in Bolivia since 2000. Further, Nicaragua's Miskitos benefited from the Sandinista government's efforts to weaken a broader counter-revolutionary movement. As an ethnically distinct part of the contra movement with roots in a defined geographic area, the Miskitos presented an opportunity for the Sandinista government to coopt them. The government's successful strategy was the creation of a regional autonomy scheme that rather quickly reincorporated the Miskito into the political system and ended their armed resistance.

Lessons from Latin America provide little insight into whether there are viable prospects for Kurds to carve a separate Kurdish nation from the four states in which they reside, however. Latin America displays a remarkable dearth of secessionist movements compared to other regions. Breaking up an extant state is usually fiercely resisted by that state and often discouraged by the international community. This is partly because many states have several national communities that might wish to pursue a similar path, and because the strategic and economic implications of state fragmentation or partition would be fiendishly complex. Both factors tend to bias neighboring states and hegemonic actors against partition. Breaking away and forming a new state is not impossible, of course. But several successful efforts have required terrible wars to accomplish (e.g., Sudan/South Sudan and Pakistan/Bangladesh). For the Kurds, breaking away from three or four states, either individually, sequentially, or all at once, to form a new state to unite the fragmented Kurdish nation appears to be no small challenge. What conditions, therefore, might contribute to third parties embracing the formation of a new Kurdish state as a better outcome than some sort of within-existing-state palliation of Kurdish grievances? My sense is that only further deterioration of the situation of the Kurds, combined with a sharp intensification of the conflicts within the Kurds' host states (thus greatly threatening the security of many third-party states), would lend itself to such a policy choice.

Notes

1. Adapted from a discussion in chapter 2 of John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade, and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion and*

- Change* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2010). This concept of political regimes draws heavily on Charles W. Anderson, "The Latin American Political System," in Charles W. Anderson (ed.) *Politics and Economic Change in Latin America: The Governing of Restless Nations* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1967). Also drawn from John Higley and Michael G. Burton, "The Elite Variable in Democratic Transitions and Breakdowns," *American Sociological Review* 54 (February 1989), pp. 17–32.
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 4. Gurr, 1993, p. 163.
 5. Gurr, 1993, p. 167.
 6. The estimates used here are drawn from the 2012 national probability sample surveys of the Americas Barometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), www.LapopSurveys.org. The item employed is the percent of the respondents in each country which self-identifies their race or ethnic group as "indigenous." We thank LAPOP and its major supporters (the United States Agency for International Development, the United Nations Development Program, the Inter-American Development Bank, and Vanderbilt University) for making the data available.
 7. This is Spanish in most countries, Portuguese in Brazil. In Paraguay, Spanish and the indigenous language Guaraní are both widely spoken among a mestizo population that has virtually no self-identified indigenous people.
 8. In Nicaragua, the FSLN revolution was the main transitional agent of regime change toward democracy, but the contrainsurgency against the FSLN-government occurred because revolutionary policies harmed Miskito communities. In Guatemala, Peru, and Mexico, indigenous community elements fought against the precursor undemocratic regimes.
 9. See chapter 7 of Booth et al., 2010.
 10. Indigenous elements cooperated with the armed forces in the denunciation and capture of Che Guevara's forces in Bolivia; see Peter Kornbluh, *The Death of Che Guevara: Declassified* (Washington, DC: The National Security Archive: The George Washington University), <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB5/index.html#chron>.

CHAPTER 7

Democracy and Self-Determination in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Nicole F. Watts

Introduction

Haidar Osman lost the use of his left leg in 1987 in a car chase. He was fleeing Iraqi security forces and went off the edge of the road. Fuad Karim lost his thumb and two fingers of his right hand in a land mine explosion playing in a field in Piramagrun, a town in the Sulaimaniya province of northern Iraq, when he was 13 years old. Barzan Bakir's right leg was blown off and amputated at the thigh after a landmine explosion on the road to Iran in 1992. He was 22 years old.¹

In January of 2013 these men were among dozens of others participating in a campaign calling for increased government benefits and for the rights of the handicapped in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. All had once been active members of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), traditionally one of the region's two dominant political parties, and all had sacrificed, in one way or another, for the Kurdish national struggle against central Iraqi control. With the Ba'th Party removed from power after 2003 and the Kurdistan Region under something close to self-rule, none would any longer have classified themselves as political rebels or even typical agitators. Nor were they part of any self-proclaimed movement for Kurdish democratization; their campaign specifically sought to alleviate material and service-related needs. But by challenging the balance of power between ruling and ruled in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, by going outside the traditional party-linked

associations, and by working through more autonomous organizations willing to publicly criticize Kurdish authorities, all the men were—in their own way—participating in a push toward a new kind of governance that went beyond the call for self-determination, toward a more democratic and representative government in a region traditionally characterized by top-down, charismatic leadership.

This chapter examines the nature of governance and democracy under the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. Throughout much of their century-long struggle against the central Iraqi state, Kurdish nationalists argued that Kurds needed autonomy from the central state to protect their individual and national rights. After the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq that toppled the Ba’th regime, the Kurdistan Region was touted as a kind of “democratic beacon” for the country and, indeed, the region. In 2010–2012 in the throes of the Arab uprisings, Iraqi Kurdish politicians would proclaim that while the Arab world was just now experiencing an “awakening” to democracy, Kurds were considerably ahead of the game, having experienced their own “Kurdish spring” 20 years prior in the spring of 1991 when they rose against Saddam Hussein and the ruling Ba’th Party. The uprising—and the collapse of the resistance, the mass flight to the borders of hundreds of thousands of ordinary Kurds, and the ensuing no fly zone and “safe haven”—left Kurds in the northern part of Iraq alone, albeit isolated and embargoed, to administer their own affairs.

This two-decades-long experience of self-governance and the development of fledging democratic institutions means the Kurdistan Region of Iraq offers a rich site for examining the relationship between movements for self-determination and democracy, a subject that has been of interest to scholars studying whether secessionist or unrecognized states are capable of delivering more representative and democratic governance than their original host states. As Caspersen² writes, “democracy is a buzzword in almost all unrecognized states” and now forms a key part of nationalist leaders’ strategy for gaining both external and internal recognition. Nonetheless, her work and that of other scholars³ find the actual record complicated. Although national movements trying to assert the right to rule tend to justify their political demands in the name of the people, their desire to maintain national unity in the face of considerable external challenges often dampens tolerance for internal criticism and challenge. In addition, the legacy of war and the skills needed to sustain a national resistance movement do not easily translate into a solid foundation for building democratic institutions or political culture.

Lofty rhetoric notwithstanding, there is, therefore, no necessary reason that Kurdish autonomy should—or would necessarily—produce a

democratic regime. While KRG governance after 2003 has been indisputably less violent and more representative than Ba'ath rule of the 1970s and 1980s, such characteristics do not in and of themselves add up to democracy. In fact, the party-state regime inherited from the Ba'ath period, the patron-client nature of Kurdish state–society relations, and both Kurdish and foreign interests in maintaining the stability of the Kurdistan Region have facilitated some profoundly undemocratic tendencies under the KRG.

That said, there are both external and internal pressures within the Kurdistan Region to develop viable democratic institutions and a more democratic political culture. Like quasi- and unrecognized states elsewhere,⁴ the KRG is vulnerable to international opinion, a fact that constrains (among other factors) the level of aggression the regime is willing to use against opponents. I suggest here, though, that the impetus for democratization has come quite a bit more forcefully from internal actors who have sought a more active role in the Kurdish state- and nation-building process. These internal actors include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), professional associations, media, students, and political parties—or parts of parties—themselves. The main argument of the chapter is that ordinary people's efforts to play a greater role in managing the symbolic and material resources of the state have contributed to an expansion of the political field and had a democratizing impact. Even when activists may be seen to be self-interested and not necessarily engaged in campaigns aimed directly at democratization, their efforts may produce a democratizing effect. This impact can be seen in three main areas: organizational autonomy, political discourse, and systemic representation and contestation. Drawing on Robert Dahl's classic formulations of democracy,⁵ we can say that, cumulatively, activist efforts in these spheres, and official responses to these efforts, have expanded citizens' capacities to “formulate and signify their preferences” through individual and collective action, readily and safely find alternative sources of information, and exercise more freedom of expression. Their efforts also have begun to hold officials more accountable for taking these preferences into account when formulating policy and managing the resources of the state.

The chapter is organized as follows. The first part offers a brief analysis of the status of democracy under the KRG in the period between 2003 and 2013. The second part examines some of the insights provided by recent literature on unrecognized and quasi-states. I find the KRG both similar and, in some ways, quite different than many other self-governing entities. The third part examines dissent and activism within the KRG, looking at how greater organizational autonomy, the expansion of political discourse, and greater political representation and contestation have contributed to the democratization of the political field under the KRG in the last decade.

Democracy in Kurdistan? Politics under the KRG

The idea that Kurds in northern Iraq could establish a democratic government was greeted with intense skepticism in the early 1990s, when the two major Kurdish parties decided to hold elections for the regional parliament created in the wake of the Iraqi withdrawal from territory north of the 36th parallel. Foreign news reports headlined the impending May 1992 elections in such terms as “Introduction to Democracy—A Tough Course for Kurds”⁶ and “Kurdish honeymoon with democracy fraught with danger,”⁷ pessimistically noting that although a “sudden flowering of democracy in this politically barren part of the world where dictatorship flourishes would catch the world’s attention,” holding an election and peacefully resolving bitter feuds between two rival Kurdish parties seemed “nearly impossible.”⁸

Two decades later both Kurdish and foreign leaders would point to Kurds’ now-considerable experiences in self-government and offer a dramatically different take on Kurdish democracy, suggesting the Kurdish north could serve as a model for Iraq and indeed the region.⁹ Sanctified by the Iraqi federal constitution of 2005, the largely autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq had its own regional parliament—the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA)—and its own directly elected president. After a short period of split governance, with territorial divisions and two capital cities, in early 2006 the two major parties unified the two administrations, making Erbil (known locally as Hawler) the official and united capital of the Kurdistan Region. Kurdish *peshmerga* (fighter-soldiers) and governance keep the Kurdistan Region secure and largely free of political violence, in sharp contrast to other parts of Iraq.

To what degree is the KRG democratic? I draw here on robust definitions of liberal democracy perhaps most famously articulated by scholars such as Robert Dahl and Larry Diamond. Robust definitions of democracy suggest that democracy can be defined as a governmental system in which virtually all citizens are entitled to participate in decision-making processes and in which elected decision makers are highly responsive to majority preferences.¹⁰ They also offer significant protection for civil liberties. Such systems rest on popular sovereignty, accountability of rulers, freedom, and the rule of law.¹¹ More specifically, as Dahl writes, democratic systems are highly inclusive—as measured by the degree to which most of the population can participate in fair and free elections, run for office, elect leaders, and legally participate in public and political life—and allow for wide-ranging contestation of ideas (opposition), as seen in freedom of expression, access to alternative sources of information, organizational autonomy, and a vibrant political culture in which diverse ideas can be legally and peacefully debated.¹² A

critical part of liberal democracy is that actual decision making is done by elected officials (and not by unelected leaders operating behind the scenes, for instance); there is horizontal accountability between officeholders and government institutions,¹³ and extensive protections for both group and individual freedoms.

Measured against these criteria, the KRG has a mixed record. Its formal system is highly inclusive. It is clearly an electoral democracy, holding regular, contested, and relatively free elections. Elections for the 111-person KNA in 2005, 2009, and 2013 were mostly viewed as fair, although some opposition figures claimed irregularities. Parties put forth a variety of candidates from many different backgrounds, and all men and women over the age of 18 were eligible to vote. In the 2010 Iraqi national parliamentary elections, the three provinces governed by the KRG boasted the highest voter turnout in the country—about 80 percent in Duhok province; 76 percent in Erbil, and 73 percent in Sulaimaniya.¹⁴ Voter turnout in regional Kurdish elections for the KNA runs at between 70 and 80 percent (i.e., about 74 percent in 2013 and 78.5 percent in 2009).¹⁵ Parliamentary seats have been shared by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PUK, several major opposition groups, minority representatives from the region's Christian and Turkmen communities, and several dozen women parliamentarians. Among the parties, the spectrum of political perspectives is also broad, including communist parties, Islamist parties, and those representing a variety of socioeconomic platforms.

However, although inclusion in formal institutions and processes is high and contestation is wide ranging, it is not necessarily safe; nor does it necessarily translate into accountable, horizontal power sharing. Political freedoms and civil rights (including, for example, religious freedoms) have been considerably greater than in the rest of Iraq, but the KRG has come under both domestic and international criticism for restrictions on civil liberties, torture at the hands of *Asayish* security forces,¹⁶ and harassment and attacks on media outlets and journalists. In December of 2013 a magazine editor and reporter investigating corruption cases in the KRG was gunned down¹⁷; his death was the third since 2008 of writers whose work criticized the ruling establishment or its families. There are significant regional disparities in degrees of associational and individual freedoms, with Sulaimaniya province, for instance, generally viewed as more tolerant (and safer) than Erbil.

Particularly problematic is the KRG's history of unaccountable decision making. Inclusive processes notwithstanding, in practice the KRG has often functioned more like a party-state: a regime in which state institutions have very little autonomy and in which party membership and status—and relations to the ruling families—play a significant role in determining

employment and promotions in government, civil service, universities, and other public and many private institutions. As the (traditionally) two largest and most important parties, the KDP and the PUK have been the key players in the political apparatus, banking on their role in the nationalist struggle, extensive powers of patronage, paramilitary forces, and close international allies to perpetuate their authority. The merger of their two administrations in 2006 was characterized as a duopoly in which the two parties shared the spoils of lucrative construction, business, and petrol-related contracts.¹⁸ Patronage politics and the spoils of a welfare state have been used to ensure continuing support.¹⁹ Real decision making—“who gets what, when and how”²⁰—has often been done by party elites, behind closed doors, and not by elected committees or members of parliament. The judiciary is weak and has little institutional autonomy.²¹ Ordinary people, human rights activists, and international observers have regularly criticized the KRG for its lack of political or business accountability and for the influence of the two major parties in virtually all business, educational, and political decision-making institutions.²² A 2010 survey of 1,000 Kurdistan Region adults by the International Republican Institute showed that a quarter of them thought government corruption was the region’s single worst problem. Almost 90 percent of respondents in both the Sulaimaniya and Erbil provinces agreed that corruption was a serious problem.²³

Self-Determination and Democracy in State-Like Entities: Competing Imperatives?

Such complexities of governance and democracy within the KRG reflect the broader sets of often-competing interests among authorities in most quasi- and unrecognized states. These complexities are also reflected in the literature. Countering the popular tendency to romanticize national movements, Amatzai Etzioni’s now-classic 1993 condemnation of (then) contemporary movements for self-determination argued that in contrast to earlier historical periods, more recent movements of self-determination tended to “undermine the potential for democratic development” and produce local and often-violent tyrannies.²⁴ (Iraqi Kurdistan, he noted, might be a possible exception, although at the time it was too soon to tell.) In the ensuing two decades, scholars have used a variety of qualitative and quantitative approaches to revisit the question of the relationship between quasi- or unrecognized states and democracy.²⁵ Their work has been stimulated in part by the emergence of a number of new unrecognized states in the secessionist, post-Soviet states of Eurasia as well as cases such as Somaliland, South Sudan, and Kosovo. Perhaps unsurprisingly, scholars have found the record ambiguous.

The KRG is not an unrecognized state (e.g., Transnistria or South Ossetia) because it has not claimed independence from Iraq. It is, however, a quasi-state and what King²⁶ calls a “state-like entity,” because it is a political unit that exercises internal but not external sovereignty. Like many secessionist states, it came into being through protracted civil war and is based on a nationalist platform of ethnic self-determination. In such contexts, political elites face dual and sometimes-competing imperatives: the desire to maintain national unity in the face of external challenges to their existence, on the one hand, and external and internal pressures to govern in a relatively democratic fashion, on the other, because they have usually sought to legitimate their struggle in the cause of the welfare of “the people.” To self-governing elites, national unity is often perceived as an existential need: as Caspersen²⁷ writes, “the status of the entities is precarious and the siege mentality is acute.” This us-versus-them mentality and the desire to maintain a unified front against external threats (real or imagined) is pervasive among both constituents and rulers, serves a powerful rhetorical tool for discouraging open contestation, and can lead to discrimination and exclusion of minorities. The “self-defense and external threat” frame also reinforces local and strategic rationales for maintaining militias and armed units and can promote support for strong (authoritarian) leaders. In addition to the national unity imperative comes the imperative of greed: the new state offers considerable resources, often in a context of scarcity, and frequently becomes a kind of fiefdom to be guarded and parceled out to family and supporters.²⁸

Nonetheless, recent research suggests that state-like entities can produce environments conducive to democratization. In a careful review (2012) of Nagorno-Karabakh, for instance, Kolsto and Blakkisrud²⁹ find it more democratic than its parent state, contrary to what might be expected. Northern Cyprus is classified according to Freedom House measurements as “free.” Somaliland (as of 2013) is ranked by Freedom House as “partly free” and more democratic than “not-free” Somalia. Other secessionist entities such as Abkhazia and Kosovo exhibit mixed records but with at least some attention to democratization. The democratizing impetus comes in part as secessionist elites seek recognition and legitimation from both the international community and their own people, not all of whom necessarily support secessionist goals. Since a key trope of most claims to self-determination is suffering at the hands of authorities, it undermines claims to the need for self-determination if the new authorities reproduce this violence against their own citizens. In addition, there are significant external resources for democratization (i.e., external aid for civic development) that can put both direct pressure on governments to behave more democratically

and strengthen opposition and societal forces (by offering them training, funding, and other kinds of support). In Caspersen's words, self-governing entities have "caught on to what they perceive as a normative change in the international arena," and whereas claims to independence in the past might be based on ethnic and national identity and grievances, "there is now an increasing emphasis on proclaimed processes of democratization." In fact, she argues, in a number of unrecognized states there has been a transition away from "authoritarian war heroes and towards some form of proto-democracy."³⁰

In some ways, the Iraqi Kurdish case fits these other studies. As with most movements for self-determination, Kurdish leaders are very concerned with maintaining national unity in the face of external challenges to the KRG's existence, and they tend to define the national interest in terms of protecting Kurds from outside threats. Continuing conflicts between Baghdad and Erbil over the energy sector, the status of Kurdish peshmerga soldiers, and the question of borders (in particular, Kirkuk and its oilfields) means conflict is an ever-present possibility.³¹ Such instability means, as Kolsto and Blakkisrud³² write of Nagorno-Karabakh, any opposition tends to operate within a "narrowly defined political field" in which "self-constraint and a perceived need for outward unity is ubiquitous" and "political disagreements are often buried in order to 'maintain stability'." Although nearly all commentators and politicians pay lip service to democracy, it is sometimes presented as a luxury the KRG cannot yet afford. Typical is one remark made by a Kurdish businessman, who wrote in an online post about the debated two-year extension of President Barzani's term of office: "We need, as Kurds, the strongman with charismatic leadership to protect the rights of the Kurds. . . . [and] the Kurdistan desire to establish the State of 'Kurdistan'. The democratic process will find its way for making the nation like any other nation who [sic] owns its state."³³

At the same time, Kurdish political elites have been sensitive to criticism of human rights abuses and worked hard to portray the KRG as, if not fully democratic, well on the road to democracy. This is not just due to their concern about their international image; it is also because an important part of Kurdish national identity as articulated by Kurdish political elites for at least two decades has been the idea that Kurdish politics are democratic politics and that the "will of the people" matters (although the will of the people—particularly when understood to be the "silent majority"—can also be used to try and marginalize critics and protesters). The "democratic-ness" of Kurds has been one of many factors used to juxtapose Kurds and Kurdish identity against Arabs, in particular. This idea—and claim to ownership of

a prior “Kurdish spring”—was clearly articulated by Nechirvan Barzani in his April 2012 inaugural speech, when he said:

Recently, some countries of the Middle East and North Africa have begun to see the emergence of democracy and justice. The Kurdistan Region welcomes these changes, and supports any change that is in the direction of democracy, freedom and human rights. By contrast, the Kurdish Spring began twenty years ago when the people of Kurdistan rose up, with the support of the Kurdistan political parties, and managed to end the authority of one of the most dangerous dictators of that time in our land, choosing to install the rule of law, democracy and freedom without the support of foreign countries.³⁴

The Iraqi Kurdish case, though, differs in several important respects from many other case studies of quasi- or unrecognized states. First, unlike entities such as Kosovo and Abkhazia, the KRG is not a secessionist state but a recognized region in a federal structure. Despite talk (or threats) of desires for independence and disputes with Baghdad over KRG efforts to establish economic autonomy, the state-building enterprise in the Kurdistan Region is, for the most part, legal, with the authority of the state recognized by both internal and external players. Although it is referred to as a quasi-state and is widely seen as “virtually independent,” the KRG still receives around 90 percent of its income from the central Iraqi government—by legal agreement, around 17 percent of the entire Iraqi budget³⁵—and maintains important connections to the central state, mostly obviously, representation in the Iraqi National Assembly and leadership posts such as the presidency. All of this means the KRG enjoys a more comfortable legal status and does not need to work as hard to establish external legitimacy as many unrecognized states.

Second, Kurdish authorities have a significant history of state and nation building that have granted them extensive internal legitimation for governance. The process of “turning denizens into citizens”³⁶ was already largely accomplished by the 2003 overthrow of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Most ethno-national movements cannot assume the loyalty of all or even most of their (claimed) subjects and face either internal or external competition.³⁷ This means they tend to need to spend considerable effort in establishing themselves as legitimate rulers. However, in the Iraqi Kurdish case the long *durée* of the Kurdish national movement (since the first decades of the twentieth century), the important albeit varying levels of cultural and political autonomy ceded by Baghdad to the Kurdish north, the brutal Anfal and chemical gassing campaigns carried out against Kurds by the Ba’th in

the late 1980s,³⁸ and, especially, the creation of a Kurdish “safe haven” after 1991 left Kurdish authorities as the only credible governing authority in the region. The service-oriented face of KDP governance and the fact that both the KDP and the PUK maintain their own militia and fighting forces have facilitated their dominance over the Kurdish north. Compared to some unrecognized or secessionist states, then, Kurdish authorities did not have to work very hard among their own Kurdish populations after 2003 to assert and maintain the right to rule. Although there have been various complaints about KDP and PUK policies toward minorities, especially Arabs and groups such as the Yezidi,³⁹ the KRG’s confidence here has nonetheless been demonstrated in its relatively inclusive policies toward such groups, for instance, in their reserved quotas in parliament and various social and economic policies designed to incorporate them into the system. Tens of thousands of Christians and Arab Muslims from other parts of Iraq have also taken shelter in the Kurdistan Region; in a 2009 report, the KRG reported giving financial assistance to more than 11,000 displaced families.⁴⁰

Third, unlike most unrecognized states, which tend to be relatively poor,⁴¹ the KRG enjoys significant resources in the form of funds from Baghdad and lucrative contracts in the construction and energy sectors: even in the 1990s the aid regime in place⁴² made the KRG a distributive rather than extractive state, and its capacity to distribute or redistribute wealth has increased exponentially in the last decade. And, as discussed above, the ruling parties have capitalized extensively on their ability to disperse these resources in exchange for loyalty. Finally, there is an international interest in seeing the Kurdish north remain stable, both because of the unstable status of the rest of Iraq and the potential for exploiting important oil contracts.

Democratization Pressures from within

Each of these factors—the well-established status of the KRG, the wide base of domestic legitimacy-accorded Kurdish leaders, the strategic and economic status of the region, and internal and external support for stability—in some ways serve as impediments or counterforces to democratization. If the KRG already exercised considerable authority and has already established a comfortable degree of external and internal authority, it would appear its leaders have little need to wield the “democracy card” to gain support. However, as Tansey⁴³ argues, a weak state lacking capacity and cohesion may present more serious obstacles to successful democratic regime change than a formal lack of sovereignty. Indeed, I suggest that the legitimacy, capacity, and cohesion the KRG enjoys concurrently thwart *and* support democratization efforts. In other words, legitimacy and capacity can serve to facilitate

democratization as much as impede it. This is in part because capacity and cohesion make for a “strong state”⁴⁴ that can penetrate society and achieve reforms (if it so desires). But it is also because legitimacy suggests the vast majority of Kurds living under KRG authority agree on what Migdal⁴⁵ calls the basic “rules of the game.” In the case of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, these can be summarized as follows: (1) that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq should continue to exercise self-determination (even if there is disagreement over whether full independence is a good idea or not); (2) that the foundation of this self-determination lies in Kurdish nationalism, that is, the belief that there is a Kurdish nation, that it has an exclusive right to the territory governed by the KRG, and in the sanctity of a Kurdish national culture; (3) that the KRG as a body of institutions is the appropriate and legal representative of the people and primary governing authority; and (4) that, in contrast to the 1990s, Kurds should avoid going to war with each other if at all possible.

The fact that both the main political players and population at large support these principles means that Kurdish critics of the KRG, while they might be accused of risking the security of the nation by airing dirty laundry or refusing to present a unified front, do not tend to be viewed in zero-sum terms or as necessarily posing an existential threat to the security of the quasi-state (even if political rhetoric might sometimes cast them as such). Challengers’ efforts in the Kurdistan Region can thus expand participation and contestation within the system rather than fragmenting it, sending it into political gridlock, or provoking violent conflict. And, along these lines, reformists within the KRG suggest that the continuing security and prosperity of nation and state in fact rests on building a more democratic and transparent state and redefining the Kurdish national interest so that it incorporates good governance at home as well as protection from external threats. In this case, then, and somewhat counter-intuitively, nationalism might serve as a source for democratization rather than—as it often does—authoritarianism and violence.

From within the Kurdistan Region itself thus have come significant pressures to democratize and to transform the basis of governance from a charismatic to more institutionalized, legal-rational form of rule.⁴⁶ Drawing crudely on Pierre Bourdieu’s schema⁴⁷ of contemporary states as seeking to monopolize control over different types of capital (resources), we can say that while activists and reformers have largely respected the KRG’s monopoly over physical capital, they have challenged KRG hegemony for control over material, political, and symbolic resources. As evidenced by the growing culture of protest and street politics, ordinary people have sought a greater role in the process of Kurdish state and nation building. This has

manifested itself around three main issues: (1) the distribution of material resources, with people demanding better services, less corruption, less nepotism, and fairer access to the resources of the state and public institutions; (2) rule making, as demonstrated in campaigns and protests concerning policymaking, laws, and the draft constitution; and (3) national memory, how “the nation” is represented and commemorated, and what constitutes the national interest.

Typically, these have been issue areas monopolized by the ruling parties. Ordinary people’s capacity to influence these areas is linked to several key structural developments—the development of a more autonomous civil society, the emergence of an opposition and independent media, and the formation and electoral success of a new, reformist opposition party. All have undergirded the emergence of a new protest culture, especially in Sulaimaniya province. More to the point here, all have—cumulatively—produced a democratization impact in the Kurdistan Region, facilitating citizens’ ability to formulate and signify their preferences,⁴⁸ transforming political discourse, and expanding contestation and representation.

Pressure for reform has been both indirect and direct. Some repertoires and activities have a democratizing impact even if their protagonists’ immediate goals do not directly concern the nature of governance. Early protests under the KRG in the 2005–2007 period, for instance, usually focused more on service provision (i.e., paved roads and better electrical services) and the distribution of resources than on overarching demands for democracy, and some campaigns continue along this vein.

Activists have also called directly for more democratic governance. Early indications of this new democratization narrative emerged alongside the material and service-related concerns of the 16 March 2006 demonstration at the Halabja Monument of Martyrs, built to commemorate the victims of the 1988 chemical gassing of the city. Organized largely by students who argued that KRG failure to deliver on promises of aid to Halabja meant officials had lost their right to hold their annual commemoration ceremony there, the demonstration—one of the earliest and most striking illustrations of popular discontent with KRG rule—resulted in the sacking and burning of the monument.⁴⁹ But alongside local concerns with the poor living conditions in the town came demands for more accountability and better representation for Halabja residents. These concerns were still largely expressed in parochial terms, but by 2010 they had begun to broaden and command a more central place within protest narratives. In the spring of 2010, many students demonstrated in protest at the murder of a young journalist and in support of press freedoms⁵⁰; other attacks on journalists and media restrictions would prompt further series of demonstrations in the years following.

In late 2010 and early 2011, thousands of activists and dozens of NGOs protested a new demonstration law that required those seeking to hold a demonstration to receive written approval from the mayor or governor.⁵¹ News stories quoted one passionate young protester decrying the new law as a restriction on freedom and “a threat to future generations.”⁵²

By far the most dramatic examples of the new democracy discourse, though, came during the protests that took place in Sulaimaniya province between February and April of 2011. On February 17, a little-known group called the Network to Protect Rights and Demands of the People held a gathering in Sulaimaniya’s Sara Square to express solidarity with Egyptian and Tunisian protesters and criticize the KRG. After the demonstration, a group of protesters left the square and marched to the KDP headquarters down the road, where they pelted stones at the building. After some hesitation, security forces shot at protesters, killing a 14-year-old boy and injuring another youth who died a few days later. These events prompted several days of street clashes and then a series of daily mass protests at the square (re-named *Meidani Azadi*, or Freedom Square, by the protesters) modeled on the Tahrir Square protests in Egypt. Activists formed a loose association—the Ad Hoc Committee of Meidani Azadi—to serve as a mouthpiece and coordinator of the protests; they arranged a daily afternoon protest schedule; and they issued a specific set of demands. Their most controversial calls were for the president, prime minister, and cabinet to resign, but the bulk of protesters’ demands revolved around calls for government transparency, accountability, and an end to party influence over state institutions.⁵³ On February 19, protests began in other towns and cities around the province.⁵⁴

These protests constituted a watershed in state–society relations in the Kurdish north both because of their size and duration—crowds sometimes numbered in the tens of thousands, and the protests continued daily for two months—and because they signaled a clear shift from local demands to calls for broad-based systemic reform. Muthanna Ameen Nader, a leader with the opposition Kurdistan Islamic Union and active in the protests, said at the time: “Before, no one talked about reform to the system; it was all about services—new hospitals, paved roads, and things like that. But now the protests are not about that. It is now about constitutional revolution to reform the system in its entirety.”⁵⁵ Although mostly peaceful, clashes between security officials and protesters took their toll, and ten people were killed including two police officers and several youth under the age of 18.⁵⁶ KRG authorities responded to the protests with a mixture of repression and offers of concessions, but on April 18 they ended them, sending security forces into Sara Square and prohibiting further gatherings.

Street protest, though, has not been the only form of dissent or the only means of campaigning for change. Both opposition and independent media and opposition parties have rallied almost continuously for greater transparency, accountability, and pluralism. Taken together, such protests, party activism, and traditional and social media debates have created a new protest culture. While, as Natali⁵⁷ writes, such challenges are “unlikely to bring about regime change at present,” in part because the long arm of party patronage can still produce compliance even among the fiercest KRG critics, they can raise awareness, shift the balance of power between ruled and rulers, pressure authorities to change policies, and change norms and assumptions. Such activities can also be seen as forming the building blocks of a more democratic system of governance. Taken unto themselves, or even cumulatively, they do not necessarily produce democracy, but they do constitute essential components for the emergence of a more liberal, more democratic, and more accountable system of rule.

Democratization Building Block 1: The Emergence of a More Autonomous Associational Life

The Kurdistan Region is home to thousands of officially registered NGOs. The vast majority, however, are linked to one of the two major political parties and receive stipends from the government. A National Democratic Institute report published in 2011 showed that 43 percent of the 30 civil society organizations interviewed in the Kurdish north (Duhok, Sulaimaniya, and Erbil) received some sort of KRG financial support, as opposed to only 4 percent of those in the rest of Iraq,⁵⁸ and 57 percent of responders in the Kurdistan Region reported having partnerships with political parties, as opposed to only 27 percent in the rest of the country.⁵⁹ This dependence means few of these associations fit standard definitions of civil society organizations or could be expected to fulfill the role NGOs commonly play in providing a relatively autonomous space for voluntary social and political interaction outside the state. Indeed, often, they have constrained alternative voices by obstructing political mobilization and co-opting or muting potential challengers.

There are signs, however, that an autonomization of the public sphere may be occurring as various groups mobilize to challenge government policies and seek better services for their constituents. One of the earliest instances of such associational initiative took place in 2006 after the March 16 Halabja protest. In the aftermath of the protest, many demonstrators were detained. In response, half a dozen civil society organizations began working to try to free the demonstrators, provide them with legal counsel,

and to promote activists' demands for better services to Halabja. Wadi (a German-based group that primarily focuses on women's rights in Iraq) and the Democracy and Human Rights Development (DHRD) Center, two of the lead NGOs in the post-protest mobilization, conducted a survey among the local population in Halabja asking people what they thought of the protest and what should be done with the detainees.⁶⁰ The results, sympathetic to the protesters and complaining about KRG services, were published in the independent media. In 2007, 14 associations—brought together largely around the issue of the Halabja protests—formed a new umbrella group, the Federation of Civil Society NGOs. Activists intended the Federation to provide support to independent associations pursuing various civic projects and calling for political reform.⁶¹ Some of the associations involved in the Federation also formed follow-up groups to pressure individual politicians to make good on their promises. For instance, lawyers with DHRD visited members of the Kurdish parliament in their offices in Halabja and asked them why they had not fulfilled promises to the city, and continued to do so until the politician in question did something.⁶² Civic groups involved with the Federation have since been active in a number of campaigns, including a series of protests concerning the 2011 association law approved by the Kurdistan parliament and the February–April 2011 Sulaimaniya protests.

Sometimes such activities create clusters or networks of activists who form temporary groups to respond to particular issues or serve particular functions. These may be less formal or durable than a more established organization but nonetheless can play key roles in campaigns for social and political change. For instance, during the spring 2011 Sulaimaniya protests many individuals and groups associated with the Federation of Civil Society NGOs and earlier campaigns formed temporary groups to work with activists demonstrating every day in the main square in Sulaimaniya city.⁶³

The autonomization of associational life facilitates wider mobilization, new and more repertoires and frames, and head-on challenges to the ruling establishment. Sometimes this occurs even when activists are not directly calling for democracy but confine themselves to relatively discrete service- and resource-oriented goals. A striking example of this came in late 2012 and early 2013 when activists seeking aid and better services for the handicapped launched a new campaign. These were people whose injuries had not been accrued directly in war but were disabled for a range of other reasons, including birth, agricultural and car accidents, and, especially, land mines. This meant that, unlike the *peshmerga* war veterans—who, like Halabjans, are attributed a critical role in the national struggle and thus exercise

considerable symbolic power—these activists had no such leverage. Most had earlier been involved with the *Yeketi Kamandamani Kurdistan* (Union of Disabled of Kurdistan, or YKK), associated with the PUK; indeed, some had been instrumental in founding it. But critics argued that the YKK's link to the PUK prevented it from effective mobilization; activists reported being labeled “troublemakers” if they wanted to directly challenge KRG policies and complained that they were prevented from effectively advocating on behalf of the estimated 125,000 registered handicapped in the Kurdistan Region.⁶⁴ In the fall of 2012, some of these former YKK activists created a new organization, the Kurdistan Disabled Group, to strike a more independent path and try to convince Kurdish authorities to accede to their demands for an increase in monthly benefits and the extension of benefits to the disabled in disputed areas such as Kirkuk.⁶⁵ By early 2013, the group reported having several thousand members.

Both the campaign tactics and sites of protest signified a highly confrontational approach far removed from the more common corporatist model of group–government interaction. Disabled Group activists created a list of 15 demands, most of which concerned welfare benefits, and then went on a hunger strike in Sulaimaniya in front of the Kurdish National Assembly offices. “We didn’t want to do a demonstration at the beginning because we didn’t think it would accomplish anything,” said activist Haidar Osman.⁶⁶ “So we decided to do a hunger strike because it would be the first and last action we did. We said, it can be our grave if they don’t answer us.” Six men from the group went on a hunger strike in December of 2012. The men spent four days in a full hunger strike before the onset of health problems that pushed concerned fellow activists to convince them to switch to a liquids-only diet, which they maintained for 32 days. In early January, the activists went to Erbil to demonstrate in front of the parliament, where they staged a protest on the main avenue in front of the parliament and blocked traffic. Kurdistan News Network (KNN) news broadcasts showed images of men in wheelchairs and on crutches on a rain-swept roadway being carried away, struggling, by Kurdish security forces.

Although it fell short of its goals, the campaign received coverage from the opposition media, attracted the attention of local and international civic groups, and prompted dialogue with a number of government officials.⁶⁷ Like the Halabja protest, it called attention to the particularistic interests of a specific sector of Kurdish society, challenging both the KRG's control over material resources, the processes by which resources were distributed, and KRG efforts to present Kurdish “society” as relatively homogeneous and sharing the same sets of interests.

Democratization Building Block 2—Contestation and a Pluralistic Discourse

Another fundamental change in the nature of political life under the KRG in the decade between 2003 and 2013 was the expansion and diversification of political discourse. Civil society groups such as Wadi and the DHRD played an important role in this through campaigns and reports that offered alternative information politics⁶⁸ to those of the KRG. Particularly important, though, was the emergence of a new opposition and independent media that helped produce a more pluralistic national narrative, offered alternative sources of information, challenged Kurdish political elites for control over historic memory, and provided civic and political opposition groups with new platforms to publicize their ideas and grievances to a much larger audience.

Like associations, many news outlets in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are closely linked to political parties. Historically, journalists, editors, and other critics of the regime have faced several main challenges: parties characterized by a top-down, leadership-based style of management that are inclined to suppress criticism; the lack of an independent judicial system; a relatively conservative society that has often frowned on open conversation about sensitive topics such as sex, gender, and religion; and difficulties in finding reliable information and research sources. Writers needed to be cautious writing about politicians and their families—particularly those of Barzani and Talabani—about family relations (especially so-called honor killings), and, in particular, money: “who has what, and where are they getting it from. Issues such as companies’ corruption. I cannot call it a taboo because we do talk about it, but it is very sensitive.”⁶⁹

Beginning with the publication of the newspaper *Hawlati* that started in 2000, these limits have been pushed and tested. After *Hawlati* came *Lvin*, a tri-monthly magazine started in 2002; *Awene* newspaper, which began in 2006; *Speda TV* satellite channel created by the Kurdistan Islamic Union party in 2008; and the satellite news channels *KNN*, launched by the opposition party Gorran’s Weshi company. By 2010 the organization Reporters Without Borders would describe⁷⁰ a “veritable media boom” in the region, with around 850 recently registered new media outlets. In February of 2011 the region’s first independent TV news station, Nalia TV and Radio (NRT), began operations.

Websites and social media such as Facebook have also, as elsewhere, played a key role in providing platforms for the formation of new community identities, the sharing of information and ideas, and in facilitating mobilization. Iraq has one of the lowest rates of Internet penetration in the Middle

East and North Africa, with an estimated 7 percent penetration (Freedom House 2012), but in the Kurdistan Region an estimated 2 million people—around half the population—now regularly access the Internet, according to the KRG’s Ministry of Transportation and Communication.⁷¹ Among students and young people, the number of Internet users is extremely high. Among the most important Facebook groups for activists involved in the Sulaimaniya province protests of 2011, for instance, were *Shaqam*, which by late 2013 had about 87,000 “friends,” 17 Shobat, Sulaimani Youth, and “We are all Rizhwan Ali” (after Egypt’s “We are All Khaled Said”). These were formed by different individuals and groups (mostly students) and did not belong to the political parties.

The journalism sector overall suffers from many problems, particularly irresponsible and “yellow” journalism in which writers publish unsubstantiated reports and do not give those they criticize a chance to respond or defend themselves.⁷² Nonetheless, the existence of a new opposition and independent media has created a more pluralistic discourse in several main ways. First, it has challenged the ruling parties for control over historic memory. Particularly controversial was the publication of stories concerning KDP and PUK links with Baghdad during the Ba’th era; debates concerning the sequence of events leading to the 1988 chemical bombing of Halabja; and the Kurdish civil war in the 1990s between the PUK and the KDP. In 2006, for instance, *Lvin* magazine ran a series titled the “Pens of the Civil War” discussing the role of intellectuals in fomenting the war, listing hundreds of people by name. The editors wrote that they “felt a sense of responsibility” and saw it as their duty “to look back at a page of our nation’s history,” and that they and many others were “ashamed of those days.”⁷³

Second, these media outlets have presented openly critical views on ruling elites and the ruling parties, writing stories about human rights abuses, torture, and corruption and misuse of funds,⁷⁴ topics that crossed a number of red lines. “We touched some taboos—for example, talking about historical figures in Kurdistan that no one could talk about. The history of Kurdistan was always portrayed in a perfect way; it was whitewashed,” said Hemin Abdul, then deputy editor in chief of *Lvin* news magazine.⁷⁵ There was, he said, “an image of our former leaders as beyond criticism. It is ideological nationalism and a national history.” Even KDP and PUK leaders Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani have not been off limits, although in 2010 at least one young journalist paid with his life after publishing a story satirizing Barzani and his family.⁷⁶

Third, the opposition and independent media has provided a new kind of daily news coverage that goes onto the street, interviews ordinary people, and covers events ignored, whitewashed, or spun to suit party interests by

the party-linked media. For instance, *Hawlati*, one of the region's first large-circulation independent papers, was founded in late 2000 after a deadly clash between PUK security forces and a small communist party. After failing to convince the party-affiliated newspapers to publish a release condemning the event and calling for an investigation, some intellectuals and writers met with PUK leader Jalal Talabani. Editor Asos Hardi recounted the meeting:

We went to speak with Talabani, and one of the guys we were with said, "Mam [Uncle] Jalal, they attacked us, and we should have the right to answer." And he said to us: "You do realize that Kurdistan Nwe is a PUK newspaper. A PUK newspaper! So if you want to publish another newspaper [and publish your response], you can!" And I think this was one of the first times we really thought about it. I think he was very clear: you are free to have your newspaper. . . . So they started to work on the idea of a newspaper.⁷⁷

In the first days of the 2011, Sulaimaniya protests, Nalia Radio and Television (NRT), the region's first independent satellite news station, broadcast groundbreaking live coverage of protests and clashes on the street between young people and security forces. Its footage included scenes of police firing on demonstrators. On February 20, 2011, masked men attacked NRT's headquarters in Sulaimaniya and set them on fire, destroying millions of dollars' worth of equipment and rendering the building unusable.⁷⁸

Democratization Building Block 3—More Representation and More Contestation

NGOs, media, and protesters have all called for more accountable decision-making and transparent governance under the KRG. Particularly important in translating such calls into concrete political pressure have been opposition parties. Although smaller opposition parties have participated in Kurdish parliamentary politics for many years (among the most important are the Kurdistan Communist Party, the Kurdistan Toilers Party, the Kurdistan Islamic Union, and the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan), it was only with the formation of the Gorran party, or "Movement for Change" that the KDP–PUK duopoly encountered its first serious electoral challenge. Through Gorran, representation and contestation in the political field deepened.

Gorran was founded in 2009 through an internal schism within the PUK leadership (see, e.g., Hiltermann 2010). Its platform calls for a de-politicization and "de-party-ization" of government institutions, for the elimination of corruption, for a democratic constitution, and for a more

equitable distribution of wealth in the Kurdistan Region.⁷⁹ In the 2009 elections for the KNA, Gorran won 25 of 111 seats. In the March 2010 Iraqi parliamentary elections, Gorran won eight parliamentary seats. In the September 2013 elections, the KDP and the PUK ran as independent parties for the first time since 1992. Gorran received more votes than its mother party and arch-rival, the PUK, making it the second largest party in the region and sending shock waves across the KRG establishment. Gorran won 24.21 percent of the votes (24 seats in the parliament) as compared to the dominant KDP (which won 37.79 percent of the votes and 38 seats). The PUK won 17.8 percent of votes, the opposition Kurdistan Islamic Union 9.49 percent, and the Kurdistan Islamic Group 6.01 percent. Most of Gorran's support came from Sulaimaniya province, where it won 40.8 percent of the votes.⁸⁰ Sulaimaniya is traditionally the PUK's stronghold.

Working closely with the Kurdistan Islamic Union and the Kurdistan Islamic Group (two Islamist opposition parties), Gorran formed the backbone of a new opposition bloc in the parliament and provided the opposition movement significant new material, human, and ideological resources. Gorran founder Nawshirwan Mustafa served as a key figure in the nationalist struggle against Saddam Hussein and thus bestows "nationalist credentials" on the movement as well as considerable charismatic authority. Although Gorran has been frequently hamstrung by infighting, its significant presence in the KNA, the electoral threat it posed to the PUK, and its willingness to join forces with other smaller opposition parties all translated into increased visibility and leverage for opposition groups and activists.

Between 2009 and 2014 Gorran's activities could be seen in two arenas: in the parliament itself and its support for civil society and street protest. And, as one analyst noted critically, Gorran "has not been clear whether it is a party or a rebellion of the people against the two ruling parties."⁸¹ Gorran's record in parliament is mixed, and at least through the fall of 2013 it mostly served as a vocal critic and opposition force rather than a governing partner or party. In January of 2012 Gorran leader Nawshirwan Mustafa said as much in a news interview, saying the priority for Gorran was to change the system, not to participate in it, saying: "We don't care how the government is run so much as the system."⁸² Gorran's presence—and deliberate absence—in the KNA has been particularly important in pushing for more budgetary accountability, in debates about the draft constitution, and during parliamentary discussion of issues such as the 2011 protests and the extension of President Barzani's tenure in office from 2013 to 2015. The regional budget approved by the parliament on June 24, 2012, for instance, was criticized by Gorran and other opposition parliamentarians for allocating money

for unspecified projects. Civil society activists then held protests calling for more budgetary accountability.⁸³

Gorran's impact has perhaps been more keenly felt outside the halls of governance. Party leader Nawshirwan Mustafa runs something of a media empire, and the party founded the influential (if financially struggling) KNN news station in 2008. Party leaders have fomented and at times coordinated mass street protest. In January of 2011 the party issued a seven-point call for reform that included a demand that the government step down, and Gorran and other opposition parties such as the Kurdistan Islamic Union played important roles in the February–April 2011 Sulaimaniya protests. (The degree to which it guided and organized the protests varied considerably according to the locale.)

Gorran itself is internally divided by a “young” and “old” guard, and many prominent reformist members of the party, including several members of parliament, resigned or were forced out between 2011 and 2013. It was also unclear how the party would proceed, and how much electoral support it would continue to enjoy, after the 2013 elections and Gorran's shift from opposition to (likely) coalition partner. Nonetheless, one supporter was not so far off the mark when he enthusiastically summed up Gorran's impact as follows:

Leaders became more vigilant in not misusing government resources because Gorran can be found in every corner of this region. Ministries were being interrogated before the Kurdistan parliament. The corruption file was released and Facebook became a big voice of the younger generation. People became aware, and everyone knew what was going on behind the curtain. The equation had changed since the appearance of the Change Movement.⁸⁴

Conclusions

Examining the development of state building in the Kurdistan Region suggests that there is at least some correlation between self-determination and democratization. This is not because secessionist or nationalist elites are necessarily any more principled than other politicians. Nor is it simply because they get trapped in their own rhetoric when the justification for autonomy is made in the name of “the people” and, by extension, just rule of and by the people. Rather, this case calls attention to how the process of contemporary national state building itself provides dynamic opportunities ordinary people can exploit to try to change the balance of power between rulers and ruled. As the KRG extends its “stateness,” ordinary Kurds have demanded

input in how it all works. They have sought and, in some cases, won some say over how they are governed, the distribution of material resources, and how their pasts are remembered and publicly represented. Increasingly, after 2006 Kurdish political and party elites saw the nationalist, charismatic basis of state authority called into question. While Kurdish leaders themselves still command allegiance and affection, both for their patronage and a genuine popular appreciation for their commitment to the Kurdish cause and ability to deliver more secure and more representative government than in past eras, they have come under increasing pressure to make the institutions they created more autonomous, more professional, and less beholden to personalistic politics. Underlying such developments is a concerted effort by some Kurdish activists, NGOs, opposition parties, media, student groups, and other actors to redefine the Kurdish “national interest” and offer new legitimations for the right to rule.

Like other quasi-states and self-governing entities, KRG authorities seek to maximize the appearance of national unity and to hegemonize the multiple resources of office. Although being democratic and on the side of “the people” is a key trope within Kurdish nationalist discourse, the incentives to provide a united front against Baghdad and to maintain the stability of the Kurdistan Region in a highly volatile context have mitigated against internal pluralism, contestation, and power sharing. The valuable material resources offered by control of the energy and construction sectors have provided an enormous disincentive for the ruling parties—and their extended families—to move toward more accountable and horizontal politics. In this context, inclusive and democratic institutions such as the parliament have sometimes served almost as shells for shadow decision makers operating behind the scenes with little accountability, and had less impact on policy-making and the distribution of resources than is implied on paper.

At the same time, the framework of democracy, a keen sensitivity to international opinion, and the high degree of internal and external legitimacy the KRG enjoys relative to other quasi- or unrecognized states have facilitated some democratic tendencies within the Kurdistan Region. Within this context, the growth of a more autonomous associational sector, an opposition and independent media, and viable opposition parties such as Gorran have built the backbone of a new protest culture and opposition movement that is finding expression in multiple spheres of political and social life. Rather than simply operating on the streets or extra-institutionally, contestants are finding formal and informal avenues and platforms for negotiation and interaction with Kurdish elites and party discourse. This includes face-to-face personal meetings, debates and discussions in the media, and representation on committees and in parliament. Cumulatively, they have

changed how ordinary preferences are being expressed and the degree to which these preferences are reflected in political narrative, political institutions, decision making, and the distribution of resources.

Notes

1. This chapter is based on a series of research trips to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq conducted between 2009 and 2014. I wish to thank Peshawa Ahmad and Shadman Hiwa for their extraordinary research assistance and translations from Sorani Kurdish. I also am very grateful to all the people I interviewed for sharing their time and thoughts with me, and to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at San Francisco State University for an individual research grant that facilitated some of this work.
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SECTION III

The Kurds and Democratization

CHAPTER 8

The Ebb and Flow of Armed Conflict in Turkey: An Elusive Peace

Güneş Murat Tezcür

Introduction

This chapter offers an empirically rich analysis of violence, reform, and negotiations characterizing the Kurdish question in Turkey during the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) rule. It is organized as three sections. The first section offers an analysis of violence on the basis of a new events dataset. A military stalemate has ensued between the two centralized and disciplined political entities with opposing ideological visions. The *Kurdistan Workers' Party* (PKK) pursues a classical “war of attrition” with the goal of achieving substantial concessions from the Turkish state. In response, the Turkish state pursued a mixed strategy of concessions and punishments to erode public support for the insurgency. While both sides try to maximize their power consistent with a realist perspective, the dynamics of electoral competition and public opinion complicates their strategies. The following section discusses the electoral dynamics, the negotiation attempts, and the reforms of the AKP. It demonstrates that there is a strong negative correlation between the scope and intensity of violence and the continuation of negotiations. However, the negotiations are not effective in bridging the gap between the demands of the insurgents and the expectations of the Turkish state. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the literature on negotiated settlements to civil wars to identify the challenges to the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question in Turkey. It suggests that a fragmented political

environment facilitating power sharing may be the most sustainable road to an enduring peace and furthering of Turkish democracy.

The Anatomy of the Armed Conflict

The armed conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, which started with the insurgent attacks in August 1984, has been one of the longest civil wars in the post-World War II period. Among the 31 armed conflicts listed as active in 2012 by the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, only two conflicts (the conflict between the Sudanese government and the Sudanese Revolutionary Army (SRF) and the conflict between the Colombian government and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC)) have longer history.¹ Factors identified as making rebellions feasible also contribute to the viability of the PKK as a military force.² The Kurdish insurgents have sanctuaries across the border in the Iraqi Kurdistan; have access to significant funds from the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe; recruit heavily among economically underdeveloped Kurdish communities not only in Turkey but also in Iran and Syria; and operate freely in the mountainous region forming the Turkish–Iraqi border and penetrating deep into eastern Turkey. The insurgency has survived significant losses and the capture of the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999 to reappear as a potent fighting force after 2004. Its armed struggle has irrevocably led to the formation of a strong ethnic consciousness among millions of Kurds and generated high levels of ethno-nationalist mobilization. Yet, the PKK failed to establish “liberated zones” free from the Turkish state’s control. Furthermore, its willingness and ability to wage a costly protracted popular war against the Turkish state has significantly waned since the early 1990s.

Despite its longevity, there is no authoritative source about fatality statistics. This is true especially for the 1984–1999 years when the clashes were most intense. One of the earliest works on the conflict mentions that the conflict claimed the lives of more than 5,100 people from 1984 to 1992.³ A Human Rights Watch report published in 1995 notes, “[o]f the 13,000 civilians and soldiers estimated to have been killed between 1984 and 1994, half died in the past two years.”⁴ Kirişçi and Winrow (1997) relying on statistics provided by the Turkish state note that a total 20,181 people were killed as a result of the clashes. More than half of these fatalities were PKK militants.⁵ Similarly, David McDowall writes, “by 1996, the estimated number of deaths was 20,000. By 1999, they were thought to exceed 35,000.”⁶ This figure is broadly consistent with the number provided by then President Süleyman Demirel in late 1999. According to him, a total of 36,445 (25,139 PKK militants, 5,882 security forces, and 5,424 civilians) were killed in

the 15-year fighting.⁷ Yet, a former general directing counterinsurgency campaigns against the PKK gives significantly lower numbers for the same period. He writes that a total of 29,102 people were killed in the violent conflict between 1984 and 1999. As many as 18,951 of them were PKK militants.⁸ Cemal (2003) cites the numbers provided by the Emergency Rule General Governorate and writes that 23,473 PKK militants, 5,040 security forces, and 4,444 civilians lost their lives from July 19, 1987 to May 31, 2001.⁹ A more recent report provided by a Turkish newspaper based on numbers provided by the Turkish Armed Forces General Staff, Gendarmerie General Command, and Directorate General of Police gives a yearly and categorical (militants, security forces, and civilians) breakdown of the casualties between August 1984 and March 2009. According to this report, a total of 41,828 people died as a result of the armed conflict. A great majority of these deaths were identified as PKK militants (29,704). In the 1984–1999 period, the fatality rate was 38,871 (27,657 militants, 5,824 security forces, and 5,390 civilians).¹⁰ In contrast, the PKK statistics published in various issues of *Serxwebun* magazine show significantly lower militant but higher security forces deaths.

As these examples clearly demonstrate, there are considerable discrepancies even between statistics provided by the Turkish state. Hence, it is unfortunate that many scholars and pundits uncritically rely on these statistics. For political reasons, both sides tend to grossly inflate the casualty figures of other sides and somehow deflate their own losses. Moreover, the official figures provided by the Turkish state are likely to classify many civilian deaths as militant deaths given the nature of the counterinsurgency campaigns not distinguishing between armed militants and unarmed sympathizers, especially in the first half of the 1990s.

Three general observations about the intensity and lethality of the conflict are warranted given these caveats. First, the conflict is highly professionalized in the sense that a great majority of the deaths were armed combatants. With some exceptions, both sides mostly avoid large-scale civilian massacres that characterized civil wars in many other contexts such as Peru,¹¹ Algeria,¹² and Sri Lanka.¹³ Next, the intensity of the conflict remains medium compared to similar armed conflicts elsewhere. On the one hand, the level of casualties is significantly higher than ethno-nationalist conflicts in Western European countries such as the Basque insurgency in Spain and the IRA insurgency in Northern Ireland. For instance, the *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA) attacks in the Basque Country resulted in the deaths of 287 people from June 1968 through December 1980.¹⁴ While the conflict in Northern Ireland was more lethal, it killed less than 4,000 people between 1968 and 1999.¹⁵ On the other hand, the armed conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK

claimed significantly fewer lives than the ethnic civil wars in Sri Lanka from 1983 to 2009, Chechnya in the 1990s, Iraq after the US invasion of 2003, and in Syria after the Arab uprisings of 2011. Finally, violence was most intense from 1992 to 1999 when death rate per year was above 1,000, the threshold used by the Correlates of War (COW) Project to classify an armed conflict as a civil war. Violence in the first decade of the twenty-first century remained limited compared to the 1990s. This decline occurred primarily because while the insurgents preserved their fighting capacity, their willingness and ability to wage a more extensive and intensive war became significantly more limited in the post-1999 period.

With the help of a new dataset, it is possible to develop a more precise understanding of the dynamics of the conflict in the second period of war, from 1999 to 2012. The Kurdish Insurgency Violent Events (KIVE) v.1 dataset provides comprehensive and reliable information about the nature, intensity, and temporal and geographical characteristics of the conflict. The KIVE dataset covers all insurgency related events with fatalities that took within the boundaries of Turkey from 2000 to 2012. It provides precise information about the date, location, type of event (i.e., insurgent attack against an outpost, military operation targeting an insurgent sanctuary, etc.), and the number of deaths (categories of soldiers, police, village guards, militants, and civilians). It is based on both Turkish daily newspapers (in particular, *Hürriyet* and *Zaman* that usually provide the most detailed coverage) and pro-insurgency news sources (e.g., Fırat News Agency-ANF, and the website of the PKK's armed forces, HPG). As a general rule of thumb, the former provides more reliable information about the security and civilian fatalities while the latter is more accurate about the militant deaths. Moreover, the reporting of the war has been much improved since 2000. In the 1990s, many deaths were poorly recorded and journalists were barred from the conflict zones.

Figure 8.1 shows the intensity of clashes between the Turkish security forces and the PKK insurgents on a monthly basis between 2002 and 2012. Several patterns are worth noting. First, the clashes have a very seasonal characteristic reflecting the rural nature of the armed conflict typical of guerrilla warfare. The clashes are generally most intense in late summer and early fall months before the PKK militants withdraw to their winter camps. Next, there is a strong negative correlation between the armed clashes and political negotiations. The intensity of clashes steadily increased from 2002 to 2008 before significantly declining in 2009 when the AKP government initiated negotiations with the PKK leadership. However, with the failure of the 2009 negotiations, the armed conflict gained a new momentum in 2011 and 2012 and reached levels unprecedented since 1999. As negotiations

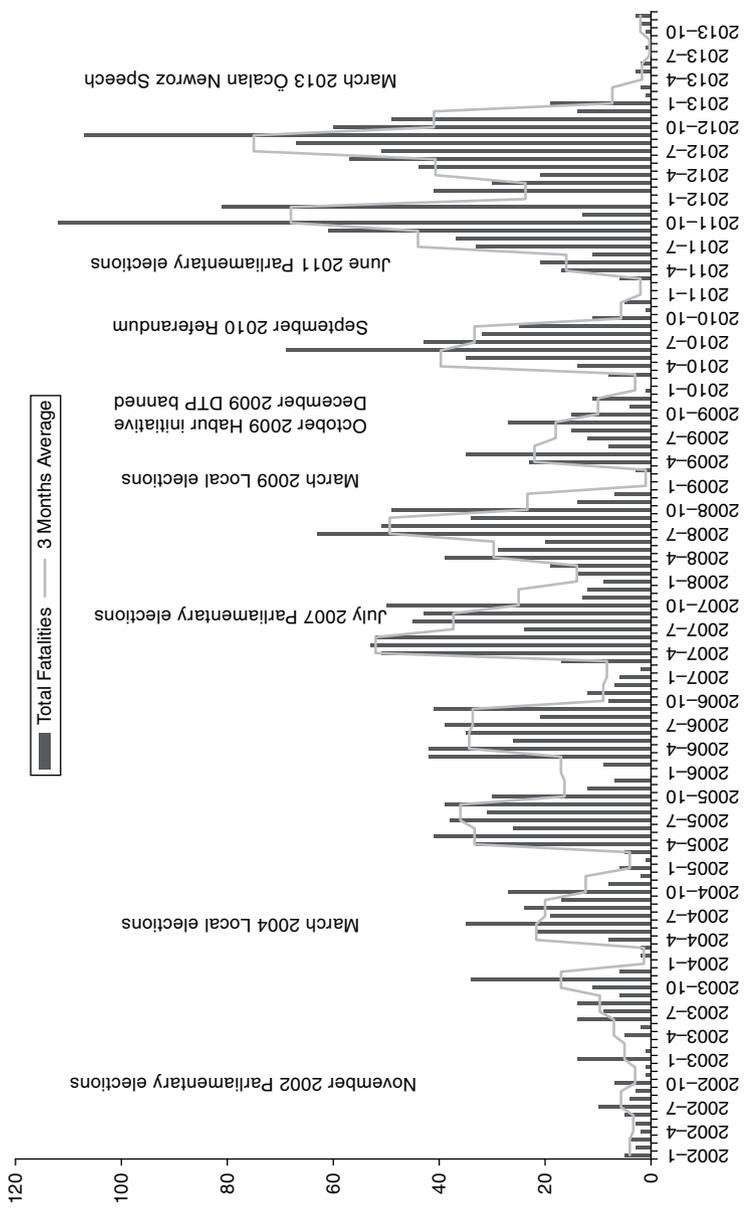


Figure 8.1 Total fatalities (security forces, militants, and civilians) related to the Kurdish insurgency that took place within the boundaries of Turkey. Casualties as a result of cross-border operations are not included.
 Source: Kurdish Insurgency Violent Events (KIVE) dataset v.1.

were reinitiated in late 2012, violence was mostly absent throughout 2013. Overall, the warring parties, both the Turkish state and the Kurdish insurgents, seem to have high levels of cohesion and organizational unity. An important implication is that “spoiler problems” besetting peace process elsewhere is not a major concern in this case.¹⁶ Finally, the PKK primarily wages a war of attrition that aims to obtain significant concessions from the Turkish state. According to Kydd and Walter (2006: 51), “in an attrition strategy, terrorists seek to persuade the enemy that the terrorists are strong enough to impose considerable costs if the enemy continues a particular policy.”¹⁷ The PKK does not qualify to be a terrorist organization according to their definition that associates terrorism with “the use of violence against civilians by nonstate actors to attain political goals” (52) as it primarily targets security forces. The PKK violence gives the message that the insurgents have the resolve and capacity to inflict harm as long as the Turkish state does not make significant concessions to their political demands. The PKK violence, which remains mostly restrained (i.e., typically avoiding indiscriminate attacks) and politically calculated, in the post-1999 period has been a tool to renegotiate the terms of Turkish democracy, since other avenues for effective Kurdish nationalist political representation have not been readily available. At the same time, the continuation of violence has significant human and economic costs, and precludes the ability of the Kurdish nationalists to form powerful political alliances with the Turkish political actors. As argued at the end of this chapter, the greater Kurdish political representation in the parliament and access to the executive power in coalition governments would both bring a permanent end to the violence and contribute to Turkish democracy by alleviating ethnic discrimination.

Political Reforms, Negotiations, and Violence

It can be argued that democratization would result in a decline in political violence for two reasons. Democratization would both generate more avenues for nonviolent political participation and reduce categorical inequalities disfavoring societal groups such as ethnic minorities. From this perspective, the PKK decision to reignite armed struggle in 2004 is completely unanticipated. After all, the European Union (EU)-induced reform process was resulting in gradual but significant changes in Turkey’s constitutional and legal order. As shown in Table 8.1, a series of reform packages starting in 2001 brought limited but still historical improvements in the status of Kurdish language in Turkey.¹⁸ The AKP sought international and domestic legitimacy vis-à-vis the military by enthusiastically embracing a pro-EU agenda shortly after coming to power. Even if these reforms were far from

meeting the demands of the Kurdish nationalists, the PKK's decision to retake up arms during the reform era is actually puzzling. The PKK's return to armed struggle was primarily a function of the insurgent leadership's fear of losing control over its constituency.¹⁹

Two developments generated concern within the insurgent leadership that the PKK was losing its hold over its ethnic constituency.²⁰ First, the victory of the AKP in the 2004 local elections and its strong support in the Kurdish populated areas was a significant blow to the PKK's claim to be the exclusive representative of the Kurdish people in Turkey. The PKK-affiliated *Demokratik Halk Partisi* (DEHAP) that fielded candidates under the banner of the *Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti* (SHP) won the municipality of only four Kurdish provincial centers—Batman, Diyarbakır, Hakkâri, and Şırnak. This was a significant loss compared to that of 1999 when the DEHAP's predecessor *Halkın Demokrasi Partisi* (HADEP) won the municipal elections in Ağrı, Diyarbakır, Batman, Hakkâri, Mardin, and Van. In 2004, the AKP won the municipal elections in the predominantly Kurdish provinces of Ağrı, Bingöl, Bitlis, Muş, Siirt, and Van. A candidate from the fringe Islamist party, *Saadet Partisi* (SP), became the mayor of Mardin before switching to the AKP. The electoral losses signified that the Kurdish nationalists' attempts to regenerate themselves as a nonviolent viable force were not being successful. In contrast, the AKP portraying itself as a reformist force challenging the military-dominated political status quo and delivering economic growth was gaining ground among the Kurds. A large number of pious Kurds found the AKP's Islamic identity as an appealing factor ameliorating the exclusionary aspects of the hegemonic Turkish nationalism.²¹ Given this electoral context, the PKK's decision to retake up arms is consistent with the argument that under certain conditions democratization can actually bring more ethnic violence.²²

The PKK aimed to show that it can make parts of the country ungovernable by using violence as a strategic asset. It can be objected that PKK violence would actually undermine its popular support as many Kurds would become worse off as a result of the deteriorating security conditions in the region. After all, the armed clashes between the security forces and the insurgents adversely affect economic development, hinder public services, and result in harassments in everyday life. In this regard, who is blamed for violence becomes the critical question. As recent research on counterinsurgency programs argues (e.g., Sambanis et al. 2012;²³ Lyall et al. 2013²⁴), social distance between the combatants and civilians in a civil war greatly affects how the civilians respond to the attempts by the combatants to gain their support. As the PKK recruited tens of thousands fighters from many Kurdish families in Turkey over the last three decades, it could count on

their almost unconditional support. As violence has crystallized ethnic identities, the PKK has emerged as a group fighting for their rights in the eyes of many Kurds. Also, the governmental policies criminalizing large numbers of people on terrorism charges have fuelled popular grievances and contributed to the image of the PKK as a force fighting for legitimate goals. Furthermore, and as shown above, it has mostly avoided attacks that would harm civilians (e.g., bomb attacks in urban areas).²⁵ Consequently, it has not received the lion share of the blame for the continuing violence as evidenced by the increasing gains of the Kurdish nationalists in the 2009 local and 2011 elections.

The second factor generating anxiety among the PKK leadership by 2004 was the consolidation of the Kurdish self-governance in Iraq following the US invasion of Iraq. The rising prestige of Massoud Barzani who achieved Kurdish self-rule in Iraq was a direct challenge to Öcalan's self-portrayal as the leader of the Kurdish people. The Kurdish self-governance in Iraq did not only hinder the PKK's ability to develop a popular base among the Iraqi Kurds but also showed the limits of its struggle in the absence of strong external backers. The Iraqi Kurds' alliance with the United States was the main reason for their ability to achieve sustainable autonomy for the first time in modern history. Lacking a strong external patron, the PKK decided that a strategy of attribution based on sporadic guerrilla attacks against the Turkish security forces would be the most effective way to achieve concessions from the Turkish state.

The PKK's return to violence complicated the AKP's strategic calculations. As the EU–Turkey relations entered into era of stagnation and deterioration after the accession negotiations, the AKP's Kurdish reforms came to a temporary end by 2005. Furthermore, as emphatically argued by Baskın Oran, the implementation of the reforms was made harder as a result of bureaucratic resistance. In the face of increasing PKK activity, the AKP initiated another period of reforms by 2009.²⁶

As shown in Table 8.1, the AKP's Kurdish reforms can be perceived as taking place in three stages: (1) the EU-induced reform process losing steam by 2005, (2) the reforms between 2009 and 2011, and (3) the reforms of 2013. Three factors explain the AKP's Kurdish overtures after the 2007 parliamentary elections. Primarily, the AKP government faced an existential threat from the military and high judiciary until the 2010 constitutional amendments that eliminated the high judiciary as a bastion of anti-AKP sentiments. The AKP's image as an anti-military force boosted its appeal among the Kurds who were victimized during the military-led counterinsurgency campaigns in the 1990s. Meanwhile, the AKP also built a strategic alliance with liberals instrumental in shaping the public discussions and the

Table 8.1 Legal and administrative reforms liberalizing Kurdish identity and language in Turkey in the post-1999 period

<i>Reform</i>	<i>Date</i>
Constitutional amendment restricting freedom of expression in “languages prohibited by the law”	October 2001
Allowing broadcasting in Kurdish	March 2002
Allowing private courses in Kurdish	August 2002
Abolishing prohibition on Kurdish personal names	June 2003
Public TV station broadcasting in Kurdish	January 2009
Allowing electoral campaigning in Kurdish	March 2010 and September 2013
Establishment of Kurdish language and literature programs at university level	January 2011
Allowing elected Kurdish language courses at the fifth grade	September 2012
Allowing limited defense in Kurdish at courts	January 2013
Allowing Kurdish language education in private schools	September 2013
Abolishing “Oath of Allegiance” (to the Turkish Nation) recited by primary school students	September 2013
Allowing q, w, and x in computer keyboards	September 2013
Allowing village names revert back to their originals	September 2013

Gülen movement whose financial power and influence in the police and judiciary proved to be crucial in the AKP’s struggle against the military.

The second main reason for the AKP’s attempts to reach out to the Kurds was electoral concerns. The Kurdish support for the party was particularly important during the crucial 2007 parliamentary elections. The AKP victory in these elections did not only enable the election of Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül as president, but also facilitated a series of trials targeting high-ranking army commanders. The 2010 referendum approving a series of constitutional amendments was central to the party’s strategy to subdue the high judiciary and further reduce the political autonomy of the military.²⁷ These amendments introduced civilian trials of members of the army accused of violating the constitution, subjected decisions of the high military council to judicial review, lifted the immunity of the leaders of the 1980 coup, and changed the composition and appointment procedures of the high judiciary. As the AKP formed a powerful coalition bringing diverse social and political forces together, it became more assertive vis-à-vis the military.

The discovery of hand grenades in a derelict home in Istanbul in June 2007 gradually expanded into a series of investigations targeting several hundreds of individuals, including high-ranking generals, politicians, journalists, and businessmen. According to the indictments, these individuals were members of a clandestine armed organization within the state (known as *Ergenekon*) and conspired to overthrow the government. A separate investigation started in January 2010 after the Turkish daily *Taraf* published documents about a coup plan organized by the First Army Command (known as *Balyoz*) in March 2003. Public prosecutors ultimately indicted 365 individuals for an incomplete attempt to overthrow the Turkish government. Meanwhile, several other investigations put many other soldiers on trial.

The *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri* (TSK) commander and the commanders of the land, air, and navy forces resigned as an act of desperate protest in August 2011, but the trials continued unabated. By early 2013, more than one-tenth of all active generals were in prison.²⁸ The final verdict in the *Balyoz* trial was reached in September 2012. More than 300 suspects were given prison sentences. The final verdict in the *Ergenekon* trials was reached in August 2013. İlker Başbuğ, the commander of the Turkish Armed Forces between 2008 and 2010, received a life sentence for his alleged leadership of the organization.²⁹ The Court of Appeals verified most of the *Balyoz* sentences in October 2013. The verdicts in the *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* trials symbolized the ultimate demise of the political autonomy of the Turkish Armed Forces. The victories of the AKP over the military leadership enabled the government to initiate direct negotiations with the insurgency that may contribute to shorten the duration of civil war.³⁰

A third major reason for the AKP's Kurdish reforms was the challenge presented by the PKK violence. Especially after the failure of a Turkish army land operation to destroy the PKK camps in the Iraqi Kurdistan in February 2008, there was a growing consensus that the insurgency could not be defeated by military solutions (for the views of the army commanders on this subject, see Bila 2010).³¹ As the military's political power gradually declined, the AKP was better positioned to pursue direct negotiations with the insurgents and to adopt a reformist strategy. Hence, the timing of the first direct meetings with the Turkish state and the insurgent leadership at large was not coincidental. The parties had their first face-to-face meeting in Oslo, the capital of Norway, in September 2008. After Öcalan submitted a roadmap to the government representatives in August 2009, Hakan Fidan, the head of the Turkish intelligence service, *Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı* (MİT), started to attend the bilateral meetings. As the negotiations continued, the PKK declared ceasefire in May 2009. According to the KIVE dataset, 152

people lost their lives as a result of the insurgency-related violent events in Turkey in that year. That was the lowest level of fatalities since 2003.

The process produced a series of reforms (see Table 8.1). The most notable development was the establishment of a public TV station broadcasting in Kurdish in January 2009. However, the hopes that the meetings would result in the demobilization and disarmament of the PKK proved to be highly unrealistic. The AKP government allowed a group of PKK members to return to Turkey in October 2009. The group was triumphantly met by large and cheering crowds at the Habur crossing. The images of guerrillas treated as victorious war heroes provoked the nationalist Turkish public opinion and weakened the government's already feeble resolve. Even before the Habur incident, the government pursued a strategy of mass incarcerations to weaken the Kurdish nationalist activism. The police operations starting in April 2009 resulted in the arrest of almost 4,000 Kurdish politicians and activists by October 2011.³² Yet, the meetings continued. A total of eight to nine meetings took place until the June 2011 parliamentary elections.³³ This process practically ended with the PKK attack in Silvan district of Diyarbakir that killed 13 soldiers on July 14, 2013. However, before the attack, the clashes had an upward trend as visible in Figure 8.1. During the campaigning for the 2011 parliamentary elections, both sides adopted a more combative rhetoric and appeared uncompromising.

By fall 2012, the armed conflict reached unprecedented levels since 1999. According to the KIVE dataset, a total of 541 people lost their lives in Turkey throughout that year. Furthermore, the Kurdish nationalists sought multiple avenues of resistance to bring pressure on the AKP government. On September 12, 2012, the 30-second anniversary of the 1980 coup, a group of PKK prisoners initiated a hunger strike. The core demand of the prisoners was the end of the isolation of Öcalan who was not allowed to meet with his lawyers since July 2011. Many more prisoners joined the strike over time. By early October, around 180 prisoners in 17 prisons were on strike.³⁴ When Öcalan called for an immediate and unconditional end to the strikes on November 17, hundreds of prisoners on strike were joined by prominent public personalities, including Kurdish parliamentarians such as Ahmet Türk and Leyla Zana.³⁵ Consequently, the hunger strikes ended with a *quod pro quo* between the government and Öcalan. The government ended Öcalan's isolation and restored his public access; Öcalan terminated the strikes before any deaths. It later became evident that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was seeking to establish a presidential system through constitutional amendments, sought the support of the Kurdish nationalists. In exchange for their voting support, Erdoğan would be willing to make

unprecedented concessions favoring the Kurdish nationalists. A similar situation occurred in 2010 when the AKP-initiated constitutional amendments received majority support in a referendum in which many Kurds voted yes.

The negotiations between the government and Öcalan became public when Ahmet Türk and Ayla Akat of the *Barişve Demokrasi Partisi* (BDP), another Kurdish nationalist electoral party) visited Öcalan in his island prison. Different from the earlier round, the negotiations in 2013 involved the BDP as a key interlocutor whose main function was to facilitate communication between Öcalan and the PKK leadership based in the mountainous Qandil region of İraqi Kurdistan. Öcalan's Newroz message on March 21, read to a very large crowd in Diyarbakır, raised the expectations that an imminent resolution was finally on the horizon. He explicitly called for the PKK-armed units to withdraw to their camps in the İraqi Kurdistan and declared that now it was the time for armed struggle to give way to democratic political struggle. After some hesitation and foot dragging, the PKK leadership announced that its forces were withdrawing in early May. Overall, both the Turkish security forces and the PKK fighters refrained from attacking each other. After a PKK attack in early January 2013, no significant clashes were reported for the rest of the year. In fact, according to the KIVE dataset, a total of 34 people lost their lives during the year. Fifteen of them (14 militants and a soldier) lost their lives in a large-scale PKK attack against a border outpost on January 7. This was a retaliatory attack against a military operation that killed ten insurgents, including a high-ranking commander, on December 31, 2012.

However, by late summer 2013, it was clear that the incompatibility between the insurgent and the government demands remained huge.³⁶ Moreover, police brutality and Erdoğan's firebrand rhetoric in reaction to the Gezi protests of May and June 2013 was a major blow to Erdoğan's international image, deepening political polarization and weakening his power to establish a presidential system under his leadership. The rift with the Gülen movement and the corruption scandal in December 2013 further undermined Erdoğan's unilateral rule that reacted with measures further curbing judicial independence. In this regard, the suspension of violence by itself did not advance democratization at least in the short term. Ironically, the AKP's authoritarian turn was associated with a truce with the Kurdish nationalists. However, as Erdoğan temporarily abandoned his presidential ambitions under a new system empowering the office of the president, his incentives to offer significant concessions to the Kurdish nationalists declined. The PKK makes four core demands: (1) the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish identity, (2) a process of decentralization that would increase self-governance at local levels, (3) the integration of the insurgents

into the political system including the liberation of Abdullah Öcalan, and (4) Kurdish language education in public schools. By summer 2013, the PKK leadership was complaining that the government was not reciprocating to its confidence-building moves. It declared the suspension of the withdrawal of its forces in early September. The AKP government's responses, which were announced as part of a "democratization package" on September 30, 2013, fell dramatically short of Kurdish nationalist expectations. The government's only partial response to these demands was to allow Kurdish language in private schools (see Table 8.1). It appeared that the government's main concern was to sustain the ceasefire at least until the March 2014 local and the August 2014 presidential elections and to maintain its electoral support among the ethnic Kurds. Not surprisingly, the reactions of the Kurdish nationalist leaders to the package were negative. In an interview, Cemil Bayık, the leading PKK commander, characterized the package as "sabotaging the process initiated by the Kurdish people's leader Abdullah Öcalan."³⁷ A shaky ceasefire was still in effect, but earlier hopes that the 30-year-old armed conflict was nearing an end were dashed. The possibility that armed clashes may start again was high as "rebel organizations fighting on behalf of excluded ethnic groups are generally more willing to accept longer periods of fighting until a decisive outcome is reached."³⁸

Coalition Building and Ethnic Empowerment

After three decades of violence, it is highly unlikely that either party would achieve a military victory. While the Turkish state remains much stronger than the insurgents, it seems unable to defeat the insurgents. Yet, the insurgents lack resources to make the Turkish state retreat from parts of the territories they seek to govern. They are also too weak to achieve their most important demand, the establishment of an autonomous Kurdistan similar to the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, by force. Given the improbability of victory by either side, public discussions focus on the relative merits of two distinct but interrelated paths to end the conflict: democratization and a negotiated settlement. As argued above, democratization by itself would unlikely to bring an end to the insurgency as long as the conditions that make it feasible persist.

The central problem with the negotiations is the incompatibility between the state and insurgent positions. The Turkish state is unwilling to forgo its authority over education, finance, judiciary, and internal security in the regions claimed by the Kurdish nationalist movement. Yet, a negotiated settlement to the Kurdish conflict in Turkey would inevitably involve decentralization, allocating some of the powers enjoyed by the Turkish state (i.e.,

education, tax collection, judicial decisions, and police) to popularly elected local authorities. Furthermore, recent scholarship suggests that negotiations lead to sustainable peace only under some restrictive conditions. Negotiated settlements are unlikely to be successful in the absence of external powers guaranteeing the security of the warring parties during the transition period.³⁹ Additionally, negotiated settlements do not necessarily result in durable peace and democratization in the long run even if they may “save lives” in the short run.⁴⁰ While decentralization may reduce ethnic conflict, it may also foster demands for secessionism in the presence of strong regional parties such as the BDP.⁴¹

Negotiations between the Turkish state and the Kurdish nationalists would have a better chance of success in a political environment characterized by more fragmentation allowing for greater minority access to executive power. The way in which political power is configured in Turkey severely restricts Kurdish representation at the executive branch of the government and higher echelons of the state bureaucracy. In contrast to arguments suggesting that all citizens regardless of their ethnic background could rise to positions of power as long as they subscribe to the prevailing Turkish nationalist ideology as Heper⁴² and Aktürk⁴³ argue, an ongoing study offers some preliminary findings supporting the view that the Turkish state has actually been ethnicized to the exclusion of the Kurds. It shows that the Kurdish representation among the provincial governors, the most powerful authorities at local level given Turkey’s highly centralized system, in the post-1980 period has been disproportionately low. Only 29 of 496 governors in this period were born in the 17 provinces with significant Kurdish populations (birth provinces of 134 governors remain unknown). These ratios are well below population ratios of these provinces to Turkey. Interestingly enough, some of the governors born in the predominantly Kurdish provinces are not ethnic Kurds.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the Kurdish nationalist parties are excluded from executive power and their parliamentary representation remains well below their voting share, thanks to the 10 percent electoral threshold instituted after the 1980 coup. The AKP government has been the major beneficiary of the threshold since 2002 and has refused to lower it despite demands from the Kurdish nationalists and other opposition parties. Overall, the Kurdish conflict in Turkey fits the pattern of ethnic exclusion identified as one of the major reasons for civil war in the modern world. The formation of nation-states dominated by certain ethnic groups at the expense of others generates acute grievances fuelling armed rebellion.⁴⁵ In fact, the violation of the political legitimacy principle of self-determination has been one of the main causes of warfare.⁴⁶ As David Mason argues in his contribution to this volume, the Turkish political system has neither provided the Kurdish

nationalists a good chance of being included in the governing coalition nor offered institutional and constitutional safeguards against the extinction of the Kurdish ethnic group.

Under these conditions, the Kurdish nationalists would have a greater chance of securing their demands only when other major players in the Turkish system need their support. Such a situation briefly occurred when Prime Minister Erdoğan's presidential system ambitions generated an opportunity for the Kurdish nationalists, until the developments throughout 2013 undermined the immediate *raison d'être* of a possible deal between the two sides. In any case, negotiations would be more fruitful only if the Kurdish nationalists first gain more representation at the political power.⁴⁷ A more fragmented party system with a lower barrier of entry would allow the Kurdish nationalists to gain more parliamentary seats and become part of a coalition government. As they have access to political power, they could directly affect policies that would alleviate some of the Kurdish grievances (i.e., the lack of Kurdish public education and the Kurdish underrepresentation in the state administration). As shown elsewhere, ethnic parties' commitment to nonviolent politics significantly increases as they gain access to executive decision making.⁴⁸ The lowering of the 10 percent electoral threshold would be an important step in this direction. Furthermore, mainstream Turkish parties are more likely to adopt multilingualism if they need the cooperation of the Kurdish nationalists to form a government, as occurred in different periods in Malaysia and Singapore.⁴⁹ As the Kurdish nationalists gain more bargaining power and access to executive power, a power-sharing agreement incorporating PKK militants into the institutional system and hence reducing their incentives to fight could contribute to democratization in the long run.⁵⁰

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CHAPTER 9

The Iraqi Kurdish View on Federalism: Not Just for the Kurds

David Romano

Introduction

Until the 2003 United States-led invasion of Iraq, the country stood out as one of the most authoritarian on earth. The title of Kanan Makiya's 1989 book, *Republic of Fear*, captured the prevailing sentiment regarding Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime.¹ Freedom House's 2002 ranking for Iraq was 7 in all three categories of "political freedom," "civil liberties," and "political rights" (7 represents the worst ranking on a scale of 1–7).² In 1987 and 1988, Saddam's regime in Baghdad went so far as to mount a campaign of genocide against Iraqi Kurds, massacring some 180,000 of them, razing some 4,000 villages to the ground, and dropping chemical weapons on many of their towns (the most well-known instance of which occurred in the city of Halabja).³ The removal of Ba'athist tyranny in 2003 offered the first real possibility of changing the authoritarian dynamic in Iraq. At the same time, there remained the very real risk that one regime's authoritarianism would simply be replaced by another's. In 2003, Toby Dodge warned that US administrators, "short of resources and time because of American domestic pressures," would be tempted to "restore the old ruling formula, foreclosing any real attempt at effective reform."⁴ By the time the United States withdrew the last of its military forces from Iraq in December of 2011, however, it seemed clear that they had not restored "the old ruling formula." Nor did they originally leave behind a Shiite Arab tyranny to replace the former Sunni Arab one.

If American officials felt tempted to effectively follow such a course of action, the Iraqi Kurds prevented them.⁵ Although the 2005 Iraqi Constitution's critics incessantly characterized the law as an American imposition, the Constitution in fact was not dictated by Americans and it did not even reflect the Americans' preferences or suggestions on decentralization, ownership, and management of hydrocarbon resources, regional security forces, and the role of Islam as a source of legislation.⁶

Many Iraqi political actors, from exile groups to Shiite religious parties to Kurdish nationalists, demanded de-Baathification and dismantling of the Iraqi army in 2003. Although it has now become almost cliché to cite the dismantling of the army and de-Baathification (Coalition Provisional Authority Executive Orders One and Two, respectively) as largely responsible for the terrible insecurity that plagued Iraq in subsequent years, these actions may have been necessary to avoid old patterns that followed new governments in Iraq as the same administrators, bureaucrats, and officials remained in their positions of power. Perhaps rather than disbanding it, the Americans could have recalled the Iraqi army to its barracks and paid its soldiers to sit there or guard weapons depots a bit longer.⁷ This could have allowed a more gradual culling of the army and its "regime dead-enders"⁸ and possibly slowed the post-2003 insurgency's growth. De-Baathification by itself, however, was not enough to alter a system of strongly centralized, authoritarian, and repressive rule. Diamond and Morlino's measures of democracy mentioned at the outset of this volume include eight criteria: the rule of law, participation, competition, vertical plus horizontal accountability, respect for civil and political freedoms, the progressive implementation of greater political equality, and government responsiveness to citizens' demands.⁹ Even without explicit criteria, one can easily recognize the absence of democracy when certain political actors successfully monopolize power, ignore the rule of law, ignore the basic needs of the populace, and seek to impose their control throughout the state. To promote democracy and prevent the reemergence of authoritarianism in Iraq, the post-Saddam era regime needed to overcome serious structural problems. This could not occur just by doing away with the Baath Party, of course. Rather, a crucial and fundamental change needed to occur in the basic governing framework of the state.

Iraqis installed a new framework with the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, which the population approved via referendum in October of that year. The 2005 Constitution offers the possibility that Iraq can truly break away from an 80-year-old tradition of an authoritarian, domineering state. Its structure, articles, logic, and language place the constitution within the best tradition

of liberal democratic states the world over. Contrary to what some of its critics claim,¹⁰ the constitution does not enshrine ethnic federalism or establish ethnic proportionalism in the government. Although it recognizes the Kurdistan Region as it existed since late 1991, the constitution envisions the formation of other regions and Iraqi governorates enjoying similarly extensive powers of autonomy. Nor does the constitution apply quotas to different national or religious groups' representation in public institutions,¹¹ or mandate a certain sectarian identity for the president, prime minister, speaker of the Assembly, or other important posts as do corporate consociational systems like Lebanon's.¹² Although many of the constitution's articles suffer from ambiguities that later engendered disputes, such was the necessary price to achieve consensus within the time frame available to draw up the agreement. Such ambiguities also offer the advantage of allowing Iraqi federalism and governance to evolve as the country changes.¹³

The Kurds emerged as the primary force pushing for a more liberal, pro-minority rights, and decentralized federal system in Iraq. The Shiite religious parties negotiating the constitution lacked the same level of interest in any of these values. Given the Shiites' majority status in Iraq, Shiites also reasoned that they would soon run things in Baghdad. Although many commentators highlight the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq's (SCIRI, later renamed ISCI, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq) commitment to decentralized federalism, this represented more a concession to the Kurds than one of their core values and demands. Even SCIRI's interest in setting up a Shiite region made up of Iraq's nine Shiite governorates in the south may have been more a tactical move than a deeply held ambition.¹⁴ Since Sunni Arab Iraqis had largely boycotted the constitutional drafting process and nonsectarian Iraqi groups had yet to manifest themselves in a powerful form, this left only the Kurds to stand up for these principles as the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) and then the Constitution were being negotiated.¹⁵ The Kurds were so successful in the constitutional drafting and negotiating process, in fact, that many of their critics began referring to the 2005 Constitution as the "Kurdish Constitution."¹⁶

Normally the absence of most Sunni Arabs, who account for some 20 percent of Iraq's population, from the TAL and Constitution drafting process should have been a source of grave concern for democracy's advocates. The analysis here argues that most Sunni Arabs initially failed to recognize the extent to which they shared Kurdish interests in a federal, democratic, and highly decentralized post-Saddam Iraq. Sunni Arabs probably thought they and those who spoke for them would manage to recapture political power in Baghdad at some point in the near future, in which case it made sense to

want a strong central government there. Although Sunni Arab opinion on these matters now appears to have shifted dramatically (an issue that is discussed later in this chapter), in 2005 the representatives of this community took stances that proved simply impossible to accommodate.¹⁷

Although many of the Kurds' critics commented incessantly about how the "pro-Kurdish" and supposedly American-imposed Constitution was so unpopular among Iraqis, we should remember that Sunni Arabs did not boycott the December 2005 Constitutional referendum and the new law of the land nonetheless received a "yes" vote from 78 percent of voters.¹⁸ This level of support probably represents the highest one could expect in the Iraqi context—a huge endorsement, in fact, even if most Sunnis at the time rejected the change.

Before we turn to an examination of the Constitution and hence the Iraqi Kurds' role in promoting democratization in Iraq, we should consider the communal balance of power in Iraq and the Kurds' role in it. As John Booth (chapter 6) and David Mason (chapter 5) discuss in this volume, and as observed by scholars such as Ted Robert Gurr,¹⁹ relatively large, cohesive, geographically concentrated, and very aggrieved minorities are the most likely to mobilize in significant form and push hard for political changes in their favor. At around one-fifth of Iraq's population and in the wake of the aforementioned atrocities they suffered, Iraqi Kurds could certainly be expected to push hard and take advantage of any weakening of Baghdad's authority to improve their lot.

The Iraqi balance of power after 2003 also allowed the Iraqi Kurds much more negotiating power than they might normally have enjoyed. With the Iraqi army disbanded by Coalition order in 2003, Kurdish forces constituted the most significant, able, and willing local ally for a Coalition Provisional Authority that was rapidly losing control of the security situation in the country. With Sunni Arabs largely boycotting the new government and new constitution writing process, or divided about how to approach either, the Kurds' relative weight likewise grew. As various Sunni and Shiite parties increasingly confronted each other, the Kurds were also able to set themselves up as "kingmakers"—uninterested in ruling more than their autonomous region, but willing to participate and help whichever parties ran the rest of the country, provided their interests were respected in the process. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, the various Kurdish parties managed to approach constitutional negotiations from a united front, which gave them an advantage when confronting the myriad Sunni and Shiite actors.

Whereas the Kurds could have just argued for their own autonomy rights in Kurdistan, they instead successfully pushed for a system that allows the formation of other regions and devolves a lot of power to the 15 governorates

not in the Kurdistan Region.²⁰ Most Shiites, who count themselves as some 60 percent of Iraq's population, looked forward to a rule of the majority as soon as possible (with Ayatollah Sistani, the most important Shiite religious figure in Iraq, especially pushing hard for a prompt transition from Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and governing council rule to "one man one vote"), although SCIRI support for decentralized federalism acted as an insurance policy in case they failed to control Baghdad democratically.²¹ By pushing so hard for a decentralized political system in Iraq, the Kurds increased the chances that the state could accommodate both democracy and many communal groups' different preferences (in their own regions). This would be the kind of system, in other words, that might prove able to "incorporate ethnic minority demands by building institutions capable of channeling these demands into nonviolent forms of participation and competition."²²

Federalist systems come in many forms, of course.²³ The purpose of federalism and decentralization in most multiethnic societies revolves around keeping the state together via institutionalized means of power sharing between the most relevant communities. By limiting the amount of power concentrated in Baghdad, the 2005 Constitution offers the losers of national level elections the chance still to wield significant authority over their own affairs. The incentive to engage in an "all or nothing" contest for control over the government in Baghdad likewise declines if that government only enjoys limited powers. This gives Iraqis today their best chance at democracy by diffusing power and somewhat lessening the stakes of the national-level political contest in a divided society.

Key Features of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution

Section Four of the constitution details the exclusive authorities of the federal government in Iraq. Besides fairly mundane issues such as formulating fiscal and customs policy, issuing currency, regulating commerce across regional and governorate boundaries, drawing up the national budget, formulating monetary policy, running the central bank, managing antiquities, drawing up the general and investment budget bill, and regulating weights, standards, measures, citizenship, naturalization, residency, asylum, broadcast frequencies, mail, population statistics and a census, this includes:

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

As well as

Formulating and executing national security policy, including establishing and managing armed forces to secure the protection and guarantee the security of Iraq's borders and to defend Iraq (Article 110).

None of these items are particularly controversial or disputed. Article 111 specifies, "Oil and gas are owned by all the people of Iraq in all the regions and governorates." All of Iraq's political actors, including the Kurds, accept that this means the revenues from oil and gas sales are to be distributed throughout all of Iraq proportionate to population, irrespective of where the hydrocarbons are extracted from.

Article 112 goes on to explain how these resources should be managed:

First: The federal government, with the producing governorates and regional governments, shall undertake the management of oil and gas extracted from present fields, provided that it distributes its revenues in a fair manner in proportion to the population distribution in all parts of the country, specifying an allotment for a specified period for the damaged regions which were unjustly deprived of them by the former regime, and the regions that were damaged afterwards in a way that ensures balanced development in different areas of the country, and this shall be regulated by law.

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

This is the extent of exclusive federal powers elaborated in the constitution. As the language in Article 112 makes clear, even federal authority over oil and gas is not exclusive, but rather limited to "present fields"²⁴ and collaborative with the "producing governorates and regional governments." This has led to significant disputes between Erbil and the Maliki government in Baghdad.

Other powers "shared between the federal authorities and regional authorities" are not very extensive either. Article 114 lists them as managing customs, regulating electricity, and formulating environmental policy, development, and general planning policies and health policy, all "in cooperation with the regions and governorates that are not organized in a region."

Public educational and instructional policy (listed in the same Article) is to be formulated “in consultation with the regions and governorates that are not organized in a region” and internal water resources are to be formulated and regulated “in a way that guarantees their just distribution” (the phrase “in cooperation with . . .” does not appear here, but is implied since this item appears under the same Article¹¹⁴ about “shared competencies”).

Article 115 then goes on to make the most remarkable statement in the constitution, a point that the Kurds fought hard for in negotiations:

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

Especially given the slim list of powers in the exclusive federal jurisdiction, this represents a very strong devolution of power—making the Iraqi federation one of the most decentralized (at least on paper) in the world. The change appears all the more noteworthy given Iraq’s long history of exceedingly centralized rule. Critics of the constitution argue that as a result, the central government stands eviscerated, lacking sufficient power to keep Iraq together and functioning.²⁵ Many Iraqi Arab nationalists viewed this, as well as some other subsequent clauses discussed below, as a prelude to Kurdish (or even southern Shiite) secession. For the Kurds, however, Article 115 is supposed to act as a guarantee against a creeping return of central government control and authoritarianism.

Article 115 did not prevent the serious disputes over oil and gas resources that have plagued Iraq since even before the constitution was adopted. From their regional capital in Erbil, Iraqi Kurds claim the constitution gives them the right to exploit new oil and gas resources they may discover, given Article 112’s language of collaboration over “present fields.”²⁶ Especially in the absence of a supplementary hydrocarbons law, agreement over which continues to elude Erbil and the Iraqi parliament, Kurds claim the right to sign agreements with foreign multinationals for exploratory drilling and exploitation of new fields as well as exports. The Kurds do not, however, claim the right to keep all the proceeds from these new ventures. Rather, they accept the principle of proportional distribution of the revenues via joint mechanisms set up with Baghdad, even for “non-present fields.”²⁷ From the Kurdish point of view, retaining some control over contracts, management, and exports is both legal and essential to keep a

check on Baghdad's control of the country's finances, some 90 percent of which come from oil exports. The Maliki government's centralist view in Baghdad, in contrast, holds that even in the absence of a hydrocarbons law, all oil contracts, all management of fields, and all exports of oil must pass through the federal oil ministry. Abdullah al-Amir, the principal personal advisor to Hussein al-Shahristani, Iraq's deputy prime minister for energy affairs, put it this way: "If you have one part of the country producing and exporting and selling the oil, then Basra, the southern part, will do the same, and the other governorates will do the same, and this will have no government planning... There will be no [central] government revenues because each governorate will do whatever it wants. This is against the constitution of Iraq."²⁸ This is not true, of course, since the central government retains a constitutional role in managing the very rich "present fields" and governorates or future regions could also choose to work with Baghdad on the issue. Nonetheless, the Maliki government blacklisted the small multinationals that first signed contracts with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and intermittently blocked Kurdistan's access to the national export pipeline. The KRG responded by independently exporting oil to Turkey via tanker trucks, and then building its own independent pipeline export infrastructure and hydrocarbons regime with Turkey.²⁹ Now that bigger oil companies also signed deals with the KRG (including Exxon, the world's largest, which also holds a concession in southern Iraq), Baghdad's boycott policy looks less sustainable.

Section Five of the Constitution also has more to say about the powers of the regions, describing Iraq's federal system as "made up of a decentralized capital, regions, and governorates, as well as local administrations" (Article 116). Article 117 explicitly recognizes the Kurdistan Region and its "existing authorities." Articles 118 and 119 outline procedures to form new regions in Iraq (besides the Kurdistan Region), but all efforts in this regard have been blocked by the Maliki government.

Articles 120 and 121 give regions the right to determine their own structures of governance as long as these do not contradict the Constitution. In case of a contradiction in legislation on matters outside the exclusive domain of the federal government, regional law takes precedence. Regions are also "responsible for all the administrative requirements of the region, particularly the establishment and organization of the internal security forces of the region such as police, security forces, and guards of the region" (Article 121, Part 5). This provision allows the Kurdistan Region to retain its fighting forces, known as the *peshmerga* (which the Kurds translated as "national guard" in order to reassure American diplomats anxious to disband militias in Iraq). Although the retention of troops outside the monopoly of force of

the federal government elicited a lot of criticism,³⁰ from the Kurdish point of view (and given Kurdish history in Iraq) all the paper constitutional promises mean little without some additional means of restraining central power in Baghdad. Iraqi army forces and the *peshmerga* nearly came to blows in the ongoing dispute over disputed territories (discussed below) on a number of occasions after 2007.

The juxtaposing of an armed Kurdistan Region determined to guard its autonomy and extend its writ into disputed territories with a prime minister in Baghdad determined to increase central government powers (as well as his own) has been viewed as the most dangerous issue threatening Iraq today.³¹ In the long run, if Iraq is to remain a stable, single state, the Peshmerga forces will probably have to be transitioned into more of a genuinely internal security force rather than a counterweight to the central government's military force. This would appear to be the intent of this section of the Constitution. The level of distrust between the Kurds and Baghdad does not permit such a development for the time being, however. Such things may require time, power sharing in Baghdad, and a functioning democratic system to build the needed levels of trust. Until trust is built, it could also make sense for mostly Sunni Arab governorates of Iraq to be allowed more of a national guard as well, so they can gain a greater sense of security from Baghdad. It was Sunni Arab Awakening Councils, after all, that played the more decisive role in stemming the insurgency of the 2004–2008 period in Iraq.³²

Article 122 addresses the powers of governorates that are not incorporated into a region (which means 15 of Iraq's 18 governorates given that Erbil, Suleimani, and Duhok governorates make up the Kurdistan Region). Governorates are to elect both a governor and "governorate councils" to run themselves, and governorate councils "shall not be subject to the control or supervision of any ministry or any institution not linked to a ministry." The councils will also enjoy "independent finances" and those governorates not incorporated into a region "shall be granted broad administrative and financial authorities to enable them to manage their affairs in accordance with the principle of decentralized administration..." Article 123, however, adds that "powers exercised by the federal government can be delegated to the governorates or vice versa, with the consent of both governments..." Such language is fairly vague, however, and Article 123's provisions seem to foresee a dynamic process in which governorates unwilling or unable to handle some issues can turn to Baghdad for help.³³

Section Six of the Constitution lays out "final and transitional provisions." Article 140, along with aforementioned Article 115 on oil and gas resources, shares the distinction of having created the most controversy in post-Saddam Iraq. Known as the "disputed territories" law, Article 140

(formerly Article 58 of the Transition Administrative Law) stipulates that: (1) people expelled from Kirkuk and other regions during previous governments' Arabization campaigns be allowed to return and compensated for their losses, and settlers brought in under previous regimes return to their places of origin in the south—a process called “normalization”; (2) a census be conducted in the disputed territories; and (3) a referendum be held to determine if the people of these areas wish to remain under Baghdad's federal authority or become part of the Kurdistan Autonomous Region. The issue here relates to the accidental but now official boundaries of the Kurdistan Region, which were determined by how far Saddam's military forces retreated after the creation of the Northern No-Fly Zone in 1991. Saddam's forces at the time retained control of the oil rich and in many cases majority Kurdish-inhabited plains around Mosul, Kirkuk, Khanequin, and Kalar. These areas now lie just south of the constitutionally recognized borders of the Kurdistan Region, and the Kurds would like to incorporate the majority Kurdish-inhabited areas (and presumably much of the oil-rich territory as well) into their administration. Most Arab and Turkmen residents of these “disputed territories” strenuously reject such inclusion, however.

Successive governments in Baghdad promised to carry out Article 140's provisions, but the issue remains politically toxic among Arab Iraqis. Being seen to “surrender Kirkuk” to the Kurds would also likely prove to be political suicide for most Arab politicians in Iraq, and so the dispute has dragged on. While Kurdish leaders in Erbil refuse to surrender on the issue, Arab leaders in Baghdad have begun claiming that Article 140 is now dead because of the following language in Part 2 of the article:

The responsibility placed upon the executive branch of the Iraqi Transitional Government stipulated in Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law shall extend and continue to the executive authority elected in accordance with this Constitution, *provided that it accomplishes completely (normalization and census and concludes with a referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed territories to determine the will of their citizens), by a date not to exceed the 31st of December 2007* [emphasis added].

December 2007, along with several new deadlines, all came and went, of course. In late 2010, Prime Minister Maliki nonetheless again promised the Kurds that Article 140 would be enacted, as a condition for their support of his new government following the March national elections. To date, none of the article's provisions have been carried out, and the disputed territories continue to hang over the Iraqi political system like a Sword of Damocles.³⁴

The wish to extend the borders of their autonomous region is probably not one of the Kurds' contributions to democratization in Iraq, unfortunately. The contest over these territories hampers democratization and increases the confrontational nature of Iraqi politics. Although Arab politicians share a part of the blame for failing to enact Article 140, this article is extremely unpopular in non-Kurdish parts of Iraq and democratic leaders, in particular, must pay attention to their constituents' wishes. The issue is thus crying out for some kind of "grand bargain" as the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) suggested in 2008, but such a deal continues to elude Iraqis.³⁵

A few final observations about the constitution are now in order. In its preamble, the constitution describes the new Iraqi system as "republican, federal, democratic" and "pluralistic." The Constitution recognizes Islam as the official religion of the state and *a* (rather than 'the') source of legislation while also guaranteeing "full religious rights to freedom of religious belief and practice of all individuals such as Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaean Sabaeans" (Article 2). Shiite religious parties originally preferred a stronger wording of "the source of legislation," but compromised with secular Kurds and Arabs on the issue. Articles 3 and 4 recognize "multiple nationalities, religions and sects" as belonging to the country, which at the same time is "a founding and active member in the Arab League and is committed to its charter, and it [Iraq] is part of the Islamic world." This too represented a compromise between Arab and Kurdish negotiators, since the Arabs originally wanted wording recognizing Iraq as an Arab state. Article 4 recognizes Arabic and Kurdish as the two official languages of Iraq, but also guarantees other groups such as Turkmen, Syriac, and Armenians the right to educate their children in their mother tongue in government schools.

Section Three of the Constitution describes the federal powers. Article 48 states that "The federal legislative power shall consist of the Council of Representatives and the Federation Council." The first is the Iraqi Parliament, while the latter is supposed to function as a senate of sorts for the regions and their interests. The Federation Council has yet to come into existence, however, especially since Iraq still only has one region (Kurdistan). According to Dr. Sherzad Nejar, an expert on constitutional law and federalism and a former Chancellor of the University of Kurdistan in Hawler, the failure to create the Federation Council and more than one region in Iraq means that Iraq is not yet really a federal state.³⁶ With only the Kurdistan Region, Iraq currently suffers from an imbalance: some 20 percent of the country's population (mostly Kurds) find themselves and their region face to face with a federal government that directly represents the remaining 80 percent of the country (mostly Arabs). In states like Canada, Switzerland, and India,

three or more regions together make up federal systems that work.³⁷ If Iraq had several regions as the 2005 Constitution intended, alliances of these regions could emerge. Besides fostering inter-communal and inter-regional cooperation, such alliances could check the power of the federal government should it overstep its bounds. Articles 92–94 of Section Three of the Constitution establish the Federal Supreme Court as “an independent judicial body, financially and administratively.” The court is supposed to oversee the constitutionality of all new laws and regulations, and settle “disputes that arise between the federal governments of the regions and governorates, municipalities, and local administrations,” as well as disputes between “governments of the regions and governments of the governorates.” Although the constitution clearly envisions the Federal Supreme Court as residing separate from and above the politics of the state, recent trends raise fears that the judiciary is falling under control of the prime minister in Baghdad.³⁸

The prime minister’s increasing control over the Federal Supreme Court appears to have compromised its intended role regarding the establishment of new regions as well. On December 12, 2011, Diyala governorate council members prepared a demand for a referendum on forming themselves into a region, as the Constitution permits (other recent demands have come from the governorates of Salah-al-Din in the north and Basra, Wasit, and Kut in the south). Prime Minister Maliki responded by quickly declaring martial law in Diyala, sending units of the Iraqi army that he personally controls to Diyala and having arrest warrants issued against the Sunni governorate officials who signed the referendum request (they promptly fled). At the same time, “thousands of Shia demonstrators stormed the provincial government headquarters” and “unidentified armed groups blocked major highways.”³⁹ The prime minister justified ignoring Diyala leaders’ request by claiming he could not accept initiatives that are “based on sectarianism.” Of course, he had no legal basis to refuse them on these grounds (the constitution does not give such powers or discretion to the prime minister).⁴⁰ The prime minister then announced new justifications for ignoring the Diyala and other regional initiatives, based on the inclusion in their boundaries of as-yet unsettled “disputed territories” described in Article 140. According to Sowell, “The incident shows that Mr. Al Maliki can now permanently close off legal channels for addressing local frustration over excessive central control. Since the disputed-territories issue has been frozen for years in the conflict between Arabs and Kurds, Mr. Al Maliki can act as he pleases.”⁴¹

Chapter Four of the Iraqi Constitution also describes the functioning of independent commissions: “The High Commission for Human Rights, the Independent Electoral Commission, and the Commission on Public Integrity are considered independent commissions subject to monitoring by

the Council of Representatives, and their functions shall be regulated by law” (Article 102). Prime Minister Maliki in December 2010 complained to the aforementioned Supreme Court that Article 102 was ambiguous about what “monitoring [of the independent commissions] by the Council of Representatives” actually meant. In January 2011, the court issued a ruling that agreed with the prime minister’s complaint and placed the “independent” commissions under the authority of his cabinet. Critics see this as “a clear bid by Maliki to monopolize powers.”⁴²

Coming around to the Kurdish View on Federalism

After the 2010 elections, Prime Minister Maliki took on the posts of not only prime minister, but Minister of Defense, Minister of the Interior, and Minister of State for National Security, all at the same time. He also moved to take direct personal control of the army, increasingly sidelining its Kurdish Chief of Staff, Babakir Zebari. Tens of thousands of special “counterterrorism” troops answer only to him, along with a half dozen disparate spy agencies he created. Besides Mr. Maliki’s famous issuance of an arrest warrant (via the Supreme Court) for Sunni Arab Vice-President Tarek al-Hashemi, he also sacked Sunni Vice-Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq. The widely respected head of Iraq’s Higher Electoral Commission, Faraj al-Haidari, complained after his commission was placed under the authority of Mr. Maliki’s cabinet. He was arrested in April 2012 on what many viewed as clearly spurious corruption charges.

At the same time that Nouri al-Maliki worked so hard to strengthen his position and that of the central federal government, he failed to include Iyad Allawi and his mostly Sunni Arab *Iraqiya* party in any meaningful power-sharing mechanisms, breaking the promise he made to them after the 2010 elections. It should be recalled that Allawi’s party won two more seats in that election than Maliki’s State of Law Party, but the Supreme Court reinterpreted the law giving the largest vote winner the right to try to form the next government first. The court ruled that this actually meant “the largest bloc of vote winners,” meaning that Maliki could try to form the next government first if enough other parties joined him in the request. After Maliki gathered enough parties around him to form the next government (a process that took almost a year), *Iraqiya* reluctantly accepted an offer to join Mr. Maliki’s new “national unity” government. At the time, Mr. Maliki promised to form a National Council of Strategic Policies that Mr. Allawi would head. The new National Council would have significant powers ceded to it by the prime minister, which was supposed to soften the blow of Allawi being denied the Premiership even though he won the

most votes. The council was never formed, however, and the aforementioned campaign of judicial intimidation of *Iraqiyya* politicians took its place.⁴³

As a plethora of political groups, including Moqtada al-Sadr's Shiite Arab bloc, the various parties under Iyad Allawi's *Iraqiyya* umbrella, Kurdish parties, and others now scramble to limit Mr. Maliki's power, they begin to see the "Kurdish Constitution" of 2005 as something beneficial to more than just the Kurds. The Constitution provides these groups with their most important legal, institutional bulwark to safeguard power sharing, and hence democracy, in Iraq. In a very real sense, Iraqi Kurds after 2003 thus came to offer the entire country an important tool in struggling for a long-awaited democratic transition. They did so not because of some altruistic impulse to help other groups in Iraq, but for their own self-interest. Kurdish interests centered on safeguarding their autonomy via a democratic government in Baghdad. Kurdish leaders also no doubt wanted to maximize their power, which decentralization offers them. Finally, they may be preparing the ground for secession at some point in the future—which they claim is their right if the government in Baghdad ignores the Constitution.

Sunni Arab groups who once saw "federalism" as synonymous with "secessionism" now increasingly embrace the idea, however, no matter what the Kurds' ultimate goal. An interview with Sunni Arab Deputy Prime Minister Salah al Mutlaq, once an arch-critic of federalism, illustrates the dynamic at the time of this writing:

The way Al-Maliki is dealing with the provinces is pushing the people toward the option of federation. About 99 percent of the people of Al-Anbar had rejected federalism in the past. These days, however, they are asking for it in order to dissociate themselves from the central authority that they consider to be an unjust authority. They know that they will lose on the economic level but the cost is their dignity that they wish to safeguard. They want to be delivered from the raids and detentions and the absolute control of the central authority.⁴⁴

The Sunni *al-Hadba* party in Mosul also appears to have finally understood what the Kurds gave them in 2005. In September 2013, Nineveh (Mosul) governorate's provincial council granted Governor Atheel al-Nujaifi "the power to sign deals with foreign oil firms independently of Baghdad, which immediately rejected the move."⁴⁵ Although an unnamed senior government official stated that "The government will not tolerate such a decision, whether from Nineveh or any other province," Governor Nujaifi appears to be going ahead anyhow: "We will start oil investments in

the province with a priority to the downstream industry, and that could be followed by broader investments in the upstream sector,” he said. Governor Nujaifi reportedly stated that “neither the central government nor the oil ministry have the right to stop him from developing the energy resources of the province.”⁴⁶

Even Iyad Allawi, another once staunch opponent of decentralization in Iraq, has now become an advocate of the Kurdish view on the issue. His majority Sunni *Iraqiya* party recently announced its support of the Kurds’ separate oil exports to Turkey: “There is no harm for Kurdistan to export oil if its imports go back to the central treasury.”⁴⁷

Such leaders as Mutlaq, Nujaifi, and Allawi generally do not share the Kurds’ interest in an ethnically defined region. The 2005 Constitution does not force them to either, but rather offers them the opportunity to pursue increased local autonomy based on whatever grounds they prefer. Many might prefer more autonomous governorates to insulate themselves from inept or increasingly dictatorial rule from Baghdad, but if regions comparable to Kurdistan turn out more suitable to the task, that will do too. Slowly but surely, non-Kurdish Iraqis are discovering that federalism need not be ethnic and need not lead to secession.

Democracy, Stability, or One or the Other?

This brings us to an old question: Are democracy and stability mutually exclusive in today’s Iraq? Must Prime Minister Maliki, or the next prime minister after him, increase both the powers of his office and the central government in order to keep Iraq under control and together? Although Prime Minister Maliki and his supporters may think they can bring stability to Iraq, their current strategy (“centralize via any means necessary”) will eventually necessitate extreme levels of coercive violence, reminiscent of the policies of past regimes. Such strategies also clearly sacrifice democracy on stability’s altar.

For Iraqi democracy’s sake, the 2005 Constitution should be given a chance. This means that especially the leadership in Baghdad needs to take its decentralizing provisions seriously. Other regions need to be given a chance to form, and the regions and governorates should be allowed to pursue their own oil and gas strategies with the new fields they develop, so long as they pay what is due to the rest of Iraq. It is true that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq’s claims on majority Kurdish disputed territories follow an ethnic federalist logic, which is a result of the Kurds’ desire for greater autonomy, self-determination, and security vis-à-vis the Arab majority in Iraq. If

Article 140 of the Constitution remains too difficult to enact, as it likely will, this needs to be settled via some sort of “grand bargain” between Erbil, Baghdad, and the affected communities.

Thanks to the Constitution’s flexible provisions regarding the formation of new regions and how much power regions and governorates decide to appropriate from Baghdad, Iraq can develop its own system which need not fall on one side or the other of the “ethnic vs. territorial federalism” dichotomy. The country can adopt a mixed system, whereby some governorates such as Baghdad (which the constitution forbids from joining a region but devolves significant governorate level powers to), Diyala, Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Salah-al-Din may become their own ethnically diverse regions or join others in new regions. More homogeneous governorates such as Anbar or the southern, mostly Shiite Arab governorates could form regions to parallel Kurdistan, pursue their own individual governorate level autonomy, or form regional blocs based on geography rather than identity.⁴⁸ This would result in an asymmetric combination of ethnic, territorial, and “regional” federalism for Iraq.⁴⁹ It would also satisfy one of the Iraqi Kurds’ original concerns—that the new Iraqi system should not function as a binary opposition between one region (Kurdistan) and the central government.⁵⁰

After 2003, Iraqi Kurds agreed to remain part of Iraq as long as their inclusion was viewed as a “voluntary union” with the other national communities of the country. This union is based on the constitution they negotiated with them and approved in a referendum in October of 2005. For years, scholars have pointed out that the new Iraqi state would fracture should such constitutional negotiations be reopened too soon, before the country’s various communities have learned to work together and trust each other more: “Ironically, then, the resurgence of Arab/Iraqi nationalist political sentiment premised on the preservation of a unified, centralized Iraq is the one thing most likely to shatter the unity it seeks to preserve.”⁵¹ As the preceding discussion hopefully makes clear, genuine Iraqi unity is the last thing we should expect from a stronger central government. Such a strong central government would instead prove much more likely to again resort to the use of extreme force to dominate and shape society according to the wishes of its leaders.

As long as sectarian divisions remain salient in Iraq, especially the Sunnis will need the Kurds to remain in the country—lest they be left as an even smaller minority face to face with a newly empowered Shiite majority. Civil war, as Gurses and Mason (2008) argue, may lead to more inclusive polities if it serves to even the balance of power between contending groups in the nation. Power balance is more likely to bring about more democratic polities, especially where power sharing is formalized in a negotiated settlement.

Although the Iraqi Constitution did not emerge as a negotiated settlement of a civil war, the post-2003 insurgency in Iraq, the country's sectarian divisions, and the state's history of dealing unequally and often very repressively with various communal groups make the same logic quite applicable to this case.⁵² Iraqi history, including the era before Saddam Hussein's rise to power, offers no reason for anyone (especially the Kurds) to place their faith in an imagined Iraqi political system that respects human rights and eschews sectarian politics and conflict. A more benign Iraqi political arena may one day emerge, if today's exercise of political power can be checked and balanced.

Identities and resultant identity-based politics in Iraq are not static, and a virtuous cycle of politics functioning within established institutional frameworks may help develop a healthy civic identity for all Iraqis. The "separatist" Kurds ironically helped furnish the building blocs for such a system, via the 2005 Constitution. As time passes within such a constitutional framework, sectarian divides may recede. To eschew the checks and balances envisioned in 2005 and support recentralization of power today, however, prioritizes a unitary Iraqi identity and stability at any cost. This was the approach of previous Iraqi dictatorships, and in fact nowadays places the cart before the horse. An Iraq for all Iraqis needs to emerge via a voluntary union of its constituent parts, power sharing, and the frustrating day-to-day compromises that permeate a diffuse political arena.

Notes

1. Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).
2. "Iraq—Freedom in the World 2002," Freedom House, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2002/iraq#.Ut1nibTnaUk>, accessed on January 20, 2014.
3. Kanan Makiya, "The Anfal: Uncovering an Iraqi Campaign to Exterminate the Kurds," *Harper's Magazine*, May 1992.
4. Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 170.
5. Peter Galbraith, *The End of Iraq* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), chapter 10.
6. Brendan O'Leary, *How to Get out of Iraq with Integrity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), pp. 110–111. O'Leary does not mention the American preference regarding *Sharia*' here, however.
7. In Paul Bremer's accounting, he did not "disband" the Iraqi Army, because nothing was left to disband—the army had dispersed with the Coalition invasion and effectively stopped existing ("How I Didn't Dismantle Iraq's Army," *New York Times*, op-ed, September 6, 2007).

8. A phrase US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously used to describe stubborn supporters of Saddam Hussein's regime.
9. Larry Jay Diamond and Leonardo Morlino, "The Quality of Democracy: An Overview," *Journal of Democracy* 15.4 (2004), pp. 20–31.
10. See, for instance, Nussaibah Younis, "Set Up to Fail: Consociational Political Structures in Post-War Iraq, 2003–2010," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 4 (January–March 2011), pp. 1–18.
11. With the exception of a 25 percent quota for women legislators and also a quota for non-Muslim groups who have a few seats reserved for them in the National Assembly. Some observers claim that Article 49 First of the Constitution enshrines ethnic proportionalism. The Article in question says no such thing, however. It states: "First: The Council of Representatives shall consist of a number of members, at a ratio of one seat per 100,000 Iraqi persons representing the entire Iraqi people. They shall be elected through a direct secret general ballot. The representation of all components of the people shall be upheld in it." Rather than enshrining an ethnic quota of Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds, the Article clearly reads as an injunction against excluding any segment of the population from power.
12. For a more detailed discussion of how liberal consociation (as opposed to "corporate consociation" or an "integrationist" approach) benefits Iraq, see John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, "Iraq's Constitution of 2005: Liberal Consociation as Political Prescription," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 5.4 (2007), pp. 670–698.
13. Ashley S. Deeks and Matthew D. Burton, "Iraq's Constitution: A Drafting History," *Cornell International Law Journal* 40 (Winter 2007), p. 42.
14. Galbraith, 2006, p. 198. In an in-depth analysis of the constitution-drafting process, Deeks and Burton (2007) describe SCIRI's position on decentralization as actually divided and fluctuating. While leaders such as Abdul Aziz al-Hakim held a strong interest in extensive local autonomy and the creation of a nine-governorate Shiite region in the south, others preferred a more centralized government in Baghdad. Current Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's *Dawaa* Party and Moqtada al-Sadr's Shiite bloc consistently preferred strong centralization. Sunni Arab constitutional negotiators mostly opposed decentralization out of fear of a possible Shiite region making off with the lion's share of Iraq's oil resources. Only the Kurdistan Alliance proved united and consistent when it came to pushing for extensively decentralized federalism.
15. For a colorful account of the Kurds' determination in the constitutional negotiations, see Galbraith, 2006, Chapter 10; for a more issue-by-issue academic account, see Deeks and Burton, 2007.
16. Author's interview with Dr. Sherzad Nejar (chancellor of the University of Kurdistan and constitutional law expert), June 22, 2012, Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan.
17. O'Leary, 2009, p. 114.
18. "Q&A: Iraq's Constitution," *The Guardian*, October 25, 2005, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/25/iraq.qanda>, accessed on December 12, 2013.

19. Ted R. Gurr, "Why Minorities Rebel: A Global Analysis of Communal Mobilization and Conflict since 1945," *International Political Science Review* 14.2 (1993), pp. 161–201.
20. Deeks and Burton (2007) ascribe the Constitution's empowerment of governorates on a level similar to regions as stemming from SCIRI'S efforts, however, after Hakim realized that the push for a Shiite region in the south might not be successful (p. 32).
21. Sean Kane, Joost R. Hiltermann, and Raad Alkadiri, "Iraq's Federalism Quandary" (March/April 2012), p. 23, <http://nationalinterest.org/article/iraqs-federalism-quandary-6512>. Mockaitis offers a different take on the issue than the opinion presented here, however, insisting that the majority of Iraqis (rather than just the Kurds) did in fact support the creation of a very weak central government in Baghdad (pp. 291–292). Thomas R. Mockaitis, *The Iraq War: A Documentary and Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2012).
22. Mehmet Gurses, "Partition, Democracy, and Turkey's Kurdish Minority," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 16.3 (2010), p. 340.
23. For a discussion of various forms of federalism and their suitability, or lack thereof, to the Iraqi context, see Brendan O'Leary, "Power Sharing, Pluralist Federation, and Federacy," in O'Leary, Brendan, John McGarry, and Khaled Salih (eds.) *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).
24. "Present fields" is an ambiguous term, but is generally thought to mean "fields in production" when the Constitution went into effect in 2006. At that time, there were no fields in production within the Kurdistan Region. Since then, however, very significant oil and gas resources have been discovered and put into production in Kurdistan.
25. For a recent example of such criticism, see Younis (2011) or various posts on Reidar Visser's Iraqi politics blog at historiae.org.
26. In 2007 KRG leaders solicited a legal opinion on the issue from James Crawford, a University of Cambridge professor and renowned legal expert. His formal opinion supported the Kurdish view of the constitution: "This Opinion confirms the constitutional authority of the KRG to manage the oil and gas resources of the Kurdistan Region as set out in the Oil and Gas Law of the Kurdistan Region-Iraq (Law no. 22 of 2007), which is in full conformity with the Constitution of Iraq" (James Crawford, "Legal Opinion on the Authority of the Kurdistan Regional Government over Oil and Gas under the Constitution of Iraq," January 29, 2008, http://www.krg.org/uploads/documents/James_R_Crawford_Kurdistan_Oil_Legal_Opinion_English__2008_07_09_h11m23s26.pdf). "Law no. 22 of 2007" refers to the Kurdistan Region's own hydrocarbons law, of course, adopted after repeated failures to adopt an Iraqi hydrocarbons law or to reconcile the differing interpretations of Article 112 of the Iraqi Constitution.
27. As of this writing, such revenue sharing mechanisms are still not working. Kurds claim Baghdad is not paying them or the oil companies pumping in Kurdistan for the oil exported through the national pipeline, and Baghdad claims that the

Kurds are not remitting to Baghdad oil revenues they earn outside the national grid (via tanker truck or their own newly constructed pipelines). In February 2013, Baghdad oil advisor Abdullah al-Amir stated that "... Kurdistan should submit all its oil contracts to Iraq's Oil Ministry for approval and claimed that at present only one-third of the KRG's oil revenues are being transferred to the central government. 'There is no record of what is happening to the [other] two-thirds of production, where the revenues are going, what prices the oil is sold at,' he said." (Roxana Saberi, "No End in Sight for Iraq Oil Dispute," *Al Monitor*, February 27, 2013). In January 2014, the Council of Ministers in Baghdad passed a 2014 draft budget that cut off Kurdistan's entire share of the budget if it did not export its oil and gas through the national, Baghdad-controlled network.

28. Roxana Saberi, "No End in Sight for Iraq Oil Dispute," *Al Monitor*, February 27, 2013.
29. Ben van Heuvelen, "Turkey, Kurdistan Cement Massive Energy Deal," *Iraq Oil Report*, November 29, 2013, <http://www.iraqoilreport.com/politics/oil-policy/turkey-kurdistan-cement-massive-energy-deal-11574/>, accessed on December 1, 2013.
30. See, for example, Soner Cagaptay (ed.) "The Future of Iraqi Kurds," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Focus* 85 (July 2008).
31. In his February 2, 2010 "Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community," Dennis C. Blair stated that "Arab-Kurd tensions have potential to derail Iraq's generally positive security trajectory, including triggering conflict among Iraq's ethno-sectarian groups. Many of the drivers of Arab-Kurd tensions—disputed territories, revenue sharing and control of oil resources, and integration of Peshmerga forces—still need to be worked out, and miscalculations or misperceptions on either side risk an inadvertent escalation of violence. US involvement—both diplomatic and military—will remain critical in defusing crises in this sphere." US General Ray Odierno echoed Blair's concerns in July 2009, telling reporters that "while violence continues to decline overall, tensions between Iraqi Kurds and Arabs over boundaries and oil revenues represent the biggest threat to the country's stability" (*Al Arabiya*, July 29, 2009). With US military forces now withdrawn from Iraq, the American ability to mediate future flare-ups has declined significantly.
32. David Romano, Brian Calfano, and Robert Phelps, "Successful and Less Successful Interventions: Stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan," *International Studies Perspectives*, November 11, 2013 (online early publication), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/insp.12067/abstract>, accessed on January 20, 2014.
33. Matthew S. Mingus, "Progress and Challenges with Iraq's Multilevel Governance," *Public Administration Review* 72.5 (2012), p. 685.
34. For a more detailed discussion of the disputed territories issue, as well as prescription for its possible resolution, see Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

35. "Oil for Soil: Toward a Grand Bargain on Iraq and the Kurds," International Crisis Group Report No. 80, October 28, 2008.
36. Author's interview with Dr. Sherzad Nejar, June 22, Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan.
37. Author's interview with Dr. Sherzad Nejar, June 22, Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan.
38. Kirk Sowell, "Iraq's Supreme Court Yields Its Independence to Maliki," *The National*, February 29, 2012.
39. Kane, Hiltermann and Alkadiri, 2012, p. 26.
40. Sowell, 2012.
41. Sowell, 2012.
42. Ahmed Rasheed, "Critics Alarmed as Iraq's Maliki Centralizes Power," *Reuters*, January 23, 2011.
43. Judith S. Yaphne, "Maliki's Maneuvering in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, June 6, 2012.
44. *Al-Monitor*, "Iraq's Deputy PM: 'Maliki Is Dragging the Country toward Chaos,'" May 17, 2012.
45. Ziad al-Sanjari, "Iraq Province Takes First Steps to Energy Independence," *Reuters*, October 23, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/23/us-iraq-energy-nineveh-idUSBRE99M07G20131023>, accessed on January 12, 2014.
46. Ziad al-Sanjari, 2013.
47. "Al-Iraqiya Declares Its Support for KRG to Export Oil to Turkey," *Shafaaq News*, December 3, 2013, <http://www.shafaaq.com/en/politics/8098-al-iraqiya-declares-its-support-for-krq-to-export-oil-to-turkey.html>, accessed on December 17, 2014.
48. For more on this, see Anderson and Stansfield, 2009.
49. Possibilities are described in greater detail in Reidar Visser and Gareth Stansfield (eds.) *An Iraq of Its Regions: Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy?* (London: Hurst, 2007).
50. If sectarian conflict in Iraq continues and worsens, as it appears to be doing again at the time of this writing, population transfers (as people seek safety with their own sectarian groups) might increase the number of fairly homogeneous governorates, of course. This would lead to more "ethnic" style federalism should these governorates form into regions—for precisely the reasons that the likes of Chaim Kaufmann say such systems are sometimes necessary ("When All Else Fails: Ethnic Population Transfers and Partitions in the 20th Century," *International Security* 23.2 (1998), pp. 120–156). The existence of more than three regions, however, would still offer the possibility of avoiding an unending Kurdish, Sunni, Shiite confrontation, since different regions could presumably find common cause on some issues, especially if some nonethnically homogeneous regions also existed in the mix.
51. Anderson and Stansfield, 2009, p. 144.
52. Mehmet Gurses and T. David Mason, "Democracy out of Anarchy: The Prospects for Post-Civil-War Democracy," *Social Science Quarterly* 89 (June 2008), p. 315.

CHAPTER 10

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Kurdish Dilemma in Iran

Nader Entessar

Introduction

Iranian nationalities have played an integral part in the country's century-long anti-authoritarian, anti-imperialist, and pro-democracy movements. The Kurds of Iran have certainly been an integral part of this struggle, and they have largely framed their demands for recognition of their sociopolitical and cultural rights within the broader context of a democratic and decentralized Iran. The purpose of this chapter is to examine factors that have inhibited the realization of Kurdish demands since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. In particular, the chapter seeks to analyze the role played by the securitization of the Kurdish demands in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and how the nexus between securitization and coercion redounds to the detriment of the broader democratization in the country. In other words, Kurdish demands for greater cultural and sociopolitical space will have a spillover effect into the larger Iranian society and will help the country establish a transparent and democratic political system that is responsive to the needs of all of its constituent elements.

Identity Demands vs. Securitization of Identity

As Janine Clark and Bassel Salloukh have noted, the scholarly debate about identity formation has been heavily dominated by constructivist

explanations associated with interpretations that assume that “ethnic identities are a product of material and political struggles in specific historical contexts.”¹ One of the best examples of constructivist explanations can be found in the writings of Benedict Anderson and his pioneering work on the process of identity formation and the rise of nationalism among various nationalities and ethnic groups.² In Iran, the development of the Kurdish national movement, especially its politicized variety, must be placed in the broader context of the country’s journey toward modern, territorially based nationalism. The Russo-Persian war of 1804, which resulted in the loss of vast tracts of Iranian territory in the Caucasus to the tsarist Russia, was arguably a defining moment for the development of Iranian nationalism based on the “myth of unity” among the country’s constituent parts and groups.³ Iranian officials as well as intellectuals began to develop a new concept of Iranian identity away from its long-established cultural construct (i.e., Iran as cultural entity) and toward a land-based, territorially focused, and Persianized concept of nationhood. That is, as Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet has observed, the “Iranian homeland, though still formally the birthplace of Armenians, Kurds, and Baluchis, as well as Farsi and others, increasingly came to represent the *vatan* [country] of Shi’i Persians through the persistent efforts of the state to extirpate competing cultures.”⁴

In the same vein, Mostafa Vaziri argues, *a la* Benedict Anderson, that the modern concept of Iranian nationhood has been an imaginary construct created by Iranian intellectuals and historians to glorify Iran’s past and create a fictitious notion of territorial unity.⁵ Vaziri, of course, does not deny the existence of a strong sense of Iranian identity and culture. What he contends is that nationalism based on the close identification of a nation with an all-powerful and centrally controlled state dominated by a single ethnic group is an “imagined” phenomenon. In addition, one can posit that this would inevitably lead to a clash of nationalisms in multinational states, especially when the central government is based on authoritarian structures.

In general, constructivist arguments do a good job of explaining the nuances involved in identity formation but they do not “do a good job of explaining ethnic conflict.”⁶ The Kurdish predicament in Iran, as elsewhere in the Middle East, has not been so much the product of Kurdish identity formation but the result of securitization of ethnic issues in the country. States that frame the presence of nationalities and ethnic demands in terms of security tend to adopt repressive policies toward these groups as they increasingly view the recognition of ethnic rights or autonomy as tantamount to secession.⁷ The so-called Kurdish problem in the Islamic Republic of Iran has been first and foremost the product of the state’s policies that

have consistently securitized ethnic issues and have failed to institute a de-securitized approach to nationality issues since the Islamic revolution.

It is worth noting that the Kurds enthusiastically supported the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979—a broad spectrum of the Kurdish population participated in the revolutionary process from the outset. However, the initial Kurdish euphoria over the demise of the Pahlavi monarchy gave way to the bitter realization that the new revolutionary regime, like its monarchical predecessor, would look at Kurdish demands through a security lens. In fact, after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, it became quite clear that Ayatollah Khomeini's objective of establishing a strong and centralized Islamic state would clash with the goals of the autonomy-seeking Kurds in Iran. Moreover, Khomeini rejected ethnic differences among Muslims. Nonetheless, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic did recognize the existence of linguistic diversity among the Iranian people. In Article 15 of the Constitution, Persian is recognized as the official language of the country. All official communications must be in Persian. However, the uses of local languages in the media and in the classroom are permitted so long as they are used in conjunction with Persian.⁸ In practice, classroom instruction in Kurdish is not tolerated by the authorities, and Kurdish language media operates under severe restrictions.

On March 3–31, 1979, the Iranian government conducted a referendum asking the country's citizens to vote on a single proposal—to maintain the monarchical system or replace it with an Islamic republic. Neither of these two choices was palatable to many Kurds and to Adbul Rahman Ghassemlou, the Secretary General of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), who had returned to Iran after years of exile in Europe. The KDPI, as well as many other secular groups in the country, boycotted the referendum. However, Khomeini's exhortations for a massive turnout resulted in an overwhelming victory for the new regime as 98 percent voted to replace the monarchy with an Islamic republic.⁹

Furthermore, many Sunni religious leaders opposed the designation of Shi'ism as the official religion of the state in the new constitution. According to Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, the then head of the Assembly of Experts which had been charged with drafting the country's new constitution, conflicting opinions were expressed by the members of the Assembly on this issue. The Sunni clerics, as well as some Shi'i members of the Assembly of Experts (e.g., Hassan Azodi) preferred Islam, rather than Shi'i Islam, to be designated as the official religion of the country.¹⁰ In the final analysis, those favoring the inclusion of Shi'i Islam as the official state religion prevailed. They argued that the overwhelming majority of Iranians are Shi'i Muslims,

and that even the monarchical constitution had recognized Shi'i Islam as the official state religion. Moreover, they reasoned that the Sunnis would still be able to follow their religious practices and follow the rulings of their own religious courts.¹¹

Ultimately, tension between the Islamic authorities and the Kurds manifested itself in a series of armed clashes between the forces of the KDPI and the newly created Revolutionary Guard loyal to the nascent Islamic Republic. In order to stem the tide of armed conflict in Kurdistan, Sheikh Mohammad Sadegh Sadeghi Guivi (better known as Sadegh Khalkhali) was dispatched to the region to try to punish those who had taken up arms against the new regime in Tehran. In a series of hasty trials that lacked the most basic elements of judicial integrity and fairness, Khalkhali condemned scores of Kurdish nationalists to death. Continuing armed clashes between the Kurds and the Iranian military and Revolutionary Guards led to the banning of the KDPI at the end of autumn 1979 and to Ayatollah Khomeini's designation of Ghassemlou as *mofsid-e fil arz* (corrupter of the earth). However, shortly before the complete breakdown of negotiations between the Kurds and the representatives of the Iranian government, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a conciliatory message addressed to the people of Kurdistan. In his message, Khomeini, for the first time, publicly acknowledged the legitimate grievances of the Kurds and promised to continue negotiating with religious and nationalist Kurdish leaders until peace and calm was restored in the area. Khomeini's message further stated that a lot of people in Iran had suffered under the monarchy and the revolutionary government, and he asked the Kurds to join him in the name of God to "save our country and to direct our energy against the real enemies of the country led by the United States."¹² The content and tone of Khomeini's message to the Kurds differed in his previous messages and was indicative of the Ayatollah's fear that the continuing securitization of the Kurdish issue would redound to the detriment of the Islamic Republic.

The Reform Movement and the Kurdish Issue

The end of the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–1988 and the eventual coming to power of a reformist movement in Iran promised a "return to normalcy" and a new approach to the Iran's myriad socioeconomic problems, including a fresh approach to the neglected nationality issues. The election of Mohammad Khatami as Iran's president in May 1997 and the defeat of conservative forces in the February 2000 parliamentary elections generated a great deal of expectation for political change in Iran. Khatami, a mid-ranking reformist cleric, received some 70 percent of the popular vote with

a clear mandate to change Iran's political system and allow the emergence of a genuinely pluralistic culture in the country. As Khatami had stated, "we cannot expect any positive transformations anywhere [in Iran] unless the yearning for freedom is fulfilled. That is, the freedom to think and the security to express new thinking."¹³ Furthermore, Khatami, from the beginning of his presidency, emphasized the notion of inclusiveness, or "Iran for all Iranians" as he called it, and the importance of the rule of law in nurturing and enhancing the foundation of Iran's political system.¹⁴

Khatami, however, was unable to confront his conservative opponents throughout his presidency. In Kurdistan, city council elections were routinely nullified by conservative forces and the credentials of either pro-reform or independent Kurdish politicians or candidates were summarily rejected when they sought to run for various provincial offices. Even in a few cases when pro-Khatami officials managed to come to office, their tenure was short. For example, Abdullah Ramazanzadeh, the Governor General of Kurdistan and a Khatami supporter, was summoned before the Special Court for Public Officials in April 2001 and was charged with the "dissemination of lies." Ramazanzadeh's "crimes" were based on his objections to the nullifications of votes of two constituencies in the Kurdish cities of Baneh and Saqqez; thus, he was accused of libelous statements against the country's powerful Council of Guardians, which had ordered the nullification of the aforementioned constituency votes.¹⁵

Moreover, some of the prominent individuals in the reform movement had earlier participated in the suppression of Kurdish uprising, thus creating an undertone of mistrust between some Kurds and the Khatami administration. For example, Hamid Reza Jalaipour, who became a significant architect of the reform movement that brought Khatami to power, had spent some ten years in the province of Kurdistan fighting Kurdish autonomy demands. As a commander of a Revolutionary Guard unit, and later as the governor of Naqdeh and Mahabad and Deputy Governor General for Political Affairs in Kurdistan, Jalaipour was at least partially responsible for some of the worst revolutionary excesses in that region. When asked if he had any remorse for ordering the execution of 59 Kurdish nationalists, Jalaipour refused to offer an apology for his past actions by claiming that he could not be held responsible for actions undertaken when he was a revolutionary in his 20s during wartime conditions.¹⁶ It may be unfair to single out an individual for actions undertaken under war conditions, but this highlights the difficulty the reformists of various political stripes have continuously encountered in articulating a coherent nationality policy in Iran. It also reinforces the perception that even the reformists could not break away from the mindset that securitizes the ethnic demands.

The Return to High-Intensity Securitization

Iran's ninth presidential election in 2005, which ultimately resulted in the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the country's president, was marked by an open discussion of the "nationality issues" by some of the candidates. This marked the first time since the establishment of the Islamic Republic that ethnic and nationality issues were recognized as part of public policy debate, and several candidates openly sought the votes of Iranian nationalities. Mostafa Moin, the main candidate of the reformist camp, made a special effort to woo voters from the non-Persian nationalities and turned Iran's multinational character into an important part of his campaign platform. Moin criticized both those who ignored the country's multinational nature and those who sought to divide the country along ethnic, religious, and linguistic grounds. In this vein, Moin promised complete equality for all Iranian citizens, which is a right guaranteed under the Iranian constitution. Recognizing discrimination as potentially destabilizing, Moin stated that his administration would be composed of all nationalities.¹⁷ Echoing Khatami's campaign slogan, Moin also made "Iran for all Iranians" the centerpiece of his presidential campaign. In addition to Moin, several reformist personalities and writers opined that without recognizing the rights of Iranian nationalities, democracy would not take root in the country. Furthermore, many reformists welcomed Jalal Talabani's election as president of Iraq and viewed his accession to power in neighboring Iraq as the natural progression of the recognition of nationality rights in the region.¹⁸

Moin was defeated in the first round of the presidential balloting. Unlike the candidates of the reform bloc, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the winner of the 2005 presidential election, campaigned on a platform that emphasized socioeconomic justice above everything else. His main target was the country's lower class, the *mostazafin* in Khomeini's lexicon, whose economic conditions had deteriorated under the outgoing Khatami administration. Although Ahmadinejad did not make the issue of nationality rights part of his campaign, he was certainly not an unknown figure among the Kurds. In the early years of the post-revolutionary era, Ahmadinejad was assigned to the Ramazan base of the Revolutionary Guards, with responsibility for military operations in Western Iran, including the Kurdish regions of the country. Ahmadinejad later served in other capacities in Western Iran, including a stint as a principal advisor to the Governor General of Kurdistan.¹⁹

Given the negative connotation of the activities of the Revolutionary Guards in Kurdistan, it was not surprising that the Iranian Kurds participated minimally in the country's presidential election of 2005. Between the two finalists in the second round of the election, Ahmadinejad received

17,248,782 votes while his opponent Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani garnered 10,460,701 votes.²⁰ According to figures released by Iran's Interior Ministry, 62.66 percent of eligible voters participated in the election, with the highest turnout (80.43 percent) in the Ilam province and the lowest rate of participation (37.37 percent) in the province of Kurdistan. West Azerbaijan, which includes the cities of Mahabad and Uromiyah with their large Kurdish population, recoded the second lowest participation rate (44.02) in the country.²¹ In short, the Iranian Kurds expressed their dissatisfaction by boycotting the 2005 presidential elections in large numbers.

Moreover, the military confrontation between the Kurds and the Iranian government forces once again intensified as the Kurdish issue became more securitized during Ahmadinejad's presidency. In particular, Iranian forces and guerrillas of the newly formed The Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), an offshoot of Turkey's Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK), have engaged in low-level military confrontation inside Iranian Kurdistan and along the Iraq-Iraq borders near the Qandil Mountains with mounting casualties on both sides. The involvement of outside groups in Kurdish affairs in Iran has added an unpredictable twist to the war of attrition in Iranian Kurdistan.²²

The most significant development in Iranian Kurdistan in the post-Khatami era has been the grassroots uprisings and other acts of civil disobedience in several Kurdish cities throughout the country. The spark that ignited the Kurdish challenge to the post-Khatami Iranian government was generated by the July 11, 2005 shooting of Shavaneh Qaderi, a young Kurdish activist from Mahabad. Subsequently, a number of websites posted photographs purporting to show Qaderi's mutilated body, which contributed to street demonstrations not only in Mahabad but also in several other Kurdish cities, including Baneh, Bukan, Sanandaj, and Saqqez.²³ In addition, several Kurdish groups, including university students in Tehran, issued statements supporting the Mahabad demonstrations and condemning the actions of the Iranian security forces, especially those of the Revolutionary Guards, in suppressing Kurdish demonstrations.²⁴

The conditions were further exacerbated by the crackdown on two popular Kurdish-language weeklies, *Ashti* and *Asou*, and the arrest of Roya Tolooi, the editor of the monthly *Rasan* and a well-known activist in Iranian and Kurdish women's rights groups. In mid-2008, a number of Kurdish nationalists, including Farzad Kamangar, Farhad Vakili, Ali Heydarian, Anwar Hossein Panahi, Adnan Hassanpour, and Hiwa Butimar, received death sentences that were challenged by several human rights organizations.²⁵ These are reflective of a pattern of human rights abuses that have affected the Kurds in recent years.²⁶

On the other hand, a number of reformist Kurdish groups and civil society organizations have continued to challenge the boundaries of government authority and push for the recognition of Kurdish rights within the confines of the existing sociopolitical system in Iran. This trend has been reflected in the myriad magazines and newspapers that reflect the vitality of Kurdish intellectual life in the country. For example, the weekly *Sirwan*, which published sophisticated analytical articles on Kurdish politics and society, and the equally analytical bi-weekly *Hawar* provided objective information in a manner that one does not find by reading highly politicized Iranian Kurdish publications in Europe and North America. Unfortunately, both of these publications, which are no longer in print because they were banned by Ahmadinejad's government, as well as other similar publications have to continuously engage in a losing battle for survival in today's Iran.

Furthermore, large-scale arrests of Kurdish civil activists have intensified since Iran's 2009 controversial presidential election, which solidified the grip of conservative forces on Iran's governing structures. For example, in February and March 2013, the Mahabad Intelligence Office arrested a score of young Kurdish activists, including Farzad Samani, Rasoul Khezr Morovat, Ghassen Ahmadi, Vafa Ghaderi, Ali Azadi, and Khosrow Kordpour, the managing editor of the highly popular *Mukrian News*.²⁷

Iran's presidential election of 2009 and the subsequent upheaval and mass protests against the results of the election by a wide spectrum of Iranian citizens augured the emergence of what has been dubbed the "Green Movement." Although some Kurdish reformists were involved in the Green Movement, by and large the Kurdish rank and file was not energized by the latest iteration of the reform movement in Iran. Although the two leading figures of the Green Movement, Mir Hossein Moussavi (an ethnic Azeri) and Mehdi Karroubi (an ethnic Lor), campaigned on a platform of restoring dignity and rule of law, neither of them focused his presidential campaign on the nationality issue. However, the Green Movement's manifesto spells out in some detail the goals and objectives of the movement in lofty terms. It emphasizes the Green Movement's respect for Iran's nationalist (i.e., secular) and Islamic heritage, supports respect for individual rights and nonviolent modes of political discourse, promises justice and liberty for all Iranians, offers support for equal rights for men and women, and rejects all forms of discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, ethnicity, and nationality.²⁸

Some analysts have argued that Iranian nationalities and ethnic groups were not mere observers as the Green Movement unfolded throughout the country. Instead, they played an active role in the formation of the Green Movement. According to the Kurdish journalist and political activist Mohammad Ali Tofighi, a former member of the now banned reformist

group Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the widespread pro-change and democratic sentiments that erupted in support of the Green Movement following the 2009 disputed presidential election had been influenced by the “ethnic discourse that has sought to liberate diverse Iranian ethnicities from oppression and discrimination.”²⁹ Similarly, Saman Rasoulpour, a Kurdish human rights activist and journalist, observed that the “unprecedented emphasis of the two reformist presidential candidates [Moussavi and Karroubi]” on minority and ethnic demands had raised ethnic issues to the forefront of contending political issues in the 2009 presidential election.³⁰

Shortly prior to the June 2009 presidential election, Mehdi Karroubi, in a frank and wide-ranging interview with Iran’s Press TV, addressed the question of endemic inequality and ethnic discrimination in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Karroubi’s words, the country’s constitution clearly states that “all minorities and all followers of different religions are equal . . . I think we should have an approach where all people regardless of their gender, religion, or ethnicity can feel that they are part of this government. Nobody else is saying the things that I am saying.”³¹ Indeed, no other presidential candidate was treating the ethnic question in the way Karroubi was addressing this issue.

Those Kurds with propensity to support the reform movement indeed participated in the Green Movement and took part in the street demonstrations that were organized during the early phases. The Coordinating Council of Kurdish Reforms (*Shoray-e Hamahangi-e Eslahat-e Kurd*), which had been formed in 2004 in the last year of Khatami’s presidency, issued a strong statement calling for full participation of all Iranian citizens in the February 20, 2011 national march in support of the goals of the Green Movement.³² The Council warned the Kurds to refrain from “military adventurism” that would not only hurt the Kurdish cause but also provide an excuse for the Iranian government, as well as other regional countries, to suppress Kurdish demands on the pretext of fighting terrorism.³³

Notwithstanding the support given to the Green Movement by several Iranian ethnic groups and nationalities in the early stages of the Movement’s existence, the overall level of support for this latest manifestation of “reformism” in Iran has now lost its earlier appeal. Both Moussavi and Karroubi, the putative leaders of the Green Movement, have been under house arrest since the 2009 presidential debacle. There is no recognized “leader” or galvanizing figure behind the Green Movement today. For some Kurds, like journalist Tofighi, who had earlier supported the country’s reform movement, in general, and the Green Movement, in particular, this latest manifestation of reformism in Iran ultimately failed to address the root causes of

authoritarianism in the country and thus lost its appeal not only to a large segment of the Kurds but also to many other democratic activists in Iran.³⁴

Moreover, it is important to note that no significant figure in the Green Movement undertook measures to establish direct contact with Kurdish political organizations or groups lest they be accused by their opponents of associating with “separatist groups.” When Mostafa Hejri, the secretary general of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, issued a statement in support of the Green Movement’s objectives and political goals, the conservative governing forces in Iran used Hejri’s statement as “proof” of the Green Movement’s support for a “Kurdish armed group.”³⁵ All in all, the inability of President Khatami’s government to, inter alia, address ethnic problems in Iran and the lingering suspicion that the country’s reformists play the “ethnic card” as an election tool against their conservative opponents have resulted in what can best be described as the “benign neglect” of the Green Movement by Iran’s Kurdish population.

Rouhani and the Kurds: A Move away from Securitization?

Iran’s presidential election of June 2013 generated a vigorous campaign among contending candidates with varying views on politics, the economy, the nuclear dispute with the West, and a host of domestic issues. Although ethnic issues were included in the campaign platforms of most of the presidential candidates, they did not play a central role in either the campaign or televised debates among the main contenders. Hassan Rouhani, the winner of the presidential contest, did not have any specific program to deal with ethnic issues and limited his comments to generalities on equal cultural rights for all Iranians.³⁶

Unlike the presidential elections of 2005 and 2009, Iran’s 2013 presidential election, the voter turnout in all Iranian provinces was high. This was especially true in Kurdistan and the provinces with high concentrations of Kurdish population, such as the Province of West Azerbaijan and Kermanshah. In the Province of Kurdistan, 62 percent of eligible voters participated in the 2013 presidential election, and nearly 80 percent of the votes were cast for Rouhani, thus making Kurdistan the province where Rouhani enjoyed the highest margin of victory.³⁷

In his first 100 days in office, President Rouhani established a special bureau in the office of the president to handle the so-called ethnic issue. He appointed Ali Younesi, a cleric who had served, inter alia, as the Minister of Intelligence during the Khatami’s reform era, as his special advisor and liaison in ethnic affairs. Younesi has taken some steps in reaching out to various ethnic groups and has stated that his main task is to ensure the safety and

equality of all ethnic groups while moving away from securitizing ethnic issues. In fact, he has stated that looking at ethnic demands and grievances through a security lens is dangerous and counterproductive.³⁸

In the same vein, Abdul Mohammad Zahedi, the newly appointed Governor General of Kurdistan, has stated that his administration's priority is to de-securitize Kurdish issues and instead turn Iranian Kurdistan into a model for Kurds all over the world.³⁹ Reiterating the same sentiments, Abdolreza Rahman Fazli, Iran's interior minister, also conveyed his desire to de-securitize ethnic issues during Rouhani's presidency. As a Kurd himself, Fazli expressed his desire to "professionalize" the administration of the Kurdistan province and place technocratic competence as the sole criterion in selecting officials in that province.⁴⁰ If indeed the Rouhani administration succeeds in his stated goal of desecuritizing ethnic issues, then a major step will have been taken in resolving Kurdish predicament in Iran.

Finally, some Kurdish organizations inside Iran may get an opportunity to revive their fortunes under the Rouhani administration. The Kurdish United Front (KUF) is a good case in point. The KUF was formed in 2005 by Bahaaddin Adab, a Kurdish deputy representing the cities of Sanandaj, Kamiaran, and Diwandara in the Iranian Parliament (*Majlis*). In addition to establishing the KUF, Adab was instrumental in forming the Kurdish faction in the *Majlis* to highlight issues that were of particular concern to the Iranian Kurds. The KUF, however, was never able to establish a following among the Kurdish population of the country due to its organizational weakness and the securitized political environment in Iranian Kurdistan. It was also unable to receive a working license from Iran's authorities. According to Hamid Fazeli, a founding member of the KUF, the organization hopes that under Rouhani it will be able to revive itself and act as a bridge between the Kurds and the Iranian government.⁴¹ In order to accomplish this task, the KUF must first overcome its own factional divisions and develop a framework to allow its constituency to work together.

Support given to Rouhani's presidential campaign by Iran's nationalities and ethnic groups should augur well for Kurdish demands for greater democratization in the country. One of Rouhani's campaign slogans was "Ethnic Participation for Iran's Progress," and this catchy phrase was highlighted throughout Rouhani's presidential campaign. Once elected with the majority support of Iran's ethnic groups, President Rouhani appointed Ali Yunesi as his special advisor on ethnic nationalities and religious minorities. Although Yunesi has not yet been able to score any major accomplishments, he nonetheless has expressed his desire to change and de-securitize ethnic issues and has promised more transparency in addressing demands of the country's ethnic groups.⁴² Rouhani has recognized that the Kurdish vote for

him was a vote to end discriminatory and undemocratic policies and to end the cycle of violence.⁴³

Iran's fractious political structure and the existence of competing centers of power may continue to make it difficult for a president, even a pragmatic one, to rein in the activities of the state's coercive instruments in Kurdistan and elsewhere, however. For example, the number of executions has not abated noticeably since Rouhani's accession to power. The state's arbitrary treatment of what it considers separatist activities among the Kurds needs to be controlled to promote inclusive democracy in the country.⁴⁴ That requires, inter alia, establishing an independent and accountable judiciary that upholds the rule of law and administers justice equitably.

Notes

1. Janine A. Clark and Bassel F. Salloukh, "Elite Strategies, Civil Society, and Sectarian Identities in Postwar Lebanon," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (November 2013), p. 744.
2. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), especially chapters 2–3.
3. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804–1946* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 4–9.
4. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, 1999, p. 5.
5. Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity* (New York: Paragon House, 1993).
6. Ashutosh Varshney, "Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict," in Charles Boix and Susan C. Stokes (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 287.
7. See, for example, Paul Roe, "Securitization and National Minority Rights: Conditions of Desecuritization," *Security Dialogue* 35 (September 2004), pp. 279–294.
8. *Matn-e Kamel-e Qanoon-e Assasi-e Jomhoori-e Eslami Iran* [The Complete Text of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran] (Tehran: Hamid Publications, 1983), p. 28.
9. Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p. 73.
10. Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, *Matn-e Kamel-e Khaterat-e Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri* [The Complete Text of Ayatollah Montazeri's Memoirs] (Essen, Germany: Union of Iranian Editors in Europe, 2001), p. 252.
11. Montazeri, 2001, pp. 252–253.
12. For the complete text of Ayatollah Khomeini's November 16, 1979 letter to the Kurds, see *Ettelaat*, November 17, 1979, p. 1.
13. Mohammad Khatami, *Islam, Liberty and Development* (Binghamton, NY: Institute of Global Cultural Studies, 1998), p. 4.

14. Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, *Tose'-e Siyasi, Tose'-e Eqtesadi va Amniyat* [Political Development, Economic Development and Security] (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 2000), pp. 55–97.
15. The Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), April 9, 2001.
16. *Asr-e Azadegan*, March 6, 2000. For a critical analysis of the role of the Kurds in Mohammad Khatami's reform movement, see Khaled Tavakoli, "Kurdistan va Vaqa'ye Dovom-e Khordad" (Kurdistan and the Events of the Second of Khordad), *Goft-O-Gu*, no. 40 (August–September 2004), pp. 35–44.
17. *Emrouz*, <http://www.emrouz.info/ShowItem.aspx?ID=1226&p=1>, accessed on April 13, 2005.
18. Ataollah Mohajerani, "Entekhab-e Talabani" [Talabani's Election], *Emrouz*, <http://www.emrouz.info/ShowItem.aspx?ID=1117&p=1>, accessed on April 7, 2005.
19. Kasra Naji, *Abmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 29–31.
20. "Final Results of the Ninth Presidential Election," Interior Ministry, The Islamic Republic of Iran, <http://www.moi.gov.ir/news.aspx?id=12593>, accessed on June 25, 2005.
21. Interior Ministry, The Islamic Republic of Iran, <http://www.moi.gov.ir/news.aspx?id=123888>, accessed on June 22, 2005.
22. Phil Sands, "Kurds Prepare for Guerrilla War in Iran," *Gulf News Online*, <http://www.gulfnews.com/Articles/RegionNF.asp?ArticleID=160707>, accessed on April 14, 2005. Also, see *Baztab*, <http://www.baztab.com/news/27867.php>, accessed on August 18, 2005.
23. See Khosrow Kordpour's interview in *Mihan* 89 (July–August 2005), <http://www.mihan.net/89/mihan-89-06.htm>, accessed on August 25, 2005.
24. *Peyamner*, <http://www.peyamner.com/article.php?id=17249&lang=farsi>, accessed on July 24, 2005.
25. See, for example, Amnesty International, *Iran: Human Rights Abuses against the Kurdish Minority* (London: Amnesty International, 2008), pp. 36–41.
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CHAPTER 11

The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria

Robert Lowe

Introduction

The instability of the Syrian Civil War has enabled Kurdish political and military actors to take control of parts of northern Syria, marking the emergence of the nascent political entity of *Kurdistana Rojava* (West Kurdistan).¹ This de facto autonomous Kurdish zone has developed politically, administratively, and militarily to the point that in November 2013 the largest Kurdish party there felt able to declare a transitional administration. Western Kurdistan was previously a vague concept rarely used by most Kurds, and this new political structure is fragile and underdeveloped. Nevertheless, it has become an important feature of the Syrian and Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape, and its future, and that of the wider Kurdish population of Syria, is a key factor in the future of the war-torn country.

Kurdish actors in Syria sit within a complex web of dynamics involving Kurdish factionalism, the Ba’thist regime, the Syrian oppositions, neighboring states, and trans-national Kurdish politics. While much of Syrian society has been shattered by bloody civil conflict, Kurds in certain areas have had some opportunity to debate political and civic organization and models of government and to hold elections. The successful example of autonomous government in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq provides enormous inspiration to most Kurds in Syria. Democratic reforms and a form of devolved government in Kurdish areas could, in the long term, help in the building of a more

tolerant and just Syrian state. The provision of full rights for Kurds as equal Syrian citizens and the establishment of a form of autonomous government need not be a threat to Syrian Arabs or to Syria's unity. Kurds themselves are insistent that democracy and liberalization must be created for all citizens in Syria, not just for their community.

This chapter provides an overview of the course of Kurdish politics during the Syrian Civil War and offers some analysis of the major developments and issues. The chapter provides context to understanding the aspirations of the Kurds, the practicalities of these being realized, and the effects this would have on the future shape of Syria. Amid the dust of the war and the complex geopolitics that deeply affect the Kurds, the demands and goals of the Kurdish national movement in Syria are poorly understood. These will be examined both for their own intrinsic importance and because they must form the basis of an argument in support of the plausibility of a more democratic and pluralist Syria emerging after the war which manages to reconcile the Kurdish population within the new order.

The final section explores how Kurdish demands could be accommodated within a reformed Syrian Republic without prejudice to the interests of the non-Kurdish population. A range of mechanisms exist to manage relationships between states and minorities, including provisions for minority rights, forms of self-governance, power and wealth-sharing, and cross-border institutions. The successful application of these to the relationship between Kurds and the Syrian state will be essential for the development of stability and democratization in Syria. The chapter concludes by arguing that the inclusion of Kurds as Syrian citizens with full equality, opportunity, and political rights for the first time would be beneficial to all Syrian citizens as the country struggles to rebuild, reconcile, and heal after its terrible war.

Kurdish Politics during the Syrian Uprising²

Kurds have a long history of opposition to the deeply oppressive Arab nationalist regimes that have ruled Syria since the mid-twentieth century and so might have been expected to be enthusiastic participants from the start of the uprising in March 2011. This history of mobilization and the limited space permitted to Kurds by the regime (which was greater than that afforded to the Muslim Brotherhood, for example) meant that the Kurds were also at that time the best-organized political opposition group in Syria. However, the Kurdish reaction has been more careful, strategic, and complex. This was probably due in part to past experience, particularly of the Kurdish uprising in 2004 and the crackdown which followed, as well as suspicions

that the Syrian Arab opposition retains much of the Arab nationalist ideology of the Ba'athist regime and might be no more accommodating of ethnic Kurds.³ There is also deep distrust between Kurds and the Islamists who have become prominent in the opposition. Kurds see the Islamists as reactionary and hostile to their political aspirations while the Islamists views the Kurds as secular (or atheist) and separatist. Other factors include the deep divisions within the Kurdish political movement, the weakened legitimacy of the Kurdish parties, and their leadership's close ties to more powerful Kurdish political actors over the borders in Kurdistan-Iraq and Turkey.⁴

Although the reaction in Kurdish areas was more cautious than in other parts of Syria, there were demonstrations and calls for change from April 2011. Initially, these came not from the Kurdish parties or leaders but from youth organizations and the local coordination committees (LCCs) as a number of youth and Kurdish civic and cultural groups expanded their activism.⁵ As the uprising gained momentum in the summer of 2011, the Kurdish political parties began to form platforms in response. In October 2011, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) was formed—an alliance of ten parties (rising to 16) and women's and youth organizations and human rights activists and LCCs. The formation of the KNC was a significant development as it marked an unprecedented coalition of the majority of Kurdish parties and organizations and because its demands are greater than those previously made by most parties. This marked a shift away from managing the status quo during the uprising to demanding the fall of the regime and Kurdish self-determination in Syria.

The *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (Democratic Union Party, PYD), probably the largest and certainly the strongest Kurdish party by 2011, did not join the KNC. The PYD is a relative newcomer on the scene, having been founded in 2003, but it taps into an older strain of Syrian Kurdish support for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey. The PYD denies it is a branch of the PKK and tries hard to downplay the depth of the relationship, but it is openly a member of the *Koma Civakên Kurdistan* (KCK, Group of Communities in Kurdistan), the umbrella organization for groups supportive of PKK ideology and goals.⁶ The numerous other Kurdish political parties in Syria⁷ are not affiliated with the PKK and most of them gravitate toward the influence and support of the Kurdish parties and government in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The PYD's ideology and its superior organization and resources have given it the confidence to operate unilaterally outside the KNC, and in November 2011 it held elections for the first "People's Council of Western Kurdistan" (PCWK), following the ideology of "democratic self-governance" formulated by the KCK/PKK. The establishment of

the PCWK does, in theory, provide the beginnings of a new alternative system of government to the Ba'athist regime in Kurdish areas. In practice, because no parties other than the PYD stood for election, and because there is little distinction between the PCWK and the PYD, the council is only representative of one part of the Kurdish community. The PCWK is part of The Kurdish Democratic Society Movement (TEVDEM), the wider civil society movement that operates within the KCK umbrella. The PCWK comprises six political and civil society organizations affiliated with and including the PYD.

In the first half of 2012, there were various efforts to bring the Kurdish sides together and defuse tensions that threatened to cause inter-Kurdish conflict. Massoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, played a prominent role as a sponsor and broker. On July 11, 2012, these efforts bore fruit as the PCWK and the KNC signed the Erbil Agreement and formed a Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC), made up of five members from the PCWK and five from the KNC. The first meeting of the SKC was held in Qamishli on July 24. In theory, the SKC is a de facto interim administrative body for Syrian Kurdistan that represents all the Kurdish parties and communities, holds authority for political and civic organization, and has control of the Kurdish militias.

The Establishment of Self-Rule in Rojava

The Erbil Agreement created the necessary political platform for the PYD to begin acquiring control of some Kurdish districts. That the “liberation”⁸ began on the day following a bombing that killed senior regime figures in Damascus on July 18 was possibly no coincidence. On July 19, 2012, the PYD began to take control of certain towns, apparently in coordination with the Syrian authorities who largely withdrew, although some civil servants remained in post. The Syrian security forces also withdrew from an obvious public presence but some stayed in their bases in the Kurdish areas, keeping a lower profile. The takeover was conducted by the PYD without coordination with the other Kurdish parties. In less than a week, control was gained over Kobani (Ain al-‘Arab), Afrîn, Amudê, Sarî Kaniyê (Ras al-‘Ain), and Dêrik.⁹

By the end of July, much of the areas of Syria traditionally regarded as “Kurdish”¹⁰ were largely in the hands of the PYD. The party asserted itself as the effective authority and along with local Kurdish committees and civic organizations began providing security and essential services. Following decades of stifling repression, there has been a great hubbub of activity: political, civic, and cultural. Political discourse has found unprecedented

freedom and Kurds have begun exploring and debating the possibilities of developing local government. The relaxation of pressure from the Syrian regime has also allowed a flowering of cultural activities and notable efforts to teach and promote the banned Kurdish language. For example in early September 2012, the health council of Qamishli announced the completion of first aid courses in Kurdish.¹¹

In November 2013, the PCWK announced the establishment of a transitional administration for Rojava. On this date, after nearly 18 months, the success of the self-rule experiment was mixed. Despite the enormous challenges and pressures, the Kurdish parties, civil organizations, and militias managed to maintain and nurture the infant autonomous structure and to provide at least some basic services and security in the region. Although very fragile, the coalition between the PYD and the KNC still held and its manifestation in the form of the Supreme Kurdish Committee survived, at least in principle, as the ultimate authority over the politics and government of Western Kurdistan. The PYD's paramilitary force, the *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (People's Defence Units, YPG), has fought a number of bloody battles with Syrian opposition jihadi groups, notably in Sarî Kaniyê and in Kobani in 2012–2013. In late 2013, the YPG gained the upper hand in this struggle for control. The YPG and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) have a complex relationship, sometimes operating with tacit understanding about areas of control, at other times fighting over territory and resources when the strain becomes too great.

The YPG militia has been crucial for securing and maintaining political control over the Kurdish areas. This militarization of the Kurdish struggle in Syria is new as previously arms have not been used (although many Syrian Kurds fought for the PKK in its struggle against Turkey). This development was inevitable given the increasingly brutal and chaotic nature of the Syrian Civil War that threatened the vulnerable Kurdish pockets of territory and left Kurds with no option but to defend themselves. Further, the PYD's emergence from the trunk of the heavily armed PKK gave that party the experience and resources to organize an armed militia. Other Kurdish parties, which have for decades been proudly peaceful, have begun to form much smaller militias with the aim of counterbalancing against the power of the YPG/PYD.¹² As many as 10,000–15,000 Kurdish refugees from Syria have fled to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, around 1,200 of whom are being trained by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) into a *peshmerga*-style militia for Western Kurdistan that could act as a counterbalance to the power of the YPG.¹³ This force is the cause of considerable strain between the YPG/PYD and the KRG/KNC parties, and the YPG/PYD has so far refused to allow this force to cross the border into Western Kurdistan.

Threats to Kurdish Autonomy

Rojava faces massive threats to its stability and existence. There have been enormous challenges and problems for an underdeveloped society with no previous experience of self-government which is stuck on the edge of a war zone: how to provide food and fuel, services including electricity, water, health care, education, and rubbish collection; and the expansion of corruption and illegal activities, including drug smuggling, extortion, and paramilitary harassment.

A fundamental weakness is geography as unlike Kurdistan–Iraq, Western Kurdistan lacks both the contiguity, which provides political coherence, and the mountains, which provide defense. Further, sizeable non-Kurdish communities (Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, and others) live in the areas in which the majority of the inhabitants are Kurdish.

Despite unprecedented efforts at unity within the Kurdish national movement, deep divisions and serious tensions persist. The most important is that between the PYD and the KNC coalition, which teeters on the edge of violence and remains a serious threat to the development of effective local government. This division is greatly exacerbated by the authoritarian nature of the PYD.¹⁴ Similar to the PKK, the PYD is not naturally inclined to tolerate other Kurdish groups and challenges to its hegemony. Since 2011, it has consistently acted unilaterally and it has used its YPG militia, the most powerful force in Kurdish areas, to enforce its will as reported in numerous cases of intimidation and violence against Kurds who do not back the PYD.¹⁵ Its commitment to intra-Kurdish unity remains questionable, and there are also suspicions about the extent of its links to the regime.¹⁶ There is no doubt these links exist, for example, following the 2012 takeover the regime continued to pay the salaries of civil servants in Rojava. But the suggestion that the PYD and the regime are naturally close is an exaggeration; both sides treat the relationship as expedient and there is underlying hostility.

The Kurdish movement in Syria is long established and highly fractious. The main rift established in the last decade is that between the PYD and the other 20 or so parties. The parties which make up the KNC also have a long history of schism, although the unprecedented opportunities of 2011–2012 appear to have bound them closer than before.¹⁷ The Erbil Agreement is holding and there appears to be a measure of cooperation between the PYD and KNC through the SKC and in establishing committees and building up local services. However, the coalition is less than two months old and looks very fragile. The key question is whether the need for unity in the service of the Kurdish community will override deep political disagreements and friction on the ground.

Politically, the main issue is the level of influence afforded to the PKK. The KNC parties are deeply opposed to what they see as interference in Syrian Kurdish affairs by an armed group whose main interest lies in its struggle within Turkey. The PYD denies it is the Syrian branch of the PKK and accuses other parties of being beholden to Massoud Barzani and even the Turks. The history of the PKK's relationship with the Syrian regime and the relative ease with which the PYD appears able to operate have led non-PYD supporting Kurds to accuse the PYD of secret links to the Syrian regime. The sides also do not agree on what form of government to establish in Kurdistan: terms are used vaguely but it appears that the PYD opposes the type of federalism that is being discussed by some of the other parties.

The disagreements between the sides are evident in the trivial: holding separate demonstrations and arguing over which flags to fly (PKK and Öcalan banners or the Kurdish flag). The schism also has a much darker side as there has been a series of accusations of kidnappings and beatings.¹⁸ In most of these, the PYD is accused of enforcing its will through intimidation and force of arms by detaining and assaulting Kurds who are critical of it. The PYD responds that it is protecting the Kurdish community and that Turkey is stirring up division by supporting and arming Kurds hostile to the PYD.¹⁹

Eva Savelsberg and Jordi Tejel argue that there is no prospect of the Kurdish transition leading to democracy in the short term, citing the authoritarianism of the PYD and the failings of the other parties as obstacles.²⁰ Harriet Allsopp acknowledges the deep problems posed by the PYD but offers a more optimistic assessment, arguing that the security of the Kurdish areas is currently paramount and that the parties broadly share the same goals and have managed to maintain their coalition.²¹ Despite the clear and difficult rift between the sides, the latter argument holds greater weight as the KNC and the PYD continue to adhere in principle to the terms of the Erbil Agreement and to negotiate on improved cooperation and a more united platform for presenting Kurdish demands. The position of the PYD, as the far stronger party, is critical. Alongside grabbing power on the ground, it continues to preach unity within the Kurdish movement, not least because it does not enjoy unanimous support among Kurds and because it prefers to avoid poor relations with the relatively powerful KRG.

The surrounding neighborhood does not give much encouragement for Western Kurdistan's future. Most immediately, jihadi groups fighting the Ba'athist regime, notably Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Shams, have since late 2012 been engaged in repeated battles with the YPG for control of border crossings and Kurdish towns. The Islamists view the Kurds as ideological enemies as well as rivals for control of territory and

resources. The relationship between the Kurds and the wider Syrian Arab opposition is more complicated. A greater obstacle to the establishment of self-government in Western Kurdistan is what may be called “non-Kurdish Syria,” that is, the 85–90 percent of Syrians who are not Kurds.

The Ba’thist regime has systematically repressed Kurds for decades and remains the government of Syria. The regime offered sops to Kurds at the start of the uprising by responding to two of the Kurds’ most prominent demands: granting citizenship to some of the stateless Kurds and repealing Decree 49 that was prejudicial to Kurdish economic rights in border areas. The tactic was clearly to prevent the Kurds joining the uprising and opening up another front against the regime. The regime has also withdrawn from many Kurdish areas, apparently expediently choosing to avoid confrontation while it is in a desperate struggle for survival elsewhere in Syria. But there is no reason to assume that the last relic of pan-Arab nationalism, which has a long history of repression of its Kurdish population, has developed respect for Kurdish rights. Should the regime win the war, it is likely to turn its attention to reasserting control over the Kurdish areas.

Then there are the many factions of the Syrian opposition. The more liberal and pluralistic of these, the National Coalition and the National Coordination Committee, have expressed commitment to including Kurds as equal citizens and ending discrimination. However, no part of the non-Kurdish opposition is likely to favor autonomous government in Western Kurdistan because of the deep roots of Arab nationalism and the fear of Syria fracturing. Opposition figures have accused the Kurds of failing to join the revolution and, while broadly sharing the same democratic goals as the Kurds, have made clumsy and insensitive remarks.²² The Free Syrian Army is openly hostile to Kurdish self-government.²³

As ever in Syrian Kurdish politics, the geopolitical situation is highly influential. The three components of Western Kurdistan all sit tight against the Turkish border. The complexities of the struggle between Kurds in Turkey and the Turkish state will continue to have great bearing on the Kurds in Syria. Turkey has chosen to play a major role in the Syrian conflict. Its position toward the Syrian Kurds is framed entirely within the context of its determination to defeat the PKK. Its hostility to further gains for Kurds in the region and conviction that the PYD is the PKK in Syria makes Turkey a huge threat to the nascent local government in Western Kurdistan. Turkey holds the awkward position of supporting democratic change in Syria, but not for the Kurdish population there.

Turkey describes the PYD as a “terrorist formation.” Indeed, Turkey chooses not to distinguish between the PYD, which undoubtedly is very close to the PKK, and the many other Kurdish parties, which are not.

Throughout the crisis, Turkey has bullishly threatened intervention in Syria as a “natural right” if “terrorists” threaten Turkey from beyond the Syrian border.²⁴ Kurdish control of towns across its southern border is highly troubling for Turkey and it has responded with severe criticism. Erdoğan accused Bashar Assad of handing over control to enable PYD/PKK terrorist activities against Turkey.²⁵ It may well also be attempting to stir up the divisions between the Kurds by trying to break the KNC–PYD alliance.²⁶ Relations calmed during 2013 as illustrated when Saleh Muslim Mohamed, the Co-President of the PYD, visited Ankara for talks with officials in July. Western Kurdistan is unlikely to gain much international support. At the time of the “liberation,” the United States, strongly supportive of Turkey and fearful of Syria splintering, immediately announced its opposition to Kurdish autonomy in Syria.²⁷

The influence of the PKK is also a challenge to the emergence of a democratic Western Kurdistan. While the PYD denies it is a sub-branch of the PKK, it is clearly very closely affiliated to the party and strongly influenced by its ideology, practices, and leadership. The PKK does not have a promising record of adherence to democratic practices. While the language of the PYD is more accommodating, it has shown PKK-like tendencies in its paramilitary style control on the ground and harsh response to criticism. It is worth noting however that Western Kurdistan could also be a challenge for the PKK. As Aliza Marcus has pointed out, the PKK does not tolerate rival groups in Turkey but the PYD has committed to work with others in Syria.²⁸ If Kurds in Syria soon become free to practice multiparty politics, then it will be harder for the PKK to deny this to Kurds in Turkey. Its involvement in Syria might, under the right circumstances, actually help democratize the PKK.

The Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq is acting as a supporter and broker of Kurdish political development in Syria. It is also providing a haven for refugees and training for Kurdish soldiers defecting from the Syrian army. But the KRG is unlikely to prove sufficiently strong or committed to Western Kurdistan should the Syrian civil war truly engulf Kurdish areas. While Massoud Barzani is promoting himself as the pan-Kurdish leader, the interests of the KRG will come first. The other prominent Iraqi Kurdish leader, Jalal Talabani, is opposed to the revolution in Syria, owing to his long history of friendly relations with the Assads.

Kurdish Aspirations for Equality

It is necessary to consider what changes Kurds seek in a new Syria. Kurdish demands can be split into three categories: an end to ethnic discrimination

toward Kurds (which would affect all Kurds regardless of where they live);²⁹ the establishment of representative democracy in Syria; and a form of autonomous government for the majority-Kurdish populated areas. The first category of demands is deeply embedded in the Kurdish national and cultural movement and has formed the basis of Kurdish political mobilization in Syria since the mid-twentieth century. It would be relatively straightforward to draft legislation to overturn the existing discrimination practiced by the Syrian state to provide equality to Kurdish citizens. Indeed, after the March 2011 uprising the Assad regime quickly and easily enacted laws to deal with some of the most egregious injustices, most notably granting citizenship to some of the approximately 400,000 Kurds denied this by the state and repealing Decree 49 which curbed property rights for Kurds. These moves were a transparent sop to the Kurds to dissuade them from joining the uprising.

Despite the deeply fissiparous nature of the Kurdish national movement in Syria, the parties are generally in agreement on many issues. There is nothing terribly radical, nationalist, or unreasonable about the majority of Kurdish demands. Most are for the basic human rights that form an essential component of any democratic and representative system of government. Some demands are specific to Kurds, others have relevance for other minority groups, and many are also shared by opposition groups who wish to see a form of democratic and pluralist government established in Syria.

All Syrians share the current prime concern—security. Kurds appreciate that their areas have escaped the level of violence endured elsewhere but are acutely aware of their vulnerability as the civil war has endured and become increasingly bitter and complex. Islamists, the FSA, the regime, and the Turkish state are all current or perceived threats to Kurdish areas. Attacks on Kurdish towns in northern Syria by Islamists in 2013 have brought the war to the Kurds for the first time and have increased support for the paramilitary YPG, even from Kurds opposed to the PYD, as it is the only force capable of protecting Kurds. Kurds have migrated from war-torn cities across Syria to the relative safety of the north, while thousands have fled the country, with a significant refugee population developing, especially in Kurdistan-Iraq.

The greatest pre-war concern, also shared by most Syrians, was economic. Despite some official optimism, the underlying economic conditions and prospects for most Syrians were very poor. Economic prospects for Kurds were even worse due to discrimination. Drought, increases in diesel prices, the dismantling of the socialist agricultural system, population rises, the lack of state investment, and job creation have also caused high levels of poverty, unemployment, and migration. The war has of course caused a

further deterioration in living standards, and securing food, resources, and some form of an income remains a critical problem.

Kurdish demands for political reform are also shared with many Syrians, and there are large common areas of interest with the non-Islamist Syrian opposition. Kurdish parties have long called for an end to the state of emergency and the one party system, democratic reforms, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, and the guarantee of human rights and the legalisation of parties based on ethnicity.

Then there are additional demands that are specifically ethnic, reflecting the official discrimination practiced against Kurds since the 1950s.³⁰ The most pressing “Kurdish” issue has been the state’s refusal to recognize the citizenship of approximately 400,000 Kurds. A census carried out in al-Hasaka in 1962 stripped 120,000–150,000 Kurds of Syrian citizenship, leaving them and their descendants without basic civil rights. The number of these stateless people, the *ajanib* and *maktoumeen*, has grown considerably in subsequent years.³¹ Their restricted status means they are not allowed passports, cannot own property, cannot work in many professions or the public sector, and do not receive the same education or health care as Syrian citizens. This discrimination ensures severe poverty. In April 2011, the regime granted citizenship to registered *ajanib*, but not to the *maktoumeen*, a category of stateless Kurds with even fewer rights than the *ajanib* who number approximately 100,000. Providing full rights to the *maktoumeen* would also be a simple step.

Since Arab nationalism gained a hold in Syria in the mid-twentieth century, special discrimination against Kurdishness means that any manifestation of Kurdish identity, however minor or cultural, has been defined as political and hence forbidden. The Kurmanji language is banned from use in education, the public sector, or business; other “foreign” languages are not. Before the war, possession of Kurmanji publications or music could lead to detention while wearing Kurdish dress and/or celebrating Kurdish festivals was highly risky. Changes to the Syrian constitution and legislation to provide cultural and linguistic equality are essential for reconciling Kurds to the Syrian state and enabling them to participate as full Syrian citizens with the same rights as Arabs. For example, the KNC calls for recognition of national rights of the Kurdish people in accordance with international conventions such as the UN Charter and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.³² The Kurdish parties demand constitutional recognition of Kurdish as an official language, as has been secured in Iraq. Even merely ending the official ban on the Kurdish language would have an enormously positive impact.

A further demand is recognition of the Kurdish people in the Syrian constitution, ideally as a second nationality living in its historical land. This

will require a fundamental change to the described identity of the Syrian state, which remains the last outpost of Arab nationalism, and one of only three states, which officially describes itself as ethnically “Arab.”³³ The term “Syrian Arab Republic” is deeply problematic for Kurdish citizens of Syria, and dropping the exclusive ethnic adjective would take Syria one major step toward inclusion and tolerance.³⁴ It would also be a positive move for other non-Arabs, including Armenians, Assyrians, and Turkmen. Kurds also campaign for the right to form political parties based on ethnicity. The many Kurdish parties have always been illegal and have suffered consistent harassment and prosecution.

This list of “softer” requirements is neatly summarized in a passage in the first Erbil Agreement signed by the KNC and the PYD in July 2012:

[We have] a unified political objective . . . based on the immutable values of the Kurdish people as a nation and ethnicity in Syria and should work towards the overthrow of the dictatorship in Damascus, the construction of a democratic, pluralistic state, and the creation of a new Syria with many ethnicities. This new Syria will satisfy the aspirations of our people by recognizing its existence as an original people in the constitution. The Kurdish question must be solved democratically.³⁵

Devolved Government for Kurdish Areas

Until 2012, the Kurdish national movement in Syria had barely flirted with the idea of devolved or autonomous government for Kurdish areas. The prospect was wholly unrealistic and any expression of interest in the idea attracted the harsh attention of the authorities. Despite the shining success of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and proposals explored for the government of Kurdish areas in Turkey, the concept of Syrian Kurdistan or Western Kurdistan received very little attention. Even the term was rarely used and then mostly only by the PYD and some more radical nationalist groups operating from abroad.

The war has changed everything. The vacuum of authority in the north of the country, the vulnerability felt by the Kurdish territorial pockets, and the sharp opportunism of the PYD have created both a physical entity (or entities) controlled by Kurds and the more nebulous but increasingly tangible idea of Western Kurdistan. Many Kurds support the PYD/PCWK and the security and systems the organization is developing. Others do not support the PYD but do like the idea of some form of Kurdish self-government. Some Kurdish political actors, including the parties with the longest histories, fear overreach, as well as a PYD power grab, but the increasingly

established facts on the ground make it difficult to go against the tide and indeed further weaken their already dwindling popular support.

The course of the war may shift and if the Islamists or the regime gain power in the north, Western Kurdistan could be snuffed out. But while the YPG is successfully defending the “liberated” areas, something called “Rojava” exists and hence Kurdish ideas for its development need to be considered. A return to the pre-war status quo is now utterly unacceptable to Kurds, and while some may be content to gain improved rights in Syria, others, notably including those with guns, are now wedded to the idea of autonomy in Rojava. According to Saleh Muslim Mohamed, “If the regime returns, it will not be as before. Anything taken by the people cannot be taken back. The PYD will, first, protect our own people.”³⁶ A KNC member remarked, “Let it (the regime) fall 1,000 times. But if the political infrastructure stays the same . . . we as Kurds won’t have our rights. So we need to change the whole system, because the infrastructure hammers in the idea of a centralized state.”³⁷

Two other ideas may be ruled out. An independent Western Kurdistan is neither desired nor remotely viable. Rojava lacks sufficient population numbers, contiguity, and internal unity, and also has significant non-Kurdish populations and an economy that is completely dependent on the rest of Syria. A pan-Kurdish independent state is also not possible (and very probably not desired), given severe differences between the political elites of the different parts of Kurdistan as well as linguistic and cultural differences. The only option remaining that would satisfy the wishes of many of the Kurdish population is for some form of self-determination settlement within a new Syrian state structure.

Given the novelty of the idea, the speed of events, and the more pressing matters on the ground, it is no surprise that ideas of self-determination have not yet been well developed or explained. The PYD and the KNC lack a common vision, and indeed within the KNC there is incoherence. The KNC calls for “national self-determination within the unity of the country,” but has no agreed view on what form this should take.

The federal model provided by the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is highly influential, in particular among the KNC parties that are close to Massoud Barzani. For example, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria favors a full federal state and in the summer of 2012 began using the term “Syrian Kurdistan” for the first time.³⁸ This model would establish a federal Syria with other communities, including Alawis, Christians, and Druzes given the right to autonomous federal regions. Similar to Iraq post-2003, ethnic and religious identification would define the structure of the new Syria. Qamishli would be the capital of a noncontiguous Kurdish region that

would include the three northern pockets. Following a census, minorities within the region would receive a share of seats in the regional government and on the municipal councils, based on population.³⁹

As the PYD is strongest in the Afrîn and Kobani areas, while the KNC parties are stronger in Qamishli and the Jazira, it is conceivable that this structure would be split into PYD (pro-PKK) and KNC (broadly pro-KRG) areas. This would enable Abdullah Öcalan and Massoud Barzani to treat each as their sphere of influence. The PYD rejects the idea of such a division, expressing fears this would divide Syria.⁴⁰ The party probably also feels the wind is in its favor and hopes to establish control of the Jazira also.

A different watered-down model based on citizenship has some currency among KNC parties who are closer to Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, President of Iraq, and an old ally of the Assads. They argue that a federal structure would not work for Kurds because of the geography of Western Kurdistan and because large numbers of Kurds live in the major cities. Under this proposal, the Syrian government would fully recognize Kurdish rights and Kurds would play an active role as full and equal Syrian citizens. The areas with large Kurdish populations would have an undefined form of self-rule.

The PYD has other ideas. While it does act as an ethno-nationalist Kurdish party, the PYD also proclaims adherence to Abdullah Öcalan's ideology for improving government and society.⁴¹ The party calls for "democratic autonomy" or "democratic confederalism," identical to that proposed by the PKK in Turkey. Under this plan of "decentralization," democratic autonomy would be established for all Syrians, not just for Kurds. Öcalan argues that the nation-state, capitalism, and socialism have all failed and that a more direct, bottom-up system of self-government should be established as an alternative form of power to that of the state.

It is this system that the PYD has been seeking to build in Rojava through the establishment of elected local councils, self-defense committees, and the YPG which all report to the People's Council of Western Kurdistan. The PCWK and the PYD are members of the KCK, an international executive body for organizations supporting democratic confederalism (and the PKK). The existence of the councils predates the war but it was only with the collapse of regular state control that they have assumed meaningful responsibilities. Democratic confederalism remains a vague, idealistic, and untested idea. Rojava is now providing its first experiment in practice and should this continue, the PYD's and PKK's commitment to the idea, and ability to implement it as an alternative system of government, will be severely tested.

The PYD took control of Kurdish towns in 2012; it is the leading party in designing and administering Rojava, and is the only party to run a militia of any strength. And yet the party appears opposed to the ideas of autonomy for Western Kurdistan discussed by some of the other parties. The PYD stresses that it wants Kurdish areas to stay in Syria, preferring a less sharply defined form of self-government. The party is not interested in Western Kurdistan emulating models set by Kurdistan-Iraq or Scotland. The PYD's plan involves towns with Kurdish majorities electing councils to run local administration. These councils then report to the PCWK, a body with executive and legislative branches. Democratic confederalism would not be restricted to the Kurds—the party argues that all of Syria would benefit from this system, which would ideally function similarly throughout the country. In practice, the PYD is highly pragmatic, and realpolitik and the imperative to retain the control it has established are likely to trump ideology.⁴² Western Kurdistan also provides strategic depth to the wider PYD/PKK struggle against Turkey and provides the PKK with a sphere of influence to balance against the rising power of the KRG.

The Kurdish Issues, Democratization, and the Future of Syria

As argued in the introduction to this volume, democratization must be viewed as a continuum rather than an absolute. For this process to begin in Syria, there must be a corresponding process that begins to dismantle the state's discrimination toward its Kurdish population. It is inconceivable that Syria could start taking steps toward democratic reform without addressing the legitimate demands of Kurds to be treated as full Syrian citizens with the same rights of opportunity and cultural practice as non-Kurdish Syrians.

A number of Syrian (and non-Syrian) parties are currently fighting in a civil war which is approaching its fourth year. While the outcome remains unclear and it is easy to be grimly pessimistic, it is also possible to envisage scenarios that could support reforms for Kurds as part of processes of accommodation and greater inclusion. The Islamist elements appear intractably hostile toward the Kurds. But the regime and the non-Islamist opposition could be involved in solving the Kurdish issues, either through expedience or because of a genuine commitment to plurality and reconciliation. Ending ethnic discrimination against Kurds would be straightforward, at least on paper. In practice, it would take longer.

A settlement of the question of self-determination and decentralized government, the issue of what has become called "Rojava," will be far more complicated. Politicians involved in negotiations between the Kurds and

the Arab opposition acknowledge that this is the key sticking point.⁴³ In general, Syrian Sunni Arabs are deeply opposed to Western Kurdistan and any form of devolution or federation in Syria. The Kurds are unclear and disunited on the issue. Western Kurdistan is riddled with internal weaknesses and sits in a deeply hostile environment.

However, because the genie is now out of the bottle, a new and imaginative arrangement will need to be found in time that can provide an institutional setting for the Kurds, and other minorities in Syria, to pursue their claims through peaceful, political means. The unacceptable alternative will involve the use of force. There are numerous models for accommodating the claims of ethnic minorities within a state, with or without some form of devolved government, which have comparative value for establishing such provisions for Kurds in Syria. These include the Åland Islands, Mindanao, South Tyrol, and Northern Ireland.⁴⁴ Non-Kurdish Syrians need not fear the dismemberment of Syrian territory. Kurds seek their rights within the framework of the Syrian state and have no alternative. After nearly a century living within the modern Syrian state, many Kurds are heavily Arabized and have complex layers of identity which include being “Syrian.” Unlike Kurds in Iraq who have a stronger and more exclusive loyalty to Kurdishness, most Kurds in Syria have a broader sense of identity that also encompasses Syria.

The outcome of the increasingly chaotic struggle in Syria is uncertain, but the one scenario that would most assure the Kurdish position—the establishment of a democratic, pluralistic government—is perhaps the least likely, at least in the short term. The central thesis of this volume flips the argument: rights and democracy for Kurds will benefit the states in which they live. Following this argument, the securing of full equal rights for Kurds in a new Syrian political order and the consolidation of some form of a representative-devolved administration in Western Kurdistan would help Syria to become more democratic.

Welcoming the Kurds fully into political and civic life in Syria would be of immense benefit to the country when it moves forward after the war. The exclusion of a community numbering roughly 10 percent of the population is inimical to developing a democracy. If given the opportunity as full equal citizens, Kurds have the potential to contribute far more to public life in Syria. The Kurdish national movement has a long and consistent history of commitment to democratic goals, and all of its many parties continue to stress the importance of building a democracy throughout Syria and working with non-Kurdish fellow Syrian citizens. The Kurds also have an unusually long history of political-cultural mobilization in Syria that gives them greater experience than most Syrians. Further, the fact of the Kurds’ minority status makes them naturally open to tolerance, pluralism, and fair

representation. The inclusion of the non-Kurdish minorities in Western Kurdistan is important.⁴⁵ So far the language of the Kurdish parties has been that of inclusion and equality. Some notable Christians have joined the PCWK, and the PYD is very keen to publicize its efforts to include the minority groups in the local government of Kurdish areas. This commitment remains to be fully tested in Rojava, but the example of minorities living in Kurdistan-Iraq offers some encouragement.

The development of self-rule in Kurdish areas could be beneficial for the growth of democracy in Syria. The country is badly over-centralized, and dispersing power more widely across the country and into more hands will help democratization. Concurrent with Kurdish self-rule, other areas could work out their own arrangements if these are felt suitable. There is suspicion and probably not much understanding in other parts of Syria about the possible advantages of decentralization in a diverse country. If Syria in its pre-2011 form is no longer viable, a decentralized state could become a possible option for other minority communities, especially the Alawis and Christians. There is also need to disperse power within the autonomous Kurdish area to be inclusive of the many non-Kurdish minorities and to combat the authoritarian tendencies of the parties, especially the PYD.

The problem of authoritarianism within the Kurdish parties requires addressing. The uprising has laid clear a deficiency in legitimacy and the older parties are struggling to maintain their relevance, although they tend toward cooperation because of the necessities of their size. The PYD has increasingly shown strong authoritarian tendencies and its commitment to Kurdish unity and to democracy is questionable. It is clear that the PYD's relationship with the PKK and the other Syrian Kurdish parties is crucial. If the party is merely a sub-branch of the PKK that is entirely subservient to the goals of the PKK, then trouble lies ahead. PYD leaders appear to recognize this and the need for the party to become a genuinely Syrian Kurdish party. The need to increase popularity among the large number of Syrian Kurds who do not support the PYD and to gain international legitimacy and support (as a non-PKK "terrorist" organization) has encouraged the party to insist that the only link is ideological.⁴⁶ Further, the reconciliation of Syrian Kurds to a future Syrian state will require negotiation and compromise between the PYD and the non-Kurdish Syrian opposition. This also requires a commitment to Syria, rather than to the PKK's struggle.

The Kurdish model in Iraq is very relevant to Syria's future. The Kurds' long and eventually successful struggle for security and equality within the Iraqi state provides visible inspiration. As David Romano argues in this volume, the Kurds were the primary force pushing for a more liberal and decentralized system with checks and balances in Iraq. Also similar to Iraq,

in Syria there is a need to avoid a return to an unrepresentative, and often brutal, “strongman” rule from the center, whether Ba’thist or from another strain. The Kurds in Syria could play an important role in preventing this.

It is also possible that the regime or its successor could see the value of decentralization and minority rights as a means of gaining support from the Kurds and other minority groups, or at least avoiding their open hostility. The balance of power during the war and in its aftermath may well require inducements and deals from those aspiring to govern Syria, or parts of it. Support from non-Sunni Arab groups would be very useful to the Ba’thist regime that is struggling to contain the largely Islamist-led political and military opposition. The concessions quickly handed out to the Kurds at the start of the uprising suggest that the regime might be prepared to offer further reforms, at least for the sake of expedience in the short term, to help tip the balance of power in its favor. Similarly, one or more successor regimes might also put realpolitik ahead of ideology.

Conclusion

Will the “liberation” of July 2012 turn out to be of historic importance or a fleeting footnote in the history of Syria and of the Kurdish nation? Either way, as the *Serbildan* of 2004 failed but established a stronger sense of Syrian-Kurdish identity, the establishment of Rojava has given a taste for equality and self-government that the Kurds of Syria will not give up lightly. According to one Kurd interviewed in Qamishli in August 2012, even if nothing else happens, “*Kurdistan çê bû ye*” (“Western) Kurdistan has been established.”⁴⁷ The emergence and expanded use of the term and idea of “Rojava” is important. The PYD-controlled local administration faces massive problems but the very fact of its existence is highly significant. This is a development of major importance in the development of the Kurdish national movement in Syria and is a natural step forward from the *Serbildan* of 2004 in the evolution of a distinctively “Syrian-Kurdish” ethno-national struggle.⁴⁸

It is clear that meaningful democratization in Syria cannot occur without a fundamental change in the state’s relationship with the Kurdish minority. Kurdish assertiveness, the more tolerant positions of most of the Syrian opposition, and the concessions already granted by the Ba’thist government mean that a return to the deeply discriminatory regime of the past is unlikely. Kurds are closer to cultural, social, and political equality as citizens of Syria, although risks to these gains remain. Solving the Kurdish issue in Syria is necessary for the continuum of democratization to begin taking place, but it is not sufficient. The Kurds are a single small, albeit

relatively important, piece in the puzzle. If the day arrives when a new Syrian political order is willing to accommodate the democratic wishes of the Kurdish population, including the right to choose a form of autonomous government within the country, then Syria will be at least on the path toward democratization.

Notes

1. In 2013 the short form, “*Rojava*” has gained common usage among Syrian Kurds and some other interested parties to refer to the PYD-controlled areas of Syria. The term will be used in this chapter.
2. For more detailed and excellent analyses of developments in Kurdish politics during the uprising and war, see Harriet Allsopp, “The Kurdish Autonomy Bid in Syria: Challenges and Reactions,” and Eva Savelsberg and Jordi Tejel, “The Syrian Kurds in ‘Transition to Somewhere,’” both in Michael Gunter and Mohammed Ahmed (eds.) *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2013); and Michael Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst, 2013).
3. Saleh Muslim Mohamed, the co-president of the PYD, argues that the revolution began in 2004, not 2011. Interview with author, London, December 3, 2012. For analysis of the 2004 uprising, see Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Robert Lowe, “The *Serhildan* and the Kurdish National Story in Syria,” in Robert Lowe and Gareth Stansfield (eds.) *The Kurdish Policy Imperative* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2010); and Julie Gauthier, “Les événements de Qamichlo: Irruption de la Question kurde en Syrie?” *Etudes kurdes* 7 (2005), pp. 97–114.
4. The problem of legitimacy is examined by Allsopp, 2013, pp. 226–231.
5. See Savelsberg and Tejel, 2013, pp. 202–208.
6. “The PYD and the PKK are brother organisations.” Interview with Saleh Muslim Mohamed, December 3, 2012.
7. There were approximately 20 parties at the time of writing: the number fluctuates regularly owing to splits and coalitions. For further analysis of the parties, see *Who Is the Syrian-Kurdish Opposition? The Development of Kurdish Parties, 1956–2011* (Berlin: Kurdwatch, 2011) and Harriet Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria: An Existence Denied* (Berlin: Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien, 2005).
8. The term “liberation” is disputed because the Syrian regime retains a presence in these areas and also because some argue that the PYD is no less authoritarian than the Ba’thists. “The pictures of Bashar Assad have simply been replaced by pictures of Abdullah Öcalan. Nothing has changed.” Interview with a Kurd from Syria, London, September 25, 2012.
9. The PYD also held control of Ashrafiya and Sheikh Maqsud in Aleppo for a while but the conflict between the Syrian regime and the Free Syrian Army later spread there.

10. There are three main areas of Kurdish-majority population in Syria: the largest is in the Jazira in the northeast corner, with the city of Qamishli at the center; in a pocket around the town of Kobani roughly at the mid-point of Syria's border with Turkey; and in a further pocket around the town of Afrin, north of Aleppo. The three areas are not contiguous. The major cities of Syria, especially Aleppo and Damascus, have also long been home to sizeable Kurdish populations.
11. *Briefing News and Activities in Western Kurdistan*, press release email from the Democratic Union Party (PYD), September 2, 2012.
12. *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within a Stuggle*, Middle East Report No. 136, International Crisis Group, January 2013, p. 33.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
14. Eva Savelsberg and Jordi Tejel provide an assessment of the PYD's assertion of control that is highly critical of the party (Savelsberg and Tejel, 2013).
15. Kurdwatch, a website run from Germany, is a rich source of such reports: www.kurdwatch.org
16. See, for example, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within a Struggle*, International Crisis Group, p. 2.
17. See Harriet Montgomery, 2005; Jordi Tejel, 2009.
18. See numerous reports published in 2011–2013 by *Rudaw*, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria> and Kurdwatch, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/>.
19. Interview with Amed Şemo, PYD Representative in the UK, London, August 22, 2012.
20. Savelsberg and Tejel, 2013, p. 217.
21. Allsopp, 2013, pp. 248–249.
22. For example, Burhan Ghalioun, in April 2012 when leader of the SNC, said, “There is no such thing as Syrian Kurdistan,” although he acknowledged the injustices suffered by Kurds and the need to address these, this comment offended Kurds. “Burhan Ghalioun: ‘There is no such thing as Syrian Kurdistan,’” Interview with *Rudaw*, April 17, 2012, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/5004.html>, accessed on January 30, 2014.
23. Colonel Riad Al-Assad, Free Syrian Army, “[We will] not leave Qamishli to the agenda of any Kurdish faction,” Quoted in Adib Abdulmajid, “Leader of Free Syrian Army Says No Kurdish Region Allowed to Establish in Syria,” *Rudaw*, July 31, 2012. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/5026.html>
24. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, quoted in Wyre Davis, “Crisis in Syria Emboldens Country's Kurds,” *BBC News*, July 28, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19021766>. For analysis of Turkey's position, see Bill Park, *Open Democracy*, August 30, 2012, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/bill-park/turkey-kurds-iraq-syria-new-regional-dynamic>
25. “Kurdish Rebels Storm Turkish Border Post,” *Al Akhbar*, August 5, 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/10738>
26. Interview with Amed Şemo, PYD Representative in the UK, London, August 22, 2012.

27. Philip Gordon, assistant secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, "We don't see for the future of Syria an autonomous Kurdish area or territory. We want to see a Syria that remains united." Quoted in Emrah Ülker, "US warns Kurdish autonomy in Syria could be slippery slope," *Today's Zaman*, July 30, 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-288108-us-warns-kurdish-autonomy-in-syria-could-be-slippery-slope.html>
28. Aliza Marcus, "Kurds in the New Middle East," *The National Interest*, August 22, 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/kurds-the-new-middle-east-7377>
29. Kurds live in many parts of Syria. The communities in the major cities, notably in Aleppo and Damascus, are long established and large. The PYD estimates that there are 600,000 Kurds in Aleppo and 400,000 in Damascus. This is probably an inflated figure but not wildly inaccurate. *Political Developments in the Western Kurdistan (Rojava)*, PYD Public Document Release, November 16, 2013.
30. It is notable that these assimilationist policies in Syria have been targeted most specifically at the Kurds. Other minorities, such as Christians or Druze, which are smaller in number and less problematic for Arab nationalism, have been largely exempt.
31. *Ajanib* (foreigners) lack citizenship but are officially registered. *Maktoumeen* (concealed) are a further subclass who have no registration and do not officially exist. They include the children of marriages between *ajanib* and Syrian citizens, these being considered illegal. See Montgomery, 2005, pp. 77–82 and *Stateless Kurds in Syria: Illegal Invaders or Victims of a Nationalistic Policy?* Kurdwatch Report, 2010.
32. Allsopp, 2013, p. 234.
33. The others are the Arab Republic of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.
34. This will prove difficult. It is notable that the "liberal" Syrian opposition remains wedded to the Arab nationalist nature of the state. This has been one of the major impediments to closer ties between this group and the Kurdish parties.
35. *Hewlêr Declaration of the Kurdish National Council in Syria and the People's Council of West Kurdistan*, June 11, 2012 [translation by Kurdwatch].
36. Author interview, December 2012.
37. International Crisis Group, 2013, p. 12.
38. Interview with Heyam Aqil, UK Representative, Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria, August 20, 2012, London.
39. International Crisis Group, 2013, pp. 26–27.
40. Interview with Amed Şemo.
41. Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (London: Transmedia, 2011) and Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, "Democratic Confederalism as a Kurdish Spring: The PKK and the Quest for Radical Democracy," in Michael Gunter and Mohammed Ahmed (eds.) *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2013), pp. 163–185.

42. Eva Savelsberg and Jordi Tejel take this argument further. “[The PYD has] no meaningful agenda for the Syrian Kurds after the revolution . . . the only interest of the PYD/PKK in Syria has been to use it as a source of funding and a place to recruit and train potential fighters for their fight in Turkey.” Savelsberg and Tejel, 2013, p. 212.
43. Interview with Heyam Aqil.
44. See Stefan Wolff, “The Relationships between States and Non-State Peoples: A Comparative View of the Kurds in Iraq,” in Robert Lowe and Gareth Stansfield (eds.) *The Kurdish Policy Imperative* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2010).
45. The areas regarded as “Kurdish” have significant and long-established non-Kurdish communities. For example, Qamishli was predominantly Syriac Christian in the early twentieth century. Seda Altuğ, *Sectarianism in the Syrian Jazira: Community, Land and Violence in the Memories of World War I and the French Mandate (1915–1939)*, PhD thesis, Utrecht University, 2011.
46. The PKK appears sensitive to the public criticism leveled at its affiliate parties for being puppets of the leaders in Qandil. Since Öcalan’s arrest in 1998, there has been a tendency toward allowing more local freedom to the affiliated parties in Syria, Iraq, and Iran.
47. Naila Bozo, “Where Were You Syria?” *Alliance for Kurdish Rights*, August 9, 2012, <http://kurdishrights.org/2012/08/09/where-were-you-syria-3/>
48. Lowe, 2010.

SECTION IV

Regional Issues

CHAPTER 12

From War to Democracy: Transborder Kurdish Conflict and Democratization

Mehmet Gurses

Introduction

Civil war destroys human lives, frays the fabric of social trust, demolishes economic infrastructure, disrupts production and trade, and threatens external markets.¹ This destruction “leaves in its wake a post-conflict environment that is not conducive to the emergence of democratic institutions or civic culture.”² Nonetheless, as several studies have pointed out, the majority of civil wars that occurred in the post-World War II era resulted in an improvement in the level of democracy.³ Further, how a war ends has substantial impact on the post-war democratization. For example, inconclusive and costly wars may lead warring parties to seek a negotiated settlement from which a more inclusive and democratic system can emerge.⁴ Additionally, the rigidities and complexities involved in ethnic civil wars make these conflicts harder to resolve than ideological wars and therefore end in a negotiated settlement. Ethnic affiliations as “powerful, permeative, passionate, and pervasive” tools shape both political and economic activities in divided societies, making democratization harder to negotiate and sustain.⁵ Civil war hardens and strengthens ethnic divisions, lowering the chances of reaching a negotiated peace that could lay the groundwork for a peaceful and potentially more democratic coexistence.⁶

Democratization after ethnic civil war is particularly problematic as the government repression may be justified by the threat posed by ethnic

rebellion. The problem is magnified when the ethnic minority that demands a better relationship with the dominant ethnic group does not have enough power to alter such an unbalanced relationship. As Joshi⁷ summarizes, with a balance of power in favor of the government, the dominant ruling coalition has little incentive to democratize. From this point of view, factors that help bring about a balanced relationship between the parties should also increase the chances for creating a democratic regime in which the previously excluded ethnic minority can coexist with the dominant ethnic group.

Most of the existing studies emphasize war characteristics (such as outcome, type, deadliness, and duration) to model post-civil-war democratization. Fortna and Huang⁸ challenge the key argument that war characteristics, most notably outcome, shape the prospect for post-war democratization. Pointing to characteristics such as economic structure of a country as the primary explanatory variable, they conclude that determinants of post-war democratization are much the same as those of peaceful societies.

These studies by and large tend to leave out an important feature of ethnic civil wars. That is, an overwhelming number of ethnic groups engaged in armed rebellion against their government were spread across an international border. Of the total 68 ethnic groups that engaged in armed conflict between 1950 and 2006, 50 had ethnic kin across an international border.⁹ For instance, both the onset and the sustainability of the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey have been facilitated and greatly shaped by the availability of logistical and political support from their ethnic kin from outside Turkish borders.

The transnational dimension of ethnic conflicts can exacerbate the situation because ethnic ties across internationally recognized borders can provide increased mobilization capabilities of ethnic groups, external sanctuaries for rebels, and a larger pool of human and economic resources that rebels can draw upon in mobilizing for violent conflict.¹⁰ Can the same factor be utilized to alter the balance of power between ethnic groups mobilized for a better status? How does the existence of ethnic kin across an international border shape the prospects for a more democratic relationship between an ethnic group and a government traditionally dominated by another group?

Civil War, Transborder Ethnic Kin, and Democratization

Both theoretical and empirical works on civil war identify “exclusionary” authoritarian regimes as being especially susceptible to civil war.¹¹ Moreover, the literature on ethnic conflict has long argued that political grievances lie at the core of ethnic conflicts.¹² Thus, addressing these grievances can lay the groundwork for improved economic, social, and political relations with

the state and is likely to result in substantial democratization or facilitate consolidation of existing democratic institutions. For example, the empowerment of ethnic brethren across a state border can have a democratizing effect by increasing the military, economic, and political cost of repression for the government, thereby leading to improved relations between the ethnic minority and the state. Further, ethnic ties that transcend national boundaries can fundamentally alter the balance of power between an ethnic group and government,¹³ thus improving an ethnic minority's status vis-à-vis the state.

In what follows, I demonstrate how the unfolding of events across Turkey's southeastern border in northern Iraq has provided incentives to address the demands from Turkey's Kurdish minority. First, I present empirical evidence for the proposed relationship between ethnic kin and democratization and, second, provide data from interviews with leading individuals among the Kurdish minority in Iraq and Turkey.

A preliminary analysis of ethnic civil wars that began and ended between 1950 and 2006 for which data were available lends support for the positive role transborder ethnic ties play on improving an ethnic group's status vis-à-vis the state. An analysis of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo (UCDP/PRIO) Armed Conflict Dataset v.4–2010¹⁴ shows that of ethnic groups working to achieve better status, those engaged in armed confrontation against their governments who further have transborder ethnic kin have a higher probability of obtaining concessions from government than those without ethnic kin spread across the borders (see Table 12.1). This relationship is stronger when the ethnic kin across an international border is a part of the ruling coalition (*kin with power*). In other words, of the 35 conflict episodes that were fought by ethnic groups with an empowered ethnic kin in a neighboring state, 21 of them resulted in an outcome favorable to the rebels in which the rebels won or reached a peace/ceasefire agreement with the government ($\chi^2=5.2$; $P = 0.02$).

To further clarify the link between the transnational aspect of ethnic civil war and democratization, I utilize measures of “political discrimination” and “access to state power” to examine the extent of democratization. Using the data from the Minorities at Risk (MAR) project¹⁵ to assess the overall levels of political discrimination, which ranges from “0” (no discrimination) to “1” (neglect/remedial policies), “2” (neglect/no remedial policies), “3” (social exclusion/neutral policy), to “4” (exclusion/repressive policy), against ethnic groups points to the positive role ethnic kin across an international border plays on improving ethnic minority–state relations. The mean political discrimination at year 2 after the end of 139 ethnic armed conflicts is 2.26. As shown in Table 12.1, ethnic minorities that have ethnic kin across an

Table 12.1 Civil war, transborder ethnic kin, and democratization, 1950–2006

<i>Measure of democratization</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Ethnic kin with power (yes/no)</i>
Political discrimination at year 2	2.26	1.59	0	4	139	1.7/2.4 (sig. at 0.01 level)
Change in access to state power at year 2	0.14	0.44	-1	2	139	0.30/0.08 (sig. at 0.01 level)
Change in access to state power at year 5	0.16	0.52	-1	2	132	0.34/0.1 (sig. at .01 level)

international border that are a part of the ruling coalition face a significantly lower political discrimination at year 2 after the end of armed conflict than other groups (1.7 vs. 2.4; significant at 0.01 level).

The “access to state power” refers to the degree of access to central state power; hence, it provides an important amount of information regarding an ethnic group’s status within a country.¹⁶ This variable is divided into three main categories: absolute power (*monopoly* or *dominant*), power-sharing regimes (*senior* or *junior partner*), and exclusion from central power (*powerless* or *discriminated*). I collapsed these categories into three ranked ordered categories: no access (includes discriminated and powerless categories, coded “0”), some access (includes senior partner, junior partner, and autonomy categories, coded “1”), and full access (includes monopoly and dominant categories, coded “2”). Further, to account for the pre-war values, I subtracted the value for the outcome variable at one year before the armed conflict started from the values at years 2 and 5 following the end of the conflict episode. This *change* variable ranges from -1 to 2 with a mean of 0.14 and a standard deviation of 0.44. A difference of means test indicates that access to state power for groups with kin across an international border that were a part of the ruling coalition shows a significant improvement after the conflict, relative to the change in access to state power for other groups.

The Kurdish conflict in Turkey is arguably one of the most complicated ethnic conflicts in the contemporary world since the Kurds who reside primarily in the eastern part of the country have engaged in armed rebellions against repressive state policies and additionally are spread across international boundaries of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. This conflict has become

more complicated with the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq and the prospects of a similar entity in northeastern Syria. Below, I present evidence from in-depth interviews with leading political actors from among the Kurdish minority in Iraq and Turkey and demonstrate how the emerging Kurdish reality in northern Iraq has become increasingly an essential element in laying the foundations for a peaceful and potentially democratic coexistence between ethnic Kurds and the Turkish government.

The Kurds: A Transnational Actor

The Kurds are one of the largest ethnicities in the Middle East, numbering between 35 and 40 million—comprising roughly 20 percent of the total population in both Turkey and Iraq and 10 percent of the total populations in Iran and Syria.¹⁷ This has led some to describe them as “the largest nation in the world without its own independent state.”¹⁸ The cultural and geographical proximity between the Kurds has played an important role in the birth, evolution, and transformation of the Kurdish nationalist movement.

Of the four parts of Kurdish-dominated territories found in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, Turkish- and Iraqi Kurdish-populated regions deserve more attention for three main reasons. First, they are “geographic and ethno-cultural extensions of each other.”¹⁹ Second, over half of the total Kurdish population lives in Turkey. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Iraqi Kurdistan is the first and only Kurdish entity that has received some international recognition.

The relationships between the Kurds and their states have been characterized by numerous violent uprisings and acts of repression resulting from the central governments’ policies of forced assimilation. The Turkish authorities employed numerous social and constitutional devices to eliminate everything that might suggest a separate Kurdish nation.²⁰ These policies included, but were not limited to, the denial of the Kurds as a distinct ethnic group as well as a ban against the Kurdish language and forbidding the display of other symbols of Kurdishness.²¹

The repressive state policies, coupled with the defeat of the Kurdish rebellions for autonomy or independence during Turkey’s formative years (1923–1938), generated a long period of coerced tranquility in the Kurdish provinces. This period came to an end with the rise of the militant Kurdish organization, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party or PKK. The PKK has sustained an armed struggle against the state since 1984 with profound domestic and international consequences. The PKK has been described as “a major threat

to Turkish state security”²² and “by far the most serious Kurdish armed struggle... since the founding of the [Turkish] state.”²³ It has succeeded in gaining sizeable material support from the Kurds in Turkey as well as moral and logistical support from the Kurds that live in neighboring states. The PKK is “the leading actor of the transnational Kurdish nationalist movement that also includes several political parties, many associations, and a large constituency in Turkey and elsewhere.”²⁴

The conflict reached its peak in the 1990s during which the Turkish armed forces conducted extensive military operations inside and outside of the Kurdish region, including cross-border air and ground incursions against the PKK bases in northern Iraq. In 1999 the PKK, following the capture of its leader Abdullah Öcalan, announced a unilateral ceasefire and abandoned its goal of creating an independent Kurdish state to begin seeking a negotiated peace deal with the Turkish government. Although the issues that gave rise to the initial war onset in the 1980s have yet to be resolved, the armed conflict has entered a distinct phase since the 2000s. This phase, as Yavuz argues, is still in formation with a chance for accommodation between divergent Turkish and Kurdish aspirations.²⁵

The War in Iraq and the Rise of Kurdish Reality

The invasion of Iraq and the events that ensued have shifted the balance of power in the region and generated important outcomes for both the Kurdish people and the states in which they live as minority groups. The emergence of a de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq caused alarm in Turkey, Iran, and Syria—Iraq’s three neighbors with significant Kurdish populations.

States “recognizing a common problem along their borders may engage in constructive dialogue” to manage these threats.²⁶ Despite their differences, Iraq (under Saddam Hussein), Iran, and Turkey showed a significant amount of cooperation against the rise and spread of Kurdish nationalist movements. The relations between Iran and Turkey over the Kurds have improved since the invasion of Iraq. Despite disagreements over several issues, the two governments signed a memorandum in 2008 to cooperate in fighting the Kurdish insurgency while engaging in talks over the status of the semi-autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Iraq.²⁷

Syria, a country that has had tense relations with Turkey in the past over a series of issues, abandoned its anti-Turkey policies and adopted a friendlier relationship with the Turkish state. Syrian–Turkish ties flourished following the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003. The Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, during his first presidential visit to the Turkish capital in 2004, signed a memorandum of understanding to deal with the changes that

the invasion of Iraq produced. The Turkish military incursion into northern Iraq to eliminate the PKK bases in early 2008 received diplomatic support from Syria. This relationship was solidified in June 2010 with the removal of visa restrictions between Turkey and Syria to facilitate the movement of goods and people.²⁸ Since August 2011, with the onset of the anti-regime protests and Syrian regime's deadly crackdown on dissent, the relationship between the two countries has deteriorated. The Syrian government suspended a free trade agreement with Turkey in retaliation for Turkish sanctions against Syria.²⁹ The Turkish support for the Syrian opposition cannot be considered independent from the Kurdish issue. Turkey's support for the Syrian opposition, primarily the Muslim Brotherhood, aims at preventing the Kurds from achieving some form of autonomy in the post-Assad Syria since such an outcome would have put pressure on Turkey to do the same for its own Kurdish minority.

The Turkish policy toward Iraq is based upon preventing the disintegration of Iraq and therefore avoids the emergence of an independent Kurdish state right across its border. Even before the invasion of Iraq, the Turkish government stated that it would deem an independent Kurdish state in Iraq as an act of aggression to its own territorial unity.³⁰ In 2005, a new constitution for Iraq was approved that gave official sanction to the de facto Kurdish entity in the north. This entity, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), reestablished the fear of Kurdish nationalism in the minds of the Turkish public. The Turkish officials openly opposed the emergence of an independent Kurdish state and Kurdish demands for the oil-rich province of Kirkuk.

In 2007, then Turkish chief of staff, Yasar Büyükanıt, referred to the fight against the PKK as "the greatest in [Turkey's] entire history."³¹ During his visit to Washington, DC, he accused the Kurdish groups in northern Iraq of supporting the PKK³² and later called for a military incursion into Iraq to eliminate the PKK bases. These tense relations culminated in the Turkish airstrikes and ground offensives against the PKK bases in the Qandil Mountains in the northern tip of Iraq. Although the Turkish government claimed victory and argued that it has shown its will and capability to cross the border whenever it deems necessary, the end outcome was far from destroying the PKK bases or support for the insurgency.³³

The KRG expressed its opposition to Turkish involvement in Iraq as it feared that Turkish interference, in the pretext of protecting the small Turcoman minority in Kirkuk or eliminating the PKK bases in the Qandil Mountains, would be directed against the fledgling KRG. The distrust reached such a point that Massoud Barzani, the president of the KRG, stated that if Turkey "interferes in our bid to attach Kirkuk to KRG, we will

retaliate by interfering into Diyarbakir,” the largest Kurdish city in south-eastern Turkey.³⁴

From Denial to Recognition

The relations between the KRG and the Turkish government took a significant turn starting mid-2008. Shortly after the military offensive into northern Iraq, Jalal Talabani, president of Iraq, visited Ankara in March 2008.³⁵ Turkey began to engage the KRG on the condition that the KRG takes some measures against the PKK.³⁶ These warm relations culminated in the Turkish prime minister’s visit to Erbil, the capital of the KRG, in April 2011—an event that served “as a testament to the remarkable breakthrough in relations between Ankara and Erbil.”³⁷

In late 2009, the Turkish government took some steps toward resolving the country’s long-standing Kurdish conflict. These steps, known as the “Kurdish initiative,” fell short of meeting the Kurdish demands but opened a public debate over how to resolve the issues. The initiative also sought to ease restrictions on public expression of Kurdish identity by restoring Kurdish names and allowing the Kurdish language to be offered as an elective course in secondary and high schools.³⁸ To date, the government has launched a 24-hour Kurdish-language TV station and allowed several universities in the Kurdish-populated region, notably Artuklu University (Mardin) and Dicle University (Diyarbakir), to offer a two-year master’s degree program on Kurdish language and culture (Kurdology). Furthermore, in June 2012, Turkey’s Prime Minister Erdogan announced the plan to offer Kurdish-language elective courses at the fifth-grade level.

Members of the Peace and Democracy Party, the pro-Kurdish party that is often described as the political wing of the PKK, describe the plan as “cruelty” and just another tactic to assimilate the Kurds. Gulten Kisanak, the co-chairperson of the Peace and Democracy Party, stated that the actions of the prime minister essentially translate into a directive of “go to school, learn Turkish, become assimilated, and then learn your own language.”³⁹ Although the Kurdish political elite describe these reforms as “cosmetic,” “disingenuous,” and “geared toward improving a façade” rather than a result of a serious attempt to address the Kurdish demands,⁴⁰ the initiative marks the end of a categorical denial of the Kurdish existence on both sides of the border and takes steps toward reconciliation with the Kurds.

The lack of trust between the PKK and its affiliates, primarily the pro-Kurdish political party, and the government, and the latter’s refusal to engage the PKK for a peaceful resolution, coupled with ongoing civil war in

neighboring Syria, led to one of the bloodiest years in the conflict. According to a report by the International Crisis Group released in September 2012, the conflict had become more violent, generating “more than 700 dead in fourteen months, the highest casualties in thirteen years.”⁴¹

Shortly after these armed clashes, and in a stark contrast to previous talks with the PKK that took place behind the scenes, the Turkish prime minister in December 2012 publicly acknowledged that his government had initiated a peace process with the jailed leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, aimed toward disarming the PKK. These “peace talks” have been welcomed by numerous civil society groups from among the Turks and Kurds and have raised hopes for a peaceful coexistence between the Turks and Kurds.

The Kurds in Iraq and the Conflict in Turkey

The data from interviews with 30 leading figures from among the Kurdish minority in Iraq and 17 in Turkey conducted between 2008 and 2011 shed light on the transnational aspect of the Kurdish issue and seek to explain the changing Turkish policy toward the Kurds. These interviews were conducted in English and Kurdish in Iraqi Kurdistan and in Turkish and Kurdish in Turkey. The majority of the interviews were held in the interviewees’ offices and lasted about an hour. The 30 face-to-face interviews with key members of the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan were conducted in July 2010 and May 2011. The sample includes senior officials from the two ruling political parties (Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)), the spokesman for the main opposition party, Goran (Change) movement, journalists, human rights activists, businessmen, and academics from all three provinces of Iraqi Kurdistan: Erbil, Suleimania, and Duhok.

The interviewees from Turkey include party members of the pro-Kurdish political parties—Democratic Society Party and the Peace and Democracy Party—mayors in the predominantly Kurdish part of the country, and members of parliament from the pro-Kurdish political parties. The sample also includes more informal and less structured conversations with dozens of ordinary Kurds. The interviewees were selected from Istanbul, the largest city in Turkey with a substantial number of ethnic Kurds; Ankara, the capital city and the site of the parliament; Diyarbakir, the largest city in southeastern Turkey; and Batman, an oil-rich city in the same region. The last two cities are known for their strong support for the PKK and the pro-Kurdish political parties.

The bilateral trade between Turkey and Iraq, especially between Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey, has increased dramatically in the last few years. According to the data provided by the Turkish Statistical Institute, the annual exports to Iraq show a significant jump—from almost \$4 billion in 2008 to more than \$6 billion in 2010.⁴² Turkish goods make up about 80 percent of the market in Iraqi Kurdistan with hundreds of Turkish construction firms benefiting from the KRG's new infrastructure projects.⁴³ According to the semi-official Anatolian News Agency, Turkish goods dominate Iraq's retail and construction markets, making up to 70 percent of the total market. Further, "approximately 60 percent of companies in northern Iraq are from Turkey and the number of people working and running businesses in the region [has] exceeded 15,000."⁴⁴

Iraqi Kurdistan, with its unexplored oil and natural gas reserves, along with its bid to absorb oil-rich city of Kirkuk, is becoming an important actor in energy supply. Because it is landlocked, the KRG transports its oil mainly through the pipeline connecting Kirkuk to the eastern Mediterranean port of Ceyhan in Turkey. Future pipeline projects to connect the vast gas reserves in the Middle East (e.g., Kurdistan, Iraq), the Caspian region, and Egypt to Europe has added a further international dimension to the Kurdish conflict.

When asked, "in your opinion, how important is the economic interdependence on building friendly relations between Turkey and KRG?," the response was a unanimous "very important." Fadel Omar, the chief-editor of *Waar*, an independent daily in Duhok, states that "Iraqi Kurdistan has become an economic backyard for Turkey." According to Sadi Pire, a senior official and member of the politburo of the PUK, there are over 1,000 Turkish companies operating in Iraqi Kurdistan. This economic interdependence, some of the interviewees argued, is becoming even more important as the Turkish investors start to consider the Iraqi Kurdistan market as a more stable alternative to the volatile markets of countries like Libya, Egypt, and Syria. Azad Jindyn, the media director of the PUK in Suleimania, summarizes by saying that "increasing economic interdependence is bringing us [the KRG and Turkey] closer."

The interviewees, however, were eager to point out that there is more to the Kurdish demands than those pertaining to the economy. According to Asos Hardi, the general manager of a publishing company who is also serving on the Human Rights Watch Advisory Committee in Iraqi Kurdistan, "economy does matter, but it is just one factor among others." Hilkat Abdula, an intellectual and human rights activist, states that while economic ties have helped to improve relations between Turkey and the KRG, the issues should not be confined to their respective economies.

Sadi Pire, the aforementioned senior official of the PUK, argued that the KRG has encouraged Turkish companies to invest in Kurdistan with the goal of creating a stake in Kurdistan for Turkey, thus decreasing the risk of an armed conflict between the parties. Sardar Sharif, a lecturer at the University of Duhok, argued that Turkey has softened its policies toward the Kurds in Iraq because it could no longer afford to ignore or overlook the growing political and economic importance of Kurdistan right across Turkey's border. Turkey, according to Sharif, was forced to come to terms with the Kurds. This view was shared by several other interviewees. When asked about whether they find the Turkish government's recent moves toward improving relations with the KRG to be a genuine attempt to reconcile with the Kurds or a tactic to weaken and/or block the rise of Kurdish nationalism, they argued that regardless of Turkey's true intentions, realities on the ground are pushing for a reconciliation with the Kurds.

As the conversations touched upon the more sensitive issue of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, the responses became more diplomatic. Nonetheless, it became obvious that the respondents in Iraq deemed the Kurdish conflict in Turkey as a fight for greater autonomy and freedom. Although the majority of the interviewees disavowed violent means to achieve greater political rights, they wholeheartedly expressed their support for the Kurdish cause in Turkey and openly talked about the Kurds in Turkey as "their ethnic brethren." Throughout the conversations the phrases "we are one," "their suffering is ours," and "we all are a part of the same nation" were commonly used by the interviewees to express their support for the Kurds in Turkey.

The interviewees in Turkey put more emphasis on the political aspect of the relationship. Only one of the interviewees pointed out the link between Kurdistan as a supplier of oil and natural gas and the prospects for peace. All respondents, however, expressed their support for the emergence of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq. Some argued that it should be considered as a gain for the Kurds regardless of divisions among the Kurdish parties. Osman Baydemir, the mayor of Diyarbakir, the largest city in the predominantly Kurdish southeast, stated that "no matter what, of course the emergence of a Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq is a gain for us."

During the interviews, the respondents showed an important amount of enthusiasm and optimism about the prospect for greater political rights for the Kurdish minority in Turkey. The developments on the other side of the border have become a model for what can be achieved. In Assos Hardi's words, the aforementioned interviewee from Iraqi Kurdistan, "the KRG has become a model for putting an end to ethnic conflicts without necessarily altering the internationally recognized territorial borders." Despite decades

of physical separation, the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey are increasingly becoming allies in the fight against repressive and discriminatory state policies.

Economic interdependence has provided strong incentives for parties to soften their otherwise radical approaches to the Kurdish problem. Nonetheless, economic ties alone fail to explain the complexities and realities on the ground. The Kurds in Iraq and Turkey see each other as an “asset,” a “natural ally,” and “a backyard”—as evidenced by an increasing dialog between the KRG and the Kurdish political elite in Turkey. Perhaps more importantly, as one of the interviewees stated, unless the conflict in Turkey comes to a mutually acceptable end, the Kurds in Iraq will always have to deal with Turkey, risking the loss of what they have achieved in the last decade. Although the KRG leaders have made calls to the PKK to cease its armed struggle against Turkey and adopt a peaceful approach to the problem, they have resisted the Turkish demands for attacking the PKK militants and bases within their borders. In November 2011, the PKK attacked and killed 24 Turkish soldiers causing a Turkish uproar. Shortly after, Massoud Barzani, the president of the KRG, during his visit to Turkey, turned down Turkey’s request to fight the PKK militants and instead offered to mediate between the parties in search of a peaceful resolution.⁴⁵

To be sure, these changes cannot be analyzed in isolation from significant democratization reforms that the AKP government has undertaken in the last decade, primarily as a part of the European Union (EU) accession talks.⁴⁶ The invasion of Iraq and the events that ensued, most notably the rise of a Kurdish semi-autonomous region in northern Iraq, however, have increased the political, military, and economic cost of repression against the large Kurdish minority in Turkey. The emerging Kurdish reality on the other side of the border, coupled with strong economic incentives and the cost of armed conflict against the PKK, have gradually, but surely, pushed Turkey to make peace with its own Kurdish reality.

Conclusions

Ethnic civil wars pose a serious challenge to domestic and international stability as an overwhelming number of these ethnic minorities transcend international boundaries. Ethnic civil wars are harder to resolve and less likely to end in a negotiated settlement than ideological wars. That said, of the ethnic groups that engaged an armed conflict against their governments since 1950, only a few successfully seceded from their governments and gained formal independence. Some armed conflicts (e.g., Abkhazians and Ossetians in Georgia; Slavs in Moldova) resulted in *de facto* partition with

serious doubts over the viability of these entities. In a significant number of ethnic civil wars that began and ended between 1950 and 2006, ethnic rebels negotiated a peace deal with their governments. To name a few: the Bodos, Nagas, and Tripuras in India, the Acehnese in Indonesia, the Mayans in Mexico, the Hutus in Burundi, the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Bougainvilleans in Papua New Guinea all signed peace treaties to end their armed rebellions. To be sure, building peaceful and democratic relationship requires more than signing a peace agreement; yet despite the complexities involved in ethnic conflicts, a democratic coexistence seems to be a viable alternative to war.

The Kurdish demands in Turkey have gone through important changes over the years. A democratic solution that accommodates Kurdish aspirations is critical for the sustainment of peace and advancement of democracy in the region. As the case of the Kurds in Iraq demonstrates, the Kurds can serve as a useful instrument to create and sustain democratic regimes in countries without a history of democracy. And resolving the Kurdish issue in Turkey by addressing the Kurdish demands for greater autonomy can help strengthen existing democratic institutions in Turkey. Addressing the key Kurdish demands such as recognition and safeguarding of education in Kurdish as a mother tongue, a new definition of citizenship with equal distance to all ethnic identity, and the empowerment of local administration⁴⁷ can bolster democracy in Turkey. As Abramowitz and Barkey argue, the Turkish government can both gain and lose a lot from its policies toward the Kurds because “the issue is the biggest drag on Turkish political life, undermining the political and administrative reforms, constraining the country’s foreign policy choices, and requiring huge military expenditures to combat the decades-old insurgency led by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party [PKK].”⁴⁸

The armed conflict between the PKK and Turkey is yet to be resolved but it can no longer be considered in isolation with the events unfolding on the other side of the border. Domestic level factors, such as the weakening of the military/secular block coupled with a substantial economic growth in the last decade, and the desire to join the EU have clearly facilitated a peaceful resolution to the decades-long conflict. Nonetheless, the emergence of the KRG in northern Iraq and the new role the Kurds play in Iraqi politics, coupled with the prospects of a similar entity in Syria, have changed the dynamics of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. As the ethnic Kurds in Iraq and possibly in Syria are rapidly becoming politically relevant, reconciling with the Kurdish reality in Turkey could create a model for peaceful and democratic coexistence.

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CHAPTER 13

Ankara, Erbil, Baghdad: Relations Fraught with Dilemmas*

Ofra Bengio

Introduction

At the beginning of 2013, a new book was published in Turkey under the title *Yeni Komşumuz Kürdistan* (Our New Neighbor Kurdistan).¹ This very title represented the revolution that the Turkish–Kurdish–Iraqi triangle has undergone of late. First of all, the Turkish author Simla Yerlikaya is not reluctant to use the term Kurdistan which only a few years ago could have sent her to prison in Turkey.² Second, by referring to Kurdistan, namely the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as neighbor, it is implied that this neighbor is no longer the Iraqi state but the Kurdistan entity in Iraq. Presented in this manner, this entity does not seem to pose a threat to Turkey any more, but rather present opportunities. Though not an official publication, Yerlikaya’s book does reflect the changing approach in the higher echelon of power in Turkey toward its neighbor. While for the greater part of the twentieth century Ankara’s partner was Baghdad, now it has become Erbil. Indeed, the dramatic change covers various economic, cultural, and political spheres.

This essay seeks to answer the following questions: What was the nature of the relations between Ankara and Baghdad before the shift? What is the explanation for the change among the three partners of the triangle? What is the role of the United States in this change? To what extent are the changes tactical and to what extent strategic? This essay argues that

there was a paradigmatic shift among all players; that in this shift Turkey appears to be the initiator, the KRG the activist, and Baghdad the reactive partner; and finally that all players having had to choose between two evils are now on the horns of a dilemma regarding the possible outcomes of their choice. The state of turmoil in the region, the changing alliances among the different players in the Middle East, the agonizing democratization process and the rise of the Sunni-Shi'i divide only serve to accentuate these dilemmas.

The Cooling of Relations between Ankara and Baghdad

Historically speaking, there was a kind of natural alliance between Ankara and Baghdad. Indeed, Baghdad's relations with Ankara were the smoothest and the least troubled of all its other neighbors. These relations were based on various common denominators: common economic and geopolitical interests; common internal enemies (namely the Kurds) and at the time also external rivals such as Syria and Iran; as well as common ideological and political affinities. Thus, even though the regimes in both countries declared themselves to be secular and opposed to political Islam, there was still strong Sunni bonds between the governments of the two states which were led by Sunnis until 2003. In certain periods, the two states also shared a pro-western orientation.

This partnership found expression among other things in the Saadabad Pact of 1937 and Baghdad Pact of 1955. Similarly, during the Iraqi-Iranian war (1980–1988) the two parties signed a hot pursuit agreement against the Kurdish Turkish *Partiye Karkeren Kurdistan* (PKK). Economically speaking, Iraq and Turkey built the strategic oil pipeline that became active in 1977 and that was the only outlet to Iraqi oil during the crucial years of the war up until 1991. Iraq's total dependence on the Turkish outlet was due to the closure of the pipeline to the Shatt al-'Arab immediately at the flare up of the war in 1980 and the closure of the Iraqi-Syrian pipeline by Damascus in 1982. On the whole, economic relations between Iraq and Turkey flourished during the war and were beneficial to both. On the political level, it can be argued that during the 1980s there were also certain affinities between the two governments that reached power by way of a putsch and militarized their societies in one way or another.

The gradual cooling of relations between Ankara and Baghdad began in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War after which at each new phase another building block of the ties collapsed, with relations reaching their nadir by 2013. The catalyst for this development was the American wars on Iraq

in 1991 and 2003; however, internal processes in each part of the triangle accounted for the tectonic change.

The first component to be severely hit was economic relations. Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Turkey joined the allies in their sanctions against Iraq by closing the strategic oil pipeline to Ceyhan in Turkey. In fact, Turkish President Turgut Özal took the initiative by cutting off Iraq's pipeline to Turkey even before President George Bush asked him to do so.³ This move caused a severe blow to Iraqi economy but it hit Turkey as well. At the same time, Turkey allowed for smuggled oil emanating from the KRG to reach Turkey by way of tankers. Even though economically speaking this was far from compensating Ankara for the loss of dividends from the closed Iraqi pipeline, the move nonetheless necessitated direct ties between Turkey and the KRG, thus granting the latter certain legitimacy.

The second building block suffered a blow as a result of the Kurdish uprising, the *Serbildan*, in the aftermath of the war in 1991 and the concomitant withdrawal of the Iraqi army from the Kurdish region. These two moves brought the Iraqi Kurdish problem to the very door of Turkey. For one thing, as a result of the uprising about half a million Iraqi Kurds flocked to the Turkish borders in an attempt to find refuge in Turkey from the Iraqi army. For another, the withdrawal of the Iraqi army suggested that Iraq was no longer the master of the common borders between the two countries, which meant that Ankara had to deal directly with the KRG in order to avert the spillover effects of these developments into Turkey. The direct dealing with the KRG was all the more pressing since the upheavals in the region enabled the PKK to further enlarge its bases inside the Iraqi Kurdistan Region while they also helped enhance ties between Iraqi and Turkish Kurds. Little wonder then that Turgut Özal, the Turkish president at the time, was behind the idea of a safe haven for the Kurds of Iraq that allowed for the return of the Kurdish refugees to their home, but at the same time gave birth to the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq.⁴

The Gulf War of 2003 and the rise of the Shiites to power in Iraq caused gradual estrangement between the governments of Ankara and Baghdad. This was no coincidence as at almost the same time the two governments which came to power had unambiguous religious inclinations. Thus, for the first time in modern history the two governments in Ankara and Baghdad had conflicting worldviews on Islam: The Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) government in Turkey was Sunni and the government in Baghdad was led by the Shiite majority. The Turkish journalist Semih İdiz described the new development, saying that Turkey was witnessing Islamization and Sunnification of its foreign policy.⁵ The fact that this trend coincided with

the Islamization and Shi`ization of Iraq's foreign policy made the estrangement between the two parties almost inevitable.

It was true that as late as March 2011 Erdoğan came on a visit to Iraq which included Erbil, Baghdad, and Najaf. Though the visit to Najaf was indeed unusual for a Sunni Muslim leader, it still did not manage to bridge the growing gap between the two governments in Ankara and Baghdad. Nor did the policies of Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, make relations any easier. Maliki's growing authoritarian tendencies did not endear him in the eyes of Ankara. Turkey's expectations were that the democratization process in Baghdad which was unleashed by the United States following the 2003 War would lead to a reconciliation between all parts of Iraqi society and enable the Sunnis to have a share in power. But this was not to be. Even though the framework of democracy, such as constitution and elections, was put in place, the democratization process was far from taking root. One of the reasons was Maliki's ongoing policies to isolate the Sunni community and marginalize the Sunnis in his coalition government. In this way rather than solving problems in a democratic way in the parliament, Sunni and Shi`i reverted to the language of violence which brought the country to the verge of civil war. These developments served in turn to increase the Sunni-Shi`i divide between Ankara and Baghdad. Adding fuel to the fire was Erdoğan's support in the 2010 Iraqi elections to al-`Iraqiyya, the majority Sunni list, against that of al-Maliki. Erdoğan went on to give refuge to one of the leaders of this party, Tariq al-Hashemi, against whom the Maliki government issued death punishment. This is another example of how Turkey initiated certain moves against the central government in Baghdad to which the latter was mainly reactive.

The two other developments that accelerated the pace of estrangement between Ankara and Baghdad were the upheavals in Syria which started in March 2011 and the final withdrawal of the American forces from Iraq at the end of 2011. Following the withdrawal of the American forces there started a strong competition between Ankara and Tehran to fill the vacuum left by the United States. And while Iran deepened its penetration into the Arab part of Iraq, Turkey did so in the Kurdish part whose population is also mostly Sunni. Furthermore, due to religious affinities between the Iraqi and Iranian governments, there was, for the first time in decades, a shift in the Iraqi worldview and orientation. While until 2003 Baghdad looked at Ankara as a kind of strategic depth against Shiite Iran, now Baghdad began to view Iran as a strategic depth for facing a hostile Sunni neighborhood that was reluctant to grant real legitimization to a Shiite-led government.

It seems, however, that the major factor that put Ankara and Baghdad at geopolitical loggerheads was the upheavals in Syria. While Ankara became

the pioneer in seeking to oust its erstwhile ally Bashar al-Asad from power, Baghdad joined the Iranian wagon by allying itself with the Syrian Ba'ath regime. Here too, the sectarian divide played an important role. While Ankara granted all out support to the Sunni Syrian opposition, Baghdad facilitated support to the Alawite government in Damascus with its pro-Shi'i tendencies. A Shiite Iraqi minister even went as far as to declare that the support that Turkey granted to the rebels in Syria was tantamount to a declaration of war on Iraq because the sectarian struggle in Syria might spill into Iraq and endanger it as well.⁶ This shift in discourse and practice is all the more ironic since after the 2003 Iraqi war it was Syria that was the main exporter of terrorist activities into Iraq.

To sum up, all these parameters demonstrate severe erosion in the Baghdad–Ankara relationship, which shifted the weight of Turkey's foreign policy priorities toward Erbil. Meanwhile, deep changes have taken place in the KRG as well, which have facilitated Turkey's dramatic shift.

Evolution in the Kurdish Camp

While the 2003 War severely destabilized the central government in Baghdad, brought to the surface the Sunni–Shi'i divide, failed to democratize the state, and wrought havoc to the economy, different dynamics were at work in the KRG where a quasi-state has been emerging. Analyzing the political system in Iraq, political scientist Aram Rifaat suggested that in Iraq there were two quasi-states, the Kurdish and the Iraqi one, with the main difference between them being that the former lacked recognition which the latter had it. Regarding the quasi-state, Rifaat mentions four major elements characterizing such an entity: a process of nation building; militarization of the society and the establishment of an army independently from the existing state; weakness of the state that brings about a change in the balance of power between itself and the quasi-state; and finally the existence of external patronage.⁷

Examining these criteria it is doubtful that one can talk about Iraq as a quasi-state; rather, it is a failed state. However, the Kurdish entity certainly fits this model because the four elements do exist there. The nation-building process has been accelerated since the 2003 War, including all the trappings of an independent entity both on the political level such as an independent parliament and government and on the symbolic level such as an anthem and a flag. Regarding the criterion of militarization, the KRG has turned the guerrilla force, the *peshmerga*, into an army with reportedly 200,000 soldiers⁸ and heavy arms that included “a large fleet of Russian-made war-planes left from the Saddam era”⁹ as well as tanks that were taken as booty from the two wars of 1991 and 2003.

The weakness of the central government needs no elaboration. Suffice it to mention that Baghdad has lost control altogether on the Kurdish region even though the system is a federal one.¹⁰ Thus, on paper, Iraq is still the sovereign in the Kurdish region, but in practice it is not. The weakness of the Iraqi government was demonstrated in its recent call on the KRG to hand over the warplanes and tanks at its disposal if it wanted to remain “within a united Iraq.” However, not only did the KRG ignore the call but it even went on to purchase new weapons.¹¹

As to patronage it is quite paradoxical that in the last few years Turkey has assumed the role of patron of the KRG or may be better said its main lifeline. Seen from a historical perspective, this region which represented the *vilayet* of Mosul under the Ottomans was indeed naturally linked to the northern part of the Ottoman Empire and the Jazira rather than to the *vilayet* of Baghdad and Basra.

In addition to the four criteria mentioned by Rafaat, one should add three other important ones that highlight the autonomous disposition of the KRG, namely separate elections for a Kurdish president and parliament, foreign relations, and economy. Even though foreign relations should have been the exclusive domain of the central government, in the unique federative system which has evolved in Iraq the Kurdish region is conducting its own foreign relations almost independently from Baghdad. This is evident in the consulates which many countries have established in Erbil and which function as embassies in all but name.¹² The frequent visits of the President of Kurdistan Massoud Barzani to different countries including the United States and Russia where he is being accorded a welcome of a head of state are another indicative of this autonomous status. The same is true for all the other Kurdish officials who have become *personae grata* in many of these countries. Similarly, many countries and companies feel at greater ease to cut deals with Erbil rather than with Baghdad because the KRG is more stable, prosperous, and secure. In the case of certain Arab countries, the antipathy toward the Shi'i-led government in Baghdad adds another incentive for maintaining relations with the Kurds.

The economic realm is even more intriguing because of the huge oil and gas resources that were found in Kurdistan and that turned them into the main bone of contention between Erbil and Baghdad. The KRG's independent policy is evident in its deals with various firms and companies that more often than not bypass the central government's injunction. Even more dangerous from the central government point of view are the new pipelines that are being built in full steam in the KRG and that, when completed, may grant the KRG economic autonomy and thus accelerate the pace of political independence.

Another very important point which distinguishes the KRG from the Baghdad government is that the democratization process is proceeding there at a better pace than in the Arab portion of Iraq. This was borne out among other things by the different elections which are held independently from that of the central government. In fact, as a rule nonrecognized entities seek to improve democratic norms as a strategy in order to enhance their chances for gaining international recognition and preserving their de facto independent status.¹³

Turkey's Changing Conceptualization

Under the AKP government which first came to power in 2002, there were dramatic changes in this party's perception of the Kurdish issue in Turkey which in turn had its repercussions on Ankara's ties with the KRG. And vice versa, the dramatic changes in the KRG had repercussions on the domestic Kurdish issue in Turkey, moving Ankara to articulate a new policy toward the Kurds.¹⁴ Generally speaking, the domestic Kurdish issue has always been an important component of Turkish foreign policy but in the last decade this factor was accelerated significantly so that the domestic Kurdish issue became intertwined with the external one in a way that they cannot be separated any more. Anyway, the changing paradigm in Turkey's approach to the KRG can be summarized as follows: while in the past the KRG was perceived as part of Turkey's internal Kurdish problem, in the last few years the KRG came to be perceived as a partner to the solution.

Paradoxically enough, in its deeds and misdeeds the AKP government contributed immensely to the establishment and flourishing of the KRG. By not permitting the allies to attack Iraq from its lands in 2003, Ankara enabled the KRG to seize this golden opportunity to consolidate its quasi-state and put itself on the regional and international map. First, the KRG managed to develop open relations with external powers, the most important of which were the Americans. Second, it proved its loyalty and prowess when it helped occupy the northern part of Iraq and later also in establishing the new Iraqi government. Similarly, it proved its importance to the United States in comparison to Turkey and forced the latter to accept the KRG as a *fait accompli*. Indeed, the AKP's approach became now the old dictum: "if you cannot beat your enemy, join him."

Concurrently, there were important changes vis-à-vis the Kurds in Turkey itself. In its drive to weaken the military and win the Kurdish vote, the AKP initiated a new approach to the Kurdish issue that was not based solely on military means.¹⁵ The "Kurdish opening" of 2009 which purported to solve the Kurdish issue by peaceful means was just this program. It seems that it

was no mere coincidence that the “Kurdish opening” in Turkey coincided with the new opening toward the KRG. Ankara’s double track policy was meant to marginalize and neutralize the PKK at home while also using the KRG’s good will in order to contain the PKK whose bases are in the KRG. However, while the internal track failed to materialize at least until 2013 the external one succeeded beyond expectations. While until 2008 Turkey perceived the Kurdish entity as a great danger to itself, from then on Ankara began to tilt toward the KRG at the expense of Baghdad. In other words, Turkey forged an unwritten alliance with the KRG while dropping the historical close relationship with Baghdad.¹⁶ An illustration of this shift were Massoud Barzani’s visits to Turkey in four consecutive years 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013 where he was accorded a reception of a head of state and not that of a tribal leader as before.¹⁷ The last one was pathbreaking as it took place in Diyarbakir, the “capital” of the Kurds in Turkey. Thus within one year from 2007 to 2009 there was a dramatic shift in the relations from near eruption of military conflict between Turkey and the KRG to one of understanding and close relationship. A Turkish commentator described the change saying: “In the past, Turkey and Barzani had very different relations, but today they meet as two close allies.”¹⁸ Another commentator had this to say on the new role of Barzani: “Some time ago he was considered as a local bandit. Now he is considered as statesman.”¹⁹

Turkey’s Motivations for the Shift

Economic interests were the first trigger for the change and only later were they followed by geopolitical ones. Over time, the KRG managed to attract Turkish entrepreneurs whose vested interests in the region turned them into the best advocate for strong relations with the KRG. More importantly, the rich oil and gas resources in the Kurdistan Region were so attractive to the Turkish government that it was willing to sign agreements with the KRG including for the building of two oil pipelines and one gas pipeline from the KRG over the strong objection of Baghdad. A government whose main pillar of power was economic success did not find it so difficult to change partners especially when in the unstable Arab part of Iraq such relations were far from promising. Thus, within a few years Turkey became the main player in Iraqi Kurdistan using soft power as its main tool for increasing its influence in the region.²⁰ Numbers speak for themselves: 60 percent of all the companies active in the KRG are Turkish, employing 50,000 Turks.²¹ The volume of trade between Turkey and the KRG reached \$9 billion in 2012 equaling that between Turkey and Iran.²² In this sense, there is a shift in the roles of Turkey and Iran who was the Kurds’ patron during the 1970s and 1980s.

Linked to this is the geopolitical consideration. The stable and prosperous Kurdistan Region is now performing as a kind of buffer zone between Turkey and the turbulent Arab part of Iraq. It is also a kind of safety valve against the spread of Shi'ism into Turkey. No less important, the fact that it is Erbil and not Baghdad which is controlling the common border with Turkey turns the KRG into a more important partner for security cooperation along the border and beyond.²³ Similarly, the latent and sometimes open competition between Turkey and Iran on spheres of influence in Iraq and elsewhere in the region made the contiguous KRG a natural choice for Turkish influence.

The vision of neo-Ottomanism that was promoted by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu fits well in the new policy of engaging the KRG. Generally speaking, this ideology sets to encourage engagement with regions which had been previously under the Ottoman Empire, and indeed Davutoğlu was the mastermind behind the opening toward the KRG.²⁴ Davutoğlu came on a “historic” visit to the KRG in October 2009 where he declared that Turkey could serve as a bridge to Europe for the KRG while the KRG could serve as a gateway to the Gulf for Turkey.²⁵ In a way this Turkish move for “integrating” the KRG appears as a vindication for the loss of Mosul *vilayet* to Iraq back in 1925.²⁶ Ironically enough, the KRG appears to be the only region where the other pillar of Davutoğlu’s foreign policy architecture, the “zero problems with the neighbors,” is being realized.

Then there was the religious-ideological consideration. As the Sunni-Shi'i divide between Ankara and Baghdad continued to deepen, the religious affinities with the Sunni Kurds made them appear more reliable or pliant partners than Baghdad. A Turkish Professor Tayyar Arı maintained that “especially after Maliki’s policies in Iraq, it became compulsory for Turkey and the KRG to be in close contact. Maliki’s insincere attitude towards Sunnis led Turkey to take more initiatives towards the Sunni issue.”²⁷ A symbolical reflection of this approach was that Ankara and Erbil cooperated in granting safe haven to Tariq al-Hashemi. It seems therefore that Ankara had to choose the lesser of two evils and at that point of time Erbil appeared the right choice.

Still, of all the other considerations that of the internal Kurdish tipped the balance in Turkey’s decision to open up toward the KRG. The fact that Ankara initiated the opening toward its own Kurds and the KRG simultaneously speaks for itself. For one thing, the KRG appeared a factor that may help contain or rather pacify the Kurds of Turkey. Cengiz Aktar described Barzani’s role saying that the Turkish government was trying “to subcontract the solution of its own Kurdish problem to him.”²⁸ Indeed, one

unexpected outcome of the rapprochement between Ankara and the KRG may be that it has enhanced the process of democratization vis-à-vis the Kurds of Turkey.

Indeed the KRG, especially President Massoud Barzani, has assumed an important role in the mediation between Ankara and the PKK in the new phase of the peace process that started in early 2013.²⁹ Furthermore, contributing its own crucial part to the AKP–PKK deal, the KRG agreed to the withdrawal of PKK militants to its own region. This move was vehemently opposed by Baghdad which regarded it as an infringement on its sovereignty and a further boost to the KRG's independent foreign policy activities. However, its warning that the withdrawal would threaten Iraq's security and stability went unheeded and the withdrawal took place over Baghdad's objection as had happened in other cases in the past.³⁰ Iran too was totally opposed to the Turkish–Kurdish peace process for three reasons: First, it feared that the peace process would inspire its own Kurds. Second, it feared that a bolstered PKK in the KRG would bolster *Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê* (PJAK), the Kurdish Iranian opposition group which is related to the PKK and which has its bases in the KRG too. Third, Iran worried that the PKK would assist the emerging Kurdish autonomous enclave in Syria. It was even reported that at a certain point Iran offered military assistance to the PKK if they remained in Turkey.³¹ But this did not work either and the PKK began to fulfill their part in the agreement by withdrawing to the KRG. However, the PKK stopped the withdrawal in September 2013 due to lack of progress in the peace process.

With the eruption of upheavals in Syria and the establishment of Kurdish autonomy there in the summer of 2012, the KRG assumed another role in the Turkish perception, namely a possible pacifier of that region as well or as a balancing power to the influence of the PKK there. Even before the takeover, Massoud Barzani's visit to Turkey in April of that year centered on the topic of the Kurds of Syria and their possible moves in what they described as post-Assad Syria. In fact, Turkey was wary that the Kurds of Syria would declare autonomy or even independence.³² An indication of these worries was the visit of Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu to the KRG immediately after the July 2012 takeover of the Kurdish region in Syria by the Kurds.³³

All in all the KRG's acceptance of the PKK militants to its region and the role it has been playing in pacifying the Kurds in Syria may in the longer run prove as a balancing tool against possible future Turkish encroachment on the KRG. In other words, its new regional role may grant the Kurds a card vis-à-vis Turkey.

The Ambiguous American Role

For the greater part of the twentieth century, the United States kept aloof from the Kurdish issue in Iraq, one of the main reasons for which was the American unwillingness to antagonize Turkey, its main ally in the region. The United States was extremely sensitive toward Ankara's apprehensions of the Kurdish issue not just at home but in the neighboring countries as well, which threatened to have spillover effects on the Kurds in Turkey.³⁴ Another reason was that the American administration has always prioritized the integrity of the nation-states that had emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War over any other ethno-national consideration. However, developments on the ground in Iraq forced the United States to change its policies, though not its strict concepts. The erosion in the American policy started in the 1991 Gulf War when it decided to establish a "safe haven" region for the Kurds from which then emerged the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. From that time onwards, the United States became enmeshed in the Kurdish issue in Iraq, prioritizing this time the ethno-national group over the Ba'thi Iraqi state with which it was in a state of war. However, the main turning point in the American policy toward the Kurds took place in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraqi War in which the Kurds played a pivotal role in the liberation/occupation of Iraq. The Kurds were rewarded by having been granted a leading role in the formation of post-Saddam Iraq as well as with the entrenchment of their autonomy. This American policy toward the Kurds conflicted with its two other concepts, namely preserving the integrity of the nation-state and assuaging Ankara's fears regarding the spillover effects of the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq on the Kurds in Turkey. Accordingly, in a policy of eating the cake and having it too the United States continued to advocate the integrity of Iraq while further empowering the KRG, as well as playing the pacifier between the KRG and Turkey.

This American ambiguous stance is indeed one of the greatest ironies of the unfolding situation in the Turkish–Kurdish–Iraqi triangle. While for the greater part of the last two decades the United States had played the role of pacifier between Ankara and Erbil, in the last few years it has changed its approach by 180 degrees.³⁵ Now Washington is trying to put brakes on the ever-extending relations between Ankara and Erbil, warning both of closer relations. However, while the administration continues to stick to the idea of a unified Iraq, a growing number of voices in American think tanks do encourage the administration to change course and support an independent Kurdistan.³⁶

The main cause for the official American stance is that it found itself now between the Turkish hammer and the Iraqi anvil: between Turkey that is

one of its closest allies in the region and Iraq whom Washington had hoped to turn into a strategic asset and a model of democracy for all the Arab states. Put differently, the American administration has been endeavoring to balance between equally failing models of democracy which it had hoped to export to the Arab world: that of post-Saddam Iraq sponsored by President George W. Bush and that of Turkey's AKP sponsored by President Barak Obama.³⁷

While Turkey has softened on the idea of a unified Iraq, now paying it mere lip service, Washington continues to hope and work for this elusive target. Clearly, for all the support which the Kurds had granted the United States, Washington does not want to be perceived as responsible for splitting Iraq. However, for all of the American endeavors and warnings Ankara and Erbil are going their own way, building pipelines which might change the geopolitical map of the region. This development is yet another symptom of the weakening clout of the United States in the region as a whole. Its withdrawal at the end of 2011 only served to accentuate this weakness.

Conclusion

The tectonic changes in the region changed the balance of power within the state system as well as between the state system and the Kurdish subsystem. On the whole, all the players are on the horns of a dilemma. As far as Baghdad is concerned, if it puts too much pressure on Erbil to toe al-Maliki's line, it might push it to declare independence; if it does not, it might lose the support of Shi'is and Sunnis who look with anxiety at the vanishing dream of a unified Iraq. As to Baghdad-Ankara relations, they are in such a fragile state that should Baghdad strain them further it might push Turkey to increase its support to the KRG even to a point of supporting independence. While such a Turkish stance might be beneficial economically and strategically, it can also sow the seeds of Kurdish separatism in Turkey. Erbil too has its own dilemmas. On the one hand, it needs Turkey as its most likely outlet to the sea and for oil exports. On the other hand, a too close a relationship with Ankara might risk the KRG becoming a Turkish satellite, loose economic assets in Iraq, and exposing the Iraqi Kurds to Iranian threats and manipulations. Already now Iran warns Erbil against forging close relations with Ankara or thinking about independence.³⁸ Nor is the United States more comfortable with its choices. American oil companies, Turkey, and growing number of states and companies seek to do business with the KRG far from Iraqi control, but if Washington gives them the green light it will help break up Iraq. Increasingly, the United States is no longer in a position to decide either way, however.

While the KRG was considered as part of the Kurdish domestic problem in Turkey, now it is considered as a partner to the solution—a solution that holds out the distinct possibility of being more democratic than military. As for Iraq, while in the twentieth century it perceived Turkey as its strategic depth against Iran, after the 2003 War the Shi'i-led government in Baghdad perceives Iran as its strategic depth against a hostile Sunni neighborhood which includes Turkey as well. Turkey's empowerment of the Iraqi Kurds also helps assure that Baghdad will not easily reassert authoritarian control over Erbil. Regarding the Janus-faced Kurds, in the last 20 years they have been distancing themselves from their Iraqi past while accelerating their movement toward a Turkish-oriented future.

The Middle East is now in a state of flux. The upheavals that have engulfed many countries in the region, including Iraq and Syria, did not stop at Turkey's doorstep but came to include it as well. The old Turkish–Iraqi alliance has collapsed and so did the decade-long Turkish–Iranian–Syrian axis, leaving Turkey with only the KRG as an ally of sort in the Fertile Crescent. If or when Assad's regime falls, Turkey might want to further strengthen its relations with the KRG as a counterbalance to probable growing Iranian penetration into Iraq. In the process, the old Iraqi, Turkish, Syrian, and Iranian state consensus on forcefully repressing Kurdish aspirations appears fatally weakened.

The great Arab poet of the tenth century, Al-Mutanabbi, wrote in one of his poems: “The winds blow not to the liking of the ships.” Indeed, this metaphor suits wonderfully the situation in the Middle East. The winds of change are so strong that the governments in these states cannot but wait patiently until the storm is over. Survival is the name of the game.

Notes

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12. There are 31 such representations in Erbil. For its part, the KRG has 15 representations in various countries. <http://dfr.krg.org/p/p.aspx?p=37>
13. Nina Caspersen, "States without sovereignty," in Nina Caspersen and Gareth Stansfield (eds.) *Unrecognized States in the International System* (Routledge: London, 2011), p. 77.
14. For the Kurdish angle, see Cengiz Gunes, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
15. For an early stage of AKP's experimentation with the Kurdish issue, see Rabia Karakaya Polat, "The AKP and the Kurdish Issue: What Went Wrong?" *SETA, Policy Brief* 14 (May 2008).
16. It should be noted though that MIT started secret contacts with the KRG already in 2006 but they came to fruition only in 2009.
17. One indication of the close relationship is Barzani's participation in the AKP Congress on September 30, 2012 where he delivered a speech. *National Turk*, October 3, 2012, <http://www.nationalturk.com/en/applause-for-kurdish-leader-barzani-at-akp-congress-condemned-by-turkish-opposition-26421>. On the other hand, Maliki declined to participate. *Today's Zaman*, 2 October 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-294091-akp-and-iraqi-kurds-the-participation-of-massoud-barzani-in-the-akp-general-congress-by-aziz-barzani.html>. Barzani came earlier in April of that year to Turkey where he met the highest officials in the state.
18. *Today's Zaman*, April 18, 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-277894-krk-leader-barzani-visits-turkey-as-alliance-with-iraqi-kurds-deepens.html>
19. *Voice of America*, April 18, 2012. <http://m.voanews.com/a/179182.html>
20. On Turkey's soft power, see Meliha Benli Altunışık, "The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East," *Insight Turkey* 10.2 (2008), pp. 41–54.

21. By 2010, it was reported that 3,200 Turkish firms were active in various areas in the KRG. *Today's Zaman*, July 6, 2010, http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=215263
22. *Today's Zaman*, October 2, 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-294091-akp-and-iraqi-kurds-the-participation-of-massoud-barzani-in-the-akp-general-congress-by-aziz-barzani.html>
23. During Massoud Barzani's visit to Turkey in April 2012, the two parties discussed common security issues. *Today's Zaman*, April 18, 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-277894-krq-leader-barzani-visits-turkey-as-alliance-with-iraqi-kurds-deepens.html>
24. The Kurds label it "Mr. Davutoglu Policy," *Today's Zaman*, July 6, 2010, http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=215263
25. Kurdistan Regional Government, October 31, 2009, <http://www.krg.org/a/d.aspx?r=223&l=12&s=02010100&a=32216&cs=010000>
26. Interestingly, the term "integration" is used by the Turkish but not the Kurdish side reflecting the divergent outlook of the two parties regarding the relations between them.
27. *Today's Zaman*, April 18, 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-277894-krq-leader-barzani-visits-turkey-as-alliance-with-iraqi-kurds-deepens.html>
28. *Voice of America*, April 18, 2012, <http://m.voanews.com/a/179182.html>
29. The new Kurdish process has emboldened the Kurds in Turkey so that in a conference in Diyarbakır in June they referred to themselves for the first time as "North Kurdistan," *Radikal*, June 16, 2013.
30. Ibrahim Karagül, "Maliki ve PKK korkusu," *Yenisafak.com.tr*, May 10, 2013, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/yazarlar/IbrahimKaragul/malikinin-pkk-korkusu/37621>.
31. Lara Vergnaud, *Middle East*, May 9, 2013, <http://blogs.blouinnews.com/blouinbeatworld/2013/05/09/iraq-rejects-pkk-withdrawal-but-lacks-leverage/>
32. *Voice of America*, April 18, 2012, <http://m.voanews.com/a/179182.html>
33. It should be noted that Prime Minister Erdoğan threatened to intervene there "since those terrorist formations would disturb our national peace," *The Kurdish Globe*, July 31, 2012, <http://www.kurdishglobe.net/display-article.html?id=E2564C82CB3871AD1E5DA4801448F156>
34. It was this consideration that moved the United States to keep secret its symbolic support to the Kurds of Iraq in the years 1972–1975. See Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012) pp. 76–78.
35. In his first visit to Turkey in April 2009, President Obama called for closer Turkish cooperation not only with the central government in Baghdad but also with the Kurds. Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 8, 2009, http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/090408_turkey_update.pdf
36. See, for example, Michael Rubin's article quoted in *Press TV*, May 14, 2013, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/05/14/303540/us-preparing-for-iraqi-kurds-to-split/>

37. For Obama's view of Turkey as a model for the Muslim world, see Ariel Cohen, "Obama's Best Friend? The Alarming Evolution of US–Turkish Relations," *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* 100 (May 13, 2013), pp. 16–18. For the failing models, see Ofra Bengio, "Are Iraq and Turkey Models for Democratization?" *The Middle East Quarterly* 19 (Summer 2012), pp. 53–62.
38. Pakistan Defense, February 17, 2013, <http://www.defence.pk/forums/middle-east-africa/235610-iran-iraq-s-kurds-don-t-think-about-independence-closer-ties-turks.html>

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