

**KURDISH NATIONALISM AND ISLAM:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF MODERN IRAQI AND TURKISH KURDISTAN**

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements  
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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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For the living martyrs who choose to make  
peace amid the storms.

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## PREFACE

Six days before the Kurdish referendum for independence, I was invited by a friend to be interviewed on Kurdish television. The following morning, I took the twenty-minute cab ride from my apartment to Rudaw headquarters in central Erbil, Iraq, and shortly thereafter, guided to the main broadcasting hub. The woman who was helping me get ready – whom I’ll call Arzu – was very professional and spoke much better English than I did Kurdish.

“How long have you worked for Rudaw?” I asked.

“A short time. Journalism isn’t what I went to school for,” she said.

“Really? How did you come here then?” I queried.

“I studied architecture, and then the economic crisis hit..”

“And construction stopped dead in its tracks,” I finished.

“Exactly,” she said, the ensuing moment of silence a snapshot of the frustrated plans of so many Iraqi Kurds in the last four years. Then, in a less somber tone, she, transitioned back to me.

“Your résumé says you speak several languages. How did you learn Kurdish?”

“There’s a program back in Indiana University. I’ve been studying Sorani for a little over two years. You said you speak Turkish, right?” I asked Arzu.

“Yes, I went to a Turkish-speaking primary school in Sulaymaniyah.”

“A Gülen school?” I asked with some surprise. The July 15, 2016 coup attempt and the subsequent crackdown on the Gülenist movement (and everyone else) had been the exclamation point at the end of my time studying in Istanbul.

She cast her gaze to the side.

“Yes, but we didn’t know anything about that at the time.”

“Oh, it was just a school,” I quickly supplied, “I get that. I’ve heard nothing but good things about the education they provided.”

“I kept wondering why they brought up religion in school. I thought it was weird at the time.”

Spurred by the mention of religion, she once again shifted back to me and my reason for being there. With a mixture of genuine curiosity and mild confusion, she asked me, “You are studying Kurdish Nationalism and Islam?”

“Yes” I said.

“We Kurds are much more secular... Why did you come *here* to study *Islam*?”

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It’s been almost two years since I had that conversation and have thought a lot about the best answers to that question. I could have said that it started in 2008 with my studying Arabic and the Middle East, which led my studies in Cairo, Egypt in 2010 and a subsequently impossible plan to study Arabic in Syria in 2011. That same spring, I decided to take a class on modern Iraq. Intrigued by what I was learning, I started a volunteer position with the International Rescue Committee and was paired with a family of Iraqi refugees. My capstone project on Iraqi electoral violence turned into a research position, and that position brought me into repeated contact with Kurdish sources online. With my Arabic, I could recognize a fair number of words, but was ultimately stymied. This frustrated me.

As I researched master’s programs, I came across one that offered Sorani Kurdish at Indiana University. I applied, was accepted with the massive perk of being hired as an assistant instructor and took Persian while I waited for the Kurdish class to get organized.

I fell in love with Persian but couldn't find a feasible way to study in Iran. Iraq was still my primary interest, but it remained an unstable and non-fundable location for research. As my master's finished and PhD started, I decided that perhaps Istanbul, Turkey would be 'the safe choice' for dissertation research. In May 2016, I kissed my two-year old son and pregnant wife goodbye, got on a plane, and made my way to an apartment near Taksim Square. There I conducted pre-dissertation research on Islamic shrines while studying Kurmanji Kurdish and continuing to study Turkish. Istanbul turned out to be a lot of things in the summer of 2016, but 'safe' wasn't necessarily one of them. 'Eye-opening' would be a better description.

This turned out to be a watershed experience, not just of my research topic, but for me as a person. It was one thing to read about dramatic political events and another to live through them. Shrines, for a multitude of reasons, were out in terms of my research; what had really caught my interest was the complex relationship between Kurdish nationalism and Islam. When school started back up, I signed up for classes on ethnography with the intent to learn proper field research methodology and theoretical framing. I had long since come to the conclusion that tip-toeing around my interests due to 'safety concerns' wasn't going to work, and that my next step was to simply go to Iraq for my dissertation.

At the end of August 2017, I once again kissed my young sons and wife goodbye, got on a plane, and made my way to an apartment in Erbil, Iraq for what I planned on being the first of two four and half month stays. Ten days after that, I was getting fitted with a microphone and trying to explain to a Rudaw employee why I was studying Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan.

'A led to B led to C led to ... conducting ethnographic research on Kurdish Nationalism and Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan.'

I could have said all of that.

Or I could have just repeated what my family has said for years, “Ben never quite outgrew his childhood desire to be Indiana Jones.”

I think I like that answer best.

Benjamin Priest

Kurdish Nationalism and Islam: An Ethnography on Modern Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan

This ethnographic research examines the role of Islam in modern Kurdish society in Iraq and Turkey. The major findings are that despite their commonalities, Kurdish national narratives are undermined by the factionalism and sectarianism woven throughout the histories of Islam and Kurdish relations in the region. The result of this is a conflict-ridden codependency between secular and Islamist parties and identities which includes a contest for authority over national narratives. The research also demonstrates how specific Western masculine archetypes have been subsumed into local masculine ideation, influencing the content and format of propaganda used in these contests.

Keywords: Kurdish Nationalism, Islam, masculinity

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## *Résumé*

## Introduction

As the title demonstrates, this writing is an ‘on-the-ground’ view of Kurdish nationalism and Islam. Kurdish nationalism here refers to the stream of socio-political consciousness that gives psychological priority to the interests of Kurdish peoples and the geographic areas they occupy. The second is the faith with which nearly a billion people world-wide are associated. Kurds make up only a fraction of that figure; present censuses indicate there being some 30-40 million Kurds, most of whom are Muslim and live in their countries of origin, namely Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Azerbaijan, with a large number of expatriates in Western Europe and to a lesser extent, the U.S.

This majority the accounts in this writing are from Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan from 2016 to 2018, where there are three distinct yet overlapping conflicts: the war against the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIS or Da‘ish), the struggle between the Turkish army and Kurdish nationalist groups, and the Kurdish Regional Government’s army battling the Popular Mobilization Forces connected to the Iraqi federal government.

While I took every opportunity to observe sermons in local mosques, the vast majority of Islam takes place outside of the sermons and prayer times. A Muslim man who decides to go to Friday sermon only spends a small fraction of his week listening to the imam and participating in communal prayer. The rest he spends at work, at home, and in between: at the bazaar to purchase goods for his family. At the coffee house playing dominoes and smoking cigarettes with his friends. At the gym exercising. What he says and does during those times speaks more to the psychology and spirituality of his Islam ‘in the wild’ than does the topic of the sermon he attended from 12:05-12:50pm on Friday. Each of them tells us something a little, or more often than not, *a lot* different.



Local proprieties regarding socializing between sexes led to my mining data almost exclusively from men. From the male perspective, much of what falls under the banner of the nationalist and Islamic character of modern Kurdistan is as inextricably tied to male ego, vanity, and sexuality as it is to religious and political ideologies. I used masculinity as a magnifying glass with which to explore the moving parts that make the larger gears of nationalism and Islam in practice move in times of turmoil and change.

*An Ethnography on Turmoil*

In many respects, this research is also an ethnography on turmoil.<sup>1</sup> In the human perception of time, not all moments measure the same way, but are a product of the physical and mental subjectivity through which it is experienced – all a zen way of saying some days feel longer than others. Sometimes there is simply a lot going on and a lot of change to adapt to, and during the time of my research, that is most definitely an accurate statement. While conducting my fieldwork, I was on the sidelines of multiple terrorist attacks, a coup attempt, a referendum for independence, and a military/economic siege. If there's a single take-away from this, it's that if you want to see what a country, a nation, a people, or even a single individual is made of, observe them in times of high stress and uncertainty. These force characteristics normally kept in confinement closer to the surface, if not exposed in their entirety. In terms of research, this is the equivalent to time and pressure yielding diamonds.

Sticking with this analogy, the problem with the best diamonds is that they usually take a great deal of searching to find. A single, large, unpolished gem can show up by coincidence; collecting enough of them to make a real collection takes much more than that kind of dumb luck. In a logistical sense, socio-political turmoil results in bureaucratic and social gridlock, the

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to turmoil as the constant, often violent changes that shift the locus of control outside of any given individual's agency

kind that makes every-day functioning and getting around to collect this valuable information a mildly masochistic function. Everything from the Kafka-esque process of getting a visa stamp fixed in Istanbul, to gaining residency status in Iraqi Kurdistan, to the night when my roommate and I had a serious discussion as to what we should do were Iraqi and Iranian military forces to occupy our city in the following hours, to the regular loss of electricity and internet connectivity – life was full of interruptions and inconveniences that made collecting information necessary for this writing quite difficult.

Once in-country, I had no program support or structure beyond the state-run Turkish language course Tömer in Turkey I had signed up for two weeks before arrival, and a few names of ‘a friend of a friend’ to contact once I arrived in Iraq. I got sick often. I developed an ulcer. I frequently had to spend time helping manage the anxieties of my friends and family (both in the U.S. and in Iraq), using a mix of honesty and ‘creative optimism’ to help them see that things would be alright. I had to have a grab-bag with enough money to make it to the border somewhere in my bedroom. When I was able to actually meet with people, interviewees could be effusive, dishonest, hard to understand due to their dialect or my own linguistic shortcomings, or simply pursued my friendship under the erroneous impression that I was an insider that could get them an American visa. On a personal level, the whole ‘turmoil’ concept was quite resonant.

On the other hand, my own personal troubles were dwarfed by those of the people among whom I was living. The vast majority of my friends may have spoken perfect Kurdish and accustomed to getting around the local systems, but they did not have the kinds of options I had. Most countries put Iraqi citizenship in the category of being more likely to commit immigration

violations at best or be a national security risk at worst.<sup>2</sup> As such, they lacked the easy-exit my American passport and family support represented and simply had to live with all of it. Their educational opportunities were crippled by the pressures of war and the inefficiencies of chronic under-funding from a government with ethnic-based policies. I knew more about textbook Islam and regional history than most of the people I spoke with. Especially in Turkey, the Kurds I met were simply too afraid to speak their native language in public, much less talk about highly sensitive issues to someone claiming to be an American graduate student.

Recognizing as many of these disparities as I could helped me contextualize and manage my own emotional reaction to the difficulties present in access to and extraction of information and the inevitable feeling of ‘smallness’ that comes from being a lone researcher writing about problems so much bigger than oneself.

Here then is what I found about Kurdish Nationalism and Islam in Turkey and Iraq.

*“Northern Kurdistan” – Turkish Kurdistan*

The political and religious situation in Turkey right now can be best described as a matter of competition for dominance between three sides – the secular Kemalist-based Turkish nationalists, the neo-Ottomanist Islamism of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP), and the Kurdish nationalists (who themselves are divided between the compromises represented by officials in the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) and the militant approach of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)). The AKP has dealt massive blows to the other two in the last year and a half – the first of these was in the aftermath of the July 15,

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<sup>2</sup> This is not limited to the U.S. and Western European countries. While we will address this more later, it will suffice to say here that this includes neighboring countries as well. For instance, Turkey requires visa applicants from Iraq to prove that they meet some rather high economic thresholds before granting them a visa.

2016 coup attempt, which Erdoğan and the AKP used to steamroll opposition and undo conciliations with the Kurdish community under the auspices of anti-terrorism.

For Turkish Kurds, this has created fractures between those placing a higher value on their Islamic identity and those who place it upon their Kurdish identity. ‘Pious Kurds’ place greater priority on the role of Islam in daily life and governance (Kilic, 2018). ‘Ethno-prime Kurds’ feel that Turkish nationalism is the root of many of their problems and view everything post-coup as more of the same ill-treatment under a different name and remain deeply suspicious of the Turkish government.<sup>3</sup>

The civil war in Syria as well as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS or Da‘ish) have further entrenched the issues of Islam and Kurdish culture in the modern Turkish state, as has the means by which Erdoğan’s administration has opaquely maneuvered itself within these situations. Its use of hard and soft power to oppose the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)’s referendum for independence on September 25, 2017 is only one example within a wide range of policies through which it has sought to extend its own influence within Kurdish society to its south.

#### *“Southern Kurdistan” – Iraqi Kurdistan*

The KRG has several key vulnerabilities. The first is a product of the precarious position the leadership occupies with respect to the Iraqi federal government, Iranian and Turkish interventionism, and the advent of Da‘ish, all of which are supercharged by social media and rising technological literacy – i.e. the weakening of government monopolies on information

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<sup>3</sup> A fellow Indiana University graduate student took a different approach with respect to these categories: secular ethnic identity – which is taken from post-1960 political constructions – votes for the HDP, and non-secular ethnic identity – wherein religion is an inextricable feature of their being Kurdish – vote for the AKP (Kilic, 2018: 7-8). Based on the attitudes Kilic encountered, simply because a Turkish Kurd qualifies under the ‘Kurdish’ ethnic category does not mean they willingly count themselves as being part of the ‘Kurdish’ ethnic group (the latter of these being a matter of self-identification, p.87).

dissemination and interpretation. In concrete terms, this refers to the political failures of the September 25, 2017 Referendum for Kurdish independence in Iraqi Kurdistan and the proceeding social, economic, and military fallout.

The second vulnerability is having a population that is Muslim-majority in an area with high competition for influence within Islamic institutions and Islamic society at large. The main actors in this are the neighboring governments of Turkey and Iran, and the sectarian (and often violent) groups under their patronage that base themselves on Islamic foundations.

This requires the KRG to make take unusual strategies to approach Islam that simultaneously maintain legitimacy with as much of its Muslim community as possible while facilitating peaceful interactions between its various non-Muslim minorities and curtailing the more radical religious elements.

Iraqi Kurds live in a state of flux that has divided society into segments that either a) maintain living within a spectrum of traditional Kurdish Islam, b) find themselves in an unusual position of maintaining a conservative approach to Islam that requires them to actively formulate reasoning to explain why and how violent groups, namely ISIS, exist outside of that tradition, or c) reject Islam as a foreign, toxic element forced upon Kurdish society. Like Northern Kurdistan/Turkish Kurdistan, the difference between ‘Pious Kurds’ and ‘ethno-prime Kurds’ is present but subject to fundamentally different stressors and requirements.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> While I have employed the ‘Islam / Ethno’ binary to differentiate identity hierarchies, it should be noted that it is a temporary short hand; part of our interest is in when and how both identifiers are inconsistent across time and issue.

## Literature Review

### *Anthropology of religion*

The founding concept upon which all of my approaches to Islam are based was most succinctly penned by Talal Asad in his piece “Anthropologies of Islam,”

(1) that in the final analysis, there is no such theoretical object as Islam; (2) that Islam is the anthropologist’s label for a heterogeneous collection of items, each of which has been designated Islamic by informants; (3) that Islam is a distinctive historical totality which organizes various aspects of social life... (1986: 2)

Abdul Hamid el-Zein summed up these concepts up by referring not to “Islam” but to “islams,” (1977).

Within the Qur’an, the followers of Muhammad are referred to as the *ummah*, the officially accepted term for the Islamic community. At the simplest level, a Muslim is someone who, with proper intent, recites the *šahāda* three times – “there is no God but God and Muhammad is His Prophet.” There are, however, multiple *madhāhib* (schools of Islamic thought), hundreds of *tafāsīr* (interpretations of the Qur’an), thousands of Hadith (recorded sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), and the split between Sunni and Shi’a.

Further, there have been over 1,400 years for these sociological phenomena to have shaped the realities in which roughly one billion living human beings identify as Muslim. There are movements that urge Muslims to move toward a humanistic, multi-cultural framework, and movements that urge Muslims to return to ways of life from the past and reject religious dilution through multicultural admixture. There are movements that seek to aid Muslims across the globe without regard to their nationality through peaceful means, and there are movements that seek specific political goals in bounded geographical areas through armed struggle. On this, Pakistani nuclear physicist and activist Pervez Amir Ali Hoodbhoy, wrote,

Where do Muslims stand today? Note that I do not ask about Islam; Islam is an abstraction.

Maulana Abdus Sattar Edhi, Pakistan's preeminent social worker, and the Taliban's Mohammad Omar are both followers of Islam, but the former is overdue for a Nobel Peace Prize while the latter is an ignorant, psychotic fiend. Palestinian writer Edward Said, among others, has insistently pointed out that Islam holds very different meaning for different people. Within my own family, hugely different kinds of Islam are practiced. The religion is as heterogeneous as those who believe and follow it. There is no "true Islam." (2001)

While Hoodbhoy's mindful employment of the term "Muslims" might seem less abrasive than el-Zein's "islams," it is in practice no less problematic. While echoes of this statement will show up again and again throughout this writing, it's no less obvious from the realities presented in talk-shows, opinion pieces, and comment threads for everything from YouTube videos to news articles that one's position relative to the Muslim community is of imminent importance. For instance, validating or attacking someone's Muslim identity is a common rhetorical strategy to justify attitudes toward a given person's choices and views. While the act of reifying one's own identity and practices through religious critique will play a large role later on, our primary interest right now is that it seeks to define the borders of Islam and Muslim behavior.<sup>5</sup>

The Encyclopedia of Islam (2018) has remarks on nature of the ummah as based on its use in the Qur'an,

Although *umma muslima* may be translated as "Muslim community," it is erroneous to imbue it with the kind of meaning the phrase would later have, after Islam had become institutionalised and Qur'anic references such as this—however authoritative—had become historically reified...

The *umma's* establishment as a community with political authority and autonomy, as well as religious and social characteristics, was in Medina... The consensus has favoured a

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<sup>5</sup> Frequently, adjectival modifiers were rejected as sufficient descriptors with respect to Islamic identities; I can't recall how many times I've had conversations amounting to my question of "So [person-x] is a bad Muslim?" being met with "No, [person-x] isn't Muslim. Muslims don't do what [person-x] does."

unified *umma* as an ideal that transcends a particular period's limitations and divisions.

Colonialism's challenge instigated a great renewal of *umma* awareness among Muslims, and modern Muslim thinkers since the 19th century have sustained a variety of discourses on the political as well as other meanings of the concept of *umma* for today, including particularly whether and to what extent it contains democratic principles. (Denny)

The concept is very loaded, as are the themes of communal division (*fitna*) and innovation within the religion (*bid'at*).

The word "ummah" appears in the Qur'an sixty-two times, and its meaning changes between contexts. On this contextual flexibility, Riaz Hassan wrote,

According to Watt (1955), *ummah* is a malleable concept that could be given various new shades of meaning, and capable of further development. Indeed, the vague nature of the term allows Muslim leaders and ideologues to manipulate its meaning and usage in order to conduct their affairs and those of society in accordance with contemporary political and social circumstances. From its numerous, and sometimes, vague meanings in the early days of Islam, it came to symbolize and embody the very notion of an Islamic community, gradually acquiring socio-legal and religious connotations. (2006: 312-313)

There are three particular points from this last passage. The first is that the concept of the ummah has degrees of malleability, an Anderson-esque imagined community subject to time and space. The second is that definition of the ummah's boundaries is a common source of socio-political justification, almost entirely reliant on memory and shared perceptions of history. The third is that it is an unresolved and unresolvable source of tension.

In the earliest years of the Muslim community, self- and governmental-definitions more or less presented themselves as problems from the start. Social hierarchies evolved first out of intra-Saudi Peninsula tribes – the first converts to Islam – and went further and further outward in concert with the expansion under the first four Caliphs. The body politic became more multi-



ethnic, and in a religion where social status determines civic matters, such as taxation (i.e. *dhimmis*),<sup>6</sup> this had to be accounted for. Was there a special role of Arabs as the closest ethnic relatives of the Prophet within the ummah? Did late-coming Arab tribes or non-Arab converts receive different treatment? Many of these issues sorted themselves out by the Abbasid era, which by virtue of its having moved the capital to Baghdad also moved more into Persianate culture in the mid-eighth century and away from Arab primacy. Problem solved, at least on paper.

### *Nationalism*

Modern ummah rhetoric has been heavily influenced by the failures of the Muslim empires that once held everything between North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Anatolia, Persia, and the Indian subcontinent when faced with the technological, military, and political ascendancy of Western Europe, Russia, and later the United States. It is this combination – the massive heritage of meaning and the evolution of political necessities – that makes harnessing communal memory so powerful and necessary in politics.

The modern concepts of nationalism and the nation-state were defined in the period between the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and the reign of Napoleon in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> During this time period, *dhimmis* who had paid their taxes wore a collar-like metal seal around their necks or wrists as both an identifier and a socially punitive measure (Robinson, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> An interesting bit of evidence for the differing mentalities comes from comparing pre-modern and modern cartography. Billig points out that maps from Medieval Europe bear little resemblance in terms of definition and precision that more modern maps do (1995: 20); i.e. phenomena such as “Winston’s Hiccup” (the arbitrary angles of the border between Jordan and Saudi Arabia drawn in 1921) exist in the twentieth century but not in the fourteenth due to predominant political thought and practice. This difference might seem unimportant, but it’s very subsumed into modern thinking.

During a lecture I gave at Brigham Young University on the Kurdish referendum, one of my slides featured a map highlighting the regions of Turkey where Kurds were the majority. Admittedly, it came from a Google image search, but it bore only minor differences to any other such map I’ve seen on or offline. One of the attendees took a picture of the map and sent it to their Kurdish friend. Their friend’s response to the borders on the map was, “Absolutely false.” He then sent the attendee a different map, which had equally straight lines, albeit in slightly different places. The differences were so negligible as to be almost indistinguishable. The attendee and I had ourselves a bit of a laugh at the situation, but the story serves as a perfect example of how prevalent this linear, precise border thinking is as well as the kind of emotions they evoke in the case of mapping Kurdistan.

The incentives for this kind of centralization include economic necessities of industrialization, capitalism, and military expansion. These in turn were the soil from which early theorists emerged, focusing on the way in which modernity forced these nation-states to coalesce into homogenous groups to facilitate the processes of industrialization (Barkey, 2005; Weber, 1946; Durkheim, 1995). These concepts were further incorporated into the belief that this social cohesion also came along with a compartmentalization of life between the sacred and the secular, diminishing the first and emphasizing the latter (Gellner, 1983). This is, however, very much a product of their respective times and has been revisited and revised by many others since then. From the bi-polarity of the Cold War, the brief, mono-polar ‘New World Order,’ ‘the Clash of Civilizations’ and 9/11, to the present ‘neo-Cold War,’ social scientists have worked trying to make sense of and predict the course of history.

Similar to el-Zein’s ‘islams,’ it is more accurate to use the plural – ‘nationalisms.’ Anthony D. Smith (1998) suggested that nationalism is a “single red line [traversing] the history of the modern world,” that blurs, fragments, and fades into its iterant manifestations (p.1). The basis of this red line is establishing belief in cohesive socio-political factors that supersede localisms sufficient to motivate groups to view and treat themselves and others in a manner based on those meta-cohesions.

Many current theories on nationalism focus on the cohesions and imagined communities created by channeling religion. From this perspective, nationalism is not necessarily irreligious (Omer and Spring, 2013), and can be considered a form of religion that requires proselytization. The omni-importance reserved for the divine, which in nations past was embodied by rulers claiming divine anointment, is transferred to the state. Preserve the sanctity of the State, and the State will in turn elevate the human condition. Books like Marvin and Ingle’s Blood Sacrifice

and the Nation regard nationalism and patriotism as being the consummate religion, replete with rituals, sacraments, sacrifices, and symbols that bind its citizens to an ephemeral greater good (2005). The proselyting of the nationalist project has been successful if its central tenets are taken as fact or otherwise unquestioned. These absolute, ontological givens are what Michael Billig calls ‘banal nationalism,’ an ideology ingrained into the cultural psyche and reinforced on a regular basis so much so that it goes entirely unnoticed despite its ubiquitous presence (1995). From this perspective, modern nationalism is as talismanic for all its abstraction as any ‘primitive religion’ described by Durkheim (1995).

There are many clear examples of religious nationalism where political rhetoric incorporates aspects or the organization of a conventionally recognized religious system. Peter Van der Veer wrote on the disillusionment that accompanied the attempt to mirror Western European systems within Indian society leading to political divisions following Hindu-nationalist ascendancy (1994). In the European context, the Catholic-Protestant divide in Northern Ireland is neither entirely religious nor devoid of religion, “rather, the religious identifications ... became interwoven with highly complex power relationships. Religious identity markers formed *boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that permeated socioeconomic and political arenas,*” (Omer and Spring, 2013: 8; emphasis added). Perhaps the most relevant in recent history is that of the socio-political fissures in the post-Yugoslavia Balkans that were promoted by certain religious establishments.

In short order, we will examine some of these cases more in-depth, but for the present, it is sufficient that the main point of interest is that in each of these states, religiously-based ontologies were interwoven throughout political rhetoric of separation and “otherness.” Ethnic conflict and segregation for the sake of the country are part and parcel to many nationalisms;

religious nationalisms make use of existing religious institutions, make the conflicts a matter of spiritual welfare, and give the use of force a modicum of divine sanction.

### *Crafting of State and Nation*

The political creative processes take place in every level of society, though its propagation requires access to the means and target populations. This is as true for a government in power as it is for any grassroots, opposition organization. One of the most influential writings on the formation of nationalisms through these processes, particularly in colonial and post-colonial contexts, is Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities. From his perspective, the advent of mass-printing, and later, electronic broadcast served as the vectors for nationalist projects. It is not an unrealistic to speculate that had Luther's "95 Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" required hand-written facsimiles requiring individuals with the ability, time, and materials to write, the Protestant Reformation and subsequent shift in political landscapes would have been greatly affected.

Anderson also argued that the marriage between national conception and geographical space was the product of colonial efforts that normalized political categorization via mapping, color-coding, and other serialization. This aided in the construction of national genealogies and memory within the bounds of modern nationalism.

The nineteenth century statesmen, Massimo d'Azeglio, summed up the idiom of the nation-state in this pithy statement, "We have made Italy; now we have to make Italians," ("Avanti," *The Economist*, 2011). The nation-state, a contiguous territory where those governing and governed identify as being of the same nation or having the same national narrative is the ideal. It is also incredibly rare, and whether or not it exists at all is a matter of debate (Dasgupta,

2018).<sup>8</sup> As a result, a major obstacle in statecraft is bridging the difference, made more difficult in the presence of significant incongruities between the ‘state’ and the ‘nation,’ (Majstorovic, 1997). Perhaps the easiest way to illustrate this issue is looking at what are commonly referred to as ‘failed states,’ i.e. regions of the world where the lines on the map say one thing and the realities of socio-political control another. The political geographies represented in The Fund for Peace’s “Fragile State Index,” Transparency International’s “Corruption Perception Index,” and Freedom House’s “Freedom Index” all tell a similar story with respect to life in states that have failed in their primary purposes – there are not any monopolies on the use of force, the borders are porous, the laws unpredictable, and the lines between organized crime and governance blurred. Civil wars are the ultimate embodiment of conflicting national narratives, and many of the nations that rank lowest in each of these indices – like Afghanistan, Libya, Southern Sudan, Syria, and Yemen – were recently or still are in the throes of civil war. What the nation was, what it is, and what it will become are in physical dispute. In other words, there may be an Italy, but it’s inhabitants may not want to be Italian or agree what on what ‘Italian’ means.

### *Memory and the Nation*

In both sociological (Sacchi, Agnoli, and Loftus, 2007) and biological terms (Frenda, Patihis, Loftus, Lewis, and Fenn, 2014; Lacy and Stark, 2013), memory is not a static fixture of perception. More specifically, a single person’s memories of everything from a single event to their understanding of national history are subject to interference and change. Short-term memory formation within the brain can be corrupted or altered by a natural failure in organic processes or the introduction of foreign elements that bring about similar disruptions. Long-term

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<sup>8</sup> Creating the category of a ‘pure nation-state’ is more or less a mental exercise. What genuinely qualifies? Certainly, they must be small, with little or no immigration or a positively magnetic national narrative that overpowers those of its imports. Vatican City? Singapore? Honestly, the only one I can think of is North Korea. Hardly a paradigm worth emulating.

memories are similarly alterable, and more importantly for our subject, *remain* subject to modification by circumstance and other memory inputs (Specter, 2014). People’s memories of trauma and disaster can be changed significantly by time (Neisser and Winograd, 1992), suggestion (Sacchi, Agnoli, and Loftus, 2007), and circumstance (Dalgleish, Hauer, and Kuyken, 2008, Lacy and Stark, 2013). Even when a long-term memory is formed, its recall is a *reconsolidation*, not *retrieval* of an unedited recording.<sup>9</sup> Disruptions and modifications in memory are the product of autonomic neurological processes and individual psychology.

While some of these disruptions may be self-contained, biological faults, similar effects can be induced by outside introduction of specific stimuli. This is not to say that a purposefully manipulating actor is requisite. Self-deception, cognitive-dissonance, repression, distortion, projecting, idealization, nostalgia, groupthink – these are all methods to deal or avoiding dealing with anxiety and fear on personal and societal levels, effectively re-anchoring one’s ontological certainty, albeit on uncertain foundations. Basic knowledge of how and why one could benefit from steering these ontological certainties is fundamental to modern governance. The group dynamics of successful statecraft highly incentivize central institutional actors to make a strong effort to frame national-self and larger events through a guided process. The cover-all term for this guiding process could be *propaganda*, but it falls short in conveying the full spectrum of applications.

Nations and nationalism are constantly subject to recontextualization and reinvention, and the power to control and project these contexts is of tantamount value to nation-builders (Arendt, 1998). Even in the most extreme examples of governing dynamics where all of the power rested within the hands of a relatively small group, the government has to expend some

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<sup>9</sup> Dealing with memory at the fundamental level of individual physiology and psychology might seem unnecessarily specific given the breadth of our present topic, it’s keenly pertinent once we reach individual narratives of ‘history.’

degree of effort to control the narrative. The governments of Josef Stalin and Mao Tse-Tung represented such a dynamic, with both individuals holding the kind of unchecked power to kill on a massive scale that had even their immediate aides, who held great power of their own, fearful of minor missteps leading to their executions (Conquest, 1991; Chang, 2006).<sup>10</sup> This capacity did not relieve them of the need to expend effort to coalesce their territories into a single, controllable unit. Before Benedict Anderson even finished grade-school, these regimes recognized the same fundamentals of nation-building and exercised intricate control over the means of communication, crafting the cults of personality that would go on to serve as the paradigms for virtually every subsequent twentieth century dictator.

For situations where cultural and political circumstances make personality cults inviable or of limited utility, other tools must be explored. Nostalgia is just such a tool in guided reconsolidation of national memories. Arjun Appuradai identified several forms of nostalgia in political rhetoric, the most relevant for our purposes being “imagined nostalgias” (1996). This refers to an invented or spun history that portrays a national identity that has been lost, with the nation is worse off for it. This can manifest in irredentist politics that pine for the national greatness strength that came with former territories or values held. An example of this kind of revanchism would be the official narratives propagated before, during, and after Russian intervention and annexation of the Crimea in 2015,

...the Kremlin’s framing of Russia’s annexation of Crimea reveals that, domestically, it was presented in unprecedented national irredentist terminology, aiming at reunifying the Russian *nation* in one *state*. The *Russian nation* was largely described in *ethno-linguistic* or *ethno-cultural*

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<sup>10</sup> Chang’s *Mao: The Unknown Story* has been on the receiving end of considerable critique for allowing her distaste of Mao to allow the work to become overly biased. Be this as it may, I feel the story it tells of the kind of power he had over the Chinese Communist Party officials is consistent with other accounts sufficient for the book to warrant inclusion.

terms, while the *Russian state* was officially acknowledged as the champion of *the Russian national cause*. The official identity discourse framing the annexation of Crimea was marked by the recasting and unprecedentedly strong *reassertion of boundaries between the Russian and Ukrainian nations*, legitimizing Russian claims to the peninsula. In this process, Ukrainians were presented as Russia's main other, against which Russian national identity was constructed. Significantly, the focus of the Russian official identity discourse shifted from the state to the nation. Previously, in the discourse led by top state officials and the state-controlled media, the state was the main point of reference around which the Russian identity was constructed; now the nation serves as its main basis. This marks a decisive departure from Putin's earlier largely statist, and for the most part non-ethnic, rhetoric in the 2000s, and a new stage of maturation and official acclamation of national ethnicization trends launched during his third presidential term. (Teper, 2016: 379, emphasis added)

For more abstract example, one need look no further than U.S. President Donald Trump's 2016 campaign slogan of "Make America Great Again," a simple, yet effective phrase that implied changes in attitude and policy that would recapture a perceived loss of American values. These in turn are tied to other, more conventional indicators of socio-economic success. It is not insignificant that both examples revolved around individual leaders and parties engineering popular support. Even in the Russian example, led by a man 'elected' in what can be considered a Potemkin election (Tisdall, 2018; MacFarquhar, 2018), managing domestic and international perception is still a matter of importance.

#### *Conspiratorial Thinking as Power*

In the Introduction, I refer to my writing as an "ethnography on turmoil." One of the hallmark traits of living in turmoil is the lack of control, and such powerlessness can be psychologically crippling. No matter how bleak one's situation is, the area of autonomy that is most difficult to deprive someone of is belief. Belief informs everything we do, shaping our



perspective and subsequent actions. Particularly in tumultuous situations, obtaining ‘absolute truth’ or even verifiable facts is an elusive task.

The situation of a Kurdish refugee trying to flee from the Middle East to Western Europe. On the most superficial level, he needs to obtain logistical information from second-hand sources – where can he get food, shelter, safe roads, electricity for his mobile phone to receive further coordination. The politics of this person’s situation are so complex that the costs for making this journey are frequently prohibitive – whether that means not being able to pay the fee or bribe to be smuggled passed a checkpoint, physical costs of risking life and limb navigating dangerous areas, or simply being stuck in the limbo of a refugee camp somewhere between their origin and desired destination.

When second-hand information turns out to be incorrect, it can be classified as a ‘false rumor.’ The conspiracy theory is when this individual formulates incorrect conclusions regarding the greater ‘why’ of their situation, particularly when they arrive at the belief that it is a purposeful plot by definitive, powerful actors that are intended to keep them in their powerless condition for the plotter’s benefit. Such a person is already vulnerable, and the only real power they have is in understanding their environment – ‘knowing why’ – so they can determine, to the best of their ability, the next ‘what.’

The unique vulnerability experienced by a refugee is by no means the necessary threshold to incentivize such narrative formation – any perception or suspicion of a weakening agent, discriminator, or oppressor is causally sufficient.<sup>11</sup> Oliver and Wood,

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<sup>11</sup> The definitions of these kinds of factors is personal and cultural, and understanding their formation is a matter of history and historiography (Oliver and Wood, 2014).

suggest this predisposition originates in a highly adaptive and unconscious cognitive bias<sup>12</sup> to draw causal connections between seemingly related phenomena ... and to presume predators are behind unknown or novel stimuli... as with many religious or superstitious beliefs, these types of causal attributions project feelings of control in uncertain situations... the second is a natural attraction toward melodramatic narratives as explanations for prominent events, particularly those that interpret history relative to universal struggles between good and evil. (2014: 954)

The world is filled with individuals of every caste and class that claim to know the inner workings ‘behind the curtain’ that determine their situation, usually with the intent to ‘keep them down.’<sup>13</sup> The term ‘conspiracy theory’ itself comes from Karl Popper in 1949, with the explanation that,

Whatever happens in society – including things which people as a rule dislike, such as war, poverty, shortages – are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or groups. This view is very widespread ... and in its modern form, it is the typical result of the secularization of religious superstitions ... the place of the gods on Homer’s Olympus is now taken by the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists. (Sapountzis, 2013: 731)

The underlying purpose of conspiracy narratives is the need to create understandable, mappable systems of causality, taking order and compatible rationality out of turmoil. Particularly when this tumultuous environment offers data that are so in conflict with deeply held ideologies and beliefs, an individual’s psychology can require formulating alternative interpretations to provide

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<sup>12</sup> That these predispositions can be immensely specific in terms of their reach makes a big difference between paranoia-based personality disorders (where everything is a conspiracy) and biases toward certain conspiracy theories. Furthermore, the line between ‘conspiracy theory’ and logical conclusions based on available information that happen to contradict commonly accepted narratives can be subjective and unfalsifiable. As such, neither ‘conspiracy theory’ nor ‘conspiratorial narration’ should be interpreted as being pejorative or belittling of those that hold such views (Robertson, 2015: 7-9). All this being said, there is always the exception to the rule where ‘just because you are paranoid doesn’t mean they are not out to get you.’

<sup>13</sup> That this true order is purposefully hidden from general view appeals to narcissistic tendencies with regard to how we view our own capacity to understand the world around us. Surety of action is one of the few comforts available, and Manichean views are easier to process.

a sense of certainty, even if that requires contradicting conventional explanations of the event or phenomenon in question.

Particularly in situations where conflict and violence have created groups that feel marginalized, conspiratorial narratives massively shape individual and group political cognition, collective action, and communal ideation (Robertson, 2015: 8). In such cases, they should be understood as legitimate, if highly problematic, socio-political discourse (Oliver and Wood, 2014: 593-94). The belief that one is acting on sound understanding of the true order of things, much less a community that affirms this belief, is empowering. So empowering, in fact, that it can supersede behavioral norms to extreme degrees.

*Case Studies: Political and Social Tensions in Yugoslavia, Ireland, and Catalonia*

*1990's Balkans*

A popular line of inquiry with respect to the Holocaust in Nazi Germany<sup>14</sup> is how it came to be that German citizens were able to castigate so many of their fellows on the basis of heredity. Even if they didn't know the details of the abuses and murders in the concentration camps, government rhetoric was abundantly clear on the ultimate fate of the Jews and other social categories deemed undesirable (Gellately, 2001). While this was the product of a great number of factors, Morrow effectively argued that specific government policies regarding *sprachregeln* ("language rules") played a definitive role in modifying social norms sufficient to allow the kinds of mass atrocities that the government undertook during the late 1930-40's (2014). The Third Reich established a mythos of racial purity that played upon pre-existing prejudices to make fundamental shifts in public attitudes towards groups the regime deemed

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<sup>14</sup> While relying on examples from Nazi Germany is something of a hyperbolic cliché, the manner of atrocities that define modern Kurdish history warrants its inclusion.

‘race enemies’ and ‘unfit for community life’ (*gemeinschaftsunfähig*). As we know, it was massively successful.

Some fifty years later, neighbor turned against neighbor in the aftermath Yugoslavia’s dissolution. Remarking on the role of manipulating historical memory to transform social norms regarding violence, Majstorovic said,

Historical memory constrains the options that leaders exercise in conflict creation and in peacemaking... ethnonational identity is continually reformulated in an iterative process in which memory and myth shape and limit the boundaries of social construction, (1997: 171).

The situation in Yugoslavia has many unfortunate similarities with Kurdistan. First and foremost, the Balkans is in a region that has proven to be a fault line between empires; it had been conquered and ruled by the Byzantine, the Ottoman, and the Austro-Hungarian Empires before the greater portion of it became Yugoslavia, which itself was related to the conflict with the Soviet Union. The nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were replete with ethno-religious conflict as the borders of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans fluctuated with its non-Muslim neighbors. While the dictatorship of Josip Broz Tito was not based on these lines, the memories ran deep, and were emphasized in popular culture. Examples of this are The Mountain Wreath, a pseudo-historical work written by Montenegrin, caesaro-papist Archbishop Petar Petrovich Njegoš, that used artful prose to demonize the Muslim Montenegrins and embrace ethnic cleansing (Peter II, 1989). It was written in 1836 and was required classroom reading in Serbia prior to the war in 1992. Another poem that embodied the reinvention of history was “The Maiden of Kosovo,” which manifested a singularly-minded approach to race and religion and made the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 a matter of Serbian martyrdom in the name of Christ under the sword of the Ottoman Muslims.



Figure 1 - Variants of “The Kosovo Maiden” painting were popular décor in Serbian homes before the war in 1992

This memory of Kosovo featured massively in the Serbian nationalist identity, and “imagined continuities” between modern Serbians and glorious ‘Serbian’ pasts were invented and used to transpose modern political strife onto an ancient and epic scale (Živković, 2011). Majstorovic called this process ‘primordialization,’ which applies not only to the enmities between (Christian) Serbs and (Muslim) Bosnians, but to the nature of the Serb ethnicity itself. On the relation between memory and identity, Richard N. Lebow (2008) made the observation that some “memories and commemorations may become inconvenient if they stand in the way of changing or reformulating identities,” (p. 29). Massive swathes of accepted history and social science were swept aside to create the myths<sup>15</sup> that fueled the war. It was a *folie à deux* on a cultural level, purposefully manipulated on the part of Serbian political elites.

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<sup>15</sup> Entire genres devoted to inventing and justifying false genealogies, etymologies, distorting histories, etc. within a given culture is hardly the sole province of Serbian nationalists – though their efforts are notable for their robust and wide acceptance within their own culture. In a parallel that is further indication of the kinds of identity crises that accompanied the shifting of social tectonics with the fall of empires in WWI and WWII, in chapter \_\_\_ we’ll run into the inventions of Atatürk’s Turkey (i.e. the Sun Language Theory) that require equal amounts of artistic license and suspension of disbelief.

The single most lethal event in the war was the massacre of Srebrenica, where 8,000 Muslim men and boys were taken from a UN safe haven (the Dutch troops being told to stand down rather than risk escalating the situation between the UN peacekeepers and Serbian troops) and summarily executed by the forces of Serbian General Mladic. In total, over 100,000 people were killed in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995, and over one million people became refugees.

In its most distilled form, the brutality between Serbs and Bosnians was a complex response to intolerable levels of uncertainty about group identities. Acts of violence served to create a form of certainty, providing a definitive answer to the crisis of national memory. In Bosnia, Muslim minorities were carriers of unwanted memories and reminders of failures. The nationalist crisis, given the tools of violence, formed a predatory identity, its social construction requiring the extinction of the other. This predation was a justified means of reclaiming that “imagined nostalgia” and bridging the “imagined continuities.” While in reality, Serbian nationalism was a veritable Frankensteinian creation that took bits and pieces from separate bodies and created a new creature entirely. Its violent, predatory nature made genocide an exercise in community building.

### *Catalonia*

A swathe of territory where modern Spain abuts France has been known as Catalonia since at least the eleventh century, and it has officially been part of Spanish territory since the uniting of Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon in the fifteenth century. It was autonomous from that period until the fall of Barcelona to Spanish troops in 1714. At this point Spanish became the official language, and it wouldn't be until the *renaixença* (rebirth) movement a hundred years later that Catalan<sup>16</sup> was revived as a literary language.

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<sup>16</sup> In linguistic terms, Catalan is extremely similar to Spanish but is different enough in its details and origins as to be its own language rather than a dialect. This is also true of Spain's other minority languages which are co-official

What cultural ground was regained during this period was cut short by the installment of Francisco Franco after the Spanish Civil War. Franco's dictatorship harshly penalized the use of Catalan, and between its rise in 1939 and fall in 1975, the country and region would both experience massive social shifts. The civil war was between Republicans and Spanish Nationalists, the former being affiliated with the left-leaning, democratic Second Spanish Republic whose allies included anarchists and communists, and the latter affiliated with fascists, monarchists, and Catholicism.

Catholicism has been officially recognized as the State religion in each iteration of its constitution with the exception of the short-lived Republican Constitution written in 1931, which recognized the separation between church and state, and the 1978 Constitution which recognized freedom of religion with no official church (Pastor, 2007). The Second Spanish Republic was openly anti-Catholic, officially cutting financial aid to any Church organizations and dissolving the Jesuit orders. The Vatican repudiated these measures, and Franco's regime reversed these measures and formed a special relationship with Rome.

During the Civil War, the largest bastion of anti-Nationalism was Catalonia, where one-third of the 6,000 execution of members of religious orders took place (which was also a third of the total priests in the region), as did the destruction of approximately 4,000 churches. Religious sacraments had to take place in secret until the Franco regime rebuilt or oversaw re-sanctification of despoiled buildings.

Francisco Franco's death in 1975 brought changes that would yield a democratic government three years later. Post-Franco Spanish politics regarding Catalonia became far more

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with Spanish in their respective regions, namely the Aran Valley in Catalonia, the Balearic Islands, Basque territory, and Galicia (Ferrer, 2000).

liberal in its approach to cultural autonomy (Ferrer, 2000). Normalization laws in the 1980's officially reinstated the use of Catalan. Despite the massive growth of Spanish as the lingua franca with immigration from southern Spain and Latin America, an individual that could speak and write in Catalan has increased employment opportunities over non-Catalan speakers (Rendon, 2007). This peaceful transition to a democracy is what is referred to as "the pact of forgetting," which included official amnesty for Franco-era officials, and was, in general, an agreement not to talk about the past ("A Rude Awakening," *The Economist*, 2007).

In opposition to the rosier aspects of Spain's democratic, multicultural transformation were the efforts at blocking additional formation of Catalonian independence. One such manifestation of anti-Catalanism was the Spanish Constitutional Court ruling out several portions of the 2006 Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia, including several acknowledgments of Catalan regional primacy and Catalonia being a nation (Calamur, 2017). In addition to the cultural snub, it was in 2007 that the global financial crisis hit, massively affecting the Spanish economy and setting the various provinces at odds with each other about distribution of finances.

In 2007, the Spanish Congress, led by a Socialist party, passed the Law of Historic Memory. This law was essentially an effort to purge public aspects of Franco's regime and rectifying tragedies of the Civil War, the most salient of which was the exhumation of mass graves for individual burials. Later that month, the Catholic Church 'beatified' – which is to say that the Pope declared the individual to be in a state of bliss and worthy of public veneration<sup>17</sup> – 498 martyrs that fought on the side of the Nationalists in the 1930's. Both the Socialist Spanish government and the Catholic Church were criticized for their decisions; the first that the laws unnecessarily opened up old wounds (Nash, 2007) or didn't go far enough in recognizing the

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<sup>17</sup> Beatification is not the same thing as canonization – beatification involves the veneration in a local area, whereas a canonization declares it to the entirety of the Church, making the beatified a saint (Wooden, 2011).



crimes of the Franco regime (Stuart, 2006), the second that the beatification was one-sided and included individuals who were closely involved with the fascist Falange group and General Franco.

As a follow-up vote to an initial referendum in 2014, on October 1, 2017, Catalonia held a referendum for independence (“Catalonia Vote: 80% Back Independence – Officials,” BBC, 2014)<sup>18</sup>. In a nearly identical fashion, some forty percent of Catalonians turned out for the vote, and over eighty percent of those voted for independence. Unlike the first run-through, the Spanish central government responded to the 2017 vote by declaring it unconstitutional, disabling the internet,<sup>19</sup> and physically barring people from voting (Encarnación, 2017). The EU made it clear that a Catalanian state would not have immediate entrance to the union, the US made clear its support for Spanish unity, and the only supporters of the decision were sub-national entities (Taylor, 2017; Keating, 2017).

While there are a great many facets of this event that are worth exploration, such as the meta-political conditions that resulted in leaders of democratic countries and institutions condemning what was essentially a democratic process, or why such a process breached the silently agreed-upon social norm, we’ll focus instead on the rhetoric within Spain itself. The moral panic of Spain losing its Spanish character or ceding territory to Catalans (or Basques, qualifies as ‘nostalgia for the present,’ which is to say it is a rhetoric warning of a future devoid of the values of the present (see Cramer, 2015 for more examples of this). It is also debatable

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<sup>18</sup> 3,000 miles away, Kurds paid close attention to their radios and watched their televisions as the events in Catalonia unfolded. Despite their having had their own referendum a week prior, many considered that of Catalonia to be something of a ‘coal-mine canary’ to judge international willingness to accept unilateral declarations of statehood. This was partially a result of Catalonia being in the heart of Western Europe, and the electronically-counted vote lent to being more quickly tallied and confirmed than their own. For more on the Kurdistan-Catalonia referendum relationship, go to the “Referendum” chapter.

<sup>19</sup> This included the internet behemoth, Google, agreeing to disable an app that showed voting locations.

that the beatification ceremony was an act of imagined nostalgia, bleaching the past of moral nuances.



*Figure 2 - Tweet from October 1, 2017 regarding the Catalan referendum*

There has been considerable debate regarding the actual expectations of the referendum, though most of it has centered on the economic imbalances in the relationship between the Catalan and central Spanish governments. Given the forty percent turn-out, it's difficult to declare the presence of a mandate for independence, but with 800 people injured in the ensuing chaos, the Catalan nationalists – given the history of Spanish troopers fighting Catalan nationalists – have favorable optics with respect to the public relations battle against Madrid in readjusting that relationship.

Beyond having its referendum within a week of that in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Spanish-Catalonia crises illustrate the negotiation between nationalisms and religion as a function of time and circumstance. Further, they provide economic and political depth regarding official action on memory of cultural oppression. Similar to the imagined continuities in Irish and Serbian rhetoric, Catalan and Spanish nationalists have specific histories that they can draw upon and aggrandize as needed.

### *Divergences – Literacy, Extractive Institutions, and Debt*

To understand many aspects of the political struggle in the modern Middle East region, we must explore some of their earlier roots. The most obvious of these are the massive socio-economic shifts that disempowered and eventually destroyed the last of the Muslim empires. In the past five hundred years, notable market disruptors include the European discovery and colonization of the Americas which brought a(n inflation exacerbating) glut of wealth to Spain and Western Europe,<sup>20</sup> as well as the Industrial Revolution massively reducing production costs beyond what the Ottomans<sup>21</sup> could do. The explanatory power of arguments that religion and culture were the basis of the divergence in technological and economic progress relative to other parts of the world has been steadily undermined in the last five decades. In its stead, colonial and post-colonial studies have grown and brought their own iterant perspectives.

From those studies, Anderson's theories on literacy, communication, and nation-building are again relevant. After the invention of the moveable type printing-press in Germany in 1439, it took less than sixty years to make its way throughout the majority of Europe. This was not the case for the Ottomans. Edicts were issued against printing in Perso-Arabic characters within the Ottoman Empire in 1485 by Sultan Bayezid II and again in 1515 by Sultan Selim I; an important addendum to this is that dhimmi languages and materials could be (and were) printed (Rubin, 2017). In 1727, Sultan Ahmed III commissioned a printing-press in Istanbul, though its materials were limited to religious texts and were highly scrutinized (Acemoğlu and Robinson, 2012: 213-

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<sup>20</sup> While there is still debate regarding the degree to which European specie directly affected Ottoman markets (Pamuk, 2001), there isn't enough data to discount its role. In any case, European colonization of the Americas provided plenty of market disruptions beyond the Price Revolution in the sixteenth century.

<sup>21</sup> The Austro-Hungarian monarchy outlawed inventions like the spinning jenny or flying loom to protect their economic interests; this did not work out well for them.

214). By the end of the eighteenth century, the press' owners had only been able to publish a handful of books.

In 1629, there were two printing-presses in the Safavid Empire – one in Armenian and the other in Perso-Arabic, purchased by Shah ʿAbbas I after he was introduced to a page featuring the printed-Arabic alphabet by Carmelite missionaries in eleven years previous (Floor, 1980). According to accounts written by later missionaries, both presses were destroyed by the dry climate they were stored in. There are no records concerning these or any other printing-presses in Persian territories until 1816, by which time the Qajar leadership was well-beyond reversing the technological and social gaps that formed in the interim.

Certainly, there are a few practical considerations when it comes to moveable type. The Chinese had invented the practice long before their European counterparts, but due to the logogrammatic nature of written-Chinese, it was impractical to use (Shiba, 1970: 103-111). While Arabic and Persian are both alphabetical, each letter has four different written forms (initial, medial, terminal, and independent) as opposed to two for Latin characters (upper-case and lower-case), and as a result the first printing-press in Iran had matrices with 347 Arabic letter types. Significantly more important than typographical issues were the socio-political disruptions that amplified, uncensored publication capacity and increase in literacy posed to these empires. Both the Safavids and Ottomans depended upon their religious credentials to maintain power, and entry to the market of religious knowledge – as well as the majority of intellectual

knowledge available – was safeguarded by the ‘ulemā’.<sup>22</sup> Preventing its unauthorized transmission safeguarded that monopoly.<sup>23</sup>

The Ottomans and Safavids, followed by the Qajars, governed with what Acemoğlu and Robinson (2012) refer to as “extractive political institutions.” The bases of such institutions are governing mechanisms and apparatuses that are used to benefit the leadership and their cadres at the expense of their polity. The opposite of these ‘extractors’ are “inclusive political institutions,” which incorporate mechanisms for accountability and distribution of power.

While there are a great many other factors that led to the decline of the Ottomans and Qajars and the debt they would accrue to Western companies and countries for technologies and the technical expertise to use them, the end result was decline and dissolution. It is upon foundations that lacked any legacy of power-sharing or political inclusion that the extractive political and economic institutions led by the French and British or their proxies were built. As the remainder of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries would prove, it is hard to break free from this kind of trajectory.

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<sup>22</sup> The great irony in this is the massively important role that scholars in the Islamic world played in preserving, transmitting, and adding to existing bodies of knowledge that, best-case scenario, would have remained untouched during Europe’s Dark Age.

<sup>23</sup> I’m of the opinion that arguments to the effect that it was the deeply-rooted traditions of oral transmission, prohibition against religious innovation (*bid‘a*), consumer preferences of Ottoman and Safavid elites regarding books being calligraphic that primarily blocked the printing-press (“they could have, they just didn’t want to”), or opposition from calligraphers themselves as being insufficient to explain the issue entirely. Certainly, there were no shortages of scholars or statesmen that couldn’t see the use of such an innovation, regardless of its aesthetic utilitarianism. Shah ‘Abbas I was a perfect example of this. Yes, *bid‘a* has and continues to be a hot debate within the ummah, but as is demonstrated in the Ottoman case, there were ways of keeping a lid on that particular pot. The printing-press was an expensive piece of capital, thereby putting a cap on supply; there were no shortages of *qādīs* (judges appointed by the Caliphate), which means there weren’t reasonable barriers to controlling print on a larger scale. Encouraging orthodoxy and orthopraxy through print would have been a valuable asset in combatting the heterodox communities within and without its own borders. For myself, it is more convincing to look at the extreme violence and division that swept through European communities as a result of the Protestant Reformation to see the incentive for preventing widespread literacy and devaluation of the officially sanctioned religious class. The Catholic Church had far less control over European countries than the Caliphate did over Ottoman territory, and it simply could not hold back the tide.

While Turkey managed to consolidate itself enough to withstand exterior forces and win its own independence, the rest of the former Empire did not. In the years following independence from more direct forms of colonial control, countries like Egypt, Syria, Libya, Iran, and Iraq underwent violent shifts from monarchies to military dictatorships (such as the Free Officers movement). Many others, including Algeria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkey, and Yemen, experienced civil wars, substantive rebellions, and coup d'états. None of the new governments that emerged broke free of the extractive structures of their predecessors. In cases where a government strayed from this pattern, as in 1951 when Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh led the Iranian government in nationalizing the country's oil production, the result was external intervention. In Mossadegh's case, that meant a coup sponsored by the US and Britain.

The greater political movements that shaped the remainder of twentieth-century Middle East coalesced during the Cold War. If one had to put an exact date on it, that would be May 14, 1948. Most Arabs refer to this day as al-Naqba ('the disaster'), but it is conventionally known as the day that David Ben-Gurion declared Israel as a state. More than any other act of colonialism in the Middle East, it is the founding of Israel under Western protection that would be the rallying cry behind so many Pan-Arab, Pan-Islamic, and nationalist movements. Not the loss of interior sovereignty with capitulations,<sup>24</sup> the economic degradations from concessions,<sup>25</sup> the humiliation of the Caliphate with the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 (see the "Türkiye" chapter for

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<sup>24</sup> Beginning in the sixteenth century, the Ottomans signed a series of capitulations with France, and later, other European countries agreeing that citizens of Europe residing in the Ottoman empire could not be subjected to Ottoman law. These in turn led to further unequal treaties that deprived Ottoman rulers of control within their own borders. See *The Editors of the Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Capitulation," 2014.

<sup>25</sup> There were a series of concessions agreed to by the Safavid, Qajar, and Pahlavi governments that granted foreign governments, namely Britain, France, and Russia, exclusive rights to various forms of geographical and financial explorations and exploitations. See "Concessions" in *Encyclopædia Iranica* (Floor and Eftehadieh, 2011).

more on this), or covert efforts by Western powers to overthrow individual governments. It was Israel, what its government has done, and what Western governments have done for it (which negatively affected Muslims either directly or indirectly) since then. The concept of Israel, “the Zionist entity” (*al-kiyān al-ṣahiyūnī*) or “Zionist regime” (*rejīm-e ṣaheyūnī*) as per many Arab or Persian-speaking news outlets, has become the default embodiment of anti-Muslim oppression.

#### *“Post-National” Nation-Building*

It is important to understand that modern Islamism evolved out of four factors – the fall of the Islamic empires as those of the West ascended, Western interference in and/or control of the affairs of Muslims, and the extractive political and economic institutions that permeate the Middle East, and the perception that Islam is actively, if not overtly, marginalized in their societies.

Broadly defined, Islamism (*al-islāmiyya*, in Arabic) is, “the promotion of a political order that is believed to emanate from the will of God and is not based on popular sovereignty... [which] calls for a return to Islamic history and glory,” (Tibi, 2012: 2). It is an answer to the cultural chaos of secularism and pluralism as well as the gross inefficiencies of corrupt governance. From the Islamist perspective, the submission of the entire world to the will of God as well as wiping evil away are eschatological inevitabilities. Islamist movements try, if not to hasten the arrival of this utopia, then at least to fulfill their obligation as Muslims to align political governance with the will of God.

*Problems between Islamism and “the ummah”*

Islamism embodies the paradox of the ummah, as it may be a call to “a return to Islamic history and glory,” but “is, in Eric Hobsbawm’s phrase, an invented tradition,” (Tibi, 2012: 2).<sup>26</sup> It is simultaneously striving to represent the will of God, something that should apply to all Muslims, but do so while governing localities. This creates a situation in which divergences of opinion on even local political matters are no longer points on a spectrum but binarily right or wrong according to God, multiplied by the sheer number of governments and peoples governed. Within this perspective, the boundaries of the ummah are rearranged, excommunicating those that disagree with what the given government (or more often, group) has determined to be the will of God.

The political friction this situation can create is not difficult to imagine, nor that this friction is at the heart of Islamist millenarian and militant movements. Obviously, not all Islamists or Islamist movements employ violence in achieving their goals; it is more accurate to say that Islamism is to militant Islamism what Marxism is to something like the Columbian FARC.<sup>27</sup> In any case, the growth of militant Islamist groups has put all of Islamism under a

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<sup>26</sup> For a different perspective on the ‘inventedness’ of tradition, we’ll turn to Shielke – “the discursive traditions of Islam are often invented to a significant degree, and it is the dynamics of invention, and the shifts and contradictions that become invisible in the invented tradition, that we have to focus on if we are to understand how traditions change. It is perhaps misleading, however, to speak of ‘invented’ tradition since it easily carries a tone of denunciation. There is no ‘authentic’ tradition that would be obscured by the invented one. A discursive tradition is always a tradition-as-heritage, an imagined relationship to a history created through the reference to a past, and all such traditions are invented: without invention there would be no heritage, no history, only a diffuse mass of traces from the past. Instead, ‘invention’ should be understood in the sense of scientific, technical and artistic innovation: a conceptual change that makes the world and the objects inhabiting it appear in a new shape, offering new kinds of solutions and new kinds of problems to solve.” (2007)

<sup>27</sup> While this is an imperfect analogy, it is still reasonable given the fact that militant Islamist groups (like Boko Haram in Nigeria or Hezbollah in Lebanon) have strategies and tactics based on geographically-bound goals and other exigencies of their immediate environment. Even someone like Juhayman al-Utaybi, who in 1979 proclaimed that the Mahdi had returned (ushering in the end of times, which is about as universal as you can get) and forcibly took control of the Grand Mosque in Mecca (symbolically taking back control of Islam), did all of this in an effort to fight the al-Saud family (a political group with geographically-bounded control). “Post-national” groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS are more slippery in this respect, but when it comes to actual governance of capture territory, they become equally bound.



critical eye and has been an evolving source of massive disruption in the Middle East since the late-eighteenth century.

The most potent catalyst for the cascade effect of militant Islamist recruitment<sup>28</sup> is fostering a shared sense of *humiliation*. Humiliation at being the true community that submits to God and are yet ground under foot of faux-Muslim and non-Muslim empires and governments. Humiliation that their third most holy site, al-Quds (Jerusalem), is occupied territory by the same. Especially for those Islamists that have had contact with the Western world, it is the humiliation of “[recognizing] the horizons of possibility denied them by the inequities of the world system,” (Lawrence, 1995: 237). All of this, combined with a belief in the glorious re-empowerment of the ummah along with the rewards for the faithful, are the taglines of almost every publicity piece produced by militant Islamist groups. While this is only one of many rhetorical strategies employed (others include highlighting hypocrisy within the neo-liberal, capitalist West or trying to ‘beat them at their own game’),<sup>29</sup> it is the underlying framework upon which all else is built.

From the militant Islamist perspective, if God’s will is not put in effect by the government, and the governing force is a nominally Muslim, military authoritarian that maintains

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<sup>28</sup> This ‘cascade effect’ refers to the way that the nebulous character of militant groups – which most closely resemble loose, associated yet occasionally fractious franchises – contributes to creating emotional constituencies within disparate populations ranging from those sharing the same geographic space as the militant group in question to individuals thousands of miles away. The latter is emotionally enfranchised from anything from shared social media propaganda or similarly connected third-party. For groups like Da’ish which extolls individuals outside of its radius of direct control to act, the consummate act of enfranchisement is smuggling oneself to Da’ish-controlled territory or acting in a ‘lone wolf’ fashion by creating havoc in their own domicile.

<sup>29</sup> Especially in al-Qaeda’s messages, there is a strong trend towards using the West’s own laws and philosophies to demonstrate Western duplicity. From the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence, this is totally unnecessary. Justifying their own actions using conventional Islamic methodologies constitutes an independent line of rhetoric. It is my assertion that for as much as ‘beating them at their own game’ is also a psychological assault on domestic support for Western military action, it is primarily a means of asserting intellectual superiority. Not only are they masters of their own jurisprudence, but they are able to outmaneuver their enemies using their enemies’ own laws and norms. Academics such as Faisal Devji (2008) assert that this approach is a genuine reflection of the underlying motivations – namely promotion of human rights – of men like Osama bin Laden or Aiman al-Zawāhirī. Based on my experiences and reading, I disagree. I think it is more a matter of pride.

their power through strict police action, the ummah must respond in kind. This requirement of force is central to the writings of Egyptian author and Muslim Brotherhood member Sayyid Qutb, whose experiences with the West and his own government led him to the belief that many within the Islamic world were living in a state of *jahiliyya*, a reference to pre-Islamic societies' ignorance, paganism, and wickedness (see the chapter "Dealing with Kurdish Extremists and Problem-Makers– II" for more on Qutb). Distinct from Wahhabism and later Salafism, Qutb's writings proved to be influential in providing the fundamental basis for many current militant Islamist groups. From this perspective, the boundaries of the ummah are defined entirely by political struggles, a loaded reimagining of the *dār al-ḥarb* (house of war) and *dār al-salām* (house of peace).

Saladdin Ahmed, writing on the Kurdish experience, posited that not only the Kurds, but all peoples of the Middle East are in a situation wherein the Marxist approach has been abandoned for its perceived inability to deliver on its promises.<sup>30</sup> Even while the government-as-patron approach of almost every single Middle Eastern government – including those that more frequently leaned toward the West during the Cold War – had a closer resemblance to Soviet countries rather than anything west of the Iron Curtain, none have had the label of 'communist' (other than the now defunct South Yemen). Ahmed argues that the choice facing the Middle East is between Western-oriented, capitalist neo-liberalism on the one hand and Islamism on the other. This choice is complicated by the continuation of extractive policies, particularly nepotism, cronyism, and other non-inclusive systems that cling to current 'democratic' processes and empower the message of militant Islamism.

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<sup>30</sup> So as not to unfairly misrepresent Ahmed, it is also his (and others') argument that Marxism was never properly implemented in so-called Marxist countries, and that many Marxist movements in the Middle East were only skin-deep. One could reasonably argue that the same is true of liberal democracy within the same parameters.

An increasingly popular term for Islamist groups with aspirations that extend beyond changes in localized governance is “post-national,” the ideological equivalent globalization’s shift beyond geographic borders. These “post-nationals” have been hard at work in their own ‘nation-building’ efforts, actively bypassing previous notions of the nation-state and forming transnational creations of their own design.

Over the past 20 years, the slow, post-cold-war rot in Africa and the Middle East has been exuberantly exploited by these [post-national] forces – whose position, since there are more countries set to go the way of Yemen, South Sudan, Syria and Somalia, is flush with opportunity. Their adherents have lost the enchantment for the old slogans of nation-building. Their political technology is charismatic religion, and the future they seek is inspired by the ancient golden empires that existed before the invention of nations. Militant religious groups in Africa and the Middle East are less engaged in the old project of seizing the state apparatus; instead, they cut holes and tunnels in state authority, and so assemble transnational networks of tax collection, trade routes and military supply lines. (Dasgupta, 2018)

This effectively puts the varying “islams” and “ummahs” in a zero-sum competition for stability. Many of the governments most relevant to Kurdish issues have relied heavily upon subtly defining the ummah themselves in an effort to coopt religious networks and sentiments to ward off Islamist groups. What we will also see is that this, when combined with government projects for inventing their own national cohesions, frequently sets Kurds as an “other” that is outside of the community of the believers, subsequently justifying state institutional enforcement of graded-status relationships.

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In summary:

- The plurality of practice and attitudes among Muslims is in direct opposition to modern understandings of the ummah.
- Nationalism and the modern state are evolving concepts with definitive junctures in their creation. This emphasizes the subjectivity of primordialist nationalist narratives.
- Nations and movements inherently require narratives of cohesion, which is the same thing as inventing imaginary communities.
- Creating communal boundaries requires delineation of the “Other,” or non-community member. In countries with strong nationalist movements, these boundaries are enforced by political, religious, and economic institutions.
- Modern political institutions in the Middle East are the result of historical divergences in power-relationships with the West. By and large, these institutions are politically and economically extractive.
- Post-Cold War, post-Arab Spring politics in the region have distilled themselves into Islamism versus promises of neo-liberal policies from institutions that continue to resemble their extractive predecessors.
- Despite claims by Islamists, Islam and Islamism are not interchangeable terms.

*Theories regarding Kurdayetî*

Look, from the Arabs to the Georgians

The Kurds have become like towers.

The Turks and Persians are surrounded by them.

The Kurds are on all four corners.

Both sides have made the Kurdish people,

Targets for arrows of fate.

They are said to be keys to the borders,

Each clan forming a formidable bulwark.

Whenever the Ottoman Sea and the Tajik Sea

Flow out and agitate

The Kurds get soaked in blood

Separating them like an isthmus.

Mem û Zîn

*Kurdayetî* – Kurdish nationalism – has definitive centripetal and centrifugal forces that problematize its definition and subsequent implementation or affectation. For hundreds of years, Kurdish peoples have occupied the space between empires –the Safavids, Qajars, and Pahlavis to the east and the Ottomans to the west. Similar to the thermodynamics of tectonic plates, the forces and shifts applied to these bordering spaces have created friction and energy. *Kurdayetî* is a result of these pressures.

At its most basic level, it is a rejection of the ontological certitudes forced upon Kurdish citizens by non-Kurdish governments. It is the struggle to deal with their “Otherness,” which at times was enforced by the outside, and at others enforced by their own communities. The larger powers controlling their homeland(s) have had a vested interest in maintaining tribal fragmentation for those segments of the Kurdish populations which resist assimilation into the governing narratives and structures. These populations have an equal interest in forging a collective identity sufficiently strong to command the kind of power (frequently of a military nature) needed to claim self-governance. The greatest hindrances to this are the highly localized nature of tribal/organizational objectives (which revolve around resource access) and the bitter rivalries that these have engendered. David McDowall echoes this insofar as “modern Kurdish history is marked by two distinct struggles, the first against the governments of the nation states in which Kurdish peoples live, the second to forge a coherent sense of community and nationhood among themselves,” (Gourlay, 2017: 25).

The foremost symbol of the Kurdish identity is the language. Beyond being the easiest means of distinguishing themselves from their Arab, Persian, and Turkish counterparts, Kurdish literature, propaganda, and prayer were symbols of cultural survival and struggle that mirror the development of Kurdish national consciousness (Bajalan, 2013). As there are still many regions where local dialects are highly idiosyncratic and not mutually intelligible, various Kurdish intellectuals and academic groups have initiated attempts at standardizing these dialects.

Presently, they are grouped into three main categories – Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji/Kurmancî), Central Kurdish (Sorānî), and Southern Kurdish (Pehlewānî). Kurmanji is spoken in eastern Turkey, northern Syria, and northwestern Iraq and is the largest dialect. In Turkey and Syria, it's written in a modified Latin script with letters deviating from the Turkish alphabet,<sup>31</sup> and in Iraq, where it's referred to as Badînî, it is written in a modified Perso-Arabic script. Sorānî is spoken in central Iraqi Kurdistan with pockets in both the northeast and northwest of the country. Pahlawānî is the Iranian variant. These categories encompass an indefinite number of sub-dialects, and ignore others such as Gorānî and Zāzākî, which have fewer speakers and have the least amount of mutual intelligibility with other Kurdish speakers.

Until the 1920's, the boundaries of Kurdish were ill-defined as there had not yet been the necessary external pressures to incentivize that kind of communal invention. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian political theorist writing on political hegemonies, posited that establishing linguistic dominance was essential as, “in language, there is contained a specific conception of the world”

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<sup>31</sup> This is not an unqualified statement. As we'll see later, Turkish official efforts at suppressing the use of Kurdish has resulted in a bastardized alphabet where Turkish letters are used to express written Kurdish; the writers are illiterate in their spoken-tongue. See Figure 7.

(Gramsci 1971: 323; Gramsci, 1985). Dovetailing on this concept is Billig's theory on the reciprocal relationship between language and nationalism, specifically that "nationalism creates languages... as markers of boundaries between "our" nation and others," (1995: 30-31). In the case of Kurdish, even the act of perpetuating its use – much less developing ideological vocabularies within the Kurdish idiom – was a reifying act of communal boundaries and competing national narratives.

### *Shared Trauma*

In general, shared pain acts as an interpersonal bridge and is the foundation of everything from support groups to arduous team-building exercises among military units (Dalglish and Kukyen, 2008). One possible reaction to severe pain and injury is 'trauma,' a state of psychological disorder and upset that exists on the higher range of that particular spectrum. In the aforementioned examples, each of the members has experienced the same stimuli; if one of their number is traumatized by it, the other members have direct knowledge of the cause and can relate in a direct way. Recognition or denial of these traumas further affects the role that the trauma plays within the community.<sup>32</sup>

Human capacity for internalizing communal identities is such that the imagination has no limit to the scale of collective identification. A perfect example of this is 9/11. While the direct experience of being in the towers or the Pentagon, much less in the planes themselves, was limited to a relatively small number of people, millions were affected – some traumatized – by the event. It created radical change over a short period of time throughout a massive collectivity.

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<sup>32</sup> For example, a friend of mine who lived and worked in the DC beltway confided his belief that if the Armenian lobbyist groups were able to get the Turkish government to publicly recognize the Armenian genocide in those exact terms, these organizations would lose their *raison d'être*. He intended no insult to either Armenian or Turkish interests or sensibilities, but rather to emphasize how much of the conflict relied on the fundamental phrasing of Armenian-Turkish history from specific parties.

Jeffrey Alexander made the observation that understanding the psycho-social phenomena of trauma requires us to deconstruct it,

The trick is to gain reflexivity, to move from the sense of something commonly experienced to the sense of strangeness that allows us to think sociologically. For trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society... (2004: 2)

The “trauma process” by which meaning was created out of the events was carried out through mass media. In the terms of Max Weber, media functions as a “carrier group” that constructs the cultural claim of trauma and creates a shared context to understand the stimuli and its aftermath (1968: 468–517).

Despite all of their differences, Kurds have formed an ethno-spatial awareness sufficiently powerful to permeate regional identification. If Kurdish pride is one side of the coin, its opposite is tragedy and trauma. For the Kurds, this includes such events as those in Halabja, Iraq in 1988, Kobani, Syria in 2015, Kirkuk, Iraq in 2017, and Afrin, Syria in 2018, all of which have created geographical foci on which the imaginary community’s drama was played in real-time. Modern telecommunications capabilities facilitate this process and amplify its emotional value. Families crowd a laptop in the living room, masses of smoking men surround a wall-mounted television in the coffee shop, and taxi drivers huddle near the portable radio as they all watch and listen to events unfold. Politicians, news anchors, and religious leaders become the carrier group for the trauma process.

Traumatic status is attributed to real or imagined phenomena, not because of their actual harmfulness or their objective abruptness, but because these phenomena are believed to have abruptly, and harmfully, affected collective identity. Individual security is anchored in structures of emotional and cultural expectations that provide a sense of security and capability. (Alexander, 2012: 19)



Applying this definition to something as tangible as the traumas visited upon Kurdish communities may appear to diminish their importance or underplay the amount of direct pain and death that resulted. Neither is intended. What *is* intended is founding an understanding of the cascading effect that these “trauma processes” can have across time and space that despite being evermore distanced from the events themselves still retain and transmit elements of trauma. It passes through generations and creates psychic bridges that bypass national and geographic borders. In effect, these traumas are etched into what Thomas Tweed refers to as “sacrosapes,” which are flows that exist across time and location and order one’s perception of the cosmos and their place within it. Knowing one’s place in the cosmos can stimulate psychic reprioritization of identity and direct individuals who imagine themselves as part of the group.

*Centrifugal Forces disempowering Kurdayetî*

*Language– the other edge of the sword*

While Kurdish satellite stations – most of which are based in Western Europe – have made a definitive impact on creating mutual intelligibility between Kurdish dialects by ‘standardizing’ Sorani and Kurmanji, Hakan Yavuz argues that this process is not strong enough to overcome the effects of geographic borders, parochial politics, and government policies restricting linguistic propagation, particularly in Iran, Syria, and Turkey (Gourlay, 2018: 25-26). For instance, the fact that most of the elements involved in the Sheikh Said rebellion in 1925

were Zāzākī-speakers greatly limited its constituency. Almost one hundred years later, there are still jokes about these kinds of intelligibility issues.<sup>33 34</sup>

While Kurdish nationalism does not necessarily include the Kurdish language itself,<sup>35</sup> its politically-motivated suppression stifles its use as a means of protest. Illiteracy in Kurdish makes potent unifying symbols, such as the Kurdish poets of the nineteenth century, unavailable for use in social discourse. This effectively limits Kurdish access to their own history and cultural idioms.

### *Intra-Kurdish Strife*

Treating Kurdish nationalism as a singular rather than a plural short-changes its underlying complexities. In a similar vein to el-Zein’s “islams,” Mehrdad Izady suggests that there are “many Kurdistans.” However, this plurality results in “pan-Kurdism [being] as politically indigestible as pan-Arabism, or pan-Spanishism, were there such a thing between the Spanish-speaking countries of the world,” (Izady, 2004, 92-93). Simply put, points of congruency among these nationalisms are insufficiently strong to overcome their incongruencies. In the case of pan-Arabism, the most obvious symbols of pan-Arab action are the United Arab Republic and the ‘united’ military efforts in 1948, 1967, and 1973. The United Arab Republic was a decade-long showcase of inequality and power-grabbing between Egyptian and Syrian

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<sup>33</sup> There is a joke in circulation among Kurds that goes as follows –  
A Zāzā man dies and the angels come to weigh the balance of his life. As soon as he starts speaking, one angel turns to the other,  
“Do you know what he’s saying? I don’t speak Zaza.”  
“I don’t either. Let’s go ask God what he’s saying.”  
They go ask God. God immediately answers,  
“Put him in Paradise.”

The angels are confused. God replies,  
“I’d rather be safe and not stick a righteous man in Hell. I don’t understand Zaza either!”

<sup>34</sup> Based on my experiences in 2016 and 2017, unless you know Zāzākī, the only way to communicate with a native-speaker of the language is with Turkish rather than Kurmanji.

<sup>35</sup> See p.115 for more on PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who speaks very little Kurdish.

leaders (Podeh, 1999). The Arab-Israeli wars, particularly '48 and '67, were Cold War-fueled and crippled by the absence of coordination between the nations' commanders (see Louis and Shlaim, 2012).<sup>36</sup> Kurdish politics are haunted by the same dissonant specter of realities failing to conform with the rhetoric.

### *Islam & Secularism*

There are two key aspects to this. The first is the debate as to whether or not Islam, or organized religion in general, has a defining place in Kurdishness. The second are the official and individual-levels of defining the limits of the ummah. Frequently, the determining factors for this process are just as likely to be political justifications as anything more clearly 'orthopraxic' (i.e. the check-list of activities that conventionally apply to Muslims, such as prayers, mosque attendance, or fasting).

Relative to other regions in the Middle East, widespread conversion to Islam happened late. The facts and mentalities behind those converting forces is a matter of dispute in modern Kurdish society. On the one hand, it is a fact that Sufi brotherhoods helped establish an Islamic foothold in Kurdistan. On the other hand, there are many individual narratives that claim their Muslim heritage was a product of their grandparents or great-grandparents being forced to convert from Zoroastrianism.<sup>37</sup>

While there are still parties that espouse communism (namely the PKK, but even this has addendums regarding its modern *videndi*; see the "PKK 2000-Present" chapter), the dynamics of

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<sup>36</sup> In the case of Iraq, there's a lot to be said about the fact that there was a Syrian Ba'ath Party and an Iraqi one rather than there simply being a single, united Ba'ath Party under the framework set out by the likes of Michel Aflaq (Devlin, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Accounts of this nature, which is to say oral genealogies, are empirically difficult to prove one way or the other. In any case, as a researcher the 'proof' of this is always less important to me than the story itself and the way it reflects its narrator's world-views.

the post-Cold War era have greatly diminished their presence and drawing power. The emerging argument is that the new Middle Eastern dynamic is a choice between liberalism or Islamism.

Salladin Ahmed argued that,

In the absence of a genuine and inspiring Left, Islamism has become the only popular ideology with a doctrine of ‘social justice’. The catch, of course, is that it is not social justice per se, but a religious notion of justice, which means it prerequisites unfreedom insofar as it is rooted in a set of metaphysical beliefs. (2018: 74)

Ahmed further argued that much of the Leftist rhetoric – including the PKK, but more particularly the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – was little more than ‘copy and paste’ window dressing that attempted to harness the symbols of revolutionary zeitgeist. Ahmed had particular issue with the dissonance between the rhetoric and the reality in Iraqi Kurdistan, where some of the most basic tenants, such as gender equality, never featured in promise or policy. While this kind of ideological hypocrisy is more or less a universally recurrent aspect of human behavior, it works in this case as a contrasting dye to highlight those aspects of society that are important to the Kurdish leadership.<sup>38</sup>

Without contradicting the realities voiced by so many in academia and media (i.e. Aqrawi-Whitcomb, 2015; Özkan, 2017), there is not necessarily common consent with respect to what Islam is or should be in Kurdistan. Kurdish mosques still fill up every Friday, bookstores peddlers have just as many books on Islam written in Kurdish as they do secular political

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<sup>38</sup> While I find Ahmed’s article to be insightful, I do not share his belief with respect to Leftist parties’ being alone in its capacity to progress social-justice in the Kurdish region. The foundation of this disagreement has less to do with Leftism, Neo-Classical Liberalism, or even Islamism, but is based entirely upon the history of local institutions and cultural norms’ capacity for sustaining such lofty goals. Alliances and the ideologies they espouse make little difference in the long-run with respect to the leading Kurdish families. This is reflected in the Kurdish truism, *siyāset na bawk na dayik niyya* (“politics has neither father nor mother,” i.e. no lasting loyalties).

writings, radio personalities that make deprecating remarks about non-Muslims,<sup>39</sup> and even Kurds that have joined ISIS.

While the following excerpt is addressing Kurdish circumstances in Iran, we will see that it is in many ways transposable across the region.

...despite the argument about the unity of Muslims as one nation ... the rejection of Kurdish autonomy is nothing but a rejection of separation from a sovereign nation-state called... Iran. Finally, it is the official nationalism of the Iranian government with its political power called Islam which refuses to recognize the legitimacy of Kurdish autonomy. The fundamental conflict between the universalism of Islam advocated by the Islamic government of Iran and the Kurdish nationalism in Iran is... the conflict between Iranian nationalism and Kurdish nationalism. (Ezzatyar, 2016: 196)

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<sup>39</sup> I overheard this during the same ride wherein my driver asked if I was *kafer* because I was Christian. See p.306.

## Indiana University & Tennessee

### *Indiana University Bloomington – a Limestone Diamond in a Sea of Green*

Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana is a unique place. You drive through the vast, green expanse of the American Midwest, passing miles and miles of farmland and forests studded with small towns with three stoplights and a single gas station. Go beyond that a bit further, and suddenly that agricultural space is neighboring a decent-sized shopping complex. Take the main road into town and soon enough you will be surrounded by acres of students walking between limestone edifices separated by yet more trees.

For as many “townies” – locals of Bloomington – that are represented in the student populace, you will also notice a large number of Koreans, Chinese, Saudis, and a few Turks and even Iranians. The main library is massive. If you go into the course listings, you’ll find more than *seventy* languages offered<sup>40</sup>. One of these is Sorani Kurdish.

Part of my coming to Indiana University in the first place was for that very reason.<sup>41</sup> I had run across Kurdish sources in past projects and lacked the tools to puzzle them out. It looked kind of like Arabic, but had some additional letters that made no sense to me. This got me searching. The more I had learned, the more I became intrigued. Unfortunately, Indiana University had the course on their list, but had no one to teach it when I showed up in August 2012. Fortunately, they had a Persian program, which helped my later efforts in Kurdish and was a very worth-while endeavor on its own. So, I studied Persian for another three years.

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<sup>40</sup> Many of these are Less Commonly Taught Languages, a category that encompasses tongues and dialects that have little if any pedagogical representation in secondary and tertiary education. We’re rather proud of how many of these are featured at Indiana University.

<sup>41</sup> That, and they offered me an assistant-instructor position for first-year Arabic, for which I am still *immensely* grateful.

Haidar Khezri is an Iranian Kurd with a love for comparative literature and all things Franz Kafka. He came most recently from Mardin Artuklu University in Turkey with a grant from Indiana University to write a first-year Kurdish textbook and teach three levels of Kurdish. He is tall and lightly-bearded with a ready smile. The first time I met him was after he gave a lecture on "Layla and Majnun," a Persian epic poem written by Neẓāmī Ganjnavi in the twelfth century. We spoke briefly about my interest in Kurdish, and exchanged email addresses in case I had any questions before the program officially started summer 2016.

Little did I know that from the class of six, only two would be able to continue from the next year, and after that student graduated,<sup>42</sup> it would be just Haidar, myself, and our shared love of Kurdish.

*Nashville, Tennessee*

*Māla/Bārī Kurdī har la sar pištī kareya* – “the home of the Kurds is always on the back of the donkey”

Kurds in America are only one of many diaspora communities from the Middle East, and as such have a great deal in common with other immigrants. The majority of them are Sunni Muslims, speak Arabic, Persian, or Turkish (albeit as second languages), and emigrated from areas that were affected by political and military conflict. This description can apply with equal validity to Palestinians, Iranians, Somalis, Lebanese, or Afghans that emigrated to America sometime in the last century. There are, however, several key features that distinguish the Kurdish diaspora. Kurds make up the largest ethnicity without a corresponding state. There are approximately 35 million in the world (CIA World Fact Book), the vast majority of whom are spread between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Outside of the Middle East, the largest Kurdish

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<sup>42</sup> “That student” is actually Drew S., who through our time together in Kurdish became one of my dearest friends, and my sons refer to him as “Uncle Drew.” I still try to keep in touch with the other students as well, which says a lot about the kinds of relationships intensive language classes can build.

communities are in the Caucus region, Western Europe (mainly Germany), and the United States. There are approximately 20,000 Kurds living in the U.S., and 13,000 of these all live in the same city.<sup>43</sup> That city is Nashville, Tennessee, or as it's known within the American Kurdish community, Little Kurdistan.

#### *American Nationalism & the American Dream*

As my conversations in Nashville took place in an emotionally-loaded political situation, we need to take a moment to frame the experience to maximize our understanding. When speaking of the American Dream, I give it two important, distinguishing markers of post-MLK Jr. and post-9/11 to highlight the ideal and follow it with the binding political realities. The former is the goalpost of a forward-thinking humanist society unhindered by racial biases from sea to shining sea. The latter is the largest cultural trauma relevant to Muslim relations in the United States, and in it are reflected the fears and biases of a society conditioned to an invisible, omnipresent 'War on Terror,' manifested most notably by Muslims of Middle Eastern ancestry.

While there are various iterations of the American Dream through the twentieth century, those stages which matter the most in our exploration of the Kurdish diaspora in the U.S. is the way it shifted post-MLK Jr. and then post-9/11. American nationalism, American exceptionalism, and the American Dream are all tied to America's revolutionary origins, its constitution, liberty, democracy, capitalism. In its most distilled form, it is the belief that anyone can become an American and that hard work and determination result in material, social, and

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<sup>43</sup> While the immigrants in Nashville are from the same locations and fled the same confrontations in the Middle East as their counterparts in Europe, the immigration policies, military capacities, and social fabric of the United States differ markedly. For instance, there are 70,000 Kurds in Sweden and 650,000 in Germany. Sweden has been described as "lacking cultural and ethnic nationalism" (Eliassi, 2013: 8), and Germany is similar insofar as "German patriotism" has something of a bad memory until recently. Both of these latter countries also have negative population growth and a social structure that needs a larger tax-base than retirees, which drastically affects immigration policies (Coleman, 2006).



spiritual success (Hanson, 2010). The caveat to this perception of national self was highlighted in the 1960's and the Civil Rights movement, namely that 'anyone' was in fact a more exclusive, category with various demographic filters. At the risk of falling too much into the domain of the Great Man theory, the most ubiquitous personification in the national imagination of this was Martin Luther King, Jr. In this context, the post-MLK Jr. American Dream is the perception that the American Dream opened up for the first time beyond descendants of white Europeans to be fully inclusive. Leaving alone the subject of inconsistencies in practice, it is the *perception* of purposeful inclusion of minority rights into this definition that is most important.

Considering the impact of 9/11 on the American psyche (Saurette, 2006), there are two important points that most directly affect our conversation on the American Dream and Muslim diaspora communities. The first is the feeling of vulnerability, a raw, naked potential to be harmed on American soil by an agent of a foreign agenda that became part and parcel of American security rhetoric and policy. Both communism of the Cold Era and the militant Islamism of the War on Terror can be seen as ideologies with the capacity for surreptitious 'corruption of American values' (Ciment 2007: 56; Evans 2011). However, there was a physical immediacy in the act of destroying the Twin Towers and attacking the Pentagon (using American jet-liners in a suicide attack, no less) that was a dramatic departure from the era of air-raid sirens, doomsday clocks, and impersonal warheads travelling thousands of miles to detonate in the immediate atmosphere.

The fact that these were suicide attacks carried out by Muslim extremists from the Middle East as opposed to Christian or Jewish fundamentalists of Anglo-American descent furthers the 'foreignness' of the violence (Hafez, 2007: 13-14).<sup>44</sup> Dramatic suicide has an alienating element

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<sup>44</sup> American perceptions and actions following violent incidents involving fundamentalist groups such as the siege of the Branch Davidians in 1993 (Kerstetter, 2004) or acts of domestic terrorists like Timothy McVeigh in 1995 did

to it<sup>45</sup> and American attitudes toward Islam have been heavily influenced by extreme political events of the late twentieth century – the 1973 oil crisis, the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the 1983 suicide bombing of American marine barracks in Beirut, the beginning of the first and second Palestinian intifadas from 1987-1993 and 2000 (taking place in Israel, a staunch, albeit complicated, ally of the U.S.), the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and the 2000 attack on the USS Cole. For many, 9/11 was Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” (1993) brought to American shores by radicalized Middle Eastern, Muslim men. This led to yet another introspection on the American Dream’s fine print, namely, a crisis in trust between those ‘native’ to the American Dream and those foreigners of non-European ancestry who are ostensibly ‘applying’ for it.

Immigration from war-torn states in the Middle East featured prominently in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential elections, and when questioned about concerns of the American Muslim community during a debate, then-presidential candidate Donald Trump employed the ethos of the Department of Homeland Security’s trade-marked slogan, “If you see something, say something,” (2017) when he said, “Muslims have to report problems when they see them ... if you don’t do that, it’s a very difficult situation for our country ... to solve a problem, you at least have to state what the problem is, or at least say the name...the name is there - radical Islamic terror,” (Bailey, 2016).

Running the risk of oversimplifying the complex issues of inter-ethnic relations, policies, and perceptions of security in America, this particular moment highlights President Trump

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not create a ‘Christianophobia’ dialectic. The term ‘Islamophobia’ was coined in 1997 (Bleich, 2012) and has become a common theme in discussions involving American relations with Middle Eastern immigrants and Islam in general. While I believe home-grown, white nationalist terrorism is arguably a far greater threat in terms of numbers, I think they lack the ‘foreignness’ that makes Jihadist threats so much easier to latch onto.

<sup>45</sup> A good example of this is the mass suicide People’s Temple in Jonestown, the majority of whom were American citizens (Chidester, 2003).

voicing the insecurity of his constituencies. Further, this statement places the responsibility onto the American Muslim community as a whole. Moments like this are evidence of conflict in defining who does and does not qualify as American and able to take part in the American Dream. Saba Mahmood, writing on Islamist movements in Egypt made an observation that is equally applicable to organizations and movements within the United States, “[Islamist movements have an] almost taken-for-granted association with terrorism [that has served] to further reaffirm their status as agents of a dangerous irrationality,” (2005).

In short, the post-MLK Jr. American Dream portrays it as many Americans desire it to be – inclusivity with no regard for race, gender, or religion; the post-9/11 American Dream is one tinged by negative perceptions and fears that create political realities where there is much more debate on issues of trust that revolve around identity. It is within these contexts that I approached my research at the Salahadeen Islamic Center in Nashville, Tennessee.



*Figure 3 - Azadi International Food Market, Nashville, TN, adjacent to the Salahadeen Islamic Center*

### *Fleeing Conflict*

In 1991, fifty Iraqi Kurdish families immigrated to Nashville directly after the First Gulf War. This was the same year in which uprisings in the Shi'ite south and Kurdish north of Iraq attempted to overthrow Saddam, believing that they had the support of the U.S. military in their efforts. To their great disappointment, that support did not materialize, and in the following months, many thousands of fighters and civilians were killed by government forces. Ostensibly, the George H. W. Bush administration's fear was that toppling Saddam's government would lead to a Shi'ite Islamist regime similar to Iran (Yildiz, 2004: 34-43). This is not to say that the U.S. ceased involvement in the area. American forces established no-fly zones and programs such as Operation: Provide Comfort to alleviate the humanitarian situation. The sanctions levied against the government as well as the U.N. mandated weapons inspections created a tense political environment wherein Baghdad sought opportunities to punish those sources of domestic opposition. In 1997, some 4,000 Iraqis working with foreign NGOs had their citizenship revoked (Hawrami, 2017). Being part of American humanitarian efforts, they were granted entry into the United States after first spending four months in Guam for screening.

Among these Kurdish immigrants was Nawzad Hawrami, a civil engineer working with USAID. As such, he was cycled through the Kurdish Asylum Program, and arrived in Nashville, Tennessee in 1997. Within his first year in the U.S., he helped establish the Salahadeen Islamic Center (SIC) of Nashville in 1998. Since its foundation, the center's leadership has helped process immigrants and refugees from the Second Gulf War onward, has hosted Kurds from all over the country, and made deliberate steps to foster good relations with the Nashville religious and secular communities.

*Salahadeen Islamic Center – Model Kurds, Model Americans*

After removing my shoes, I was welcomed into the center’s main office. Based on its appearance, it functions as a small meeting room, private study, and reception when needed. On one end sat a large desk, and the wall next to it was a hefty bookshelf containing books on Islamic law, most of which were written in Arabic. The opposing wall of the office was almost entirely covered in laminated information guides about living and working in Tennessee. Every conceivable government office and municipal service that an incoming immigrant would need was represented. While a little overwhelming in terms of the sheer amount of information presented, it was a practical use of space. In many ways, it was these two walls that summarized the center itself – a place for legal, psychological, and spiritual integration.

My first contact with Nawzad had taken place over email, and this was our first meeting face to face. After offering me water, we both had a seat. My first question was which language we should use for our interview – Sorani or Kurmanji Kurdish, Arabic, Persian, Turkish, or English? He replied with a smile and a shrug, “Whichever you’d prefer.”

*Trump’s Travel Ban*

On January 27, 2017, President Trump issued an executive order banning the entrance of citizens of Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen for 90 days. It also banned admitting any refugees from these same countries for 120 days (Executive Order January 27, 2017). This included permanent U.S. residents, green card holders, and all other types of visa. Further, it reduced the number of refugees that could be admitted into the U.S. from 110,000, the level at which President Barack Obama set, to 50,000. While it was met by immediate gridlock the day after its release and would be revised less than two months later<sup>46</sup> and upheld by the

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<sup>46</sup> The most notable change in the order was the exemption of Iraq from the ban by request of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

Supreme Court more than a year later (Executive Order March 6, 2017; Thrush, 2017; Gladstone and Sugiyama, 2018), the executive order was a clear statement of distrust by the then newly inaugurated administration.

It was in this light that I intended to approach the interview with as much tact and transparency as possible. I wanted to avoid any impression of ulterior motivation, as I expected to encounter undercurrents of indignation and fear – indignation if they framed their plight as a direct result of American policies,<sup>47</sup> and fear of those voices stoking anti-immigrant sentiments gaining greater power to shape policy. To my great surprise, I picked up on neither. Everyone was very open and accepting of my questions. This being the case, it wasn't because Kurds were not being directly affected by the executive order and the political climate regarding Middle Eastern Muslims in America.

On Sunday, January 29, 2017 the first Kurdish family arrived in Nashville from Iraq after the travel ban was announced. Nawzad was quite proud of this, and on the topic of the travel ban almost immediately began praising the local and state-level support the Kurdish community has been receiving. On the night of President Trump's election, Meghan Barry, the Democratic Mayor of Nashville, made a phone call to Nawzad to reassure the Kurdish community of City Hall's dedication to preventing intimidation or other forms of harassment of its Muslim population. Jim Cooper, the Democratic Congressman Tennessee's Fifth District, also communicated his support for the Kurdish community. Nawzad went on to outline the networks of support that continued on into the lower echelons of city management, specifically law

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<sup>47</sup> While we will discuss more of this in the segment on selective historical emphasis, there are plenty of examples of Kurds expressing negative feelings toward American policies regarding Kurds – for example, a Kurd living in Germany remarked, “Turkey [which has been in violent conflict with Kurdish separatists in eastern Anatolia for nearly four decades] is economically and politically supported by Germany and the U.S.A. The Kurdish towns and villages have been bombed by German Leopard II tanks,” (Keles, 2015: 134).

enforcement. On the future of Kurdish Americans, Nawzad made it clear that they had to make the decision to be in the U.S. to stay.

### *Strategic Essentialization of History*

On my second trip to the SIC, I asked Nawad whether or not he was still working as a civil engineer here in the States. When he left Iraq for Guam and then the U.S., Nawzad was already married and had small children. If he wanted to continue on as an engineer, he'd have had to take five years working as a low-level mechanic before being qualified to take the appropriate engineering exam for resume his normal employment in America. After being uprooted from working with USAID in Iraq and living off of his personal savings, that wasn't financially feasible. While he has been able to earn a living attached to the Center, it's not farfetched to imagine the resentment that could develop for Kurds in Nawzad's position toward the U.S. for their socio-economic predicaments.

Nawzad's situation is a pointillist dot in the overall picture of Kurdish-U.S. relations.<sup>48</sup> During the 1960's and 70's, the Iranian regime supported Mustafa Barzani's Peshmerga forces against the Ba'athist regime in Iraq. In 1972, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger met with the Shah in Tehran, at which point he pledged to support Iraqi Kurds as leverage against Iraq.<sup>49</sup> Three years later, Iran and Iraq signed the Algiers Accord in which the Iranians ceased all support of Iraqi Kurds in return for more favorable terms regarding border issues along the Shatt al-Arab. In reaction, Barzani sent a personal message to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, stating, "Your Excellency, the United States has a moral and political responsibility to our people," (Schorr, 1996). In an inquest by the Intelligence Committee, Kissinger explained the

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<sup>48</sup> Pointillism is a neo-impressionist art form that employs tiny dots of color that when viewed in their sum form a distinct picture.

<sup>49</sup> American interests in supporting the Shah were tied to the greater Cold War strategy of communist containment.

decision to cease the \$16 million CIA program, “Covert action should not be confused with missionary work.” With their foreign support removed, the asymmetrical relationship of power between Barzani’s fighters and Saddam’s army led to thousands of Kurds, both Peshmerga and civilians, being killed by Ba’athist forces.

In 2000 and 2002, the SIC featured a photo gallery of the aftermath of Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons in 1988 on the city of Halabja, Iraq, as part of the Anfal Campaign.<sup>50</sup> These kinds of exhibitions are a means of preserving the past, conveying a painful reality of what it has meant to be a Kurd, and directing the communal narrative.<sup>51</sup> That pieces of these came from the homes of migrants and refugees demonstrates how homesteads act as “memory museums” (Boym, 1998: 516) wherein the home-culture is on active display in interactions and relationships in addition to static fixtures like memorabilia and pictures. Members of this community are simultaneously onlookers and participants by virtue of shared pain. These foci are similar in function to religious shrines, existing as symbolic, yet tangible reminders of the visitor’s ontological status and responsibilities for continuing the community’s life. It felt in some ways akin to the Shi’ite *taziyyeh* during Ashureen.

Members from both the Kurdish and non-Kurdish community came and paid their respects at the SIC. While the SIC’s leadership cannot speak the mind of all of its members, such actions convey uniting aspects of Kurdish essentialism that they would like to perpetuate. Given the mixed history with the U.S. government, this essentialism could easily include anti-

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<sup>50</sup> The term ‘Anfal’ is a Qur’anic reference to Surat al-Anfal. This sura outlines Muslims receiving the bounties of war and God sending His wrath against the unbelievers and criminals, specifically referencing the use of fire (Arabic: *nār*; 8:14), stones raining from the sky (*hijāratān min al-samā’*; 8:32), and painful punishment (*‘adhābin alīmin*; 8:32). Alongside the chemical weapons, napalm, conventional bombs, and torture were hallmarks of the Anfal Campaign.

<sup>51</sup> For a comparative analysis on the psychology of memorial and genocide, see Ochsner (1999) on the Jewish Holocaust and Galip (2016) on the Armenian Holocaust.



American, isolationist elements that strives to keep their community at arms-length from those that have historical precedent for allowing suffering.<sup>52</sup> The most visible and publicized attitudes are the inverse, both in diaspora and in the Middle East.<sup>53</sup> A major theme throughout my conversations with Nawzad was the need for full-born participation in American civic and political processes. “We need to have a Kurdish mayor, governor, senator... we [currently] have students in law school.” Perhaps a conversation directed towards the Algiers Accord, Henry Kissinger, or the aftermath of the First Gulf War might have elicited less positive opinions, but the automatic direction regarding the Nashville Kurdish community and the U.S. was one of preservation and prosperity through engagement. Far from eschewing Americans as fair-weather friends, he frequently made statements embracing the incorporation of American identity into their community - “*Hem Kurdîş, hem Emerikîş ... Ba ko bijîn* (both Kurdish and American ... we all live together).”

#### *Reification through outreach*

I spent the summer of 2016 in a Kurdish neighborhood of Istanbul studying Turkish and Kurmanji Kurdish. Despite the large number of Kurds I met, the topic of an independent Kurdish state was not an easily discussed subject. For the handful of times that I did speak with anyone regarding their thoughts on the creation of a Kurdish state, they were all in private and only took place after significant preamble and what amounted to extensive screening of my character and motivations (see p.163 for more on this). This equated to the question simply not being proper to bring up. Every portion of Kurdistan has painful memories not far below the surface, and plenty of reason for suspicion. As such, I was expecting Nawzad to diplomatically avoid a direct

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<sup>52</sup> This is particularly true given the Reagan administration’s role in enabling Saddam’s use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War. See Hiltermann, 2003 and Harris and Aid, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> See Khezri, 2017 for a story regarding Kurdish efforts to gain the attention of American presidents by naming their newborns after them.

statement for or against its creation and I originally did not plan on bringing it up. Once more I was surprised. “We *need* to have [an independent Kurdish state]...” he told me, and while he had several important addendums to this position, the first to come out was, “but you need to educate it.”

As with most Islamic centers, the SIC is primarily a mosque with facilities for hosting other activities. Of primary interest to our conversation was the Center’s hosting weekend and summer school. These are composed of two class groups – the first has students ages six to eighteen and the second for sixteen to twenty. Both are focused on religion, civics, Kurdish language, and Kurdish culture. The diverse nature of the Nashville community contributes to a number of potential conflicts and difficulties in communication, among these being the diversity of dialects spoken, including Hawramani (west Iran), Gorani (northeast Iraq and northwest Iran), Sorani (northeast Iraq), and Kurmanji (Turkey, northern Syria, and northeast Iran), which are written in Latin or Perso-Arabic scripts. The language taught in these classes is Kurmanji. Culture classes include everything from history to traditional clothing, and the civics classes cover aspects of American citizenship.

#### *Neighborly Islam - Security through outreach*

In terms of solidifying its relationships with other religions in the community, the SIC is a member of the Family of Abraham, a local group made up of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim congregations. Once every quarter, they’ll host activities, soccer games, seminars, or visits to the members’ respective places of worship. For the past several years, a local Kurd named Shirzad Tayyar started leading a free tour of some of the Kurdish landmarks. They start with the SIC, and then follow it up by visiting the two Kurdish markets on each side of the Center, a jewelry shop, and then to a Kurdish restaurant, of which there are several to choose (Fletcher, 2016; Campbell,

2016). On receiving visitors with different values and dress codes, the article on tours to the Center quotes Tayyar as saying, “People tend to think about not offending anybody... It’s the house of God so everyone is welcome,” (Fletcher, 2016).

Many aspects of the SIC’s approach – namely the emphasis on diplomacy and acceptance of differing faiths – are quite standard within an American Islamic context. While I encountered the same kind of understanding and neighborliness in Kurdistan proper, it’s particularly unsurprising to encounter it in American society where norms of religious pluralism require such strategies as a method of diffusing tensions (Eck, 2007).

Another aspect of the mosque that I found interesting is the effort they put into establishing media presence, which in its own way is a measure of public transparency. They operate a YouTube channel where they post videos of their sermons and activities as well as a Facebook page to connect members of their mosque community. Again, this is not necessarily unique, but it is nevertheless demonstrative of the kind of effort the Center puts into being as connected to the community at large as possible (YouTube SCN1998 channel; Salahadeen Islamic Center Facebook).

#### *First Prayer Service at the SIC Center*

Three blocks before I arrived at the Center for my very first time, I stopped at a gas station. While in line, I overheard the attendant and a patron speaking in Arabic. Curiosity overruling my desire to not be impolite, I asked where they were from. As it turns out, they were from Kenya. Arabic is not the first or second language for Kenyans, yet our entire conversation took place in a mix of Egyptian and modern standard dialects. I did not realize it at the time, but this was my first introduction to an important facet of the SIC. Namely, that for as much as it is

about Muslim Kurds in diaspora, it's also about serving a Muslim population that expands beyond the boundaries of Kurdistan and encompasses much of the Middle East and beyond.

This trip was specifically to attend the prayer service at the Center on a Thursday afternoon. I took a seat on the floor and observed the men kneeling in a short line several meters in front of me. The attendees were elderly retirees and men on break from work. For a morning or afternoon session on a weekday, this mix has been consistent for every mosque I've ever visited. Nearly half of the men in front of me were wearing traditional Kurdish garb – olive and khaki pants and jacket bound by a high-waisted sash. While I immediately recognized their turbans as being distinctively Kurdish, I am not nearly familiar enough with the techniques of winding to distinguish them by specific region.

During the prayer, a gentleman came in from beside me, looking in all respects to be coming from work. His dress was casual American wear and if pressed, I would have placed him as being from North Africa or the southern Gulf. After completing his ablutions, he joined the elderly Kurdish men in line to continue the prayers. With so many mosques to choose from in Nashville, I had not anticipated encountering non-Kurdish Muslims at the SIC.

#### *The Sermon(s)*

During my second trip to the mosque, I arrived early for a Friday sermon and ended up starting a conversation with a group of young men who were sitting nearby. While three of them were Kurds born in America, the fourth was a Palestinian. Before I could ask any more questions, the service started. The requisite prayers were all in Arabic, as is custom and the topic of the sermon that day was divorce, delivered almost entirely in Kurmanji.<sup>54</sup> I regretted not being

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<sup>54</sup> It is interesting to note that there were points in which the imam incorporated an English word before using a Kurmanji equivalent. The most notable of these was the word for 'personal,' which he first said in English and then in the Kurdish word (*şexsî*) borrowed from Arabic (*şakhsî*). If nothing else, it is an interesting testament to the cultural gap in certain words to describe ideas. In this case, it was the nuance between most Middle Eastern

able to ask my new Palestinian acquaintance why he had chosen to attend this sermon. Perhaps it was because his three Kurdish friends wanted to go, or a matter of fitting a sermon into his schedule. It might have felt more ‘authentic’ for him to hear the message delivered in a language foreign to the mostly white, Christian America in which he had immigrated with his family years ago. Maybe the second service later that day just gets too crowded. Whichever the answer may have been, he was not alone in this particular arithmetic. For as many men gave off an impression of overt Kurdishness, there were many that were clearly from different ethnicities. In addition to Arabs from different parts of the Middle East, I saw some men in the traditional dress of eastern Africans. All of them chose to attend the mosque with the Kurdish, Kurmanji-speaking imam.<sup>55</sup>

What makes this choice all the more interesting is that the SIC offers *two* sermons, the second one starting not long after the first and being conducted in English. What’s even more interesting is that this sermon, rather than be delivered on the same subject by the same imam, is instead a different imam and a different subject entirely. This is an outlier in mosque protocol. Neither Haidar – who has lived, studied, and taught in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey – nor myself have encountered this anywhere else. Regardless of the rationale, it is clear that the SIC is tasked with satisfying the needs of many non-Kurds – a more diverse portion of the ummah – all the while maintaining its essential Kurdishness.

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countries’ understanding of personal, private space and that of Western liberal countries, and that this particular gap led to a mid-sentence linguistic reshuffling. My theory was seconded by Haidar, who made the same observation after the sermon had concluded.

<sup>55</sup> An interesting cultural note on the code-switching is one point in the Kurmanji sermon when the word “private” was used; he first used an Arabic loan word – *şahsiyet* – then immediately said “private” in English. The intended meaning of what an American would refer to as privacy, which was the imam’s intent, was incommunicable in his home linguistic culture. Kurds, Turks, and Arabs regard personal privacy and space quite differently than the average American. After the sermon, Haidar asked me if I had noticed that, which confirmed to me the degree of concept and language mixing that was going on in the sermon.

While a Palestinian might feel a kind of stateless kinship with a Kurd's situation,<sup>56</sup> a Turk or even an Iraqi Arab very well might not (Keles, 2015). In cases like this, openly supporting such a politically loaded goal can be extremely problematic for communal unity. In my first conversation with Nawzad, I asked him how he felt nationalism worked within an Islamic context. "Islam is not opposed to nationalism... unless it is racist." As to the means of achieving this, he clarified, "I prefer the TV to the gun."<sup>57</sup>

### *Conflict*

Prior to my my conversation with Darvon and his friends, there was another young man who caught my interest. Specifically, I was intrigued by his shirt, emblazoned upon which with bright, reflective letters large enough that they covered his whole chest was the word "PESHMERGA." This is a combination of the Kurdish words *peš* (before, in front of) and *marg* (death) – *pešmarga*<sup>58</sup> – "one that stands before death." In practice, it is the universal term for the Kurdish militaries and militias. In this context, such a symbol is complex. On one hand, it represents a kind of 'combat chic' that has had a strong resurgence during the Second Gulf War and following the arrival of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS/Da'ish) on Kurdish territory, mostly young men and women seeking a connection with the physical embodiment of their national history's struggle through dress, social media, or other forms of consumption.<sup>59</sup> Some of the middle-aged and older men in that room may very well have carried a rifle and fought against

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<sup>56</sup> See Bengia 2012 and Daloglu 2013 for some comparison between the situations of Palestinians and Kurds.

<sup>57</sup> His statement is similar to those of Iranian Kurdish Mufti, Ahmed Moftizadeh, who liked to quote the Prophet saying, "fight with the ink of your pen, rather than your blood," (Ezzatyar, 2016: 98).

<sup>58</sup> پێشمه‌رگه though it is frequently (and erroneously) transliterated as Peshmerga.

<sup>59</sup> For example, Facebook states that the "International Peshmerga Volunteers" page has 13,883 "likes" and the "Peshmerga" group has 12,496 members. The logo for the first is an amalgamation of the American flag and a knight's shield. The banner for the second is a screenshot from Helly Luv's "Revolution" music video featuring a Peshmerga fighter aiming a rocket launcher (see p.65-66). Helly Luv is a Kurdish-American pop-singer, who has become one of the biggest icons for Kurdish combat-chic.

fellow Muslims under the auspice of securing Kurdish rights from an antagonistic government. In this sense, the Peshmerga are a universal symbol of Kurdishness.

On the other hand, it is an unavoidable fact that there is no single, unified Peshmerga force. Not only are they split into regional factions, but those factions have also come into violent conflict with each other,<sup>60</sup> and have ties to opposing governments. Just as some of those men attending the Friday sermon might have been involved in conflicts against those governments, there might just as well have been some involved in conflicts with other Kurdish militias. Talking over lunch, Nawzad told Haidar and me how some years ago intra-Kurdish politics were tense enough in Kurdistan proper that they affected those in Little Kurdistan. Certain families forbade their children from intermarrying based on the other family's political allegiances.

Beyond highlighting the problematic complexities of intra-Kurdish politics, there is a second line of conflict represented by the 'combat chic.' While not a direct analogue, Peshmerga merchandise has similarities with the commodification of the likeness of Ernesto "Che" Guevara. In life, Guevara was a polarizing, revolutionary guerilla who stood in opposition to America and capitalism. He has since become social currency that capitalizes on selective aspects of his narrative and ignores others, as evidenced by his identity being printed, stamped, or sown by the very machines he decried (Larson and Lizardo, 2007). In this, the guardianship of collective memory resists a single hegemon, and the resulting images are a kaleidoscopic penumbra with varying resemblance to its 'original' state.<sup>61</sup> As such, the *use* of the symbol becomes a subject of debate extending beyond the initial debate surrounding the symbol itself.

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<sup>60</sup> The most prominent example of this is the conflict between Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Masoud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party, both of which command Peshmerga forces (Gunter, 1996).

<sup>61</sup> For an interesting example of Kurdish-oriented combat chic being appropriated by non-Kurds, see the story on Swedish fashion H&M's olive green jumpsuit, which uses a similar term to describe the trend (Wyke, 2014).

Peshmerga paraphernalia can be seen as a segment of the processes of self-identification for young Kurds, perhaps being more important in diaspora than in Kurdistan itself. In contrast to the regionally specific dress of their progenitors, they don a generalized symbol that dismisses specificity, and in so doing recast some important aspects of the previous interpretation. A good example of this is in a recent pop phenomenon. In 2013, Helan Abdulla, better known as Helly Luv,<sup>62</sup> released a music video in 2013 named “Risk It All” that takes place in an unspecified city in Kurdistan (HellyLuvVEVO, 2014). In it, Helly Luv is wearing a loosely bound gossamer headscarf and traditional hand jewelry most often associated with special occasions. Her dress is reminiscent of an *abaya*, save for the fact that it has only one-shoulder and a thigh-high hemline cut low enough to reveal ankle-length high heels. Other notable symbols are incorporated into the background of the video, the most relevant being two lionesses (the lion/lioness being a Persianate symbol of power and royalty; kavehfarrokh.com, 2009), female Peshmerga fighters wearing heavily modified traditional clothing, and intermixing traditional Kurdish dance with ‘twerking.’<sup>63</sup> Along with a gaggle of children, she runs through the town seemingly upsetting older, traditional dressed citizens and arousing the curiosity of the younger ones.

A specific YouTube comment on this video, which has since been deleted, criticized Helly Luv for misrepresenting Kurdish Muslims with her scantily clad appearance and extremist behavior. They made no reference to the guns and militia as being extremist, but rather the use of a Molotov cocktail. In response to this, multiple commenters expressed their disagreement in heated terms.<sup>64</sup> Outside of YouTube, she received death threats from Islamist groups and

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<sup>62</sup> Helan Abdulla was born in Iran in 1988 shortly after her parents fled the Iraqi city of Dohuk. Her family then fled to Turkey where they applied and were accepted for Finnish citizenship. She has based herself in the U.S. for the last ten years (Crowcroft 2014) and considers herself as an American (Kurd editor 2016).

<sup>63</sup> See Merriam-Webster “Twerking.”

<sup>64</sup> Of the hundreds of negative comments on the video, this was the only one featuring an explicitly intra-Muslim criticism. Others either outright criticized Islam as a religion or more frequently than not, used their comment as a



condemnation from fellow Kurds, including members of her own family (Helly Luv, 2015). A little over a year after “Risk It All,” Helly Luv released “Revolution,” (HellyLuvVEVO, 2015). This particular video was filmed in an abandoned town named Khazr on the outskirts of Mosul, which was approximately three kilometers away from the frontline of the conflict with Da<sup>c</sup>ish. It also incorporated active-duty Peshmerga fighters, real firearms, and tanks.<sup>65</sup>

Pop music videos produced in Los Angeles and Northern Iraq, social connectors like YouTube and Facebook, and 24-hour news cycles help reveal that topics like ‘combat chic,’ the ongoing debate over the role of Islam in the Kurdish identity, and ownership of the definition of Kurdish essentialism are not isolated to Kurdish diaspora communities (Hall, 2014; Lynch, 2016; Rudaw, 2017).<sup>66</sup> Rather than undermining the importance of focusing on localities, i.e. living in Kurdistan or in Nashville as a first or second-generation immigrant, this strengthens the argument for the power of transnational ideas and communities facilitated by modern communication technologies (Anderson, 1995; Keles, 2015). As such, to understand the whole, one must understand its parts. Little Kurdistan is just such a part.

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stage for ethnic-based vitriol.

<sup>65</sup> The comment thread for the video was a microcosm of inter-ethnic conflict surrounding Kurdish issues - comments include (in their unaltered state):

“2,263 Isis people disliked this video! :V” (referencing the ‘dislike’ counting feature on the YouTube page)

“im Pakistani and we are with our Turkish Friends as they are Muslim Country but we cannot leave our Kurdistan Brothers as they are Muslim too so what is the fact of this comment i mean why man why we are brothers why we cant live unite”

“4274 dislike is Turkish people”

“fck turkey they killed my brothers #VivePkk”

“fuck Terrorists fuck pkk fuck ypg and then #frefedom”

<sup>66</sup> My experiences in Nashville, particularly with the Peshmerga-chic and meeting a number of Kurdish boxers, started my exploration of martial arts and masculinity in Kurdish culture. For the follow-up in Iraq on this subject, see pp.400-419.

## TÜRKİYE

I would like to write the history... with all the political investments of the body that it gathers together in its closed architecture. Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means that by writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present.

(Foucault, 1979: 31)

### *Turkish Kurdistan – Pre-Modernity to the 1938*

#### *Pre-Modernity*

Kurds exist within an odd sociogeographic sphere wherein they are simultaneously part of the surrounding cultures and separate from them. While there have been large portions of Kurdish peoples that have identified as Alevi, Shi'a (Failī), Yazidi (Izīdī), Ahl-e Haq, Christian, and Zoroastrian, the majority are Sunni Muslims of the Shafi'i *madhhab*. This differed from the official Hanafism of the Ottomans and Twelver Shi'ism of the Persians, but put them safely within the four main schools of Sunni *fiqh*. Similar to other minority groups in the Middle East, Persian, Arabic, or Turkish were probably not their mother tongues and as such di- or polyglotism was normal in regions with contact with official government presence or inter-regional trade.

For the majority of their history, Kurdish society has existed within tribal structures, and even as nationalist movements incorporated socio-political idioms, they've never truly departing from this paradigm (Lalik, 2017; Ahmed, 2018; see pp.436-437).<sup>67</sup> The closest equivalent of a 'national consciousness' was exhibited in tribal customs such as women and children being forbidden to be harmed were a neighboring Kurdish tribe to raid their village or livestock

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<sup>67</sup> While I make frequent use of the word *tribal*, this is not to be confused with *ignorant*. As early as the seventeenth century, we have records of Kurdish emirs that were as educated as was possible within that period. This included libraries in Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, as well as Western European languages (Eppel, 2016: 32). Furthermore, Kurdish ulema wrote in their own language in the madrasa system until the nineteenth century (p.40).

(Makhūl, 2013). Raiding other Kurdish tribes was permissible, while purposeful injury of opposing tribes' women or young was not. Were the tribe non-Kurdish, then these rules would not apply. Further, plunder – warriors raiding other tribes – was permissible, but thievery – like burglary or other surreptitious appropriation – was not. On the subject of warrior culture, historian Hanna Batatu noted,

The ascendancy of warriors over cultivators appears to have marked also the societies of the Kurdish mountain belt. According to C.J. Rich of the East India Company, who toured the area in 1820-1821, the people of Kurdistan were divided in warrior tribesmen and an inferior nontribal peasant caste called *gorān* or *ra'iyyah* (subjects) or Kelowspee (White Caps). The clansmen rarely, if ever, put their hand to the plough. For their part, the peasants, whose condition, "much resembles that of Negro slaves in the West Indies," were never soldiers and, though speaking a Kurdish dialect, were thought to be, as noted elsewhere, racially distinct from the clansmen.

The reigning family of the Sorān principality sprang, it goes without saying, from the clannish Kurds, and belonged to the mounted, originally nomadic Pizhdar, one of the most powerful Kurdish tribes. (1978: 70)

It wouldn't be until well into the twentieth century that the dominant fighters in Kurdish society were not also the most well-armed mounted warriors.

From largest to smallest, the social structure was the *aşîret* (clan), the *tayfe/hoz* (tribe), the *tîre* (subtribe), and the *fekhr/bavik* (family) (van Bruinessen, 1992). As evidenced by the *bavik* (which literally means 'father'), the *mâle* (blood lineage) is patrilineal. While the Ottomans installed beys within the Kurdish region, they were what amounted to town landlords in competition with the aghas, which were the mountain fighting chiefs.

#### *Kurds 1860's-1990's Turkey*

It is arguable that all of the key junctures in the creation of Kurdish nationalism were unintended externalities of the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms (Davison, 2012; Shield, 2012). These reforms, which took place between approximately 1839 and 1881, were the empire's efforts at

retaining autonomy and power in the face of its decline by centralizing the government and maximizing state revenue. Most relevant to our study was the piece-meal dismantling of the Kurdish emirs and aghas and replacing them with Ottoman governors. Two hundred years prior, Sultan Selim the Grim had selectively given Kurdish aghas their own semi-autonomous territories. This helped assure their loyalty against the Safavids (Jwaideh, 2006).

To ensure that these Kurdish principalities did not unify into something that could challenge Ottoman authority, Selim and the sultans who followed made sure to stoke the rivalries between ruling Kurdish families (Eppel, 2016: 31). These policies included joint-sacking of successful Kurdish provinces by Ottoman forces and select Kurdish rivals, as was the case in the Bitlis emirate in 1655 (p.33). As the Persian threat diminished<sup>68</sup> and those of rebellion in its westernmost provinces (particularly Egypt and the Balkans) and the overall decline of the Ottomans in the face of Europe and Russia increased, maintaining this kind of political leniency lost its urgency. What would have been locally farmed taxes instead went into official channels to replenish the heavily burdened royal treasury.

In the 1830's, American and British Protestant missionaries entered Kurdistan to convert the Nestorians and Chaldeans. Under the Tanzimat, these foreigners had concessions to build churches where they wanted to, and the structures they built were more like fortresses than conventional chapels (p. 58). In 1840, the reforms abolished the *jizye* tax on dhimmis (non-Muslims), and required taxes of ulema and waqf (religious monetary foundations; Taspinar, 2005: 19). Most of the Christians in Kurdistan were vassals of Kurdish tribes, and upending the status quo was not a welcome development to the ulema, emirs, begs, and aghas. In 1843, the

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<sup>68</sup> The Safavids and Ottomans signed the Treaty of Zuhab in 1639 to officially establish the border between their empires. This did not stop the fighting, which continued on a smaller scale until the Treaty of Erzurum in 1823 (Eppel, 2016).

forces of Kurdish Emir Bedir Khan massacred the Assyrian Christians of Hakkari. He was supported in his efforts to hurt the Christian community by the Ottoman government, which then used the excuse of incensed British to turn around and take down the Emir and dismantle the emirate.

Yezdansher Khan, who betrayed Bedir Khan and helped lead the Kurdish elements that fought against him, was left with far less than he had expected following that victory. The government was well into the process of consolidation, and this created a fundamental disparity in expectations for cooperation and compensation. In short, he expected to take over the newly vacated emir position – as was the established norm – but there was no emirate to be had.

In 1853, the Crimean War broke out, with Russia on the one side and the Ottomans on the other. As part of the Great Game dynamic, Britain was supporting the Ottomans. Perceiving the diminished capacity of Ottoman forces, Yezdansher Khan revolted with several tens of thousands. While most of these were motivated by tribal aspiration and loyalties, the revolt extended beyond Kurds and included Arabs from places like Mardin.

Yezdansher failed to garner Russian support and was very clearly told that he had put his forces in direct conflict with not only the Ottoman Empire, but the British Empire as well. In the face of what would have been a very bloody battle with the Ottomans, Yezdansher Khan surrendered and the revolt fell to pieces.

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In the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War from 1877-1878, the region was suffering from famine. The Ottomans were forced to sign the Treaty of Berlin, which increased Russian patronage of Armenians. As Kurdish clans had been in the habit of treating non-Kurdish communities by different standards, the enmity this created for Armenians, Nestorians, and

Chaldeans lent to their ready acceptance of foreign patronage. Russian presence for Armenians also opened up the potential for greater British patronage of Nestorians as they set up consuls in Kurdistan (Olson, 1989). In terms of territory, the creation of an Armenia would be a very zero-sum situation – any gain to Armenians would be at the loss of Kurds (Armenian National Committee of America, 2004).

### *Sheikh Ubaydullah*

Within the existing social structures, it would have been impossible for any given clan agha to garner the respect and adherence needed for inter-tribal coordination. Despite the air of lawlessness and breakdown in order as tribal leaders enacted vendettas, the sheikhs<sup>69</sup> emerged as the intertribal leadership. They were ideally positioned to do this – charismatic leaders with a modicum of religious legitimacy that existed outside of the traditional tribal structure and were best equipped to mediate and, when needed, consolidate forces (van Bruinessen, 1992). Sheikh Ubaydullah Nahrī was one such leader. In addition to being a Sufi sheikh, he was from a wealthy mercantile family that sold spices and owned large swathes of fruit groves in both the Ottoman and Qajar empires.

During the Russo-Turkish War, the Ottoman army recruited Sheikh Ubaydullah as the leader of some 50,000 Kurdish irregular troops, awarding him with a captain's commission. At the end of the conflict, these Kurdish troops kept their firearms and Sheikh Ubaydullah kept expanding his foreign contacts. These included not only the British and Russian consuls, but American missionaries, the sharifs of Mecca, and the khedives of Egypt. His local efforts were quite successful and he established the Kurdish League, which group was composed of tribal

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<sup>69</sup> It's important to note that the title of 'sheikh' does not reflect the same connotation that it holds in larger Islamic epicenters, i.e. a man who has studied in Islamic law through official channels.

leaders, ulema, and other Kurdish notables. In an effort to garner Western favor, Sheikh Ubaydullah worked to repair relations between the Armenians and Kurds.

In a missive sent to British Vice-Consul Clayton in July 1880, Sheikh Ubaydullah wrote, The Kurdish nation is a people apart. Their religion is different (to that of others), and their laws and customs are distinct. They are known among all nations as mischievous and corrupt<sup>70</sup> ... The chiefs and rulers of Kurdistan, whether Turkish or Persian subjects, and the inhabitants of Kurdistan (the Christians) one and all are united and agreed that matters cannot be carried on this way with the two governments, and necessarily something must be done so that the European governments having understood the matter shall enquire into our state ... We want our affairs to be in our hands ... Otherwise the whole of Kurdistan will take the matter into their own hands, as they are unable to put up with these continued evil deeds, and the oppression which they suffer at the hands of the two governments of impure intentions.

In 1879, he led a revolt against a regional governor that led to a battle between Ottoman troops and supporters of the sheikh. Several months of *détente* later, the forces of Sheikh Ubaydallah invaded Iranian Kurdistan with the hope of increasing their territory. The Qajars had been putting Iranian Kurds loyal to Ubaydullah under economic and political pressure. With the Iranian government occupied on their border with Afghanistan, the sheikh underestimated their defense of their western flank.

Unfortunately, the rhetoric of unity that depicted in the letter to Clayton did not match the realities. He lacked foreign support against the Ottomans,<sup>71</sup> and it is uncertain how much Ottoman support he had in his initial fighting with the Qajars. This was in part because he could not restrain his own subordinates in their looting of Christians, Shi'ites, or even their fellow Sunnis. As the Qajars rebuffed the Kurdish advance, they retreated only to find their way

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<sup>70</sup> This stereotype is repeated throughout a great many foreign accounts of Kurdish dealings; see Zardykhan, 2006.

<sup>71</sup> The British needed to keep the Ottoman heart pumping as a body to stand between Russia and warm-water ports. The Russians feared the power that a charismatic sheikh can wield, a lesson they learned in the Caucasus.

blocked by the Ottomans. His forces were decimated, and a year later Sheikh Ubaydullah was arrested and kept under house arrest in Istanbul. After an escape and return to Nehri, he was arrested again and exiled to the Hijaz, where he died in 1883.

Clearly, the forces that fought under Sheikh Ubaydullah were a mixed lot and did not have the kind of cohesive vision of self that one normally associates with current nationalism. Across all the accounts, the shiekh was religiously attentive in a conventional Muslim sense, and this helped legitimate him in a region where Sufi-esque observance was dominant. It is also consistent that he was an extremely adept strategist willing to use any resources available. While it is unclear where he would have settled with regard to regional autonomy, it is clear that he viewed the Kurdish peoples as a nation; they were a millet as separate from the Turks and Persians as were the Armenians, Chaldeans, or any other group that could conceivably be claimed a protectorate by a foreign patron. The Kurdish League was the first formation of its kind in Kurdish history as it had created a fighting force that extended beyond clan and provincial loyalties to envelope a tenuous sense of Kurdish fraternity (Eppel, 2016: 74).

#### *Hamidiyye Units*

Recognizing the dangerous potential of Kurdish tribal consolidation – such as a reformation of the Kurdish League or the emirate of Bedir Khan – the Ottoman Sultanate sought policies that would increase the number of Kurdish tribes that worked for, rather than potentially against, the government. It was under these auspices that the Hamidiyye, a class of light cavalry regiments manned largely by Kurdish troops, was established in 1891. Kurds that participated were rewarded by avoiding conscription into the regular army, and being given armaments, horses, and uniforms by the government. The majority of the tribes recruited were located in northern Syria (where they competed with the Arab Bedouins) in the Levant and Hakkari and



other areas along the borders with Persia and Russia. Recruitment almost completely excluded Bitlis, Dersim, Diyarbakir, and other areas in eastern Anatolia and Lake Van, which explains why the first efforts at gaining Russian support were made by leaders from these areas (Eppel, 2016: 100-105).

The combination of regional and religious selection hit on the two greatest Ottoman concerns – the Russians ‘answering’ the Armenian question with an independent Armenia, and Kurdish leaders with supratribal links cannily playing in the Great Game to undo the prior sixty years of Ottoman consolidation. Of note to our interests is that recruitment of these forces followed along a Sunni pan-Islamist policy, meaning that it both excluded and frequently acted against Shi’ites, Alevis, Christians, and other non-Sunni Kurds. This created long-lasting grudges and blood feuds not only between Hamidiyye Kurds and Assyrians and Armenians, but with other Kurds as well. So effective were Ottoman efforts that these divisions outlasted the Empire itself and played out well into the twentieth century.<sup>72</sup>

#### *Nationalism in Literature*

The proponents of pre-modern Kurdish were poets. The most prominent of these are Eli Hariri, Malaye Jaziri, Ahmadi Khani, Nali, Mahvi (of Soran), and Mahvi (of Pehlewan). In 1692, Ahmedi Khani wrote down the oral tale of Mem û Zîn, an epic love poem about two Kurds, Mem and Zîn, whose love is separated by the rivalries and jealousy of others. Comparative literature academics, such as my mentor, Haidar, most often compare this story to that of Romeo and Juliet in terms of story arc and cultural impact. It has long been a favorite among modern

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<sup>72</sup> The stigma of being Kurdish and fighting other Kurds on behalf of a non-Kurdish government has carried on to the present. Two of the worst insults in Kurdish are *jāš* and *bakregîraw*. The first literally means ‘little donkey’ and the second ‘mercenary,’ but both imply being a blood traitor for money and a puppet of outside interests. I suspect the ‘little donkey’ is a reference to the Hamidiyye units being given horses by the Ottomans which were ultimately used to fight other Kurds.

Kurdish nationalists for its intense assertion of Kurdish identity in the midst of Turkish, Persian, and Arab dominion (see Wadie Jwaideh's definitive dissertation, 1960: 53-64). Nālī is lauded the most for his conscious role in generating written Sorani, which had hitherto been solely a spoken language (Hitchins, 2010).<sup>73</sup> Nali, the pen name for Melā Khidrī Ahmadī Šawaysī Mikā'īlī, was a polymath from modern-day Sulaymaniyah who travelled throughout Kurdistan before his time in the Sufi *xānaqāh* of Mawlana Khalid Naqshbandi (founder of the Naqshbandiyya Mujaddidiyya). For as much as Nali's works were deeply influenced by Turkish, Arabic, and Persian,<sup>74</sup> all of it reflected his national sentiments regarding Ottoman actions against Kurdish autonomy.

Jumping back to the Tanzimat era, the Ottoman government used many aristocratic Kurds for their knowledge of bureaucracy to govern regions outside of Kurdistan, thereby 'Ottomanizing' their offspring through official education and removing wealthy families from their original well-springs. The children of the Hamidiye officers, who had fought not only in Kurdistan, but in the Balkan Wars as well, were also privileged with imperial education. This

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<sup>73</sup> His works were bolstered by the efforts of his uncles, Salim and Kurdī, both well-established poets in their own right.

exposed them to many elements that would have been unattainable to them in their original environs (Olson, 1989).



Figure 4 - The first issue of “Kurdistan” published in April, 1898 in Cairo, Egypt

In April, 1898, family members of Bedir Khan started to produce the very first Kurdish newspaper, *Kurdistan*. They issued the publication in in Cairo, London, and “of all unlikely places, Folkestone, [England],” (Edmonds, 1957: 11). The family settled on splitting the paper between Botani-Kurmanji and Turkish, though standardization efforts were so far in the future that only people from the Botan province could read it without difficulty. While there was some stratification in individual visions for the emergence of a united Kurdistan, most of the publications at this point were supportive of working within existing political – that is to say, Ottoman – structures to maximize Kurdish political and social autonomy.

There are a few particulars regarding both the exiled Bedir Khans and the paper itself that need pointing out. The family members who left the Ottoman Empire were wealthy and able to pay for quality Western education. This education affected which aspects of Kurdishness they brought to the fore and which were supplanted by Westernized approaches, particularly the

burgeoning zeitgeists of nationalism and secularism.<sup>75</sup> The first issue featured a portrait of Saladin, founder of the Ayubbid dynasty. He was born of a Sunni Kurdish family in Tikrit, a fact which some Kurds like to point out.<sup>76</sup> *Kurdistan* also published Mem û Zîn (which in this instance is a fine example of primordializing modern Kurdish issues) along with much modern poetry of a complementary hue. All of this was nothing less than declaring the genealogical and historical separation between Kurds and the greater Persianate and Islamicate world.

*The Republic of Turkey – Adieu Ottomanisme, bonjour Nationalisme Turc*

The Turkish Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) was the umbrella organization formed after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 that re-established a constitutional government and ousted the Sultan. The alliances they initially forged gave place for quite a number of non-Turkish nationalist groups, including Kurds.<sup>77</sup> During this same period, various Kurdish societies were established in Istanbul, such as the Society for the Rise and Progress of Kurdistan, the Kurdish Society for the Dissemination of Education, and the Kurdish Society of Student Hope. They had little or no connection to non-elites and were focused in Istanbul, Cairo, Baghdad, and Western Europe. Even within the ranks of the Kurdish elite, reactions were mixed to the events of 1908. For example, the Bedir Khans held positions in the CUP government, yet also sought to strengthen relationships with anti-CUP tribal leaders.

Not long after coming to power Russia aided Bulgaria in declaring its independence from the Ottoman Empire in October 1908. In reaction to this loss, the CUP struck down hard on nationalist groups that had impetus for seeking greater autonomy. The dissolution and

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<sup>75</sup> ‘Secularism’ in the case of these early Westernized Kurds was less the secularism associated with later groups like the PKK and more a lack of overt religiosity. They maintained nominal Muslim identities and supported the Sultan but did not emphasize demands for implementing sharia like many of the Kurdish sheikhs did.

<sup>76</sup> An unfortunate anachronism given all the differences in self-identification for a Kurd in the twelfth and nineteenth centuries.

<sup>77</sup> Some of its early founding members were Kurds, including Abdullah Jawdat and Ishak Sukuti (Eppel, 2016: 92).

persecution of these kinds of groups led to the use of *tekiyyes* (religious lodges) as the point of origin for dispensing nationalist rhetoric.

The state of the eastern provinces was one of civil decay defined by the conflict between rival families that rose in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish war. These were the Barzinjis and the Talabanis, the first being in Sulaymaniyah and the second in Kirkuk. Another family to rise out of the massive social reshuffling was the Barzanis led by Qadiri Sufi sheikh ʿAbd al-Salām Bārzānī. According to a book written by Massoud Barzani, Sheikh ʿAbd al-Salām united multiple tribes in the region and openly worked toward reforms, including the abolition of land ownership, distribution of land to the peasantry, and the abolition of the dowry and forced marriage (Eppel, 2016: 97-98). His vision included centering autonomous communal life around central mosques. While it is unclear how popular these goals were among tribes subservient to Sheikh ʿAbd al-Salām, many were represented in a telegram to Kurdish activists written in Duhok in 1909 by a confederation of sheikhs and tribal leaders of which he was a member.

The demands of this group very much embodied the differences in what could be considered the eastern Kurdish nationalism from that of the Westernized exiles. Both were adamant about institutionalizing the Kurdish language through official use and education. They were equally stalwart on installing Kurds in local leadership positions and that taxation result in local development. Where the easterners differed was the role of religion. The demands of the eastern Kurdish confederation included basing courts and taxation on sharia law and having the muftis be Shafīʿi rather than Hanafī, which in many ways was the same as saying they too must be Kurdish.

The sheikh also met with Russian officials searching for support. This he received, but in the form of refuge after his forces fought and eventually lost to the Ottomans. He initially fled to

Iran, but soon ended up under Russian protection. Upon returning to Iran, he tried to put together a supratribal force, but was instead taken by Ismail Agha Simko and turned over to the governor of Mosul. Sheikh °Abd al-Salām was executed in December 1914.

Seeking Russian patronage was a tactic used by both eastern and western Kurdish nationalists, who also threw in against the Ottomans during WWI. Two prominent Bedir Khans, Kamel and °Abd al-Razzaq also strove to develop systems of exchange between Kurdistan and Russia, which included founding language and cultural centers. Russia maintained these contacts, gave some protection, and even installed °Abd al-Razzaq and Kamel as *valis* of Bitlis and Erzurum in 1917. They did not, however, put any substantial weight into ‘answering’ the Kurdish question.<sup>78</sup> In 1911, the Russians routed out the Ottoman forces that had been occupying western Iran. This effectively put Iranian Kurdistan under Russian domination, which at its height in 1917 extended well into eastern Anatolia.

In 1915, the Kurdish troops employed by the Ottomans were directed towards routing out the Armenians who had been in league with their greatest enemy, the Russians. Somewhere around 750,000 Armenians were killed outright or died as a result of the privations of being forced out of the empire (History.com Staff, 2010). Those troops benefitted from the land and goods confiscated and the government benefitted by driving a wedge between two potential allies in the region.

Despite the role of Kurdish troops in the Armenian genocide, Kurds as a whole suffered greatly during WWI. Close to 700,000 were driven into western Anatolia as part of a Turkification effort of the east. The populations of many Kurdish villages and cities were

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<sup>78</sup> In fact, many Russian commanders viewed the Kurdish fighters as little more than ignorant robbers with guns and knives, not fit for proper combat. This view was also influenced by the number of Russians with Armenian roots. See Zardykhan, 2006.

reduced by close to two-thirds through starvation and disease. Desertion of Ottoman Kurdish troops was rampant. For as many leaders sought the aid of Russia, it had no bearing on tribal areas Russians occupied (Zardykhan, 2006: 76).

### *The Treaty of Sèvres*

The Treaty, signed by the Ottoman Empire and the Allies in 1920,<sup>79</sup> was a milestone in the Kurdish independence movement. While it ignored all of the Kurds within Mesopotamia, Iran, and the Levant, it allocated “[a territory for] local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia ... and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia,” (Jwaideh, 2006: 131). After a year of autonomy, Kurdistan would then be able to apply to the League of Nations for independence, whereupon the League’s Council would “then [consider if those] peoples [were] capable of such independence and [recommend] that it should be granted to them,” (132). As a signer of the Treaty, Turkey would have been bound to honor the Council’s decision.

In the history of the Turkish Republic, the most important figure is by far Mustafa Kemal Paşa, better known as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the latter change being an honorific title meaning ‘father of the Turks.’ From his position as an officer in the Turkish army and hero of Gallipoli during WWI,<sup>80</sup> he made his way to founding a country out from the bones of the Ottoman Empire. Much of the popular appeal that gave him such great influence came from his successful lead in Turkey’s 1919 War of Independence against the Allied powers after the First World War. The result of this was regaining Turkish-speaking regions that were to be partitioned by the British, French, Italians, Greeks, and Armenians.

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<sup>79</sup> Though not all of the Allies were involved - Russia was purposefully cut out and America had withdrawn into isolationism. Great Britain, France, and Italy were the primary representatives in the treaty.

<sup>80</sup> This battle was one of the few Ottoman victories (Danforth, 2015).

The Ottoman government recognized the threat that such a powerful and charismatic leader represented. The Sultan's government sentenced Atatürk to death in absentia for instigating the war for independence. As is apparent from the fact that Atatürk's life was not taken at this time, the Sultan and the Caliphate lacked the political and logistical power to carry out the sentence as Mustafa Kemal Paşa led the war effort that dismantled the Sultan's treaty with the Allies. While he was not the first government or governing figure who stood in opposition to the direction of the Sultan and Caliphate, he was by far the most successful.

As a last resort, the ousted sultanate sought out the help of the Kurdish organizations. In 1919, the Kurdish Alevis of Koçgiri revolted in order to secure an autonomous Kurdistan from the Ankara government. The British reaction to this was one of non-aggression that tried to persuade Kurdish deputies to side against the Kemalists, and this was done through promises of creating a Kurdish homeland akin to the Jewish homeland being established in Palestinian territories. The potential prize in this for the British was control over Mosul, which was still under dispute with the Ottomans.

Both the Koçgiri rebellions and the Treaty of Sèvres failed. However, the drive towards regional autonomy continued on through the Society for Kurdish Freedom (Ciwata Azadi Kurd). Following the Treaty of Lausanne, the Allied powers reneged on the creation of a Kurdistan. After the Turkish War of Independence, the British and French either openly occupied or served as a 'patron-guide' to massive tracts of the former Ottoman Empire, specifically Greater Syria (modern-day Lebanon, Syria, Israel/Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq). None of this land was earmarked for an independent Kurdish territory. The Society for Kurdish Freedom continued to work within the evolving political context to carve out Kurdish autonomy.



On October 30, 1922 the last vestiges of the Ottoman Imperial administration were dissolved, and the Republic of Turkey was created. On July 24, 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne was negotiated by the republican government in Ankara, the forward capital of the Turkish Republic.

On March 3, 1924, the Caliphate was officially abolished, and Atatürk was firmly in command of the new Republic. As of that point, he had ridden in on a wave of a popular victory that established himself as superior to the prior government in terms of preserving the nation. What that nation was, and how Atatürk would be received in the position of administrator rather than military commander was yet to be settled. Within the history of Turkey itself, this was just one more chapter in the ongoing question of Turkey's place within the processes and realities of the Ottoman Empire having been 'the sick man of Europe.'

The new republic had to find a solution to the patron-addled millet system. As such, the question of 'what is a Turk?' and 'what is Turkey?' can be seen as the unresolved questions of 'what is an Ottoman?' and 'what is the Ottoman Empire?' The answer that Atatürk and his retinue developed in the years following their empowerment was a paradox of Western-effacing, Western-inspired secularism and self-reinvention. Kemalism, as this style of Turkish nationalism came to be known, was based on five points – nationalism, republicanism, secularism, populism, *etatism* (French for government supremacy over individuals, free enterprise), and reformism (i.e. dynamism as opposed to the bureaucratic rigidity that bound the Ottoman administrations).

Concurrent to these administrative makeovers were massive cultural reorientations. The Kemalists dismissed the millet system and established what were called "People's Houses." These were essentially efforts to direct social life, emphasizing fine arts, theater, and sports. They also offered social assistance, public education, libraries, and museums. To address the

needs of non-urban Turkish citizens, the government also put an emphasis on extending these “People’s Houses” into rural development.

### *Sheikh Said Revolt*

“...like a jealous husband, nation-state paranoia often excites the very thing it fears.” (Houston, 2001: 99)

Having no hope of the Republic ceding territory for Kurds, many tribes that had formerly opposed the Caliphate found themselves fighting for its reinstatement. On February 14, 1925, the Kurds had been fighting against the Turks in Eastern Turkey for less than a week when Sheikh Said, the Naqshbandi leader after whom this rebellion is named, declared a fatwa (an official religious issuance) claiming himself to be the Emir al-Mujahideen, an official title that entailed his fighting on behalf of the then disbanded Caliphate in the name of Islam. Despite his strong economic standing and ties through marriage and family, none of it was strong enough to overcome the history of the Hamidiyye units and his extreme regional exclusivity.

Robert Olson wrote of the sheikh,

Even Kurdish religious leaders, or perhaps one could even say especially Kurdish religious leaders, were wily characters then. Shaikh Said, the famous Kurdish rebel leader executed by the Turks in 1925, once said that the Naqshbandi Sufi order in Kurdistan, which produced revered holy men, some of whom became rebel leaders, “resembled more a ‘gangster ring’ than a religious order. (1989: 101)

The rebellion itself involved predominantly Zāzākī-speaking Kurds from the Dersim region. While this common tongue helped forge certain alliances, it also created limitations, and Sheikh Said endeavored to work outside of this by employing not only the Zaza Kurdish idiom but also that of greater Islam, particularly in his claiming to be Emir al-Mujahidīn. While Sheikh Said was the figurehead of the movement, it was in fact guided by the Azādī congress of shiekhs.

Landowners who had gained or retained their status under the Turkish Republic had vested interest in seeing Atatürk's course through. Alevi had promises, or the hints of a promise, that they would be more included than they were under the Caliphate. As such, neither party had interest in joining the nominally Sufi sheikh. The peasantry under the power of their landlords were neither recruited nor volunteered to participate in the rebellion. Later that year, the sheikh was captured and hanged along with several of his lieutenants.

Between the end of his rebellion and 1938, there would be eighteen uprisings against the Turkish government. All but one originated with Kurdish movements. For the Turks, the Sheikh Said Revolt was the most costly as the death toll may have been higher than that of the Turkish War for Independence (Taspinar, 2005: 80).



Figure 5 - ““Those of Diyarbakir, Van, Erzurum, Trabzon, Istanbul, Thrace, Macedonia, All are of the same race, all are of the same core essence,” M.K. Atatürk” – this adorns a wall bordering the central square of Diyarbakir.

*"Happy is he that can say, 'I am a Turk!'"<sup>81</sup>*

A large segment of defining a 'Turk' came from the language itself. The alphabet and script, formerly of Perso-Arabic derivation, were switched to Latin, and many grammatical elements and vocabulary, inherited from Persian and Arabic (the first being the language of court for many hundreds of years and the latter inexorably bound up with Islamic practice), were replaced by inventions of the new regime. Reeducating the populace was a massive endeavor, and the changes this reformed language embodied served as much to create the identity of the Turkish Republic as any of the other sweeping initiatives.

In legal terms, the three constitutions of the Republican era equated Turkishness with Turkish citizenship and did not involve any ethnic, linguistic, or religious modifiers (Aytürk, 2011). In practice, the application of ethnic labels and official recognition of those distinctions were mixed. Examples of this include such periods as the 1940's wherein Greeks, Jews, and Armenians were taxed at a much higher rate than ethnic Turks. Kurds were not so easily 'traded away' as were Greek populations throughout the eighteenth and now nineteenth centuries. This required social engineering to convince them they were in fact Turks, a veritable proselyting mission to convert ethno-linguistic history, and by connection, personal and ethnic histories, into a single narrative of Turkishness (see Appendix: Item 1).

Consequently, Kemalism gave little room for Kurdish expression. Kurdish language and culture were repressed, and official polemics were developed involving no mention of Kurds but

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<sup>81</sup> This was a massive rebranding of the moniker 'Turk.' As one British observer wrote before the end of the Ottoman Empire, "the surest way to insult an Ottoman gentleman is to call him a 'Turk'. His face will straightway wear the expression a Londoner's assumes, when he hears himself frankly styled a Cockney. He is no Turk, no savage, he will assure you, but an Ottoman subject of the Sultan, by no means to be confounded with certain barbarians styled Turcomans, and from whom indeed, on the male side, he may possibly be descended," (Mehmet, 1990: 115).

of *dağ Türkleri*, literally ‘mountain Turks,’ a reference to the mountainous regions of eastern Turkey wherein the majority of the Kurdish population originated and lived.<sup>82</sup>

“*Vatandaş Türkçe konuş!*” (*Citizen, speak Turkish!*)

There were two main tracts that worked to this end, both of which had direct support from and involvement of Atatürk. The first was the Turkish History Thesis (*Türk Tarihi Tezi*), and the second was the Sun-Language Theory (*Güneş Dil Teorisi*). Both of these were produced by an academic committee, called The Turkish Hearths’ Committee for the Study of Turkish History, and directly worked with Atatürk. The Turkish History Thesis essentially claims that the Turks originated in Central Asia, and that they were the first people to develop civilization while the rest of the world remained at a primitive level (Emritan, 2008). They had,

‘crossed with other races,’ [but] the Turkish language had preserved their memories, cultural characteristics, and everything else that made them a nation, including their most cherished possession, the Turkish intellect. (Cagaptay, 2004: 89)

The second was an extension of the first, furthering the belief that the first language of civilization was from the Sumerians – who were Turks – and that all the major world languages and civilizations sprang therefrom (Aytürk, 2004; Cagaptay, 2004).<sup>83</sup> With the national narrative ‘sorted out,’ the language purification programs set to work ridding the vernacular of Arabic, Persian, and other loan words.

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<sup>82</sup> While I have not had success in tracking down the etymology of the Turkish word *kurt* (‘wolf’), I’ve wondered if there was ever a purposeful connection to *Kürt* (‘Kurd’) or simply an unfortunate confluence of linguistic histories. The phonological proximity hasn’t seemed lost in Turkish society, as evidenced by such films as the popular anti-Iraq War film “*Kurtlar Vadisi*” (“Valley of the Wolves,” 2006) which took place in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq (which is populated by *Kürtler* (Kurds) and, being a mountainous region, has many valleys).

<sup>83</sup> It is useful to remember that none of the furor over genealogies and comparative races in Turkey came *ex nihilo*; ‘scientific racism’ had been developing within not only Western nationalist discourses, but popular belief since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Take for instance, phrenology or anthropometry, or eugenicists such as Margaret Sanger, Winston Churchill, George Bernard Shaw, and John Maynard Keynes.

Part of these primordialist pseudo-histories was the claim that ‘Kurds are Turks,’ and the first references to Kurdish people as *dağ Türkleri*.<sup>84</sup> In 1934, Atatürk enforced the Surname Law which required citizens of Turkey to register fixed surnames for themselves and their family members (Turkoz, 2004). While I am a staunch opponent of retroactively writing history,<sup>85</sup> there is a term that originated in the 1990’s that works to describe the process which had started so many years earlier – *türkleştirmek* – ‘to be made Turkish.’ Similar to the linguistic changes, these names eliminated not only the vestigial Persian, Arabic, and Kurdish, but Greek and Slavic ones as well. It is notable that non-Muslims were not subject to this law, though many feared not changing their names and becoming a conspicuous minority (2004: 5). During this same year, the Settlement Law of 1934 was enacted, forcibly moving Kurdish tribes out of their traditional environs to ‘jumpstart’ cultural assimilation.

#### *Atatürk and Islam*

Despite the bedrock position of secularism to his state, Atatürk’s approach to Islam was not without nuance. For as many overt tools as were used by Kemalists in directing Turkish Islam to their own benefit (i.e. establishment of the Diyanet, originally claiming to be fighting to save the Caliphate), there were more subtle variations at play that color the transition into the Republic of Turkey as a religious endeavor. When the death sentence for Atatürk was issued, the Sheikh al-Islam, who was working with the Caliphate, issued a fatwa that ordered that all true

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<sup>84</sup> To be fair, Kurds were not the only non-Turkish Muslims that needed historical re-writes. Many of these same policies applied to the Albanians, Abkhazes, Arabs, Bosnians, Circassians, Daghestanis, Georgians, Greeks, Macedonians, Pomaks, Serbians, and Tartars who ended up in Turkey after the events of the Balkan Wars and WWI. While these groups were much smaller and were generally Muslim, they represented additional burdens to the Turkish narrative. The Christian and Jewish population had decreased precipitously. Fewer members meant fewer problems assimilating. There were considerable efforts made to further the argument that not only Kurds, but Armenians, were Turks (Cagaptay, 2004: 91-93).

<sup>85</sup> As an ethnographer, I have no qualms acknowledging that it’s difficult to write a work of ‘pure’ history. Be that as it may, I object to practices and mindsets that don’t try to weed out modern outlooks when describing those of the past.

believers should kill Turkish nationalists. To counter the fatwa, Atatürk had the mufti of Ankara issue a fatwa of his own stating that Istanbul and the Sultanate were under the control of the West.

The Republic had something of a quandary on its hands with regard to Alevi. Despite the fact that Alevi failed to qualify as the “imagined ideal Turk” (Kose, 2013),<sup>86</sup> non-Kurdish-Zaza Alevi were staunch supporters of the new Republic. They viewed Atatürk personally as a quasi-Mahdi, “white knight” saving them from the deprivations of the past century. It’s even quite possible that Atatürk made promises to some of these leaders that their way of life would be incorporated in the new Republic. However, it’s obvious that Atatürk considered political exigencies of that early Republican era to require forceful consolidation. For as helpful (or at least unharmed) as Turkish Alevi support was, it ultimately did not get them any special treatment. By 1928, Turkey was no longer officially Islamic and all of the Sufi tekkiyes, including those operated by Alevi and Bektashis, were closed.

The perpetuation of Islamic practice was to be conducted under state guidance as part of the government’s laicism. All mosques and religious affairs were placed under the Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Administration of Religious Affairs, or simply the Diyanet), and the kinds of organizations and manifestations of religiosity were strictly regulated. This meant doing everything possible to strip ‘popular’ Islamic practices from being too Sufi-oriented or being used for overt political purposes. Practices like the call to prayer were performed in Turkish rather than Arabic. As important as any particular item, the funding for all things Islamic came and went through the Diyanet.

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<sup>86</sup> Talha Kose defined the “ideal citizen,” as one “who can be depicted as ethnically Turkish (preferably from the Balkan peninsula); religiously Muslim, in terms of understanding and practising the Hanefi sect of Sunni Islam; and secular and westernized, in terms of religious practice and worldview.”

*Final Revolts pre-WWII – Ararat and Dersim*

The largest and most important Kurdish revolts after that of Sheikh Said and before the changes that came with the post-WWII, multi-party era were the Ararat Rebellion and Dersim Insurrection. Both of these are demonstrations of one of the fundamental distinctions between state and sub-state actors, namely the monopolies granted by an air force.

In 1927, the Kurdish nationalist group Xoybûn (“being oneself”)<sup>87</sup> declared the Ağrı territory to be the Ararat Republic. Its leader was General İhsan Nuri Paşa, a former commander in the Ottoman Army who fought in the Balkans and later Yemen and western Turkey during WWI. Beyond his having been an actual officer in the Ottoman military, he was also the first leader of a substantive Kurdish rebellion to not be a tribal sheikh. Initially, the Turkish government tried to make an amnesty deal with the rebels and even released Kurdish political prisoners from previous conflicts. When this failed, they resorted to military means. İhsan Nuri was prepared for this.

His efforts to gather foreign patronage had limited success. The British and French still had no interest in pursuing a policy of supporting an independent Kurdistan, and even with his Wilsonian-esque outreach through League of Nations channels, he received nothing from the West. He did, however, gain the support of the Barzanis of Iraq, the Armenian Dashnak Party, and the newly installed Reza Shah Pahlevi of Iran (“Republics of Ararat and İhsan Nuri Pasha,” [ekurds.com](http://ekurds.com), 2018). That the rebellions lasted as long as they did is a testament to both the support of Kurds from throughout the Bitlis and Van regions as well as the effectiveness of their tactics.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> While “independence” is usually expressed as *ser bi xweî*, *xoybûn* can also be understood to describe the same idea.

<sup>88</sup> Modern PKK efforts in eastern Turkey mirror some of the tactics used by the Xoybûn, particularly cutting off supply lines by destroying key roads.



Compared to previous revolts, this may seem to be more or less a repeat of previous performances. Where it differs is in the way that the dynamic of forthcoming conflicts was crystallized. We've already referred to the use of aerial superiority, but this also includes the degree of transnationalism involved in the creation and support of the Republic. Even though the appeal to the Great Powers was unanswered, it did receive support of some kind from all four quarters of Kurdistan. From the East, there was the (albeit ultimately self-serving) support of the Persian government. From the South there were the Barzanis. Xoybûn itself was founded in Greater Lebanon (the West), and Ararat itself was firmly situated in the North.

The change in tides came when in 1930 the Shah cut a deal with the Kemalists for a land exchange (yielding border areas near Mt. Ararat for land near Qutur and Bazirgan) and subsequently cut off Kurdish traffic between Turkish and Persian territory. The French and British governments in Greater Syria and Iraq did the same. Between this and the indiscriminate bombing campaign of Mt. Ararat by the Turkish Air Force (TAF), the Ararat Republic's strength simply withered on the vine. The main fighting ended in the fall of 1930, but didn't conclude until the spring of 1931.

*Law No. 1850 – Back-Dated Carte Blanche*

On July 29, 1931, the Turkish government passed Law No. 1850, which included the following statement in its first article:

...killing Kurds or committing any actions individually or collectively against them from June 20, 1930 to December 10, 1930, by representatives of the state or the province, by the military or civil authorities, by guards or militia men, or by any civilian during the pursuit and extermination of the revolt (Ararat), *will not be considered crimes.* (Abdulla, 2012: 21; italics added)

This law was made in particular to cover the events in the Zilan Valley on July 8, 1930. Two corps and eighty aircraft were sent to “clean up” the area, which amounted to 7,000 unarmed

Kurdish men, women, and children being brought to the Zilan River and machine-gunned down. Those that survived this were killed with bayonets (Beam, 2015).

### *Dersim Rebellion*

*Dersim is a carbuncle for the government of the Republic. To operate on this carbuncle and prevent the possibility of pain is a must for the salvation of the nation . . . To build schools, construct roads, in order to provide means of prosperity to build factories, to provide a variety of industrial jobs and work to keep them occupied or to try and progress them through settlement and civilization is nothing but an impossible fantasy . . . It is necessary to settle Turks on lands to be ploughed . . . Once this rehabilitation is complete, to appoint idealist elements as public servants for a term of twenty-five years, given the missionary roles with a view to Turkify the Kurds in the region. (Shorash, 2015)*

For many Kurdish families, survival meant either voluntary or forced relocation. Law No. 2510, the Law of Resettlement, “round[ed] up and deport[ed]” more than 25,000 Kurds from the east and southeast to western Turkey (Kuzu, 2018: 84). In 1936, the Turkish government changed the name of Dersim to Tunceli and planned for the entire population to be removed. Its population had proven troublesome in past conflicts and their being Zaza Alevis made them an intersectional challenge to the creation of the ‘ideal Turk.’

Correctly anticipating resistance, they sent troops to the Dersim region’s borders. The locals sent a group to negotiate with the military governor, who refused their pleas and had them killed (Shorash, 2015). The Kurds of Dersim retaliated, which in turn opened the flood gates. The TAF led indiscriminate aerial bombardments<sup>89</sup> and the army led a campaign similar to that experienced by the Armenians in 1915. Men were shot, women and girls raped, and families herded together and burnt alive in hay sheds (Mustafa, 2012). Children were thrown into the

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<sup>89</sup> One of these pilots was none other than Atatürk’s adopted daughter, Sabiha Gökçen, after whom one of Istanbul’s airports is named (Mustafa, 2012).

Euphrates, and the women and children who fled to surrounding caves were pursued; some were bricked in, some caved in with demolitions, and others suffocated with burning sulphur. Those that fled were bayoneted.<sup>90</sup>

By the end of the first of two campaigns, rebellion's leadership was eliminated. By 1938, more than a million and a half Kurds were removed from Turkish Kurdistan (Abdulla, 2012: 22) and somewhere between 13,000 and 70,000 were killed. There are a few simple reasons that the Dersim insurrection is the last entry in the category of Kurdish uprisings in Turkey before we reach the PKK in the 1970's. First, after so many tries, it was obvious that the rebellion/insurrection/revolt wasn't going to work. Second, it's hard to have one of those if your surviving constituencies have been deported to the opposite side of the country.

I will conclude with the segments from a transcript on the meeting between Seyit Rıza and Mustafa Atatürk after Dersim (for the full text, see the Appendix: Item 1).<sup>91</sup>

A meeting was held with İhsan Sabri. He told us the court would issue a judgment and that the executions needed to take place by the weekend. But the most important point is that Seyit Rıza and our President must meet ... The President reminded [Rıza] that the court had handed down a death sentence, which would be carried out that very night... Seyit Rıza said he had not done anything that warranted remorse, that all they had done was protect their own lives, property and land... "Ask forgiveness from me, express remorse so that I may pardon you. If you do this you will be more useful to Dersim. You will cooperate with us. The Republic will do very worthwhile things for Dersim. *The people of Dersim came from Khorasan, they are Oğuz Turks. When they become reacquainted with their Turkishness they will do very useful things for the Republic. I*

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<sup>90</sup> This event remained in the collective memories of Kurds throughout the rest of the century. For example, Mullah Krekar, an Iraqi Kurdish Islamist, referred to the events in Dersim in the late 1990's as part of a justification for the unreliability of existing institutions to bring about an Islamic community ("An Official from the Islamic Movement in Kurdistan Provides: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Kurdish Cause," islam.org/au). See pp.243-244 and Appendix: Item 2.

<sup>91</sup> The documents were written by Turkish security and initially released in 2015 by the pro-government newspaper, Yeni Şafak.

believe this, don't miss this opportunity," [the President said] ... Seyit Rıza replied: "I did a lot for peace, for the republic. I helped collect the weapons. Certain people were wanted, I turned them in. Every time they said: 'this is the last thing.' Then they began to ask for more things. At first I didn't understand, then when the Tunceli Law was enacted I realised [sic] that it didn't matter what we did, as your plan was to eradicate Dersim, to wipe it off the map. I eventually understood this. I do not regret anything I did. I do not want a pardon. These are my final words. I will say no more." The President was annoyed and stood up. He pointed to Seyit Rıza, saying: 'take him away and do what is required'. ("Controversial Dersim Documents Revealed About Seyit Rıza and Atatürk Meeting," KurdishQuestion.com, 2015; italics added)

### *Going to Turkey*

#### *Kurdela Street, Kurds, and Black Markets*

By the spring of 2015, I had completed my first year of PhD coursework at Indiana University and was trying to figure out a workable PhD dissertation. I had a full year of Sorani Kurdish under my belt and was keen to find a place to use it. Unfortunately for me, Iraqi Kurdistan was still very much under the shadow of Da'ish, Syria was hopelessly intractable, and even during the Obama administration, studying in Iran was not feasible. I was reaching a point where I even considered going back to Egypt to do work on shrines.

Somewhere in all of this I started considering Istanbul, Turkey. Most of what I knew about Turkish Kurds was when they crossed over into Iraq and the Turkish army followed them. In terms of the language, I knew no Turkish and was immensely reluctant to take on a fourth Middle Eastern language (not even counting the dialects). Between the fact that the last Kurds in Egypt were probably there when the leaders still had names involving "*baša*" and the fact that Sufi shrines in Egypt already had a large body of work done, I chose Turkey.<sup>92</sup> I signed up for

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<sup>92</sup> "Turkey is the safest choice. It's nowhere near as insecure as the other places we're looking at," I told myself and my wife on and off until early 2016.

first-year Turkish for the Fall semester and started writing up a preliminary dissertation topic on Sufi shrines. I don't think much of that original premise, much less most of my other plans, made it passed the events of June and July 2016.

Initially, I was going to connect with some Kurdish teachers for Kurmanji and do a few Turkish courses through Tömer, the government program for Turkish as a second language in Turkey. Between classes, I was going to transfer down to the campus in Adana and then make trips into Mardin as I could. The Istanbul Tömer campus is located in the middle of İstiklal Caddesi in Beyoğlu. Wanting to avoid costly hotel stays, I decided my best route was using AirBnB to set up lodgings. I found a suitable apartment on Kurdela Street. It was close to class and about a mile from Taksim Square, which between being a major metro stop and the hub for İstiklal, made it the center of town for Beyoğlu.

The last time I lived in the Middle East was six years earlier while participating in Brigham Young University's intensive Arabic program. As a result, one of the biggest mental leaps I had to make over and over again throughout my time in Turkey was "well, this isn't like Cairo at all." Cairo is the ninth biggest city in the world, and Istanbul is fifteenth. So while I wasn't terribly shocked at the sheer sprawl of it as my taxi wound its way from the airport to Kurdela, I was amazed at how *clean* it was. Taken as a whole, Cairo is the color of sand. Sand-colored buildings, sand on the sidewalks (which the shop owners are constantly hosing off), and during the *khamṣīn* (storms coming in from the Sahara), a sand-colored sky. Istanbul is slate-colored marble with highlights in white and blue. The first time we had a real downpour of rain in 2016, I didn't quite know what to do with myself.

I made contact with my landlord's nephew, a twenty-something year-old with a pleasant smile and whose English was about as broken as was my Turkish. He showed me my

accommodations, and told me that he occupied the apartment above me if I needed anything. I spent the rest of the day exploring and as soon as was reasonable, collapsed into sleep.

“‘*Ki lira ‘ki lira ‘ki liraaa!*”

The next morning I awoke to someone loudly advertising in the near distance and the unmistakable sounds of human traffic. I dressed, went up the stairs, and took a peek outside. The streets were lined with vendors and a steady stream of people walked up and down the entirety. Fruit, vegetables, cheese, housewares – pretty much everything. The man who disturbed my jet-lagged slumber was selling children’s shirts for two lira each (*iki lira* shortened to *‘ki lira*). I later found that his name was Mehmet, and he set up shop outside my apartment once a week every week I lived on Kurdela. It was a Sunday, and the full meaning of the Turkish word for it – Pazar, from the word ‘bazaar’ – finally sunk in.

In a serendipitous turn of events, Kurdela turned out to be a fascinating intersection of Istanbul culture. It had the bazaar, which brought out a large number of vendors from in and outside of the city, and in turn meant attracting a mix of tourists and local buyers. The food was always fresh and it spared me the necessity of going to the Grand Bazaar for random nick-knacks like power adapters. Kurdela also bordered the edge of the hotels and shops that made up the tourist center of Beyoğlu – a veritable tide-pool where the ‘real life’ of Istanbul mingled with that of transitory interlopers. Some of the more humorous aspects of this were not immediately recognizable but would become a regular feature of life after I knew what I was seeing. Most importantly, it was inhabited almost entirely by Kurds who held activities that fall well into the category of ‘folk Islam.’

### *The Absence and Omnipresence of Kurdish*

While my first few weeks in Istanbul had me extremely preoccupied with fixing some logistical problems, I also had time to go exploring and do some subtle social probing. As I've said, Kurdela was almost entirely Kurdish, and as the months went on, I discovered just how much of the rest of the city was as well. At any given restaurant the chances are most of the waitstaff are Kurds. That being the case, whether or not they'll speak to you in Kurdish depends on who else is in the restaurant. When the situation was right, this meant easy access to basic conversation speaking partners.

Outside of restaurants and other service industries, it was a lot harder to find Kurds who would open up. It took me a good month to get to the point where my conversations near home were in Kurdish, and I didn't find out my landlord and her nephew were Kurdish until two months in. Everyone spoke with each other in Turkish in public, and in general, the topic of ethnicity and language didn't come up. At the risk of social alienation, I allowed myself to be open about who and what I was, including my interest in Kurdish. This had mixed results.

For instance, I once asked an older gentleman if he was Kurdish or Turkish. His manner changed abruptly from professional congeniality to extreme indignation.

"I am a Turk! Like Atatürk. Turkey is Turkish," he barked, his bushy eyebrows forming a tightly-knit line of indignation.

I can't remember what made me think this was an acceptable question. Fortunately, that was in my first week, and I made a mental note to tread more lightly.

Adjacent to the Hagia Sofia there is a döner restaurant that I liked. My first time there I got talking with my waiter and mentioned that I was studying Kurdish. For the rest of my meal I could hear the other customers buzzing, "He's an American but he speaks Kurdish!" and one by

one, members of the staff made their way to me to say something to me in Kurdish and have me respond. It's like they were seeing a cat that could bark like a dog.

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This is as good a place as any to provide a few relevant bits of personal background that shaped how I approached my research. My biggest disadvantage as a researcher in the Middle East is having celiac disease. This means I can only consume a ridiculous three parts-per million of gluten every week. That goes beyond avoiding food with gluten and extends to cross-contamination – physical contact leaving residual pieces – that is invisible to the naked eye. In the US, this is much easier to manage as I get to ride the wave of brands feeding into fad-diets that claim gluten to be the source of all evil. I only met a handful of people in the Middle East that had any idea of what celiac disease or gluten were. You'd think that religious prohibitions on certain foods touching would make the concept of cross-contamination an easy one to convey, but they're so used to having a kitchen that has never had pork in it that it never clicked. Between that, the phrase "the customer is always right" being a very American-ism, and the logistic impossibility of returning home for every meal, eating out was difficult. For as massive as Istanbul is, I had four or five places in a four-square-mile radius that I could reliably eat at without being served bread on my food.

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Between being a barking cat and not eating bread, I found that Istanbul isn't massive enough to not get noticed. For the places I was a regular, that's not surprising. One of my favorite haunts was a cafeteria-style place near Gazi Park. After my speaking Kurdish lost its novelty, they switched to the bread.

"Hey! How are you all doing?" I asked.



One by one, they cued off with some version of “Good!” in Kurdish.

"I'll have the *pilav tavuk*, without bread."

"Ok."

Twenty seconds later, one of the cooks turns to me, “Would you like bread with it?”

Without faltering, "Nope, no bread," I said as I moved on to the man at the checkout.

Holding a packaged piece of bread, the checkout asked, “Would you like bread with that?”

"...no, no bread," and that's when I notice that they're all trying to hold back from cracking up.

No sooner had I noticed this than they all started laughing.

On one of my outings a few weeks in, I ended up at a restaurant near the southern tip of where the Bosphorus meets the Sea of Marmara. As all the cheaper shops already had bread over everything, I went to a nicer outdoor restaurant. Being a bit early for lunch I was the only customer, and I watched as the wait staff responded to my presence. The very first thing I noticed was one waiter telling the other,

“This guy speaks Kurdish.”

I had never seen this man before, never been to this part of town, and hadn't uttered a word upon my arrival at the restaurant. Yet, he knew who I was. The combination of being a non-Kurdish American learning Kurdish cut through the anonymity granted by such a large city. Inside myself I struggled to know what I should be feeling – flattered? scared? For as glad as I was to use any advantage I could find to further my studies and research, I hadn't counted on being *noticed*. The part of me that still thought in terms of an American in Cairo started to wring its hands. When my meal came, it brought the realization that for as much as my reputation preceded me, it failed to include the bread-free part. I ate the pieces of fish that hopefully hadn't touched anything with gluten, paid up, and went home.

For as positive as most of my Kurdish experiences were, there was an undercurrent that was hard to define but impossible to ignore. No one talked about ethnicity, and one private conversation I had on the matter centered around my friend's memories of the coup in 1980 and all the people who disappeared during that time. Two observations from him – first, everyone knew someone that suffered as a result of it; second, no one wanted to talk about the government. It seemed easier to get answers from Kurds and Turks *outside* of Turkey. At one point, my youngest brother emailed me saying he'd spoken to a Turk in Las Vegas and mentioned me and what I was doing. He said his first reaction was expressing how much he didn't like Kurds, that they were responsible for a lot of problems in Turkey. I wasn't hearing these kinds of opinions because I could not ask these kinds of questions any more than I could ask sensitive questions about someone's parent, child, or spouse. It was awkward and unwelcome.

### *Finding the Unspoken*

In the vast majority of Beyoğlu, the graffiti is better referred to as street art. It is contained and it is purposefully artistic in a post-modern sense.<sup>93</sup> Pandas with cartoon machine guns on İstiklal, Mermaids with their nipples delicately covered by starfish near Zirafe,<sup>94</sup> and

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<sup>93</sup> Though if I'm perfectly honest, I don't think I'll ever understand the post-modernist sense of art.

<sup>94</sup> Zirafe street is the official closed-corridor for legal prostitution. For more, see pg.122.

Salvador Dali wearing a massive watch on a chain two blocks south of my apartment; there is a definite sense of care and thought to the spray-painted walls.



*Figure 6 - Istanbul graffiti*

Kurdela and its adjoining streets are different. There you'll find "PKK" or "YDG-H" written in a utilitarian script adorning almost every avenue in each direction for perhaps a half-mile square. I never saw anyone, not a city cleaner nor police officer, touch, alter, or erase these. I suspect they saw these as being a weed one could simply not kill for more than a night or two before it popped back up right where it was or a little down the same street.

The most interesting of these street tags was a few blocks north of Kurdela. It read, “*Jiyan bi Kürdi xweşe,*” which idiomatically translates to “*la vie est belle [en Kurde].*” Phonetically, it makes sense. It is, however, written with the Turkish characters rather than those of written Kurdish. This summed up much of the Kurdish struggle in Turkey. You can suppress the language to the extent that only a few will use it openly, but the culture will continue behind closed doors and behind the backs of officials.



*Figure 7 – Right: in Kurmanji it should be written “*Jiyan bi Kürdi xweş e.*” Second, I’ve also had a friend say that the best way to translate it would be something like, “*Life is good when you are a Kurd and live in a Kurdish culture.*” Left: street tags for the PKK and one of its offshoots, YDG-H*

#### *The Passport Stamp & Introduction to the Great Struggle Against the Bureaucratic “Nobody”*

When I came through customs, the man working at the desk stamped my passport, but apparently the stamp wasn't flat on the page and a few blips of information were missing. More specifically, the date of entry. Three quarters of the stamp were visible, but that missing segment made all the difference in my being able to get my mobile phone, with all of its communication

and mapping abilities, at my disposal. Before I began trekking around the city and studying the language in earnest, I had to have this taken care of.

I took the long taxi ride through heavy traffic back to the airport, where I spent over an hour going from station to station asking where I could get this stamp fixed. I was met at every turn with some iteration of, “No one knows anything about that at this office; [x-office] does that, and they're closed. Come back tomorrow.”

I repeated this the next day only to find that I could not go to [x-office], but I was supposed to call them on the red telephone hanging attached to the Danışma<sup>95</sup> office wall. After twenty tries and three alternate numbers, no answer. When I did talk to the information desk, they spoke no English and my Turkish was subpar for the task at hand. My last shot was going back to the Beyoğlu police station – which was closed for a national holiday – to see if any of them knew anything at all.

With the police station it only took two days and one more trip to the airport. It's almost as if I had to sacrifice x-amount of hours in the pursuit of my goal before a man with whom I'd spoken on multiple occasions suddenly told me that what I needed to do was go upstairs and have person-y sign a paper, then restamp the passport. Within five minutes, the whole debacle was wrapped up and I have no idea what changed to make that happen.<sup>96</sup>

My own experiences were, when compared to everything I'd see the rest of the time in Turkey and then in Iraq, quite simple. The people who had to work with the governments over villages razed by tanks and demolitions in the military's pursuit of the PKK or living in exile from Syria or northeastern Iraq had were living in a unique nightmare of bureaucratic red tape.

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<sup>95</sup> Mentally, I began referring to this as the ‘Danışmasız Offisi’ – “The Office without Information.”

<sup>96</sup> Lest I unfairly cast a shadow on the people who I dealt with, I met one or two individuals who were *extremely* thoughtful and helpful, even if they didn't know how to do what I was asking.

### *Kafka and the Castle ruled by Nobody*

If we consider specific cases of this “action of telling a story,” we can see how critical it is that the story receive recognition from outside the immediate world of the individual – ideally, even if symbolically, from the very social field – often the State – that is held accountable for having ‘stolen’ or ‘cheated’ the victim out of her humanity in the first place. However, if the modern bureaucratic state is, in [Hannah] Arendt’s words, ruled like Kafka’s Castle, by Nobody – with “nobody left with whom one can argue” or “to whom one could present one’s grievances” (1969), how is it possible for the State to listen and apologize to those it harmed, let [alone] compensate them for what it has taken from them? And given the fact that the bureaucratic state, as Weber noted, “does not establish a relationship with a person ... but rather is devoted to impersonal and functional purposes (Weber 1968:959), how can its utterances be anything but the rhetoric of bad faith?... for if the individual is to regain some sense of power, the State or Corporation must symbolically forfeit some of its power. (Jackson, 2002: 53)

Jackson’s description of psychological trauma dynamics between the individual, the group, and the State vary little from the experience of Turkish Kurds. Some of these traumas are acutely tangible with the destruction of property and loss of kin. Others are less so, as is the case with cultural suppression of language and history. ‘Dağ Türkleri’ is an effective term to denote the non-entity that Kurdish identity plays in many segments of Turkish society and law.

### *Tömer*

My classes at Tömer had students from all over the world. Most were from Arab countries, but we had a good portion from Central and Eastern Asia. As we were spending twenty hours a week together, we became well acquainted. For the most part, these interactions were interesting on a personal level but nothing particularly relevant to this project. A few, however, set some backdrop for the cosmopolitan admixture that is Istanbul.

I am not entirely certain my classmates knew what to make of me. On the one hand, there were plenty of jokes about my being a spy. In Cairo, it took my friends a while to wheedle one of their number to simply ask me if I were CIA. That my friends from Tömer were up front and half-joking about it was more comfortable.

Religiously, I was harder to digest.

“You’re studying Islam and you’re *not* a Muslim?” my Uzbek friend asked, her skin seeming exceptionally pale beneath her black and navy blue hijab.

“Yes. Odd, I know. I’m a Christian and I’m studying Islam; in America, it’s less odd.”

She simply stared, trying to wrap her head around this fact.

One day we were practicing the grammatical suffix for repeated, habitual actions. The last ten minutes of this boiled down to a collective game of, “wait, Mormons can’t do what?” Muslims live and die by tea and coffee, and meeting someone that had no technical constraints against eating something like dog, donkey, horse, or pork, but could not drink coffee or most teas was, once again, difficult to grasp.

I wasn’t ever the only Arab speaker in class, but I was the only one that would go out of their way to practice speaking. Having grown out of the ‘participate-or-die’ school of language pedagogy, it was the only way I knew to operate. That my background included Arabic and Persian meant that when I fumbled for something in Turkish, I could almost always shoot something else out in the hopes that it was an acceptable cognate. Sometimes this passed muster, but more often than not it was a word or phrase that stopped being used in the 1920’s. Between that and my knee-jerk use of “*alhamdulillah*,”<sup>97</sup> I not only came across as an American, Christian spy, but one that talked like their grandfathers.

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<sup>97</sup> Most Muslim Arab cultures employ *alhamdulillah* (*al-ḥamd li-Allah*) with great frequency. Especially after years of teaching Arabic at Indiana University, it’s habit for me. In the Muslim Arab contexts, it usually just sounds like

During Ramadan, a good number of restaurants closed during the day. On the one hand, this surprised me for the number of mini-skirts I'd noticed on any given day on İstiklal. On the other hand, seventy-five percent of my classmates were fasting. While I was under no such obligation, I've fasted enough to know that it is unpleasant to do so while other people are eating in front of you. Our well-meaning if oblivious Korean classmate could be less tactful. One particularly warm day, he took a massive pull from his water bottle. Instead of swallowing it straight away, he let it stay there and ingested it in tiny, absurdly loud gulps.

After one particularly obnoxious deglutition, I had to say something.

"Tesan.. you're acting like my son," I said, keeping it in Turkish.

*\*gulp\**

Apparently, he needed it a laid on a little thicker.

".. he's two years old."

He choked as he and the rest of the class began to laugh. At least it wasn't in his mouth anymore.

*Enstituya Kurdî ya Stenbolê (The Kurdish Institute of Istanbul)*

Tömer only took up four hours a day in classwork and another hour or two after that in homework. Part of the excess I spent doing pre-dissertation researching, and an hour or so a day at the gym. Several hours of every week I set aside for Kurmanji Kurdish at The Kurdish Institute of Istanbul.

The Institute was established in 1992 as a center for research and publication of Kurdish culture, language, and literature. The classes and offices were located on the second floor of a

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someone saying 'good' or 'wonderful' unless it's in an expressly religious context. Persians use it less frequently, the Kurds even less, and I haven't ever heard it used by Turks outside of religious settings. So, whenever I used it in Turkey, it's like being in America and seeing a rather obviously Muslim Arab learning English respond to 'how are you?' with "Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!"



restaurant and mini-mall. One of the metro stops in Eminönü was marginally closer, but the other let me pass under the old aqueducts. It could get a little sweaty inside those classrooms, but I enjoyed the area, or at least did before June 10.

Prior to my arrival, I had no contacts at the institute and could not reach anyone through the main site's information. Ends up I came in after their semester had started and would be leaving shortly at the beginning of the next one. The director helped me figure out that the easiest way to accommodate my unusual time frame was private tutoring. Kejo was twenty-five-year old from Silvan, a small town north of Batman. He hoped that his work would give him enough to start a master's program in comparative literature in Mardin Artuklu University. He spoke Turkish and Kurmanji fluently, but had very little English, Persian, or Arabic. As my Turkish was still quite weak, that left us with Sorani as our pedagogical go-between. For the next two and a half months we met between two and four times a week. The logistics of my time schedule and the city itself didn't allow me the same immersive experience as I did with Turkish, but it bolstered my efforts with a foundation in the differences between the dialects,<sup>98</sup> basic conversation, and (slow) newspaper reading.

#### *Sex as a Weapon in The War of Numbers*

Before moving on from the Institute, I need to mention Dengdar. My first time in I was greeted by a bespectacled gentleman in his late sixties. He'd been sitting behind a massive desk so covered in Kurdish reading books, magazines, and journals that it barely had room for a flat-screen computer and a small, steaming cup of coffee. The two of us chatted while we waited to meet with the program director to get me set up with classes. His name was Dengdar, and I later

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<sup>98</sup> Most Kurmanji-speakers tell me that it is closer to Arabic than Sorani. I've never understood this. I still wonder if the people who say this actually know all that much about Arabic, as the only commonality I've found is nouns having gender and the subsequent effects on verb conjugation.

learned that he was from Diyarbakir (Amad) and had twelve children. He was immensely proud of this, and whenever we saw each other I'd ask after them, and he after mine (which at the time was 1.5 sons, the youngest still being *in utero*). Several of Dengdar's children had emigrated to Western Europe, and one was even a doctor working out of the Netherlands. For as many socio-economic pressures may or may not have entered into the expansion of Dengdar's family, our conversations made it rather clear to me that his, his wife's, and his progeny's Kurdishness deeply colored the way he viewed his situation.

Getting accurate numbers for Kurdish fertility rates in eastern Turkey is a laughable idea, though I expect that there are some serious efforts in a few offices in Ankara and Istanbul to keep track. All I have is based on impressions gained from what I saw. Kurdela and all the streets around it had plenty of families with lots of kids. I'd say that every third or fourth shop sells some kind of lingerie, not just for women, but men as well. I was rather shocked to see condoms and basic sexual accessories available in public venues (again, my expectations were Cairo and the reality was Istanbul).

In addition to these composite impressions is the official anxiety over the future of Turkish demographics. For the past two years the fertility rate has been somewhere between 2.05-2.1 and the median age in Turkey is 29.8 ("Turkey's Total Fertility Rate Falls to 2.07 in 2017," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 2018). This is, however, a *national* total, and the reason it isn't much lower is all because of the southeast. The fertility rate in Şırnak was 3.72, Ağrı 3.6, Muş 3.39, Bitlis 3.29, Mardin 3.2, Van 3.18, Diyarbakir 3.12, and Batman 3.1 (Khalidi, 2017). The highest was Şanlıurfa with 4.29. Some of these names should be familiar from the preceding history section. We don't know the precise numbers, but what we do know is that, all else being

equal, lower-income, rural Kurdish women are having more children than lower-income, rural Turkish women (Ghosh, 2012).<sup>99</sup>

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been very vocal on the matter of childbirth. In a gathering on November 11, 2017 of the intergovernmental Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Erdoğan said,

What do our God and prophet say? The order is pretty clear. Get married and reproduce. It is imperative that Muslims reproduce. I trust Muslim women's sensitivity on this issue... The terrorist group in Turkey is very sensitive on this. They have at least ten to 15 children... (Khalidi, 2017)<sup>100</sup>

Reactions to this came mostly from the People's Republican Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP, which draws support from left-leaning Kurds) with their public members calling out Erdoğan's not-so-veiled reference to Kurds as terrorists and equating Kurdishness with non-Islamic. The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) was equally vocal in its denunciations.

Starting in 2008, Erdoğan urged Turks to have "at least three" children (Shaheen and Saracoglu, 2017). In 2017, that number jumped to five while addressing Turks living in Europe (Sanchez, 2017). From the Turkish end, I have little idea on how much family-size and child-bearing is incentivized by patriotism, nationalism, or religion. The armchair economist in me says that people change behavior in response to incentives surpassing the threshold dictating current behaviors. It seems Erdoğan and the Turkish government haven't found that threshold yet. I wonder if they've considered subsidizing all that lingerie and taxing the condoms.

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<sup>99</sup> See Erdem, 2013 for the kinds of internal discussions that take place regarding the Kurdish question and demographics.

<sup>100</sup> It is important to note that active PKK members are technically prohibited from sex and other marital relations.

## WWII to Present

Turkey remained neutral during WWII until siding with the Allies in the beginning of 1945. The economic hardships of the preceding years brought then-President İnönü to the decision of liberalizing the political system. The first elections in 1950 led to a landslide victory on the side of the Democratic Party which represented the agricultural class (which included Kurdish landlords). The introduction of competition lessened the pressures on Kurds and religious Turks alike. The mechanization of agriculture led to Kurdish peasants migrating to larger towns and disempowering the landlords who used their position to sway votes. These in turn became wealthy enough that all they migrated west, all the while maintaining ownership of the land, which was being worked by a smaller number of people using tractors (see Taspinar, 2005: 83-89).

The first military coup took place in 1960 in reaction to the distance the Democratic Party created between its politics and Kemalism. The coup included arresting several dozen Kurdish notables with influence in creating policy. Three-hundred people were killed in riots in the east, and things would have progressed much further had the 1961 constitution not stopped military laws from being enacted. The constitution shifted the centralized power in the executive to a more independent judiciary and parliament. It also installed the National Security Council, staffed by the military, as a safe-guard against future departures from that constitution.

The Cold War zeitgeist had a large role in forming the divisions within Turkish politics. In 1952, Turkey and Greece were the first 'recruits' to NATO, a far more clear statement than joining in on against Germany and Japan that was mostly won. The first leftist party to emerge post-Atatürk was the Turkish Worker's Party (Türkiye İşçi Partisi, TİP), which attracted the

support of Kurdish intellectuals. These were few, and the party barely reached three percent in the elections.

Despite its relatively small size, the TİP was important. First and foremost, it represented the institutionalization of leftist rhetoric as an idiom of protest within a Kurdish population. Second, it represented the first real divergence from the landed aghas who had managed to stay in power through the transition from Ottoman to Republican administrations. In terms of Kurdish nationalism, the primary lens of the TİP was Marxist-Leninism. As such, the question of ethnic politics and cultural suppression were all simply part of the greater class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

In 1965, the Democratic Party of Turkish Kurdistan (PDKT) was formed, in part inspired by the successes of the Barzanis' KDP and their guerilla war in Iraq (White, 2015). The PDKT did not conform to the rapid leftism of the time, which highlights one of the greatest divisions between the brands of Kurdayetî. To the largely student-led movements in Turkey, the PDKT was a 'bourgeois nationalist' organization. The government took a less stringent approach when it came to separation of the two and subsequently treated nearly every Kurdish institution as an aggregate.

In 1967, student protests erupted over the contents of a Turkish nationalist magazine article that dehumanized Kurds. Tens of thousands of students came out, and the Turkish military came to staunch them. Many radical Kurds started forming their own leftist organizations. Some of these, such as the Eastern Revolutionary Cultural Centers, were technically legal under the

pre-1971 framework. The military cracked down on all of them; the ERCC became illegal and the majority of the PDKT leadership was arrested or assassinated (Kutschera, 1994).<sup>101</sup>

Fear of the politicization of the military's lower ranks along the backdrop of political violence of leftist student organizations against rightist student organizations (the Grey Wolves) and the police resulted in the NSC intervention in 1971.<sup>102</sup> It quickly became clear that for as much as the ultimatum was to stop the violence, it was also to staunch the growth of leftism. The TİP was shut down after it released a pro-Kurdish nationalist statement.

Ultimately, the NSC's interim government brought more power back to the executive ostensibly to narrow the political spectrum. This failed to stop the multiplication of underground, Kurdish leftist groups. From these competing ideologies emerged a small group of students led by Abdullah Öcalan in 1974. In late 1978, Öcalan formed the PKK in Ankara. While it incorporated Marxist-Leninist ideologies, its main emphasis was on mobilizing the peasantry in armed struggle as the means of creating an independent Kurdistan (Kutschera, 1994: 13).

In 1979, Turkish forces found a cache of 370 firearms in Van. Though they were bound for Iranian Kurdistan, the message was clear that Kurdish groups were able to procure large numbers of small arms. In the midst of the military crackdown, the lack of cohesion between leftist groups created a scenario in which various agendas were violently affected. This included Alevi pogroms, bombs in town squares, and other forms of street violence (Taspinar, 2005).<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Politically unaffiliated politicians fared no better; Mehmet Emin Bozarslan was arrested for publishing an elementary textbook for Kurdish and preparing a Turkish copy of Mem û Zîn for publication (McDowall, 2004: 410).

<sup>102</sup> This period was a particularly important and lucrative one for organized crime in Turkey. The Turkish state allowed and covered for criminal activities (extrajudicial killings, arms smuggling, etc.) that fought against the leftists (Bovenkerk and Yeşilgöz, 2004).

<sup>103</sup> Oddly enough, this may even include direct connection to an assassination attempt against Pope John Paul II on St. Peter's Square in May 1981 by a member of the Grey Wolves (History.com Staff, 2010).

The accumulation of this violence throughout Turkey led to the 1980 coup. From 1980 to 1983, the military prorogued civilian governance and performed a thorough purge of the party system. The 1982 constitution rolled back civil rights of expression even more than the changes in 1971. Interestingly enough, for as much physical and political strong-arming as took place, the NSC chose to not only not penalize, but actively encourage Islam in the public sphere.

The PKK leadership had fled to Syrian-controlled territory within Lebanon early in 1980, thus avoiding the capture, torture, and death in one of the Turkish prisons in southern Anatolia as would have been their fate had they stayed.<sup>104</sup>

### *Islam Re-Engineered*

The NSC had effectively alienated the Kurdish populations, particularly in the east, and was looking to consolidate what support they could. The logical answer to this was opening some doors to counterbalance the ones they were trying to shut. In 1981, the Diyanet opened a new Dawah office (which conducts missionary-esque activities) to preach against Kurdish nationalism. While the entirety was couched in anti-communist and anti-Marxist rhetoric, the statement was once again implicit that to be Kurdish in Turkey was anti-Islamic (Yavuz, 1997). Further abandoning the Kemalist model, the military government released a Milli Kültür Raporu (National Culture Report), which essentially leaned on the façade of a mandate dictated by the Turkish-Islamic ideal based on the family, the mosque, and the military barrack (Yavuz, 1997: 68). They cast the Turkish nation as being a single *cemaat* (community)<sup>105</sup> part of the ummah. Both of these terms carry a meaning in Islamic contexts. The government also coopted Sufi

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<sup>104</sup> The Syrian governments managed the Kurds of Syria much like the Turkish government had. For instance, in 1962 they enforced a surname law that required all Kurds to Arabize themselves. That they allowed the PKK to operate out of Syrian territory was a means of avoiding Kurds across the border enfranchising their own Kurdish population to rise up. Simply put, it was easier for Damascus to control the PKK's direction if a) they were under the nose of the government, and b) the continued existence of the leadership was contingent upon good behavior.

<sup>105</sup> From the Arabic *jāmi'ā*.

tariqas into the new management scheme. With the input of Naqshbandi officials, the educational curriculum was changed to include far more Islamic terminology into history and geography. Some seventy new İmam Hatip schools<sup>106</sup> were opened and 6,000 positions as religious functionaries (73). Through their emphasis on Islam and Ottomanism, the NSC had ironically brought themselves full-circle.

In the original constitution of the Turkish Republic, the line on ethnicity and citizenship was, “the people of Turkey, regardless of religion and race, are Turks as regard to citizenship,” (Cagaptay, 2004: 87). In October 1983, the military junta released Law 2932, which stated,

It is forbidden to express, diffuse or publish opinions in any language other than the official language of states recognized by the Turkish state... the mother language of Turkish citizens is Turkish. It is forbidden to use as a mother tongue of any language other than Turkish and to carry, at public gatherings and assemblies, placards, banners, signs, boards, posters and the like, written in a language other than Turkish. (“XI Restrictions on the use of the Kurdish Language,” Human Rights Watch, 1997)

Without coming out and saying it, this set of *sprachregeln* was aimed entirely at the Kurdish language.

On August 19, 1984, the PKK conducted its first attack against the Turkish army. They targeted a military compound in Eruh, less than thirty miles from the Syrian border near Cizre. The attack killed one soldier, wounded six others, raided their weapons stash and burned the building (“Turkey: The PKK Have Killed 14,000 Since 1984,” Anadolu Agency, 2015). Fighters commandeered the mosque and used the minaret’s loudspeaker to proclaim their ideology and goals.

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<sup>106</sup> İmam Hatip (from the Arabic *khaṭīb*, ‘giver of the mosque sermon’) schools were the outgrowth of the post-medresse system in the 1910’s. It should also be noted that such religiously-oriented prep schools would cut directly into the same base as the schools run by the Hizmet Movement, which we’ll cover later in greater detail.



In many ways, this incident embodies permanent aspects of PKK strategy. Planned, surgical, guerilla strikes against Turkish military outposts and materiel have been their modus operandi whenever they weren't in a ceasefire. Also among the parameters of PKK norms is antagonizing Kurdish Muslims (and perpetuating the failures of previous Kurdish rebellions by forcibly limiting their constituency). From all of the radical, leftist organizations in competition in that period of violent politics, the PKK distinguished itself with its effectiveness in damaging the Turkish army, opposing Kurdish, leftist groups, and surviving.

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Before proceeding into the Turkish-PKK conflict, we need to take a look at several organizational aspects and practices of Öcalan's creation. For as much as the initial PKK manifesto claimed to be a revolutionary democratic force carving out an independent Kurdistan from beneath Turkish colonialism, the facts on the ground bore out a different story (Laizer, 2016). Öcalan led the PKK from the 80's until the mid-90's and promoted a cult of personality. He defended his centralized position with physical violence on occasion (Aydin and Emrence, 2015: 23-32). Even when the organization grew, his management strategy of personal oversight did not. As such, he started to lose control and ceased gaining territory only a few years before he was arrested.

His initial approach to Islam was the statement that, "Islam is a Trojan horse used by every invader in Kurdistan," (Davis, et. al, 2012: 102). This softened some in later rhetoric, but abusing Kurdish Muslims is effectively an institutionalized norm within PKK strategy. In the 90's, they tried to recruit Kurdish Alevis, and later, conservative Kurdish Muslims. They had little success with either.

Recruitment was a mix of volunteers and abductions, which included children. It's worth noting that forced conscription took place in regions geographically furthest from Turkish zones of control, depriving those families of an alternate governing force. Recruits were trained in camps<sup>107</sup> wherein they received tactical training and ideological conditioning. They were cut off from their families, prohibited romantic relationships (which included fellow recruits), and essentially given a new identity as part of the PKK collective. Ideological control and group pressure were key elements in maintaining party discipline. An ex-PKK member is quoted as having said, "You get these ideas in your head, *like Rambo, and you want action* and the state pressure pushes you toward the PKK," (Davis, et. al, 2012: 103, emphasis is my own; see pp.409-419 for more on Rambo, cinema, and masculinity). The deaths of recruits were as important as anything they did while they were alive insofar as it emotionally leveraged the recruits' families against the Turks.

Violence was a tool not only against the primary enemy, but against collaborators, "traitors," and the families (and entire villages) of Village Guard members. Wholesale slaughter was a means of taking revenge. Locally, they funded themselves with blackmail and extralegal taxation of the thriving black market in the Turkish borders with Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Internationally, they receive millions of dollars annually through their efforts in Europe.

Starting in 1996, the PKK began using suicide bombers, the majority of whom were women in their twenties attacking security centers in big cities (Aydin and Emrence, 2015: 30). Around this same time the party started to create semi-autonomous offshoots, such as the Freedom Falcons of Kurdistan, all of which were employed in violent efforts.

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<sup>107</sup> During the 1980-1990's, most of these were located in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon and received some ancillary support from Hezbollah and the PLO (Laizer, 2016).

As a final note on Öcalan, or Apo<sup>108</sup> as he is affectionately known, it's interesting that despite the prominent role he still plays in Turkish-Kurdish relations, the linguistic aspects of many other movements are notably absent in his approach. While he can give basic speeches in Kurmanji, "he speaks Turkish, gives orders in Turkish, and thinks in Turkish," (Laizer, 2016).

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In 1985, the Turkish government pulled an older card by attempting to coopt Kurdish tribes as part of a Village Guard against the PKK. However, intertribal enmities greatly limited their effectiveness. From 1987 to 2002, the entirety of Turkish Kurdistan was put under martial law, led by a Governor-General. The end result of this was enfranchisement of the population to the PKK's cause.

The Iran-Iraq War resulted in 100,000 Iraqi Kurdish refugees seeking refuge in southeastern Turkey. Between the international attention this garnered and the 1987 bid for membership into the European Community, many of these were allowed entry as displaced persons in 1988. Kurdish members of parliament took the opportunity to raise the question of ethnicity. Lawmakers managed to get the NSC to repeal Law 2932, though it was replaced by the Anti-Terror Law which more or less kept the former law's effect (Taspinar, 2005: 102-104).

President Turgut Özal, elected to that office after his six year tenure as prime minister, made history promising to lift the legal ban on Kurdish and openly recognizing the presence of Kurds within Turkey. Needless to say, he gained a great deal of support from the east, but got no support from the NSC. By the end of 1991, 4,500 people had died in the conflict with the PKK. In the Newroz celebration of 1992, Turkish security forces killed 92 Kurdish civilians, and openly Kurdish politicians were shut out of office. With that, all of the forward momentum that

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<sup>108</sup> 'Apo' is short for Abdullah; see footnote 225 for more on Kurdish abbreviations on Islamic names.

had been building toward a liberal solution to the hostilities died. In tandem with this setback was the development of guerilla groups operating outside of the control of the leadership of Turkish security forces, the Village Guard, and the PKK. These were responsible for a large number of assassinations of non-combatants, including politicians and journalists.

On March 20, 1993, Öcalan called a unilateral ceasefire. Less than a month later, President Özal died,<sup>109</sup> and President Demirel, elected by the parliament from his position as prime minister, placed control of the Kurdish situation firmly under military jurisdiction. Just over two months from the ceasefire, PKK members ambushed a bus and executed thirty-three unarmed Turkish soldiers (“Turks Say Kurds Killed 33 Troops,” Reuters, 1993). Throughout the rest of the year, 350,000 Turkish troops were deployed against the PKK, and in the following two years the death toll came to 21,000.

The military occupation of massive areas in Kurdistan led to hyperinflation in 1994, the displacement of two million people and destruction of 3,000 villages by 1996, and the EU’s rejection of Turkish candidacy in 1997.<sup>110</sup> Most of the legitimate political parties with any kind of Kurdish orientation were disbanded, and even small shows of Kurdish identity severely punished.<sup>111</sup> All of this served to perpetuate the no-man’s land between the NSC’s line and that

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<sup>109</sup> His death may have been assassination. He survived an attempt made by a gunman in 1988, and his wife felt convinced his death was the result of another such attempt. In 2012, Turkish officials exhumed Özal’s body, and the investigation revealed a high presence of insecticides and heavy metals. Presently, there is no definitive ruling on his death (certain of these heavy metals may also be the natural result of the body being underground for an extended period of time; “Body of Turkish Ex-Leader Shows Sign of Poisoning: Paper,” Reuters, 2012; “No Evidence Turkish President was Poisoned: Autopsy,” Reuters, 2012), and his moves toward Kurdish rapprochement were not his only divisive actions; he was also actively pursuing a union with fellow Turkic countries from the former-Soviet Union (Luqman, 2012).

<sup>110</sup> Though it’s debatable whether or not France would ever accept Turkey’s entry because of its continuing claims on Cypress territories.

<sup>111</sup> Leyla Zana, who only learned Turkish as she helped own children through school (and her husband, the mayor of Diyarbakir, served out a sixteen-year sentence in the aftermath of the 1980 coup), was the first woman elected to parliament. During her swearing in in 1991, she hadn’t even begun speaking before the parliament erupted in commotion over wearing a headband alternating between green, yellow, and red – the colors of the Kurdish flag. She ended that oath, which was in Turkish, with a sentence spoken in Kurdish (Sert, 2013; klilmagazine, 2012). Zana was arrested three years later, ostensibly for her party having connections to the PKK.

of the PKK. For all of its indiscriminate violence, it remained the only choice for Kurds who weren't overtly Muslim in their political thinking.

Through all economic and social turmoil of the 90's, not only in Turkey, but also in Iraq and Bosnia, the Islamic Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP) gained some popularity. They even had their own television channel, which given the government's history is quite a statement. The zenith of this movement was a coalition government and Necmettin Erbakan, a pro-Islamic politician,<sup>112</sup> to the presidency (Yavuz, 1997). Particularly with the Bosnian War, there was a strong sense of Muslim kinship, bringing with it a shared sense of oppression. The RP used this to their advantage. That they won not only eastern provinces such as Diyarbakir, Malatya, and Kayseri, but Istanbul and Ankara speaks to their effective campaigning. Despite their popularity, the government was not allowed to last long. The "soft coup" of 1997 dismissed the RP's government and marked a return of the NSC to being the de facto power.

The ensuing years put a great deal of domestic and international pressure against Öcalan. In 1999, he found himself without shelter in Syria and no permanent asylum in Europe. He tried to avoid capture by hiding in the Greek embassy in Nairobi, Kenya. Despite his female

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<sup>112</sup> The 1987 referendum allowed politicians forbidden from the public sphere in 1980 to reemerge. Among their number were the leadership of the Welfare Party, then the Islamic-oriented National Salvation Party.

companions' threats to immolate themselves in the embassy gardens were Apo taken,<sup>113</sup> he was tricked into the arms of the Turkish security forces.<sup>114</sup>

### Prostitutes, Drugs, & Refugees

During my second week in Turkey, I went for a walk down İstiklal after sunset. While I never felt unsafe in this area, I always tried to keep my sphere of awareness as wide and undistracted as possible. Near the south end, I noticed a young man look at me, and moments later he sidled up to me.

“How’s it going? You new here?” he asked in perfect American English.

“Hey.. Yeah, I’m new,” I replied.

“That’s sweet. You American?” he continued.

“Yeah.”

“You want some cocaine?”

My brain came to a full-stop and I think my walk faltered a little.

“Uh, no. No, thank you. I’m good.”

“Oh, ok.”

For as little as I wanted anything to do with illegal activity, I could not believe I had been given such an opportunity with zero effort on my part – a source within Turkey’s black market!

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<sup>113</sup> Female companions in this case made sense – in general, public response to violence against women is almost always worse than men. Based on my conversations with a former PKK commander, it is my opinion that despite Apo’s official rhetoric regarding women (see White, 2015: 133-148), I suspect he availed himself of the privileges of office and his travel companions had a dual role not too dissimilar to that occupied by former-Libyan president Muammar al-Qaddafi’s “Amazons.”

I first experienced the effectiveness of the women as the first line of defense was entering Israel via Egypt. The initial security personnel were all unusually attractive Israeli women; as soon as you set off a red flag, you got pulled to a different portion of the facility and then surrounded by heavily armed men with severe expressions. I believe the underlying psychological assumption is that men are less likely to harm women, more so if they find them attractive – a variant of the ‘good cop, bad cop’ approach.

<sup>114</sup> The Kenyan, American, and possibly Israeli intelligence services also played strong roles in affecting Apo’s capture (Varouhakis, 2009). The latter suspicion resulted in the Israeli Embassy in Berlin being raided by PKK supporters.

“So where are you from? Your English is amazing, by the way.”

In the ensuing five minutes, I learned a lot. First and foremost, Istanbul is a city where you can find whatever vice you want if you look for it. In some cases, you can get *private tours* for it. Second, the number one producer of heroin in Turkey is not Afghanistan. It is Van, firmly in PKK territory (in every sense of the term). Had I more time with my new Kurdish ‘friend’ I would have plied him about whether he did any business out east, but he had work and I was not a paying customer. I ran into him another six or seven times over the months, but never got him talking like he did that first night.

I went home and started pulling up as much as I could about the drug trade in Turkey. Some of what I learned made the Iran-Contra scandal look like child's play. On November 3, 1996, a top-line Mercedes crashed into a tractor trailer in Sursuluk (Gingeras, 2017; Kinzer, 1996). In that car were Sedat Bucak, Hüseyin Kocadağ, Abdullah Çatlı, and Gonca Us. Bucak was a member of parliament<sup>115</sup> and one of the Village Guard’s commanders, Kocadağ a senior official in the Istanbul police, Çatlı a heroin dealer and assassin for the Grey Wolves since the 1970’s,<sup>116</sup> and Us a former beauty pageant winner, ‘Parliament girl’ (i.e. someone with romantic connections to multiple members of parliament) and Çatlı’s mistress; all perished in the crash except for Bucak. In the trunk of the car were multiple sub-machine guns and pistols, one of which was fitted with a silencer.

In the ensuing months, the alleged presence of the Ergenekon gang, which acted as a *derin devlet* – the infamous “deep state” – was responsible for extrajudicial killings and terror, came to the forefront of Turkish politics. It (may have)<sup>117</sup> existed since at least the 1970’s, and its

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<sup>115</sup> A Kurdish clan leader and member of the True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi, DYP; Jenkins, 2009: 22).

<sup>116</sup> He also helped jailbreak the man who tried to assassinate Pope John Paul II (Bovenkerk and Yeşilgöz, 2004).

<sup>117</sup> The best counter-argument to their existence comes from Gareth Jenkins, who extensively researched the Ergenekon investigation. “...there is no proof that the Ergenekon organization *as described in the indictments*... has

reach extended throughout the government and military. It was staunchly Kemalist, anti-communist, and anti-Kurdish nationalist (White, 2015: 111). Much of its money came through the drug trade.

The massive population of Turkish ‘guest workers’ in places like Germany made product placement in Europe far easier. By the 1980’s, these drug traffickers were protected by many of the most important figures in Turkish politics and police (Bovenkerk and Yeşilgöz, 2004: 598).<sup>118</sup> Before the ceasefire in 1999, drug traffickers (not working with the PKK) were more or less treated as part of the process of escalating the cost of business for Kurdish guerillas and affecting their own policies.

Post-2010, Turkey produces close to a third of the world opium supply (Unlu and Aksu, 2016). The PKK is responsible for 50-80% of the heroin supply in Europe, and it makes some \$400 million annually on cannabinoid products within Turkey. After the Ergenekon Investigation, information on continued ultranationalist involvement in the drug trade has become far less easy to procure. Only a small number of officials actually saw a prison cell, and the Syrian Civil War and Turkish military reengagement with the PKK have more or less reintroduced many of the same elements that incentivized the alliances that made the Turkish “deep state” able to function so effectively. The biggest difference between the 1970’s-1990’s and the last seven years is the massive presence of Syrian refugees with no ready sources of

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ever existed... the indictments are so full of contradictions, rumors, speculation, misinformation, illogicalities, absurdities and untruths that they are not internally consistent or coherent... appear[ing] to be the products of “projective” rather than deductive reasoning, working backwards from the premise that the organization exists to weave unrelated individuals, statements and acts into *a single massive conspiracy*... Rather than convincing the investigators that what they are looking for does not exist, this elusiveness appears merely to make the organization more fearsome and powerful in their minds; and further fuel their desperation to uncover and eradicate it,” (2009: 11; emphasis added).

<sup>118</sup> The Turkish government used the proceeds – some half of all the profits netted by the traffickers in Europe and sent back to Turkey via the Pamuk Bank and İşbank – to the Turkish Cultural Association which had stations throughout Europe.



income. Trafficking refugees is profitable and carries a significantly reduced punishment as compared to those caught smuggling drugs.

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My interaction with the cocaine dealer on İstiklal was pleasant and cordial, but we were also on the main thoroughfare. The majority of what was really going on was behind closed doors. For as intensely curious as I was to find out as much as I could about how this all worked, I could not find a safe way to get this information without going into places that I may not be able to get out of. It was like taking a tour in a submerged aquarium – I was right next to everything, so close I could almost touch it. However, if I were to leave that glass barrier behind, I could not control what would happen. This is especially true given the potentially dangerous fauna that had attracted my curiosity.

Perhaps if I were a more adventurous soul less constrained by religious and family obligations (not to mention unafraid of diseases common to black market vices), I might have had a lot more interesting stories to share.<sup>119</sup> That being said, some basic research combined with my daily/nightly commute helped me identify several zones of work. The primary hub of sex work in Beyoğlu is Zurafa Caddesi, followed by Turabaşı. After that, it turns into workers occupying segments of the street and operating out of apartments or inside of construction zones that are shielded from public view. While I did not encounter this, Istanbul is also famous for high-price escort services marketing to wealthy men from the Gulf. The only one of these that is legal is Zurafa, and it is almost exclusively for local men.

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<sup>119</sup> I mean this in no derogatory way – see Rabinow, 1977 for an interesting ethnography involving prostitution, see Paul Rabinow's Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco, which is also one of the greater influences on my approach to this dissertation.

Even with its technical legality, it is highly limited in its zoning and increasingly pressured by a right-swinging political administration. Zurafa is really interesting, as it's kind of a circle with two entrances and is quite openly regulated. It's also out of my way, and I wasn't sure how to approach it. Most of this problem revolved around how bad my Turkish was. This being the case, I simply played time honored anthropological strategy of 'oh goodness, I've gotten myself lost.' There's a small official check post, and a big man came out to talk to me. Despite our being the only people around (other than two guards), he chose to whisper. From what I've read, foreigners have more hoops to jump through to get any further – this included paying a large fee (surpassing the rate for locals) and surrendering your passport to the guard station until you were through with your time. Knowing this, I had purposefully left the house with nothing but my keys and enough money to get some ice cream – nothing worth getting in trouble over. My acting was good enough that he decided I had no idea why I could not just go into the gated street. "Prostitutes," he said in Turkish. I feigned shock, thanked him for his help, and backtracked to İstiklal.

The real estate on Zurafa is owned by the family of Matild Manukyan, a Turk of Armenian descent. In the 1990's, the RP used her as an example of the direction Turkey was going in, and there was even a movement of Muslim women against this prostitution nicknamed the "anti-Natasha" movement (Yavuz, 1997: 79).<sup>120</sup> <sup>121</sup> Despite the nature of her work, many in the city considered her to be a pillar of the community for her charitable work and civic presence

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<sup>120</sup> "Natasha" was a reference to the large number of Eastern European and Russian prostitutes that worked in Turkey, particularly in the Black Sea regions. Based on the language of passing solicitations as well as physiognomy, I believe the vast majority of prostitutes in Beyoğlu were from Turkey.

<sup>121</sup> Eleven years ago, an American ESL teacher named Lauren Price wrote about her experiences in almost the exact same region I was in – "Call Me Natasha – Istanbul, Turkey" (2009).

(Zaman, 2001). In any case, Turks buying the sexual services of prostitutes working for an Armenian madam has yet to lose its irony to me.<sup>122</sup>

Turabası is basically a street full of smaller hotels that line the tourist area.<sup>123</sup> In contrast to Zirafe's obviousness, Turabası's workers are far subtler. Scattered here and there are similar venues that take place in bars and clubs, of which there are many. Most of the sources I've spoken with or read up on say that these all have some connection to organized crime.

Kurdela is just far enough away from Turabası to be part of the third zone, which is where the surplus demand finds its supply. Zirafe is a stagnant in terms of size and there are only so many ways to maximize efficiency and output. Turabası has some of the unregistered spill-over, and the rest uses the apartments and walled-off construction areas. The workers here would more accurately be called 'street walkers' or 'window workers' (minus the window; Fuchs, 2013). It is extremely evident that the prostitutes are also drug users.

It is also evident that most of the conventionally attractive women were able to get work at the better venues. Many of the street walkers were women old enough to be my mother (and in a few cases, grandmother) or older transvestites or transsexuals in miniskirts. Everyone there knows who they are and what they're all about, and there's just a kind of equilibrium that exists

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<sup>122</sup> The animosity between many Armenians and Turks is still alive and well. For instance, my MMA instructor in Istanbul was contending in a mixed-martial arts fight in the US. In his prep area, he had hung a large Turkish flag. One of the referees came in to inspect him pre-match. He saw the flag and asked, "Are you Turkish?"

"Yes, I am," he said.

"I'm Armenian."

My instructor, who is a genuinely upbeat person, smiled and replied, "You and I are neighbors then!"

The referee only scowled and said nothing.

During the match, my instructor took a hard hit to the chest. The Armenian referee didn't stop the fight, despite the fact that his ribs were obviously broken. Fighting resumed, and despite the injury my instructor won. He looked out to 'rib' the referee by thanking him for not stopping the fight, but the Armenian had left the arena entirely. To this day, he has a metal plate in his chest that keeps his ribs in place.

<sup>123</sup> Larger, upper-class hotels fall under the first zone of prostitution that caters almost exclusively to tourists. See this customer review regarding Radisson Blu Conference & Airport Hotel, a five-star establishment – "Prostitutes in the spa !!!", TripAdvisor.com, 2017.

and is occasionally interrupted by an arrest, usually of a 'John' rather than one of the sex workers.

Being the person who I am, I decided to push this equilibrium. One morning, I decided I'd start giving all of them a hearty good morning.

"*Günaydın!*"

The ladies responded with a good morning of their own and went straight into propositioning. I could not understand a lot of it, though I am sure I would have learned some interesting vocabulary. That I was saying hello without finding a partner with whom I exchanged money for sex was a complete rupture in the flow of things. The shopkeepers (who were either their pimps or their customers, it was hard to tell) were in their normal seats looking at me with expressions of complete bewilderment. So, I started saying good morning to them too. I thought if I did this enough, they'd get to know that I was all play and no business, creating an equilibrium of my own design.

It never really had the effect I wanted. I could not get them to not make a pass whenever I greeted them. One day I was doing my hello's and the girl immediately asked me if I had a cigarette for her. They all did this at some point, and while I am not ignorant of double entendres, I had until then responded as if they were in fact bumming a cigarette. For whatever reason, it suddenly clicked. Beyond the obvious phallic visual of the cigarette, the term in Turkish is *sigara içmek*, 'to drink a cigarette.' I almost stopped in my tracks, turned around and said, "Isn't that a little 'on the nose?'" I didn't, as I doubt that's a Turkish idiom, and would in any case be referring to the wrong organ. It was at that point that I decided to stay silent in my coming and goings any time after 10am. 'Good evening' would simply be worse.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Especially for non-locals, it would be *unwise* to actually go with these women. I rather suspect half of them are honey-traps. Get into a room and find scary looking men with unfriendly faces. You'd end up paying to *not* get

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For as interesting as these stories may or may not be, they do beg the question of what, if anything, they have to do with Kurds, nationalism, and Islam. Let me explain.

First, it was my introduction into the reality and permanence of Kurdistan's smuggling operations. While I didn't get any demographic information for the red-light district,<sup>125</sup> there is a great deal of information available regarding Kurdish involvement in opiate and cannabinoid cultivation, transportation, and sale. Second, it highlights the divisive position Turkish politics came to by July 16, 2016. In order to understand the layers of conflict in Turkish society, it is worth taking the time to detail the vices that are so readily available and so obviously flaunt Islamic norms. It's also worth taking time to record the awkward conversations, such as those I had with the handful of people, including one taxi driver that was married with children, who tried to convince me of the merits of male prostitutes. For as many Kurds that conform to modern Turkish secularism or reject religiosity on PKK/leftist perspectives, there are a great many that view Islam as being trodden underfoot by the state. These Kurds, along with their religious Turkish compatriots, vote according to that consciousness. For many of them, this meant voting for the AKP and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

#### *The rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan*

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was born in 1954, received his education from the İmam Hatip school system and higher education from Marmara University (Presidency of the Republic of

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touched. After that, what are you going to do? Go to the police and say you were held up by your hooker's pimp? "So, what's your name, sir?" "Uh.. John." "No – your name – not what you we're arresting you for being."

<sup>125</sup> Had I gotten that kind of information I would have been extremely interested to see if there were ethnic lines drawn between the range of prostitutes. I'd be interesting knowing if Syrian refugees and Kurds were relegated to the 'hooker' end due to Eastern European human-pipelines' monopoly of the high-priced 'escorts' market for sex tourists from the Gulf, or if existing ethnic divides were a reflection of consumers' sexual preferences. Monopoly-induced market inefficiencies or assigning value on an ethno-physiognomic basis? My inner economist wants answers.

Turkey, 2018). In 1984, he was elected as the RP Provincial Head in Beyoğlu. Ten years later he was elected the mayor of Istanbul, which position he held until his arrest and four-month long imprisonment on December 12, 1997 for reading a portion of a poem. The poem was written by Ziya Gökalp, a Kurdish Ottoman whose writings were fundamental to the development of Turkism, and the bits Erdoğan incorporated revolved around Islam as Turkey's primary means of defence against aggression (Arslanbenzer, 2016; Friedman, 2016).

In 2002, he established the AKP (Justice and Development Party, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) which was elected into government the following year. Between those years and the present, an *immense* amount has transpired. For the sake of economy, we'll cover the highlights and then go backward in time for a few key events. In 2003, 2007, and 2011, Erdoğan was elected as prime minister. In 2014, he was elected as Turkey's twelfth president. As per the referendum of April 16, 2017, Erdoğan is now the head of the presidential system that did away with the prime minister position entirely. The judiciary and the military have been greatly diminished in their capacity to act in contravention to the executive.

The situation as it stands is one in which Erdoğan has set himself up as a Neo-Ottoman, strongman leader with massive support from Muslims both domestically and internationally. His home constituency even includes religious Kurds. Evidence of the international popularity is evidenced on every social media platform I've used to read up on current Turkish events. While many of these positive (and negative) comments are easily searchable under #RT\_Erdoğan, I've included one Tweet here just as a reference.



*Figure 8 - Tweet from one Hassan Tahliil, a Somalian, on June 24, 2018*

All of this is a scenario that he and his cadres have been working toward since he became prime minister. This has required moments of pragmatism and conciliation, though they are more akin to sacrificed pawns in a decades-long game of chess. In 2008, Turkey allowed the Turkish Radio & Television (TRT) to broadcast a channel with Kurmanji Kurdish along with other minority languages. The broadcast was opened with Prime Minister Erdoğan speaking a sentence in Kurdish (Olson, 2011: 27-28).

Over the years, many journalists and academics have been imprisoned for their work regarding Kurdish-Turkish relations. For instance, Turkish sociologist İsmail Beşikçi published a book on the Dersim massacre that claimed it an act of genocide on the part of the Turkish government (Beşikçi, 1989). This resulted in ten years in prison.<sup>126</sup> In 2013, Prime Minister Erdoğan actually apologized for the massacre. When referring to Kurdish issues, he actually uses

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<sup>126</sup> In total, Beşikçi spent some seventeen years in prison because of his writings on the Kurdish question and thirty-two of his thirty-six books are illegal in Turkey (Rudaw, 2014).

the term “Kurd.” On the economic side, the Turkish government has built a large number of dams in the east, accompanied by development and increased access to electricity.<sup>127</sup>

That is more or less where the list of relevant pacifications ends. Erdoğan is (in)famous for the steps he takes to punish those who insult him. This is once again, as true abroad as it is at home. Between August 2014 and February 2016, there were 1,500 legal cases involving insulting the president. These included such cases as that of the German comedian, Jan Böhmermann, being sued over a highly derogatory poem (Connolly, 2016), and the eleven-month sentence of a Turkish woman for making a rude hand gesture toward President Erdoğan (“Getting Off the Train,” *The Economist*, 2016). All of this combined with the way in which he has firmly planted his cause under the silver domes of newly-built Turkish mosques, places his defensiveness in the category of ‘honor preservation’ rather than authoritarian censorship. Especially in an era where media transmission facilitates the political magnification of microevents into international symbols of protest,<sup>128</sup> Erdoğan is able to tap into the psychic distress felt by many Muslims over slights by the West with regard to their religion. In many ways, it also taps into the same absolutist, millenarian irredentism utilized by Da’ish.

#### *Turkish Islam*

As we’ve noted earlier, official use of Islam for political ends is part and parcel to the functioning of the Republic of Turkey. One of the apparatuses for this end is the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*). It was established in 1924, with the intention of

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<sup>127</sup> This is probably a matter of hitting the maximum amount of birds with a single stone – civic complaints and conservationism probably had a part in making these decisions.

<sup>128</sup> See anything regarding Westboro Baptist Church, a highly conservative Protestant congregation with 70-odd members, burning copies of the Quran and the waves it set off across the Muslim world; see also reactions to “The Innocence of Muslims,” which included White House press conferences and multi-faith leadership assemblies denouncing what turned out to be a tiny, self-financed, fourteen-minute long film distributed on YouTube.



‘replacing’ the role of the then-recently dissolved Caliph. Control of every mosque and sermon comes and goes through the Diyanet; as such, it is the center of a great deal of money.

In 2015, the budget for the Diyanet was quadrupled, making it better funded even than the Interior or Foreign Ministries, which are responsible for civic, civil, security, and social administrative services (Lepeska, 2015; Zubaida, 1996; Ministry of Interior, 2018). That’s everything from foreign relations, disaster and emergency management, border patrol, immigration, elections, and national police all wrapped up and put together.

Of the Diyanet’s list of top priorities, transparency is not terribly high. Despite my best efforts, I have continued having trouble finding any account of where its money goes.<sup>129</sup> This isn’t to say that much of this money isn’t very obvious in the way it’s spent (“Turkish Religious Body Not Transparent, Misuses Funds,” Today’s Zaman, 2016) – as of 2016, there were 85,000 mosques in Turkey and 200 outside of it, and the Turkish government employs all of the staff for those mosques (Özgenç, 2016). This includes a \$100 million mosque in Maryland, the opening of which was attended by both President Erdoğan and President Obama (Lepeska, 2015). It has a satellite TV station – Diyanet Television – which runs 24/7.

The final prime minister of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoğlu, wrote a book called “Strategic Depth,” in which he states that, “the defense of Eastern Thrace and Istanbul now begins in the Adriatic Sea and Sarajevo, and the defense of Eastern Anatolia and Erzurum begins in the Northern Caucasus and Grozny,” (2011).<sup>130</sup> When he was in Sarajevo in 2009 as the Foreign Minister he stated in a speech, “the Ottoman centuries of the Balkans were *success stories*. Now

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<sup>129</sup> According to its own statistics, the amounts allocated seem to be in order (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2013), but there is a dearth of specific information. Beyond my own suspicions, the Diyanet has been accused by Turkish politicians of having budget items that remain withheld from governmental scrutiny.

<sup>130</sup> The term Davutoğlu used to describe this expansion is “Lebensraum,” a term coined by German political geographer Karl Haushofer meaning ‘breathing room’ and later used by Nazis (Ozkan, 2014). As such, it was hardly a benign word to pick to convey the idea of ‘making friends and influencing others.’

we have to *reinvent this*,” (Nagy, 2012; emphasis added). In defense of increased Turkish involvement in the Balkans, Bosnia-Herzegovina in particular, Davutoğlu added, “We are paying the bill for our Ottoman history because whenever there is a crisis in the Balkans (Bosnians, Albanians, Turks in Bulgaria, etc.), they look to Istanbul.” Eight years before that speech, Davutoğlu wrote that Bosnia-Herzegovina was a “political, economic, and cultural outpost of Turkey in Central Europe,” and that the societies of both Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania were “the remnants of the Ottoman Empire whose fates are tied to Turkey’s regional power and hegemony.” The Bosnian term used to describe this outreach is “*džamija diplomatija*” (“mosque diplomacy”; Noel-Hill, 2011).

While we will discuss the role of the Diyanet in Iraq in a later chapter, it is by no means its only outreach in the east. Erdoğan has played the role of Palestine’s protector, the most publicized example of which being the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010. One of the fatalities was a Kurd named Ali Haidar Banjinin, who wrote, “I am going to be a martyr, I dreamed about it.” A politically jaded person might suggest that sending activists who were “ready for martyrdom” (Sherwood, 2010) into a situation where they would absolutely be stopped and searched by Israeli forces was a form of violent entrapment, using the activist deaths to set the stage upon which Erdoğan could strike a public pose.

In effect, the Diyanet serves two functions: first is the AKP’s campaign apparatus, and second is securing its particular brand of Turkish Islam.<sup>131</sup> It wasn’t until recently that the Diyanet’s expansion met any roadblocks within Turkey. In 2013, Justice Minister Bekir Bozdağ, whose primary responsibility was religious affairs, stated that complaining about the Diyanet’s

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<sup>131</sup> As the Diyanet appoints all of the muftis and imams, they screen along their own lines. They pay for their staff to oversee mosques in Alevi areas where everyone goes to the cemavi – which lacks Diyanet funding – rather than the mosque – which is paid for by the Diyanet. The only functioning cemavis in the larger cities like Istanbul were used for tourist purposes.

budget was “[going] against the presence of the institution itself.” In a statement that is classically Erdoğan in delivery, the president said, “those who promise to abolish the Diyanet, it is clear what kind of a lesson our nation will teach them,” (Kreeft, 2015). The primary instigator of this was the pro-Kurdish HDP.

The drive behind the Diyanet’s funding for foreign outreach and mosque construction is reflected in other ministries. Funding for İmam Hatip schools gives 22% of the total to 11% of Turkish students in order to “raise a pious generation that will work for the construction of a new civilization,” (Butler, 2018).<sup>132</sup> Mosque services that openly conflate (Turkish) Islamic orthopraxy with allegiance to Erdoğan are common (see Hamiş, 2016 for example). This phenomenon stuck out to me in particular during and after the July 16, 2016 coup attempt.

#### *Kurdish and Alevi Counter-Institutional Islam*

For as many Turkish citizens as are pleased with the direction the AKP is bringing public religiosity and the kind of Islam on display, not everyone is buying what the Diyanet is spending so much to sell. This is particularly true in Kurdish country.

On April 15, 2011, the Peace and Democracy Party (*Bariş ve Demokrasi Partisi* in Turkish, *Partiya Aştî û Demokrasiyê* in Kurmanji) in conjunction with several local civic societies organized the Civil Friday Prayer. Some two thousand Kurds gathered in Dağkapı Square in Diyarbakir to conduct the entire service in Kurdish (Güvenç, 2011). This act was interwoven with layers of protest – protest against forbidding Kurdish in schools, protest against the sermon topics dictated by Ankara, and protest against Kurdish being forbidden within the

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<sup>132</sup> My personal suspicions regarding ulterior motivation on this matter are counterbalanced by the fact that the opportunities that İmam Hatip schools also provide opportunities for disadvantaged populations, particularly to girls from low-income families.

mosque sermons. While there was a heavy police presence to monitor the proceedings, the prayer service went without incident.

That the prayer service took place in in Dağkapı was in and of itself laden with meaning. After the Turkish army defeated Sheikh Said in 1925, it was in Dağkapı that the Turkish army hanged him. If you stand in the middle of the square and turn in a circle, you'll find the banners of Turkish the nationalist narrative on every point of the compass – Atatürk on a banner next to a Turkish flag on the remnants of Ottoman architecture, a thirty-foot tall Atatürk in bas-relief (see p.84). Flags and Atatürk, Atatürk and flags. Bilig's Banal Nationalism in this case is less banal and more a thinly veiled conceit, a gun hidden beneath a silk flag.

The Civil Friday Prayer services continued for years (Gambetti and Jongerden, 2015: ch.3). It wasn't until 2015 that I heard of their existence, and while I tried multiple times to get out there, political instability and open violence prevented every single one of those trips. I only ever managed it for less than a day in December 2017. Dağkapı was my first stop. I have not been able to ascertain whether or not the week I was there was simply an aberration or if the prayers had been discontinued, but afternoon prayer time came and went, and I sat in Dağkapı in silence.

I rather expect that the series of closed-door discussions in Ankara on the Civil Friday Prayer concluded that the trouble involved in shutting it down far outweighed the benefits of allowing this small concession. Getting rid of a Kurdish mayor for supporting Kurdish cultural promotion is easy – simply charge them with “supporting terrorism.” Disperse the crowds by making targeted arrests for “inciting ethnic hatred.” I think there were just too many supporters, and while I lack solid references, I've heard stories of Kurds in or near Diyarbakir that did the

same kind of civil disobedience by praying in mosque parking lots. Let them do it in Dağkapı out in the open where you can see and hear everything that goes on.

Despite the realities of cultural push-back on the ground, the Turkish government persists. In a series of interviews published by Al-Monitor, a Turkish Imam said,

I get paid by the Diyanet, and I have good benefits and a retirement plan. Yet here I am in a small town in Diyarbakir province. Most of the congregation here is Shafi [most people in Turkey belong to the Hanafi sect so the Diyanet teaches Hanafi school of Islam]. They do not pray with me. They come to the mosque and they are nice and respectful but they don't want me as their imam. I had high hopes becoming an imam to reach out to the community and help people. Now I am stuck with a community who sees me as alien. (Kreeft, 2015)

#### *PKK & Kurdish Islam*

While there is ample evidence of the political rift between anti-religious PKK members and religious Kurds, it's worth noting that it isn't *always* that way. Going back to Istanbul, the PKK/YDG-H tags throughout my area of Beyoğlu were not the only ethno-social indicators. Along many of these same streets were Alevi street art.<sup>133</sup> The only defacing of these tags is done by the city authorities who wash them off, and I never saw one that was scratched out and replaced with the other. This, as well as every conversation I've had in Istanbul, indicates that there wasn't rivalry between those two icons – at least not in Istanbul.<sup>134</sup>

Another marker of the near impossibility of forcing through the Diyanet's vision of Turkish Islam are the "little traditions." While not as actively counter-Turkish as the Civil Friday Prayer, it is still in contravention with official lines. Due to my limited social circle, evenings on the weekend were a blank space for me. Many of my friends from school were either

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<sup>133</sup> To my great frustration, I've lost or deleted the pictures I took of these. Almost every one of them were simply the bifurcated sword of Ali, which in this context could only mean Alevism.

<sup>134</sup> The not-uncommon Marxist streak within Alevi academics probably greases the points of natural friction between these two movements. See Köse, 2012.

conservative Muslim women with whom I had no outside contact,<sup>135</sup> and all the men were big in the club scene. Perhaps I missed some informative interactions there, but I simply felt too awkward playing the false bachelor.

On one such evening, I was watching a movie and my entertainment reverie was interrupted by a really loud Quran recitation going on nearby. Recognizing that not getting out and investigating it would be something of a travesty for me, I got out and did exactly that. I thought it was going to be at the nearest mosque, but the loudspeaker led to me a side street where I found about thirty people, mostly women and children, sitting outside in a large circle of plastic chairs, listening to someone broadcasting from a different location. There were four or five grown men there, two of whom had very significant physical handicaps. My presence was noticed, as there was enough light to make out my face – which is quite notably non-Turkish – but they treated me like everyone else. Near the end, they switched from Quranic recitation to a short speech in Turkish, which I understood less of. The younger girls then got up to pass around a bottle of rosewater, which we used to anoint our hands, and then our faces.

When the speech was over, the girls then passed out sweets. With that opening, I started talking with Ufut, an elderly man in a wheelchair, Sadat, a middle-aged man whose few

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<sup>135</sup> Our small class had a trio of Syrian girls, one of whom was quite pregnant and unmarried. The others acted as a kind of entourage. Publicly, the trio denied any insinuation that one of their number could possibly be pregnant out of wedlock, much less moving with the pained, eight-months along gate that I knew too well from my own wife's experience. The only time they released their death-grip on their farce was when our instructor asked after her.

"She and the baby alright?"

"Yes."

"The birth went well? Both healthy?"

"Yes."

"Boy or a girl."

"Boy."

"*Tabrik ederiz.*" Congratulations.

After this exchange, the vow of silence returned.

I felt terribly for this girl. Pregnancy and motherhood are hard enough without the child's existence conflicting with one's cultural proprieties *and* being a refugee from Hallab, a war-zone. As for the father, I simply hope for everyone's sake that the child's conception was a consensual romance and not a more traumatic alternative.

remaining teeth were stained yellow with nicotine, and a number of children. They were quite surprised – and gracious – about having a Christian American in their midst. We talked about what I was here doing, about my family, warned me about thieves that would take my phone, and told me a little about what they were doing. They were observing a *mevlet*, a word which I had not hear before, but quickly connected the cognate dots to realize it was a *mawlid*, the birthday of a saint.

I asked them who the *mevlet* was for. None of them knew. There was a *mevlet*, so they gathered for it.<sup>136</sup>

Looking back on it from the perspective of ethno-nationalism, I have no idea who there was Turkish and who was Kurdish. Nor would it have been an appropriate to ask. Beyond Turkish as the lingua franca, the gathering was authentic communal worship wherein political trappings had no place.

#### *Eyüp Sultan Shrine*

On another aimless weekend evening, I made my way to İstiklal to purchase some halva. Not long into my foray into a sweets shop, the Turkish owner and his Syrian assistant engaged me in conversation. Given that this took place right before Ramadan, religion was on their minds, and my being an American led to the topic of my being Christian. In what I swiftly found to be their opening lines in an attempt at converting me, they began to talk about Eyüp Sultan. “There,” the owner told me in Turkish, “you will see the people pray. And you yourself will get an answer in a dream.”

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<sup>136</sup> The blurriness of origins and details regarding *mevlets*, shrines, sacred springs, and other ‘little tradition’ rituals and locations is common throughout the Islamic world. See Ali Köse (2015) for more examples of the psychological ordering of importance with regard to religious practices in Turkish Sufism.

My inner anthropologist was bouncing up and down at this completely unbidden, local perspective on conversion. My inner-missionary was dissecting the dynamics of the situation and the body language involved.

They were quite pleased that I did not drink alcohol but baffled by my prohibition against tea.

“You must come back during Ramadan, and we will have *iftar* together. We will drink tea and eat.”

I agreed, as they were pleasant company and this was, after all, what I was here for.

"You have a good face - you will be a Muslim!" he exclaimed as he held my shoulder and patted my cheek.

As I departed, the Syrian assistant followed me out.

"Did you understand?" he asked me in Arabic. He then proceeded to retell me the highlights of what the owner had already said. I thanked him, and as I was about to leave, he said, in a voice his boss could not hear,

“Some of what he said.. they don’t understand Islam the same way here.”

Before I could ask him to clarify exactly which part of all that he disagreed with, he headed back into the shop to help other customers.

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As I mentioned at the beginning of this writing, one of my initial plans was to use the Eyüp Sultan shrine complex as the base of my dissertation subject.

I came, I saw, I left.

It is beautiful and full of great research topics – but only a few of those can be successfully pursued by a male researcher. Part of the massive disparity between male and female shrine visitation lies in the nature of Islamic social spaces. Köse notes that mosques are



considered male spaces, a claim I'd extend to every mosque I've ever been to in the Middle East. Shrines are essentially dual purpose – they are a source of divine connection and a place for like-minded association (2015: 145). Unlike mosques, there are few – if any – restrictions on movement in the shrine's environs. Women can go for their own spiritual needs as well as enjoy a protected space where they can socialize with other women.

For my purposes, the most important fact regarding the shrine is that Erdoğan visits and prays there after significant political events, such as his becoming president and the change to an executive system. Beyond the popular appeal that this offers, it was a practice of the Ottoman sultans to offer a prayer of gratitude at the shrine after their enthronement (“According to Ottoman Tradition, Erdogan Visited Istanbul’s Eyüp Sultan Mosque,” ARMedia, 2017; “Erdoğan Eyüp Sultan Türbesi’ni Ziyaret Etti,” Haberler.com, 2018).

#### *Turkey, Da'ish, and the YPG*

If you follow the thread of state-sponsored Islamic practices in Turkey, you'll inevitably run into the question of how it deals with the many iterations of militant Islamism active in the region, particularly Da'ish. Due to the geography and demographics involved, this runs directly through the question of Kurdish Nationalism and Islam. For all intents and purposes, alignment of state and sub-state actors is governed primarily by political exigency, not theology or sect. The main states involved are France, Germany, Great Britain, Iran, Iraq, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Qatar, the UAE, the US. Peripherally involved are Armenia, Chechnya, China, Egypt, India, Israel, Lebanon, and Yemen. The list of primary and periphery sub-state actors is much longer, and tracking and analysis of all those fluctuating relationships is simply too much to attempt here. For now, I'll simply focus on Da'ish as they are the chief Islamist group claiming territory within Kurdistan.

Ostensibly, Turkey is opposed to Da'ish and al-Qaeda. The facts lean toward a far more nuanced, problematic relationship, the crux of which is the Syrian Civil War and Kurdish militants. In 2003, Erdoğan and Assad had an extremely amicable relationship that existed along with commercial interests. In 2005, there was a free-trade agreement and visa-free zone between the two – a situation that is unimaginable now (Alam, 2018). The cooperation between the two countries gave the PKK no quarter, forcing them into a position of increased acquiescence. The civil war flipped all of that on its head. For as much as Turkey has placed itself in the same orbit as Russia and Iran, it actively worked against Assad – who was a Russo-Iranian client. So poor were Syrian-Turkish relations that for a time the AKP seemed to be working toward a reproachment with the Kurds in the northern cantons of Syria (“PYD Leader Arrives in Turkey for Two-Day Talks: Report,” Hürriyet Daily News, 2013).

When I was considering moving down to Adana to finish my last month out there, a friend of mine in that area told me I ought to reconsider.

“There are ISIS guys basically out in the open. They [the Turkish authorities] don’t do anything about it.”

I have no reason to disbelieve my friend, a local from Adana. In October 2014, US vice-president Joe Biden, in his characteristically unfiltered way, said,

The Turks are great friends... what were they doing? They [Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar] were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war. What did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad. Except that the people who were being supplied were al-Nusra and al-Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world... all of a sudden, everyone’s awakened because [ISIS]... found open space and territory in eastern Syria, work with al-Nusra... and we could not convince our colleagues to stop supplying them... [but] all of a sudden... what do we have for the first time?... the Turks, President Erdoğan told me

– he’s an old friend – said, “you were right, we let too many people through,” now they’re trying to seal their border. (Cockburn, 2016)

Many journalists and politicians have also voiced their opinion that the AKP has had some kind of deal with elements of Da’ish.



*Figure 9 - Some are less subtle in their critique of Erdoğan’s proximity to Da’esh than others. This specimen is from a Tweet by Dutch cartoonist Ruben L. Oppenheimer. Also see Belgers, 2017*

The exact nature of the relationship between Erdoğan’s government and jihadists (particularly Da’ish) is difficult to nail down. On the one hand, there are some extremely obvious indicators of enablement. The first of these was a large number of imprisoned jihadists that were given amnesty after Erdoğan was elected in 2003. Many of them have since resumed procuring supplies and funnelling money to their respective organizations from Turkish soil. One of their most successful strategies for maintaining government protection is forming religious charities to indoctrinate and radicalize Turkish youth (“Al-Qaeda and ISIL Outfits Operate in Turkey Under Charity Cover,” NordicMonitor, 2018).

In 2013, more than 30,000 militants entered Syria through Turkey, forming what came to be known as the “jihadi highway,” (Yayla and Clarke, 2018). Fighters, including al-Baghdadi himself, received free hospital treatment in Turkey. A Da’ish commander captured in northern Syria mid-2018 stated that both the Syrian and Turkish governments had been purchasing oil

from them for at least three years (Shekhani, 2018). Additional confirmation of the Turkish-Russian oil relationship comes from Russia's defense ministry, which asserted that the transactions were taking place on an industrial scale (Taub, 2015).<sup>137</sup> In late 2015, Erdoğan's son-in-law was appointed minister of energy and natural resources, thereby adding another layer of diffusion to a situation already obscured from foreign scrutiny.

In contradiction to all of this are reports of police cracking down on such illegal transportation rackets. The Turkish government did, for a short time, shut down the 'Jihadi highway' in August 2015 (Amos, 2014; Yayla and Clarke, 2018). The terror attacks in that ensued shortly thereafter demonstrated an important aspect of the relationships existing between the jihadists and Erdoğan – namely, they are as fluid and paradoxical as the situation requires.

“It's the economy, stupid”

In November 2015, the Turkish airforce shot down a Russian fighter jet, precipitating a crisis between the two countries. Part of this was economic and very obvious on the ground. “This place used to be full of Russians. Many, many Russian tourists,” a cab driver told me one day.

“But now,” he said, waving resignedly at the street in front of us, “it's just Turks and Arabs. No Americans either.”

Other vendors and workers confirmed the cabbie's sentiments, many elaborating on the fact that even with more Arabs coming, there were simply fewer people. Even more ubiquitous to my route than the street walkers were newspaper stands. It seemed like at least one of the major publications had some front-page story or other dealing with Turkey's problems with

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<sup>137</sup> The US State Department denied these allegations, instead asserting that the oil was sold through middlemen who then sell it elsewhere. In either case, the oil is still being bought and used by Turks, and 'someone' (or a lot of 'someones') is/are not being overly discriminating over the oil's origin.

attracting tourists (i.e. Bayer, 2016). Despite the “zero problems with neighbors” policy, it’s neighbors’ problems were deeply affecting the bottom-line for Turks throughout the country.<sup>138</sup> While violence in the eastern territories were quite bloody, it was the attacks in Istanbul that really made an impact.

Between January and March 2016, fourteen people were killed in two suicide bomb attacks in Istanbul (“Turkey’s Terrorism Attack Timeline,” Euronews, 2016). In situations outside of Turkey, Da’ish claims responsibility within a matter of a day or two after a strike. In this case, they were only ‘suspected,’ but it wasn’t the the urban terror wing of the PKK, the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (*Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan* – TAK). This was punishment for Turkey shutting down the Jihadi pipeline.

The largest retaliatory attack by Da’esh was on June 28 at the Atatürk Airport. They had rolled up in vehicles and attacked the crowded entrance with small arms and grenades. Forty-one people died and 239 people were injured. Less than two months prior, I had been going out those same doors in the International Arrivals, excited despite the jet-lag. I wonder how many people were just like me, coming to this great city to start a major phase in their lives, only their journey took an abrupt turn for the worst. One of my professors here at Indiana University left from that airport only an hour or two before the attack. Coming in such close contact to catastrophe is an emotionally confusing experience, and unfortunately for me, it wasn’t the last or the closest it would get.

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<sup>138</sup> I visited Kapadokya in July and saw only a handful of Occidentals touring. Some people were rather shocked to see me, a lone American travelling on a rented motorcycle across the Anatolian plateau to visit the Hacı Bektaşî Turbesi (Hajji Bektashi’s tomb/shrine complex).

TAK

On June 7, I was in class when the news came in. It was one of the Arab students that pointed it out, and soon enough there was a somber, numb feel to the whole institute. My teacher seemed to deflate. Across the bridge from Beyoğlu in Beyazıt there was an explosion that killed eleven people, seven of them policemen. The attack was on one of the two routes I walked to get to Kurdish class. I took that route the next day.

The cars took the brunt of the explosion, but it knocked the glass out of the buildings for a full block. Many of the blown-out buildings were covered in a massive Turkish flag and lined with flowers.

Apparently, this attack came on the tail of some 400 people getting arrested on terrorism charges near Diyarbakir. It didn't take long to find out that the TAK, the Kurdish Freedom Hawks, was responsible.



*Figure 10 – A view into one of the affected buildings; Hoş Geldiniz - "Welcome"*

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of this attack came as I frequented that route over the ensuing weeks. At first, there were only a few people still working out of what remained of their workplaces, like hermit crabs refusing to crawl out of a broken shell. They simply continued to cut hair or sell their stringed instruments or shoes – after they cleared out enough of the glass, that is. On one particular occasion, several of the store owners were gathered on the street in front of their shops. They were all speaking *Kurdish*.

The TAK might have been targeting Turkish law enforcement, but they did so with something between zero consideration and absolute contempt for their fellow Kurds. I don't know if the TAK regarded these people as acceptable collateral damage or justly punished for being 'collaborators.'<sup>139</sup> Collaboration in this case meaning that they paid their rent, their taxes, and kept their heads down. Those Kurdish civilians working to salvage their livelihoods amidst the broken glass, charred metal, and flash-fried human detritus told me more about the situation than any manifesto.

#### PKK 2000-present

In a series of shrewd moves, the Turkish government tried Öcalan, gave him the death penalty, then abolished the death penalty throughout the country in 2002. They then transferred Öcalan from death row to his own personal Elba on İmralı Island in the Sea of Marmara, not far from Bursa. It satisfied those Turks that want to see a murderer and rebel held accountable for his actions, then avoided further incensing the Kurds and kept the EU application viable.<sup>140</sup> For

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<sup>139</sup> At least one of the culprits was from Diyarbakir, and if her compatriots were also from outside of Istanbul, the fact that they hurt so many fellow Kurds may well have been an unknown by-product (“[TAK, Investigators Announce the Name of the Attacker: 32 Year-Old Eylem Yaşa],” Diken, 2016). It still begs the question of the foreknowledge of whoever orchestrated the attack.

<sup>140</sup> ‘Viable’ being a generous word given the intransigence of the Cypriots, French, and Turks regarding the issue of northern Cyprus.

these reasons alone he was more valuable alive than dead. Add to this the fact that he had no real successor as *serok*,<sup>141</sup> and the Turkish government could keep the PKK's single-most authoritative voice under its thumb. Unsurprisingly, issuances post-2002 have been markedly conciliatory, all a far cry from the violent Marxist-Leninism that had driven the machine for more than two decades.

Since that time, the PKK has been engaged in on-again, off-again unilateral cease-fires followed by violent ruptures which spiral into increased military activity on both sides. Three items stand out in this period. The first was the significant presence of moves toward rectifying the Turkish-PKK situation through constitutional and social reforms. While journalists had been arrested as late as 2009 for publishing details from a survivor of the Dêrsim massacre, in 2013 Erdoğan was apologizing publicly for the events of 1937-38.<sup>142</sup>

The second item was the question of Öcalan's continuing importance in the peace process. With the exception of military activities, much of the PKK's business is conducted by smaller groups under larger umbrella organizations in Western Europe, Canada, the US, and Australia (White, 2015: 89-97).<sup>143</sup> Between genuine disagreements within PKK militia branches leading to activities uncondoned by the public leadership and false-flag attacks perpetrated by Turkish ultra-nationalists intent on preempting dissolution of the state,<sup>144</sup> it is impossible to tell

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<sup>141</sup> *Serok* means "leader" or "president," but in relation to the PKK it can only mean Apo. Öcalan's single-minded consolidation of power in himself handicapped the leadership structure. For as democratic as it claims to be, it's painfully obvious that Öcalan never had any interest in fostering succession processes. As such, Apo's charismatic authoritarianism went with him to İmralı.

<sup>142</sup> The timing of this apology was conspicuous given his family's involvement in a corruption investigation instigated by the Gülenists. When combined with his administration's vulnerability and the AKP purges of Gülenists in the judiciary and military, attempts at winning over as many Kurds as was possible was a logical strategy.

<sup>143</sup> A great deal of money has gone into propaganda via satellite stations broadcasting the 'PKK as freedom fighter' essentialized identity.

<sup>144</sup> Çatlı may have died in a car crash, but there are always men like him to be found in this particular conflict. Furthermore, it's obvious that PKK sympathizers know many of the front-groups engaged in this kind of work; in 2012, groups of Kurds in several major European capitals destroyed the offices of the Zaman magazine, which was



exactly how much of a break-down in leadership exists. Some of this confusion is reflected in Apo's attitude as reflected in his public statements. In 2011, he said, "Both parties use me for their own interests... I am ending this intermediary role... there can be no peace talks under current conditions," (White, 2015: 69). Two years later, he declared that the time for armed struggle had ended, and every attempt at peace since then has had his involvement.

The third item – which is the most obvious from an on-the-ground perspective – is the hazy, grey line for delineating 'support for terrorism.' There is the censorship situation, and others have written more extensively on this elsewhere (see "Turkey's Press Freedom Crisis: The Dark Days of Jailing Journalists and Criminalizing Dissent," CPJ, 2012; "Silencing Turkey's Media: The Government's Deepening Assault on Critical Journalism," Human Rights Watch, 2016). Both of these reports concurred on the point that writing on Kurdish issues puts journalists at high risk of being arrested for "crimes against the state."

While in Iraq, I made friends with a Kurdish émigré based in France. She was conducting field research for a master's at the University of Paris. Prior to starting her program, she worked as a journalist. In that position, she wrote a few articles that were critical of Erdoğan and the AKP policies with regard to eastern Turkey. This resulted in her being indefinitely banned from travelling to Turkish Kurdistan. She hasn't seen her family for two years and the only way she'll see them is if they get the money and documentation required for tourist visas. All things considered, she got off quite lightly.

Within Istanbul, finding Kurds willing to talk about the living situation in the smaller cities and villages in southeastern Turkey is difficult. Cross the border into Zakho, Iraq, and they immediately have something to say. Inevitably, it is the same story – they don't know the

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closely tied to the Hizmet movement ("Turkey's Press Freedom Crisis: The Dark Days of Jailing Journalists and Criminalizing Dissent," CPJ, 2012).

fighters, but they know (or are) the people whose homes were destroyed when the Turkish army came to flush them out. The homeless have been promised reparations, specifically that their house will get rebuilt, but in the words of person I spoke with,

“They say they will rebuild your house. But how many houses do they have to build before your house? It takes years, and you have no house.”

So, they move in with family or somewhere they might find work in an area where steady employment is already stretched thin. In the years before Da<sup>c</sup>ish, that sometimes meant crossing the border into Iraq.

#### *Kurdish Islamism in Turkey – Kurdish Hezbollah & Hüda-Par*

The electoral thresholds discount any party that receives less than 10% of the vote, effectively marginalizing radical groups that weren't already ejected from the system. The AKP has worked hard to capitalize on minor linguistic concessions, assimilated Kurds, and religious appeals in picking up as many of the side-lined Kurds as possible. Beyond the aforementioned Kurdish on TRT, this included items such as founding a center for Kurdish language and culture in Mardin Artuklu University accompanied by the rescission of the ban on non-Turkish letters as part of the “democratic package” in 2013 (Çicek, 2016: 159; Keres, 2013: 53).<sup>145</sup> During a speech in 2015, Erdoğan named every high position in the Turkish government that has at one point been occupied by a Kurd, then proceeded to ask,

[My friends, what is the Kurdish question?... *In the name of Allah, what difference is there between us? We have everything. We build an airport, businessmen and contractors spark the*

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<sup>145</sup> The only letters in Kurmanji that aren't in Turkish are ê, î, î, î, q, ř, û, and x. The only Turkish letter not used in any Kurmanji alphabet is ğ, though ü and ö are rare.

machines. What do you spark? You want a movement, huh?]<sup>146</sup> (Cihan Haber Ajansı, 2015; emphasis added).

The Islamic perspective is divided. There are the Statist Islamists, like the Gülenists, that would ignore the question of ethnicity altogether and the Islamists who recognize ethnicity issues, both stressing Islamic solidarity (*ümmetçilik*)<sup>147</sup> – with a hearty dose of “reverse Occidentalism against the Western ‘other’ (Houston, 2001: 196) – as the answer.<sup>148</sup> Then there are the Kurdish Islamists, who exist as a “powerful adversary” to the non-gendered, Marxist social imaginings of the PKK (Çiçek, 2016).

The Kurdish Hizbullah<sup>149</sup> was established in Batman in the violent years preceding the 1980 coup. While technically unconnected to the Lebanese organization of the same name, there is something to be said of the immense swell in militant Islamism in that period, two of the most notable examples being the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981 by Egyptian Brotherhood in Egypt. In the decade after the coup, Hizbullah committed to a violent, consolidating purge of competing Islamists in eastern Turkey (Kurt, 2015: 16). Similar to the PKK, leadership coalesced in a single person. In this case, it was Hüseyin Veliöğlu. The

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<sup>146</sup> Any Turk using *Allah* and not *Tanrı* is specifically referencing the Islamic understanding of God. The full text goes, “*Allah aşkına bizden farklı neyiniz var? Her şeye sahiptir. Havaalamı yapıyoruz, işadamlarının, müteahhitlerin makinelerini yakıyorlar. Niye yakıyorsun? Hani hizmet istiyordun?*”

<sup>147</sup> Mehmet Göktaş, Turkish editor of an allegedly Hizbullah-oriented newspaper, said, “...when you dig a bit below the surface of even the most radical Turkish Islamist, you find Turkish nationalism. I don’t mean the *ülküçüler* (Idealists). Islamists are like that. When I speak, they say to me ‘perhaps you shouldn’t use the word *Kurdistan*’. They get upset by Kurdish hymns (*ilahi*) and Kurdish tunes... I believe Turkish Islamists have been greatly affected by racism. It is the poison of Kemalism... Attach a Turk to a polygraph and speak the words Arabia, Turkistan, Turkmenistan, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan to them. As soon as you say *Kurdistan*, the machine will show a change. Turks are prejudiced in this regard” (Kurt, 2015: 105).

<sup>148</sup> It is perhaps more accurate to say that Statist Islamists and Islamists within the Turkish context have conflated simply uniting under Islamic guidelines with acceptance of the current ethnic-power dynamic. The counter argument from a member of either of these would be that following the edicts of Islam and avoiding *fitna* would clear these issues up.

<sup>149</sup> Between purges and general paranoia within the group, the best information on Hizbullah only comes from a small, handful of sources. Mehmet Kurt’s *Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey* is by far the best work available on the subject.

name ‘Hizbullah’ came from a nickname, as it was originally called the Community of Islamic Scholars, or simply the Cemaat.<sup>150</sup> Based on early accounts, Hizbullah was seeking an Islamic revolution in Turkey similar to that in Iran.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Iranian governments have harbored and aided multiple, select Kurdish rebel groups. However, Hizbullah is – to the best of my knowledge – the first Kurdish Islamist organization that has been funded and trained by the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>151</sup> Initially, Hizbullah had a strong relationship with the Iranian Foreign Affairs Office; several years in, that relationship collapsed as it became apparent that the Iranians were primarily looking to convert the members to Shi’ism and use them against Sunni regimes (Kurt, 2015: 25). Furthermore, Iran was also working with some of Hizbullah’s Kurdish Islamist rivals.

Hizbullah recruitment took place primarily in schools and compliant mosques<sup>152</sup> in Diyarbakir, and these efforts were boosted by the migration of many eastern families to larger cities further west. In some respects, they resembled their Kurdish adversaries rather than non-Kurdish, ultra-conservative Islamists. They wore the traditional Kurdish şelvar (as opposed to conservative Islamic dress or contemporary Turkish styles) and put a lot of effort into disseminating their message with cassette tapes of pro-Hizbullah music. In others, Hizbullah differed very little from other Islamist groups. They preached pan-Islamism but had highly

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<sup>150</sup> *Hizb Allah* – party of God – is a term from the Quran (58:22), and its modern use is akin to the extemporization and politicization of *ummah*.

<sup>151</sup> Two notes on this one. First, Hizbullah is a *Kurdish* Islamist organization insofar as it was composed almost entirely of Kurds. While Hûda-Par’s platform focuses on Kurdish issues, Hizbullah is not centered on Kurdish nationalism as much as establishing a regime run by sharia in Kurdistan. This made them far more useful to Iran. Second, the involvement of Iran in Kurdish Islamic groups has left a lasting mark in the popular Kurdish imagination. For examples of how tainted Islamist issues are by Iranian relations in the eyes of many Kurds, see pp.360-362.

<sup>152</sup> Hizbullah members threatened non-compliant mosques with violence, so ‘compliance’ in this case is not necessarily the same thing as acceptance.

localized goals. Hizballahi youths patrolled their regions acting as morality police, beating others into compliance and even throwing acid on the faces of women they deemed improper (Kurt, 2015: 27). Martyrdom, *tabliğ* (preaching), and punishing *mürtet* (apostasy from Islam) were central tenants of their cosmology and teleology (126).<sup>153</sup>

The violence Hizballahis employed brought them into conflict with the much larger PKK. Because of the overlapping military actions of the PKK, Turkish official troops, ‘deep state’ apparatuses, etc., it’s difficult to parse out precisely how many people died between 1991-95 because of Hizballah-PKK tensions. Once again, the Turkish central government showed its preferences by turning a blind eye to Hizballah activities so long as they were engaged in the fight against the PKK. For the violence that they acknowledge, Hizballah members claim self-defense; for the rest they cry ‘infiltration!’ and blame the Turkish government. While it is difficult to prove, there’s a strong likelihood that there was some kind of communication between Hizballah and agents of the Turkish government with respect to the PKK conflict. That is, in any case, the prevalent belief among the PKK (Kurt, 2015: 90-91).

Like the PKK, Hizballah was also very brutal in keeping its members in line. While they never acted on any of the intelligence gathered, they also sent some of their number into the military and civil service to act as spies. As the heavy violence of the 1990’s reached a lull, the government decided it would no longer tolerate Hizballah. Velioglu fled. In 1998, Turkey sent an extradition request to Iran, which responded by denying any connection to “any group hostile to Turkey,” (“Iran Rejects Alleged Presence of Turkish Hezbollah Leader in Iran,” Tehran Times, 1998). Velioglu was killed by Turkish forces during Operation Beykoz on January 17, 2000.

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<sup>153</sup> Hizballah greatly expanded its understanding of self through quasi-historical novels and books written by their members, which taken in their total clearly delineate the ungodly ‘Other’ from their own righteous ranks.

During this raid, the whole of Hizbullah's archives were seized, effectively exposing every cell and every planted informant the organization had. The authorities arrested the most important members, and the organization collapsed.<sup>154</sup> The personal accounts in Kurt's ethnography taken from former-Hizbullah members all illustrate not only how bitter and humiliating this defeat was, but also the paranoia of the government's eye – or that of ultranationalists – falling on them in their post-Hizbullah lives. It's a combination of the same flavor of paranoia following the 1980 coup, what I saw after the 2016 coup attempt, and accounts given by former-cult members.

In 2004, members of the former-Hizbullah formed the Mustazaf<sup>155</sup> organization and pressed fully into the realm of socio-political activism. In 2012, Huda-Par came into being, its platform centering solely on the Kurdish issue from an anti-Kemalist, pro-Islamic unity perspective. The Salafi-oriented members of Hizbullah have left Huda-Par and made their way into the ranks of Jabhat al-Nusra and Da'ish in Syria. As such, they became actively engaged in fighting fellow Kurds, labelling them tafir. Despite this seeming shift in methods and membership, former-members and Turkish officials believe that little has changed. "Hizbullah is "alive" and has made "a comeback with Huda-Par", [said] Yilmaz Arslan, Batman's governor. "Iran is using them to undermine Turkey and the peace process," he [added]," ("Huda-Par's Emergence," The Economist, 2013).

Kurdish Hizbullah was/is relatively small when compared to the PKK or the constituency of the AKP. What makes the PKK-Hizbullah conflict so important is the divide in their perceived histories. Particularly, the strategic emphasis on who and what they as Kurds were and therefore

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<sup>154</sup> Its members were all trained to some extent in counter-interrogation but losing the archives and its leader were a crippling combination.

<sup>155</sup> From the Arabic *muṣṭadhaf* – the oppressed, which in the writings of Iranian Ali Sheriati came to be the Islamic equivalent of the proletariat (Kurt: 41-42).

are. It is as much a battle over their collective memory, which encapsulates their intellectual, spiritual, and physical inheritances. Beyond its application in the Hizbullah-PKK case, this divide exists across the whole of Kurdistan.

#### *Free Food PKK*

After about six every evening, the food cart vendors start to show up in force. Looking for a quick meal that wouldn't involve being given bread I couldn't eat, I sidled up to one. The three most popular varieties of food cart outside of İstiklal are fried oysters, fruit and veggies in a tray, or simple chicken with chick peas and rice. This was one of the latter. I had nowhere to go that evening, so I made small talk with the vendors. Both of them were probably younger than me, though their beards made them look older.

Given my location and their generation's attitudes, I didn't think I'd get a harsh response if I mentioned that I was studying Kurdish.

Immediately, the cart's owner switched from Turkish to Kurdish and asked, "Do you know the PKK?"

No volume change in his voice, no hesitation in his question. He didn't seem the least concerned about what he'd just said.

"Uh, yes, I know about them," I replied. I'd gotten in conversations about whether or not there had been an Armenian genocide but had thus far avoided real conversations about the PKK. Had they pressed me on it, I would have dodged a direct answer by saying that 'terrorism' is a subjective political label that has lost its utility through overuse<sup>156</sup> (though my wording in Kurdish would have been *far* more simplified) and that what is really being asked is whether or

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<sup>156</sup> My graduate advisor used to half-joke that terrorists were people who had bombs but no air force. I've thought a lot about that since first hearing it, and it's honestly a better definition than the one implied in ninety-percent of journalism.

not someone agrees with the motivation and methods of a given group. Fortunately, they didn't ask. They just smiled at me and said that my meal was free because I was an American student of Kurdish who knew about the PKK. Sure, it was only a five-lira dinner, but times being what they were, it was a meaningful gesture.

*PKK antagonism towards Islam and Islamic practices*

The issue of religion and secularity has increasingly been a source of division since the Syrian Civil War. Up until the conflict with Hizbullah, Apo regarded Islam as being under the guise of authentic Kurdishness but is in reality a Trojan horse run by the Ottomans and then the Turks (Yildiz, 2016). The advent of Hizbullah within Kurdistan marked a shift in the rhetoric, stressing the need to work around the deep-seededness of Islam within many aspects of Kurdish culture. Apo's writings began to essentialize 'true' Islam as being an anti-imperialist, radical force of change (therefore conducive to the spirit of the PKK) led by Muhammed and then Ali. The HDP, the current legal embodiment of Kurdish nationalist sentiments, has also tried to incorporate more Islamic elements into their presentation (Çevik, 2016).

The vast majority of writers who have commented on this shift have been Turks, and most of them have a particularly jaundiced eye regarding the PKK's motivations and sincerity. The proof of their suspicions comes from Syria, where the rhetoric falls apart and PKK/YPG members regularly harrass and denigrate Kurdish Islamic practices ("PKK/PYD Terrorists Shut Down 64 Mosques in Syria's Afrin," Yeni Şafak, 2017). While I don't believe the majority of Turkish journalism to be objective on Kurdish issues, I have yet to see anything that negates the claims of Kurdish Muslims whom the PKK/YPG treats with contempt. From a real politik perspective, whether or not the PKK and the HDP genuinely wish to see Kurds carve out their own national space within the Islamic idiom is irrelevant; that they or any of their members get



caught acting outside of that mandate is extremely relevant. As such, efforts at coopting Kurdish Muslim sentiments have been met with limited success, leaving the field open for the scattering of smaller parties that don't pass the electoral threshold and Hüda-Par. Most, however, gravitate toward the AKP.

#### Erdoğan and Gülen from 1999-2016 – Political Mafia vs. “Deep State”

Born in 1941, Fethullah Gülen spent the first half of his life as an imam in Turkey. During the 1960's, he expanded his ministry through education and charitable work. In the following twenty years, he became the leader of the Naqshbandi Nurcu offshoot, the Fethullacılar (followers of Fethullah; Taspinar, 2005: 144), also called Hizmet.<sup>157</sup> Hizmet set up schools throughout the world, which up until the 2016 coup had a degree of prestige.<sup>158</sup> Where the leftist parties picked up support in the 70's and 80's, the Islamist and Turko-Islamic synthesis movements picked up in the 90's (Taspinar, 2005: 144-148). Less than two years after the 1997 “soft coup,” Gülen went to America to pursue treatment for a heart condition at the Mayo Clinic. Shortly after his departure, “a prosecutor” – namely Ankara State Security Court (DGM) Prosecutor Yüksel – opened a case against him (Siegel, 2017). The impetus for this case – which sentenced him in absentia for trying to undermine the government (Sanderson, 2018) – was a particular sermon he gave that was leaked in 1999,

You must move in the arteries of the system without anyone noticing your existence until you reach all the power centers ... until the conditions are ripe, they (the followers) must continue like this. If they do something prematurely, the world will crush our heads, and Muslims will suffer everywhere. (...) You must wait until such time as you have gotten all the state power (...) Until

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<sup>157</sup> The Ottoman phonologic modification of the Arabic *khidma* (service).

<sup>158</sup> According to multiple sources I've spoken to, these schools were known for two things – first, they did involve Quranic classes. Second – they weren't subject to the same kind of bribery that was rampant in most every other school in the regions they were in.

that time, any step taken would be too early -- like breaking an egg without waiting the full 40 days for it to hatch. It would be like killing the chick inside. (Popp, 2012)

What follows from here are mixed reports and claims that can neither be confirmed nor denied by those that side with Erdoğan and those that side with Gülen. Like those who criticize Erdoğan, openly sympathize with or dig too deeply<sup>159</sup> into Kurdish issues, anyone in Turkey who digs too deeply into the relationship between Gülen and Erdoğan will incur legal action and detention. Ahmet Sık, an investigative journalist, was jailed for a year for writing The Imam's Army, which delved into exactly this subject (Sanderson, 2018).<sup>160</sup>

When the AKP took power in 2002, it did so in concert with the Gülenists. Alumni of Hizmet schools took jobs throughout the judiciary and security apparatuses. According to reports, it was simply by chance that in 2007 security forces found information that members of the military and judiciary were in league in an attempt to take the AKP from power. In that same year, the charges against Gülen were dropped<sup>161</sup> and the Ergenekon investigation began (Taşpınar, 2016). It was around this same time that Gülen claimed Erdoğan made overtures to include his personalized propaganda within the Hizmet curriculum.

The story gets even more wrinkles in it when in 2009, Apo publicly attempted to work with the Gülenists. According to an article posted on Fethullah Gülen's official website, these overtures failed because,

If we communicate with the PKK, the groups, including *the deep state, who hates us more than they hate the PKK*, would use this to throw mud at us, if not terrorize the movement. Gülen

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<sup>159</sup> These amount to the same thing.

<sup>160</sup> He was charged for being a member of the Ergenekon gang and anyone possessing any copy of the book would be charged with the same (Jenkins, 2011). Of the more interesting claims made in the book is that the Gülenists were working in tandem with the 1980 junta.

<sup>161</sup> The name for this was Operation Sledgehammer, and it has enough irregularities in the evidence that put the veracity of the entire investigation into question (Filkins, 2016; Taşpınar, 2016). It's also impossible to say if there's any relationship between the charges against Gülen being dropped and the discovery of the nascent coup attempt.

followers strongly deny any rapprochement from their side because they are very sensitive about being portrayed as being close to any illegal, criminal or terrorist organization in any part of the world. They told me that what they do around the world is promote education and transform the society from within, which requires being extra careful to obey rules and not get involved in any wrongdoing. Thus, Gülen followers think that any rapprochement with pro-PKK politicians would harm them in the long run and on the global scale. (Uslu, 2010; emphasis added)

During the 2011-2015 period, there are credible allegations that elements of the deep state actively sought to derail the peace process with the PKK (White, 2015: 112). This included assassinations of Kurdish political figures outside of Turkey who incensed Kurds both in Turkey and Europe. Despite Hizmet's strong support for the AKP in the 2011 elections, they pitched in with the effort against Erdoğan's Democratic Opening. Arrests and cases related to the Ergenekon Investigation started getting rolled back and rescinded.

In 2013, the judiciary and police launched a massive bribery investigation into a large number of Turkish elites, including Erdoğan and his family, as related to a gold-smuggling operation run by Reza Zarrab (see pp.440-441 for more on Zarrab). There is strong evidence that the Gülenists were behind this operation (Siegel, 2016; Taşpınar, 2016). With Erdoğan's overtures for rapprochement with PKK sympathizers, the timing of this massive scandal was conspicuous to say the least. Erdoğan responded with claims that the Gülenists were the backbone of a "parallel state" (*paralel devlet*; Toksabay and Jones, 2014).

In December 2014, Erdoğan officially declared Fethullah Gülen officially the head of FETÖ – the Fethullah Terror Organization (Fethullahçı Terör Örgütünün). Despite all of these tensions, Hizmet continued to prosper. By 2016, there were some six-million Fethullacı and many high-level Turkish government employees held allegiance to Gülen on a personal level (White, 2015: 114-115).

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All of the parties involved have put a massive amount of effort in keeping the details of their relationships hidden, and much of what we have comes from opposing actors. That each is extremely agenda-driven makes most of them questionable, if not outright unreliable narrators. Americans, who are involved by virtue of Gülen's continued non-extradition from Saylorsberg, Pennsylvania, don't seem to know what to make of him. Half of the articles I read by Western sources started off with the quaint Pennsylvanian settings wherein Gülen lives and then proceeded to describe his unassuming physical appearance and the absence of the usual trappings of the powerful.<sup>162</sup> For as little regard as I give to the hyperbolic opinions advanced by members of the Erdoğan administration, there are simply too many indicators that Gülen is what they claim him to be – expatriated provocateur.

It's entirely possible that Gülen and his cadres are sheltered from extradition for two primary reasons – first, they very well might be former-CIA assets that played a part in the 'Green against Red' of Soviet containment in the Turkic region (Engdahl, 2017).<sup>163</sup> The second is that the financial largesse of Hizmet has benefitted American politicians through sizeable political donations on both sides of the American legislative aisle (Gray and Mora, 2014; Ross, 2015; "Hillary's Ties to the Shady Islamic Cleric Accused of Backing Turkey's Coup," Huffington Post, 2016). Political differences between Ankara and Washington would be subordinate to this.

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<sup>162</sup> If the people journalists research would don sinister, black mustaches and cackle maniacally during their interviews, it would make everyone's job easier.

<sup>163</sup> Green being the Islamists and Red the Communists.

I would suggest that the projection of quietist humanitarianism and lack of Bentleys in the driveway are weak means of assessing the full character of Fethullah Gülen.<sup>164</sup> For as tame and “friendly, neighborhood Islam” as the outer aspects of Hizmet may be, accounts from the inside show how much millenarian cultism exists within its inner circles.

In meetings of the leadership assembly, Gülen described his plans as divinely ordained. “He would tell us, ‘I met with the Prophet last night,’ and he told me to do the following things,” Keleş said. “Everyone believed him.” Indeed, Gülen’s followers came to see his teachings as an entirely new faith. “He started with Islam, but he created his own theology. We thought Fethullah Gülen was the Messiah.”

Other former Gülenists told [Filkins] much the same thing. “On the surface, he projects this idea that he is not interested in money or women or power, that he only wants to be close to God,” Said Alpsyoy, a follower for seventeen years who left the movement in 2003, said. “The goal is power—to penetrate the state and change it from within. But they will never talk about power. They will deny it...” Inside the movement, Keleş and Alpsyoy said, people often lost themselves in fantastical rituals. In one, a group of men gathered in a room would grab a comrade, pin his legs and arms, and remove his socks and shoes, often against his will. “They would hold him down, and everyone would kiss his feet,” Alpsyoy said. “This I witnessed hundreds of times.”

...It took years for Keleş to leave the movement. The turning point came in 1997, when Gülen publicly attacked Necmettin Erbakan, Turkey’s first Islamist Prime Minister, directing his followers in the media to undercut him. Under pressure from the military, Erbakan stepped down in 1997. “Erbakan and Gülen said they wanted the same things—an Islamic state—and yet Gülen destroyed him,” Keleş said. “Power was more important to him than religion.”

Not long after that, Keleş wrote a letter to Gülen, enumerating the ways in which he had drifted from Islam in the pursuit of power. Gülen expelled him from the movement. Keleş said that it was

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<sup>164</sup> See figures such as Adnan Oktar, leader of a highly idiosyncratic Islamic group in Turkey, or Ali Ağaoğlu, a successful Turkish businessman and ‘sugar daddy’ extraordinaire, for counter-examples in image projection.

only after he left that he realized how cut off he had been. "I woke up to the real world," he said.

(Filkins, 2016)

## The Coup Attempt

A few days before the coup attempt, I was walking past the first prostitution corridor and had stopped to buy a snack. On my way out, I looked at the newspapers. One of the cover stories in particular caught my eye. Though my Turkish was still not strong, I gleaned enough to understand that there was a law proposed that would change how sex offenders were treated when they married the underage girl in question. I was shocked at how conservative, Islamic-oriented the law was. Perhaps more than that, how blatantly 'anti-Kemalist' it was. At that moment, I wondered just how long the powers behind the curtain would tolerate this trajectory. As it turned out, the answer was 'not very long.'

I think that newspaper article was on a Tuesday or a Wednesday. Classes came and went that Friday, and with no martial arts class, no *mevlet*, and no real desire to go out to chat up the candy shop owner that night, I settled in with some mindless computer gaming.

An hour or so in, my phone started ringing. It was John, a fellow student and good friend from Bloomington. He had been in studying in Ankara for a few months and we'd gotten together a few times after we came to the discovery that we were both in Turkey.

"Hey, Alex, what's up?" I asked.

"Are you ok, man?" he said, concern in his voice.

I was confused.

"Yeeaah, I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"They've shut down the bridges there in Istanbul. They've got tanks and everything. Just wanted to call in and make sure you were somewhere safe," he said.

I started to look around online and couldn't really find anything. We talked a little longer and I told him I'd keep him posted as things developed. After I hung up, the word came unbidden to my mind like a little whisper – "...*darba*..." – coup.

Alone in my apartment, I opened every media source I could to figure out if anyone knew what was actually happening. By 8:30pm I could physically hear it – automatic gunfire, mostly – and social media was on and off for the next twelve hours or so. A few times I even heard what must have been the mosque speaker system from a few blocks away, though I couldn't make out what they were saying.

Knowing there was nothing I could do and needed all the rest I could get, I tried to sleep through the sporadic gunfire and helicopters. The rest of the morning was filled with minor explosions, the largest coming at 3:36am. I was shocked awake by an enormous \*BOOM\* that shook the entire apartment. There was a shocked silence interrupted only by a child crying in one of the nearby apartments. I tried to wrap my head around what could have just happened. I could only postulate that something that loud and ground-shaking must have been a bomb, and if so, Taksim Square must have been hit.

I assumed we'd all be coming out to a pretty bleak situation – lots of rubble and at least one of the bridges gone. I also expected to see troops coming up and down the street to keep people contained.

None of that happened.

Everything was muted. Communications were coming back up, and instead of a curfew, that night in (the completely unmarred) Taksim Square there was a pro-government *rally*. My Syrian friend posted a video of it on Facebook, and if it hadn't been for the night before, I would've thought it an impromptu rock concert.

Even in the direct aftermath, it was obvious that something was very off about how it happened. Surely those officers knew their own history – in 1980, everyone woke up with everything having been done while the country slept. Spill the offenders' blood while they're still in pajamas. Starting a coup by blocking rush hour with tanks, not grabbing the government heads immediately, Erdoğan being able to make his famous FaceTime call-to-arms, the Diyanet having mosques blaring the same message.. it was a failure from the start. On the other hand, the government was off from the starting blocks without a hitch. Only hours later, they were working through lists that included thousands of Turkish citizens to arrest. It was quickly apparent that the rule of law had been suspended on the auspices of stopping FETÖ. The whole of it was surreal.

A day later, I boarded a metro and saw a video initially aired in the 2014 election. A man, his face obscured, hands covered by gloves, and body hidden beneath a trench coat, approached a massive Turkish flagpole in an empty square. Surreptitiously, he opened a compartment, and using an industrial-sized wire cutter procured from within the folds of his jacket, cut the steel cords that held up the Turkish flag. As the flag fell, it cast a shadow across a montage of Turkish scenes. A barber in the middle of an old-fashioned razor shave, a classroom filled with eager students, an old woman, whose eyes filled with tears as she saw the descending symbol. The shadow even extended beyond the city and into the agrarian countryside, where an elderly man – his features and dress as essentially Kurdish as possible – stared in pained disbelief as the shadow engulfed him. Every one of these dropped what they were doing and sprinted toward the source of collective distress. They swarmed the square and clambered upon each other in complete negation of their own safety. Body stacked upon body, their living pillar finally reached high enough. A youth, the very picture of the ideal Turkish man, grasped the torn cord,



and with a collective cheer, he leapt from the top, bringing the flag back to its zenith, its crimson and white curving and thriving in the wind.

When the video was over, I looked around me to see if anyone else was seeing what I had just seen.<sup>165</sup> No one seemed phased.

*Mosquito Fogger?*

On my way home, I saw a small municipal truck rumbling through Kurdela. Out of a pipe in its rear coughed uneven gusts of opaque mist. Where it couldn't reach in a straightline it backed up into. A dog, leashed to a front porch, was going mad as it barked at the intruder. I was a little concerned, partially by the dog being completely bathed in the stuff, but far more by the fact that there were kids still playing up and down the block.

Having no interest in breathing in the mystery cloud, I took cover in one of the many micro-shops that lined Kurdela. The shop's owner was Sardar, a Kurd with whom I'd spoken on many occasions. I greeted him briefly and asked, gesturing at the cloud outside the glass door, "*Eve çiyye?*" (what's this?)

"*Siyaset,*" he said with a shrug.

I frowned with confusion. '*Siyaset,*' has the same meaning in every Middle Eastern language I know – 'politics.'

Noting my expression, he followed up with,

"Erdogan."

I looked out the window again. The gray was now settling into the cracks of the walls, the fibers of canine fur, the clothes hanging on lines draped across the street, and the lungs of the

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<sup>165</sup> It's what Arjun Appuradurai would have labelled "nostalgia for the present," marketing a future bereft of the principle being sold (1996).

children, ignorant of the ongoing power-struggles that would define their futures – playing ball down the street.

With complete resignation, Sardar had just implied that he believed the country's prime minister had authorized the use of malignant chemicals on the Kurds of Istanbul.

When I got home, I looked up videos of truck-mounted mosquito foggers. It looked similar to what I'd just seen, and while it hadn't occurred to before, I'd never had problems with mosquitos. I hadn't, however, seen this kind of thing anywhere else at any other time in the whole city.

Either way, I stripped off all my clothes and took a long shower.

#### *A Crumpled Map*

Two nights before I left for America, I went to buy my groceries for the thirty or fortieth time from my neighborhood grocer. For whatever reason, this was the first time he felt comfortable enough to ask me what I was doing in Turkey. As I explained who and what I was, he sounded me out regarding why I was learning Kurdish. After a few minutes more, he finally worked around to seeing if I could actually speak it. Turned out that he was in fact a Kurd, though what that identity meant to him was not something that was immediately obvious.

His first track was one of being a Turkish Kurd, emphasizing his Turkishness. We kept talking. The conversation took on some political twists, and he asked what I thought of Kurds in Iraq and Iran, and how many Kurds were in America. He then asked how many Kurds were in Turkey and in the world. All the while, his body language became more loose, and after about fifteen minutes he asked his assistant to grab a bottle of orange juice, which we proceeded to split as we delved further into Kurdish politics. It was after our first cup or two that he asked me, "What do you think about there being a Kurdish state?"

I had to take my time with this one, not simply because I needed to collect the right words, but because it's a question that hadn't been answered for over a hundred years to anyone's satisfaction.

He took out a paper, motioned his young assistant to block the view from the front door, started to draw. I conspiratorially bent over the front desk, watching my new friend outline a primitive map of eastern Turkey, northern Syria, and northern Iraq. In detail, he explained how it would be possible for the PKK and YPG to squeeze Da'ish out and set the foundations for a pan-Kurdish state.

Time passed, and I eventually had to take my leave. As we concluded, he took the paper, now covered in lines and labels, crumpled it up, and threw out the door and onto the street. We then made plans to meet at the store for dinner the next night before I returned to America.

#### A Competition of Cults, Mafias, and Irredentisms

Émile Durkheim suggested that society worships itself through the medium of religion, and Ernest Gellner that society worships itself directly. This implies that politics and partisanship can be considered religious acts. With that in mind, I propose that furthering our understanding of the dynamics of the ultranationalist Kemalists, the Gülenists, Hizbullah, and the PKK, it would be best we consider them as cults and approach them as such. 'Cult' is a highly problematized word in academia; normally, I would instead use Marc Galanter's "charismatic groups" (Simon, 2008: 219), but I think 'cult' emphasizes the 'differentness' of the group. Cults have specific foci of worship, an intense reliance on a single leading individual empowered with the tools to manipulate subordinate members into lifestyles that sharply deviate from local norms, such as celibacy, specially sanctioned identity, and acceptability of violence and

suicide.<sup>166</sup> Almost every group I mentioned has a pyramid hierarchy with power coalesced into a single, leading personality.<sup>167</sup> Swearing personal fealty to that respective leader in a high-stakes oath – much is promised to the leader and the penalties of oathbreaking are severe, if not lethal – is also a central feature. Leaving the group and transitioning to normal society involves some degree of deprogramming.

For both the Erdoğancılar<sup>168</sup> and the disparate groups that fall under the conglomerate title of ‘deep state,’ I propose that we use the term ‘mafia.’<sup>169 170</sup> While we’ll deal with the details of some of the more egregious examples of collusive behavior between the Erdoğan administration, business leaders, and other politicians, it suffices us here to say that these relationships are lubricated by money and regulated with threats and occasionally violence.

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Being more than three years out of the events of July 15, 2016, it’s obvious that all of it has been little more than a key-change in the danse macabre that is Turkish politics. According

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<sup>166</sup> I find the phenomena of suicide within an organization that is explicitly non-religious and lacks an afterlife rhetoric (i.e the PKK) extremely interesting. While there is “the expectation of a cult developing around a person’s death [possibly being] a psychological reward that the person values while still alive” (Ferrero, 2013: 882), it must also be reinforced with the attacker’s beliefs. No virgins, no heaven, no apotheosis; “Her bijî Apo! Her bijî Kurdistan!”

<sup>167</sup> Ergekekon in particular comes with a large *caveat emptor*, as the leadership and actual structuring is, at best theoretical or implied, and at worst whimsical conspiracy. What is true is that there are highly committed, highly secretive cabals that hold the continuation of Kemalist *laïcité* sacrosanct. Hizbullah, by virtue of its highly secretive cell-based operations, kept its lower echelons ignorant of Velioglu’s role.

<sup>168</sup> Lacking a better word, I’m using the Turkish suffix -CI (denoting affiliation) and -IAR (plural) to designate those that actively buy into the image of Erdoğan as Imam of the neo-Ottoman Empire.

<sup>169</sup> This is only the first time and the first group we’ll use this term; it was my flatmates’ go-to word to describe the Barzanis and Talabanis. See pg.185.

<sup>170</sup> I’m not the first to come to this conclusion, which in my mind is reinforced by the fact that I came across these kinds of like-minded sources after having formed my own opinions on the matter. As far back as the 1920’s, “Even Kurdish religious leaders, or perhaps one could even say especially Kurdish religious leaders, were wily characters then. Shaikh Said, the famous Kurdish rebel leader executed by the Turks in 1925, once said that the Naqshbandi Sufi order in Kurdistan, which produced revered holy men, some of whom became rebel leaders, “resembled more a ‘gangster ring’ than a religious order.” (Olson, 1989: 101).

to the now famous Erdoğan quote, “Democracy is like a street car; you ride it as far as you need, and then you get off,” (Sontag, 2003). Every indicator is saying that the street car has stopped, at least for now. The AKP successfully defanged the military and has gone to work culling the rest of society. According to Onderoglu of Reporters Without Borders, “They are not just crushing what exists... They are building new media, a new civil society and a new deep state,” (“Getting Off the Train,” *The Economist*, 2016). The neo-Ottomanism of the Erdoğan mafia and its most hardcore constituency is manifest in their expanding economic and cultural reach into their neighbors east and west. This strategy brought them into direct competition with the vision (and resources) of the Hizmet. Having failed to coopt Gülen’s schools, they then sought to dismantle him and his institutions while Gülen composed his counter-attacks.

Every stage of the PKK’s strategy has clashed with both the Gülenists and Erdoğancılar. Even Apo’s ‘democratic separatism’ of the 2000’s interfered with the kind of cohesion, national image, and collective memory those parties wished to project. What they needed was solid definition, which required taking no interest in differentiating academic/journalist research, empathy, emotional support, and tactical support with regard to Kurdish separatism. To balance this with converting Turkish Kurds to their cause, the Turkish government has employed a hazy grayness of legality and tolerance when in the absence of a proper mandate to act more decisively. The July 15 coup attempt provided just that.

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So that people won’t say that the Kurds  
Have no knowledge and have no history;  
That all sorts of peoples have their books  
And only the Kurds are negligible.

(Mem û Zîn; Eppel, 2016: 42)

### *Closure of the Kurdish Institute of Istanbul*

Assets of the Kurdish Institute of Istanbul, which was closed down in December 2016, have been seized by Turkish government through the Saving Deposits Insurance Fund (TMSF) on Tuesday.

The AKP government closed down and sealed the Kurdish Institute of Istanbul, which was founded by prominent Kurdish intellectuals including Musa Anter, Feqî Hüseyin Sağnıç and Cemşîd Bender on April 18, 1992, which conducts researches on the Kurdish language, culture and literature.

The Institute was raided and sealed by police forces on December 31 after the Interior Ministry announced the suspension of the activities of 94 associations in accordance with the Article 11 of the State of Emergency declared by the Turkish government following failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016.

Officials from the Saving Deposits Insurance Fund (TMSF) have seized the assets of the Institute on Tuesday.

Turkish government has effectively nationalized [809 companies](#) by taking over their management or turning them over to the Treasury as of January 2017 as part of the crackdown on opposition and critical groups in the country, the Parliamentary inquiry revealed.

Responding to a motion filed by the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) Denizli deputy Melike Basmacı, deputy Prime Minister Nurettin Canikli said the government has seized 809 companies as of Jan.11, 2017 with a total value of TL38,3 billion (nearly \$10 billion). ("The Assets of the Kurdish Institute of Istanbul seized," SCF, 2017)

This last even took place more than two years ago, but it still manages to raise my blood pressure to write about it. I see Dengdar seated behind piles of Kurdish texts drinking his coffee. I wonder if he went to live with one of his children in Diyarbakir, or if he managed to make it to that one that was in Holland? I'd ask Kejo if he had the money to start that master's program in Mardin, but none of the email addresses I have for them work any longer. All I am left with are the mental images of all that was and an article that says it's been taken by the state that doesn't care what that meant to the people whose lives it filled.

Is it possible that there was some connection to someone in the PKK or the Gülen Movement? That some money might have come from Kurdish nationalists with questionable histories?

Maybe.

Maybe a small institute with a strong message of Kurdish identity attracted funders unwelcome to the AKP. I am not naïve enough to reject the possibility of something even more direct than that.

You could counterargue that something as publicly counter-narrative as a *Kurdish* institute would have every reason to stay as far away from that hazy grey line as possible. They certainly didn't put the capital up for such a venture to only get closed and arrested because of a keen auditor.

No matter which the case may be, I don't think it would matter.

In post-Gülen Turkey where you were able to be arrested for having an F-type American dollar bill (Aksoy, 2016; "Turkey: U.S. Dollar Bills Seen as Evidence of Coup-Plotter Links," Tribune News Services, 2016) or have your life turned upside down because you needed to open a bank account,<sup>171</sup> I don't think it would matter at all.

IRAQ

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<sup>171</sup> A Turkish student at Indiana University – who is a friend of mine and will remain anonymous and simply identified as a female – had to get a credit card when she was starting her undergraduate studies in Turkey. The most convenient means of doing this was through Bank Asya. She opened an account, put in \$10, and thought nothing more of it. Bank Asya has ties to the Gülen movement, and after July 15, 2016, anyone with an account was suspect. She had her passport and Turkish assets completely frozen by the Turkish government. It took her the better part of two and a half months to sort things out, turning her life inside-out in the process. Had she been in Turkey, she would have seen the inside of a jail cell, unable to defend themselves and prove her innocence.

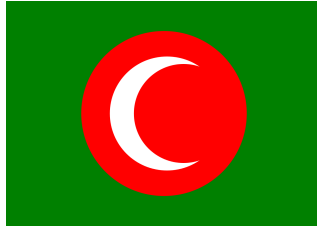
## Iraqi History – 1914-1969

From their arrival in 1914 on the shores of Iraq to the end of the war, British forces took the majority of the Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul vilayets from the Ottoman Empire. One of the few remaining notables with any power was Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji, who put his full effort into establishing his own dominion of a quasi-independent Kurdistan under a British protectorate. He could not rally enough local support, and when the British retreated in 1918, they left him to deal with what remnant of Ottoman authority could reassemble itself. Due to the Treaty of Sèvres, this situation was brief.

By the fall of 1918, Sheikh Mahmud had strong armed his way into becoming Sulaymaniyah's governor, which was confirmed for a time by the British. Barzinji recruited the local elites to jump-start the political technologies of nationalism, and soon they had their own newspaper – *Rojî Kurdistan* (Day of Kurdistan; Eppel, 2016: 118). However, mercantile classes and notable families from the surrounding region rejected being ruled over by a religious tribal leader. Combined with a change in British policies, Barzinji found his aspirations seeping away. He claimed himself to be the leader of all Kurdistan as he attempted a revolt that even garnered support from Iranian Kurdish tribes, but it was squashed. Initially the sheikh was sentenced to death, but that judgment was rescinded and replaced by exile to the Andaman Islands, a tropical cluster near Indonesia.

Beyond the fact that he faced a much larger foe, his movement had two other weaknesses, namely, his call to arms was based on Kurdish nationalism and jihad. The first of these was as of then an alien concept and the second was simply over-used by the Ottoman authorities in their final years. Neither had sufficient drawing power to garner the support needed to hold even small portions of the nebulous Kurdish region together under a solid defense.





*Figure 11 - The flag of the Kingdom of Kurdistan, 1922-1924*

In 1921, the British established Faysal al-Hashimi as the king of Iraq. While the Kurds had been particularly restive, they were by no means the sole protestors of British occupation and treatment. By establishing the monarchy, the British hoped to appease those in revolt by giving a modicum of sovereignty to the country and setting Faysal at its head as a consolation prize for the reneged promise of Greater Syria. With the newly invested kingship, both the British and the king sought to consolidate and centralize national power and create a centripetal force to give the newly cobbled-together country stability. From the very start of this process, Kurdish displeasure was immensely evident; the province of Sulaymaniyah, which was Shaykh Mahmud's territory, entirely refused to participate in the referendum confirming Faysal's kingship.<sup>172</sup> Faysal was confirmed with 96% approval, with the four percent 'no' votes came from Kirkuk.

Despite the treaty, Turkish forces were still working to secure the Mosul vilayet for inclusion in their still-forming Turkish state. This once again set the Kurdish tribes to play and be played between two greater powers. The British installed the grandson of Sheikh Ubaydullah, Sheikh Taha, as governor of Sulaymaniyah in an effort to inculcate a strong leader capable of swaying enough tribes to go in favor of British interests. This proved to be ineffectual.

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<sup>172</sup> One of the unfortunate repeating themes in Iraqi politics is disastrous vote boycotting. It's *never* benefitted the boycotters, yet it continues to this day to be a standby strategy.

On September 30, 1922, Sheikh Mahmud was released from his exile and brought back as governor of Sulaymaniyah. Almost immediately, he resumed his original course of action. With the support of his own tribe as well as a number of local notables whom he'd included in his new government, he declared himself the King of Kurdistan and demanded a meeting with the British to define the borders between Kurdistan and Iraq. Knowing that this had minimal likelihood of gaining traction with the British, he started fostering relationships with the commander of the Turkish forces in Rawanduz and the Shi'ite leaders in the south.

Between Sheikh Mahmud's uprising and the Treaty of Lausanne officially sweeping away the territory that the British granted to a Kurdish state (Lawrence, 2008), the British felt pressed to react quickly and strongly lest they lose their foothold in Kurdistan. First, they mounted an aerial and ground offensive against Rawanduz, forcing the remaining Turks out of southern Kurdistan. They then installed Sheikh Taha as the governor of that region and turned their forces against Sulaymaniyah. After chasing Sheikh Mahmud out, they gave a watered-down version of Sheikh Mahmud's position to his brother, Sheikh Qadir Barzinji (Eppel, 2016: 132). Once again, these steps proved ineffectual.

British military policy in Iraq centered around constraint, primarily of the budgetary variety, and they were consequently unable to maintain their power over northern Iraq. Sheikh Mahmud took the region back only months later. The British bombed his forces in August and December of 1923. In early 1924, King Faysal and the British condoned the use of poison gas against the second uprising of Shaykh Mahmud, which, as then British parliamentarian Winston Churchill predicted, effectively quelled the movement (Lawrence, 2008). Sheikh Mahmud's last political appearance was in the fall of 1930 with another attempted revolt, but it was violently squashed by the Iraqi army. The sheikh spent the rest of his life under house arrest.

While these early conflicts won nothing in terms of territorial gains or mass support, their most important yield in terms of the future of Kurdish nationalism was the experience and impetus it gave to one tribe in particular, the Barzanis. Within that family the two most important individuals were Shaykh Ahmad Barzani and Mullah Mustafa Barzani. While their own achievements would dwarf those of their progenitors, their line of Kurdish dissidents was impressive. They started their careers as revolutionaries in 1919 by participating in Shaykh Mahmud's first rebellion against the British and declaration of royal sovereignty over Kurdistan.

While the titles of 'sheikh' and 'mullah' were passed down through the Barzani family, it is clear from multiple accounts that the charismatic authority from its original progenitor, Taj al-Din from the early nineteenth century, carried over to the rest of the Barzani family (Gunter, 1992). Mullah Ahmad Barzani took this to extremes by encouraging his own veneration, and there are even reports that he encouraged his followers to pray towards Barzān rather than Mecca (Lawrence, 2008). If this was true, then it shows just how Kurd-centric the Barzanis were willing to be. If stories like these – and there are many – were fabrications, then it would in all likelihood be an attempt to make him look even more of a danger to the central government. In either case, the Kurdish independence movement did nothing to endear itself to the Iraqi or British governments. The extent of this displeasure is further elucidated in an anecdote related by Archibald M. Hamilton, an engineer for the British in Iraq, who wrote,

When the government campaigned in 1931 against Shaykh Ahmad Barzani, I was faced once with the following opinion, "Well, what should we do with the Iraqi army which we have spent so much to build and equip if we do not send it to your road, Rawanduz Road, to learn the art of war, and get trained in the fight against the Kurds?" Here was my answer, *which was laughed at*: "Closer than that area to Baghdad, there is between Baghdad and Mosul a vast empty desert... It is good to try out guns and artillery, move tanks and fly planes. Let artillery roar there where it can hit no one." (Bārzanī and Ferhadi 2003: 25-26, emphasis added)

Clearly, the government saw in the Barzani tribe a hindrance to the state and was determined to eradicate them. It is also clear that they underestimated the lynchpin roles that Sheikh Ahmad and Mullah Mustafa played as well as the tenacity their forces would demonstrate in the years to come.

In 1932, Barzani's followers opposed a government plan to resettle Assyrians into their tribal territory and refused to pay their own taxes. As all the land skirmishes strongly favored the Kurds, the British RAF was eventually sent in for a bombing campaign over the mountainous region with a focus on Barzān proper. After being pushed over the Turkish border, Ahmad and Mustafa Barzani were arrested and later returned to Sulaymaniyah with promises of safe passage. While having tea with the governor of Mosul, Mustafa was poisoned. The attempt put him in a coma, from which he miraculously recovered in the space of two weeks. Shortly thereafter, the government shuttled him to Baghdad, and later to the southern city of Nasariyya in Dhi Qar, where he ostensibly would do the least amount of damage while under house arrest. If there was no organized fighting during this period, it was because the government had opted for a policy of maiming the Barzani family structure by bringing its heads to trial, which policy resulted in many of its members being executed and their families exiled to southern Iraq. Many of the Barzani leaders survived by going into hiding. Despite all direct and indirect attempts on their lives, Ahmad and Mustafa would die of natural causes in 1969 and 1979, respectively. That so many different governments failed is a result of the luck, slyness, and dogged determination of the Barzani brothers.

#### *King Ghazi*

King Faysal died in 1933. Despite his only being twenty-one years old and being far less attached to events on the ground, his son Ghazi succeeded his father as per the Iraqi constitution.

Despite his young age, he gained a large degree of acceptance among his fellow Iraqis due to his keen interest in furthering Iraqi interests. With respect to Ghazi and the Kurds, there is not much to be said, as Kurdish nationalist movements had grown quiet with the Barzani leadership so sequestered. Only three of 150 registered national associations were Kurdish-oriented, and the tribes could garner no real unification for further attempts to wrest control from the central government (McDowall, 2004). Given the high importance that such clubs and organizations had in that era, such a low number is notable insofar as it indicated just how detached most of the Kurdish nationalists were from the mechanisms that were increasingly influential in shaping public opinion and generating civic power. In the absence of consolidated or officially recognized Kurdish leadership, other institutions of this type absorbed Kurdish support, one of the foremost being the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP; Dodge, 2003). The ICP was formed in 1934 and was very keen on promoting Kurdish rights. For a brief time in 1935 the party even advocated for complete Kurdish autonomy before political necessity forced it to retract on this point.

Another influential party to receive Kurdish support was al-Ahali, which strongly advocated social reformation and transmitted its ideas through the newspaper service from whence it derived its name. The party was formed by two of the members (the leading member being a Turkoman) of the Hashimi cabinet shortly before they helped Bakr Sidqi overthrow the government in 1936. Sidqi himself lasted less than a year before being assassinated by the same people who helped him get into power. In the following years, several more revolts took place (Davis, 2005), though none featured a heavy emphasis on the relations between the Kurds and Baghdad until the Barzanis returned to the place of their nativity.

### *King Fayṣal II*

In 1939, King Ghazi perished in a car accident and was deeply mourned within Iraq. His brother-in-law, Prince Abdulilah, assumed the regency as Ghazi's son King Fayṣal II wouldn't come of age – that is, eighteen years old – until 1953. In 1943, Mullah Mustafa returned to Barzān and the government, with British encouragement, initiated a parley aimed at improving relations. This effort was led by Prime Minister Nūrī Saʿīd, who, before he was assassinated in 1958, had served as prime minister on fourteen different occasions and had been a staunch supporter of the Hashimite regime ever since its short rule in Damascus. Saʿīd sent the provincial governor to be his spokesman, and Barzani outlined Kurdish interests in having Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah, Arbil, Duhok, and Khanaqin to be set apart as an autonomous Kurdish region in all things outside of military matters (Gunter, 1992). Not long after, Sheikh Ahmad was released and the government felt that Kurdish appeasement was going too far, resulting in Nuri Saʿīd's dismissal and the resumption of hostilities. By 1945, the political climate of Iraq had embittered the British against the pro-Axis regime, and Mustafa Barzani came under the impression that the British would support him in a coup against Baghdad. In reality, he had neither their support nor that of many of his fellow Kurds, as tribes that were key to his anti-government alliance switched sides mid-conflict.

This led to the Republic of Mahabad, created by Kurdish nationalist Qazī Muhammad in the space left by British and Soviet occupation of Iranian territory. Mustafa Barzani was invited into the newly founded Republic, and it was there that the Kurdish Democratic Party was established (Jwaideh, 2006). While its founders and main body were focused in the northwestern-most corner of Iran, their ambitions clearly reached further west and south, with its first congress being held in Baghdad and its main foreign ally being the Soviet Union. This latter influence led to an importation of Marxist-Leninist ideology in exchange for larger armaments

previously unavailable to the Kurdish fighters. The logistics of the situation highlight just how rugged and peripheral the region truly was in up to that point – in 1946, the combined tribal forces measured something along the lines of 8,800 lightly armed infantry and 1,700 horsemen (Bārzānī and Ferhadi, 2003). Machine guns were few, as was ammunition. While they later received four tanks from the Soviet Union, the reason that they escaped complete obliteration at the hands of the superior British and Iraqi forces was Kurdish knowledge of the geography, mobility on horseback, and their ability to hide as needed.

As post-WWII Great Powers politics played out, it quickly became apparent that an independent Kurdistan was once again not in the strategic interests of the patron. The USSR agreed with Britain and Iran to pull its forces out of Mahabad, effectively surrendering the Kurds therein to Iranian forces. At that point, the British and Iraqis knew exactly who to target; the Republic was abolished, the Barzani brothers routed and exiled (again), and many of their male family members were imprisoned in southern Iraq or, more simply, executed. Previous policies of collective repression as embodied in the RAF gassing or bombing Kurdish villages were not required at this time.

*ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim*

ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim took power after violently overthrowing the monarchy in July 1958. Upon receiving an ingratiatingly congratulatory communiqué, Qāsim invited Mustafa Barzani back into “our dear Iraq” from his exile in Russia in October 1958.<sup>173</sup> At this point the Barzanis became a client of the state, Mustafa himself living in the house of the then recently assassinated Nuri Saʿīd. The KDP was legalized, as was the printing of Kurdish journals and the

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<sup>173</sup> From most reports, it's apparent that they were disappointed with the realities of Soviet Russia and grew homesick.

Kurdish section of the ICP given some free rein. For a time, the majority of Kurds were either content with the direction in which their leadership was heading or were simply silent.

With the coup, Qāsim inherited the same problems faced by his predecessors, and many of those problems were then embodied by members of the new government, sundry of whom pulled towards the various strains of communism, Nasserism, pan-Islamism, and secularism (Bashkin, 2011). Within the first few months, Qāsim had sent most of the Free Officers that helped him gain power to peripheral assignments. If Iraq's previous twenty years had instilled any one lesson on the leadership, it was to guard oneself against usurpers from among their compatriots.

Many minorities, including Kurds who were described by the provisional constitution as *šurakā'* (partners [of the state]), found themselves empowered in the central government to a greater extent than in previous regimes (Davis, 2005). The approach Qāsim's government used with the Kurds was mixed and tenuous, ranging from selective patronage to collective suppression in a relatively short time. Initially, Qāsim directly supported Barzani and used Kurdish forces to put down the revolt of the Second Iraqi Army Division in Mosul in 1959. Later, after the attempt on Qāsim's life by the Free Officers movement led by Muhammad bin Hussein al-Saqr, Qāsim became extremely paranoid. In a country with already weak institutions, the fact that the military itself was susceptible to fracturing was a cause of great concern. On top of this was a massacre of Turkomans in Kirkuk by Kurdish members of the ICP, which led to a crackdown on the party and all of its members, signaling a strong shift away from inclusive governance.

As the talks between Qāsim and Barzani progressed, it was clear that the parameters of Kurdish autonomy had expanded, including more concessions from oil and outlining what would



later come to be known as the Peshmerga. In the following months, Qāsim used state patronage to divide Kurdish tribes against each other, and specifically against Barzani. The latter, however, still had popular sway and maintained a reputation of heroic proportions for his role in fighting the British and previous regimes since 1931. In September 1960, Barzani gathered some 7,000 troops to expel government forces from Sulaymaniyah. From that time until the spring of 1961, Qāsim authorized large military actions against Kurdish guerillas, which continued well past Qāsim's overthrow in 1963 into 1966. The most controversial of these actions was the indiscriminate bombing of Kurdish villages, which missed the more mobile Kurdish troops and instead killed large numbers of Kurdish civilians and razed their villages (Yildiz, 2007). These latter tactics of collective suppression (enacted after Qāsim's overthrow) proved to be costly and ineffective, as the violence instead disaffected populations and push them toward Barzani's cause.<sup>174</sup>

*A taste of Ba'athism followed by 'Abd al-Salam 'Arif*

While there were many groups, including minorities, who benefitted during Qāsim's relatively liberal era, he had made himself politically vulnerable through a number of policies regarding land reforms, pan-Arab unity, alienation of the Shi'ite clergy, and of course military action against the Kurds. The opportunity came when the army forces required to contain the then-newly formed Peshmerga in Kurdistan<sup>175</sup> as well as those occupied at the Kuwaiti border left Baghdad vulnerable.

In February 1963, the first Ba'athist government came to power after violent riots (Davis, 2005). The Kurdish nationalists began working with the regime and were hopeful despite the

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<sup>174</sup> They also included the use of poisonous gas, though their execution was ineffective and caused problems by being blown across the border into Iran (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1972).

<sup>175</sup> The Peshmerga were the first Kurdish standing army, and were established by the KDP political bureau as a counterbalance to Barzani's tribal forces in 1962, (Anderson and Stansfield, 2003: 71).

authoritarian manner in which it began its reign. While the initial dynamics differed from that of Qāsim's final two years, the pattern remained virtually the same – limited appeasement and patronage ending in policies of collective suppression after talks failed, only accelerated in terms of time. The breaking point for this round of negotiations was including Kirkuk and Mosul in the Kurdish autonomous zone (Yildiz, 2007). The Ba'athists introduced a new form of collective suppression, namely "Arabization," or the forced resettlement of Kurdish communities into Arab areas, a kind of authoritarian gerrymandering no doubt influenced by the Russification efforts that the Soviets had been using for the previous decade.

The first Ba'athist revolution only remained in power for roughly ten months before ʿĀrif made his way back to power. In an effort to re-stabilize the country, he negotiated a ceasefire with Barzani, which he accepted without consulting the KDP political bureau (which was primarily helmed by Ibrahim Ahmed, Jalal Talabani, and Omar Mustagfa; Anderson and Stansfield, 2013: 72). The ceasefire itself stayed more or less in place until ʿĀrif's death in 1966, whereupon his brother ʿAbd al-Raḥman al-Bazzāz took up his mantle. Al-Bazzāz' approach to the Kurdish question was to pursue full inclusion and appeasement for autonomy so long as it did not interfere with the unity of Iraq as a country. With talks that spanned from April to August 1966, a more permanent cease-fire was agreed upon. However, al-Bazzāz lacked the support of his officers, the upper echelons of whom were still suffused with Sunni Arabs that worried for their positions in a more ethnically inclusive hierarchy. In any case, Bazzāz' government had very little time to deal with the situation owing to their overthrow at the hands of the Ba'athists for the second time in July 1968.

## Coming to Kurdistan

### *Erbil*

I arrived in Erbil<sup>176</sup>, Iraq, on September 4, four days after finishing my qualification exams, and two days after kissing my wife and sons goodbye in the San Antonio airport. I'd done as much preparation beforehand as I could. I had a few leads for places to stay and a few names to contact regarding working with one of the local universities. Unlike Istanbul the year before, there was no AirBnB and no government-sponsored language programs targeting foreign students. I had tried to reach someone – anyone – for the better part of a year to set up some kind of framework for me to start from. Not a single email I sent to anyone got an answer. The only substantive correspondence I'd had with anyone was over Facebook, and that was with a local MMA gym I was hoping to join.<sup>177</sup>

Despite not getting an Iraqi visa,<sup>178</sup> my magical American passport got me a thirty-day visiting visa upon arrival in Iraqi Kurdistan. With the help of a few friends, I procured an apartment on my second day. It was on the northeast side of the city, less than a mile away from the coalition airbase and a ten or fifteen-minute drive to the American consulate, located in Erbil's Christian 'node' of Ankawa.

Being on the official U.S. radar was important enough to me that my third day in I even tried to *enter* the consulate. I got passed all of the twenty-foot high, three-foot thick blast walls, through the line, and up to the bullet-proof glass. I had a pleasant conversation with the Kurdish

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<sup>176</sup> You'll also see references to Hawler in quoted sections. Hawler is the Kurdish word for Erbil.

<sup>177</sup> MMA – mixed-martial arts.

<sup>178</sup> I tried emailing and calling the Iraqi embassy in D.C. for over five months. Two weeks before my departure (and one day before I told myself I was going to drive ten hours to D.C. to deal with the problem in-person), I finally reached someone and got a letter back one week later. They had returned my application and my passport along with a single sentence on a printed paper reading, "refer to the website." What they did not include was the \$110 I sent to pay for a multiple entry visa, and no visa. I imagine I funded a five-star dining experience for an unscrupulous employee.

attendant, and while he was impressed with my speaking Kurdish, just because I had American citizenship would not get me in.

“You need to have an appointment. For everything else, go to the website.”

### *My Friends & Taxi Drivers*

In a lot of ways, everything I did came back to two things – the experiences I had with my flatmates and the time I spent travelling to and from places. My friends and the taxi drivers.

First, there was Yaran,<sup>179</sup> a Kurdish man who, despite only being my roommate for a total of three days, formed a strong bond with me and we still keep in touch. Second was Jenny, an Occidental worker with the UN. She and I shared the place on our own for the better part of a month, and ours was a very symbiotic relationship. The only downside to our arrangement was that despite our maintaining certain unspoken rules on personal space and privacy, the fact that I was living with a woman who was not my wife deterred a number of local friends from visiting me. The third was Samir, an Iraqi-Lebanese who had spent more than a decade in the US. He started off as a medical doctor, but his license didn't qualify outside of the Middle East. By 2017, he was in Iraq working for as a franchise agent for an European clothing company. He was an outspoken agnostic that spent most of his time with his Assyrian girlfriend in Duhok. What time we did spend together in Erbil was immensely informative. The last was Baho, who has become so much like a brother to me that it's almost too distasteful to use any other name than the one his family gave him. He is from Sulaymaniyah, and his mother is the only local woman in the Middle East I've ever had physical contact with, much less hugged. I love his family dearly, and

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<sup>179</sup> Important note – only rarely will I use someone's real name. Part of this is a matter of privacy, and in some cases it's a safety measure. The only people I refer to by their real names are those that occupy a well-known or easily searchable public position.

his companionship and the social circles he introduced me to were priceless in the course of my work.

Then there were the taxis. Normally, my first act living in a new city is to get a feel for the place, and I always do this by walking through it. As I had not yet found a cooperative ATM, I tried the next best thing which was a money order from America, and the only place I could pick up this money order was a bank several miles away. I donned my hat and sunglasses, pocketed my passport and keys, and set out. Erbil is set up like a tree stump with concentric circles of major roads getting smaller and smaller until you reach the ancient citadel at its center. My walk was along 100m road, the second-largest of the belts.

While still in America, I had read on some well-meaning globe-trotter website with recommendations for almost every major city on the globe that, “Erbil is a city for walking!”

No, no it’s not.

Erbil is *not* a city for walking.

Erbil is a city for taxis, and there are taxis aplenty. Khaki paint, red plates, and interiors covered in the shrink-wrap they came in or decorative covers that conceal potential dirt tracked in by passengers.<sup>180</sup> At any given time, I think every third or fourth car on the road was a taxi. Based on my conversations, most of the taxi drivers only did so as a second or third job. Those that did it full-time were either privately contracted by apartment complexes catering to expatriates, or they were massively under-employed.

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<sup>180</sup> That they completely buried the seat belt apparatuses along with it was also standard. I thought that in the event of a wreck, the broken safety glass and shredded human detritus might distract somewhat from the clean seats.

*Erbil – a City in Transition*

Between 2010 and the beginning of 2014, much of Kurdistan was undergoing something of a boom in foreign investment and construction, most of which came from Turkey. It's easy enough to find evidence of the hopes investors and investees had in the future of Kurdish Iraq,

HEWA Group representative: People say it is becoming the new Dubai. And I would say we would be even better than Dubai. I mean the people of Dubai are also very ambitious and they did a lot for their country and built a lot. But you know the weather over there is not that good...you cannot walk outside. But Kurdistan also has beautiful nature...so we have a lot and we are building all this. So we are proud of our development and Kurdistan is secure. (Sama, 2015: 93)

Continuing the Dubai analogy, an article from The Guardian reads,

In Hewler, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, minarets are now outnumbered two to one by cranes. New shopping malls, hotels and blocks of flats are being built at an extraordinary rate. On a recent visit I heard many people, from politicians to shopkeepers, making comparisons with Dubai... Hewler's wealthy suburb of Ainkawa boasts Chinese, Italian and German cuisine... (Woolf, 2010; see also Rudra, 2014)<sup>181</sup>

In 2017, a lot of this was still the same. Perhaps the *exact* same, meaning that no progress has taken place. There are still Chinese, Italian, and German restaurants in Ankawa, but the ingredients are all bought from the dregs, the leftover bits and pieces Turkey or Iran didn't buy. Jenny and I noted that it takes twice as much cinnamon in Iraq to have the same taste as anywhere else we'd lived.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> To be fair, not only is this article able to avoid casting everything in rose-colored shades, it also accurately pointed out that the situation was extremely vulnerable to exogenous violence as well as the endogenous corruption.

<sup>182</sup> I bought Thai food (made by Filipinos) and brought some back home for Baho and me to share. He tasted it, and with a luxuriant roll of his eyes, told me, "This is the best thing I've ever tasted!" I didn't feel it was necessary to tell him that it was on par in quality to off-brand, canned stuff.

All of the cranes for construction are still all over the place, but the workers weren't. They were driving taxis instead. The number of unfinished buildings in Erbil was a frequent topic of discussion for Baho and me. One day we were at a stoplight, and he started to laugh. "I mean, just look around," he said, "how many unfinished buildings can you see? Just with our view, right here in the car."

We started counting.

Twelve. There were twelve large, unfinished buildings within that small portion of cityscape, like weathered concrete skeletons with rebar bone spurs. One or two had a handful of construction workers, but their numbers were few and the progress hard to notice.

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While Samir was in Erbil he worked out at the popular, if expensive, EthnoGym, along with a large number of ex-patriots and a few locals. He came back one day from a two-hour session and related a story from his trainer. She's a woman in her late twenties and was irate enough to take a minute of their session to voice a complaint.

"I come here to train every day. Do you know how I get here? I have to pay 5,000 dinars<sup>183</sup> to take a fucking taxi. That is one thing I hate about here. Everywhere you go, you have to pay for a fucking taxi. There are no fucking buses! Loads of bus stops, but no buses!"

Unfortunately for Samir's trainer and all those like her, there is no change in sight. Why would there be? With no suitable public alternative, the demand for taxis remains fairly inelastic. You buy a vehicle, fight with traffic, keep it clean of dust, pay the annual fees, watch out for speed traps, and pay for parking when the street is full. Or you take a taxi. Changing that paradigm by introducing a cheaper and equally available service, albeit one carrying opportunity

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<sup>183</sup> At the time, this was roughly \$1. When you go everywhere by taxi, this adds up quickly.

costs related to crowding (comfort)<sup>184</sup> and circuitous routes (time), would also introduce elasticity in that demand, and the oversupply of taxi drivers becomes even more stressed. With taxi driving as the last resort for supplementing the greatly-diminished income (*muča*) of a police officer, primary school teacher, or Peshmerga, that means that the chronic, structural *underemployment* would deepen, and in some cases become the even more bleak *unemployment*.

What Samir's trainer was describing was simply one more price tag of the collective cost of endemic corruption and political feuding that gets passed on to the Kurdish populace.



*Figure 12 - Chronic, structural underemployment – a number of taxi drivers (their cars all parked on the right side of the road) pass the time waiting for fares to arrive by playing a game with stones and broken tiles. Incidentally, the small shelter they're playing next to is a bus stop.*

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<sup>184</sup> Given some of the stories that women or their male friends have related to me regarding lone female passenger-taxi driver dynamics, the 'comfort-factor' disparity of sacrificing personal space in a bus versus the potential awkwardness of a taxi may well be negligible.



Three weeks prior to the September 25, 2017 Referendum, I had a meeting with Rastam, a staff member of the KRG's Department of Foreign Relations. It was my on-the-ground introduction to Peshmerga issues. More specifically, how he didn't want to talk about it. While he made some statements that reflected poorly on the Barzanis, he was loath to discuss the impact of KDP corruption in Kurdistan.<sup>185</sup>

“When I was in the central bazaar, I noticed that there's an entire street for Peshmerga hardware.. they told me that Peshmerga have to buy their own equipment...” I said, letting that last part hang between us, forming a question.

Rastam looked away, clearly uncomfortable.

“Yes, that is true... we have money problems and that effects the Peshmerga.”

The Peshmerga, the living, breathing, fighting embodiment of Kurdish identity. Turn on the radio, and you'll find a song praising the Peshmerga. City checkpoints are preceded by portraits and details of martyred Peshmerga members. The closer you get to the city center, the more pictures and murals featuring the Peshmerga you'll find.

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<sup>185</sup> He may have been more willing to dish out on the PUK, but that was something we never got to as our follow-up interview wasn't able to happen.

Also, the man driving the taxi taking you downtown might also be Peshmerga. Take that taxi to the central bazaar, and not far in you'll find the Peshmerga market. Camouflage jackets, holsters, extra ammo clips, hats, binoculars, patches, camping gear, hardy-looking boots of every variety – if you're going to war with Da'ish and need something, you'll find it there. This includes weapons ranging from Soviet-era pistols with odd calibers to modern, variable fire-rate German assault rifles.



*Figure 13 - top left: painting of Peshmerga in downtown Erbil; top-right: picture of a PUK martyr posted 100m from a PUK checkpoint; bottom-left and right: Peshmerga bazaar in Erbil*



In the taxis and market, you'll have no problem finding people willing to talk about the Peshmerga salary crisis.<sup>186</sup> When Da'ish took territory in Iraq in 2014, the federal government and KRG all but shut down the flow of money to government services. Every salary paid by the government – which is the vast majority of salaries – was slashed to a third or fourth of what they were prior to Da'ish. Everyone that wasn't part of the political or business elite was looking to supplement their income. For those upper echelons that were affected, it was manifested in their clamping down on investment, offloading what they could, and moving on to less-yellow pastures.<sup>187</sup>

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Not long after my meeting with Rastam, I arranged a meeting with a professor for Salahhadin University. We sat down at a coffee shop within one of Erbil's new malls. He had invited a friend with him, a fellow professor. From my experiences in Cairo, I immediately assumed that this development indicated their wanting something from me. Fair enough, as I was hoping to network with him into a tutoring position at Salahhadin.

After talking about my entry into Kurdish and our mutual friend in America, they cut to the chase.

“Things here are not so good. I have many children, and my salary has been cut to a sixth of what it used to be... what is the situation in America like for Kurdish professors? Would Indiana University need more Kurdish staff?”

I grimaced, partly in empathy, and partly at the truth I'd have to tell him.

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<sup>186</sup> This isn't a unique phenomenon in Kurdish history. Krzysztof Lalik succinctly described it as “the distribution of power ... proceeding through similar channels and patterns as in the past; the best example of it may be the adaptation of Kurdish tribes to new political and judiciary systems,” (2017).

<sup>187</sup> See pp.276-281 for more on business in Iraq.

“Unfortunately, the Kurdish department is really small and there are only three or so places that have Kurdish at all,” I confessed.

“Could you put me in contact with the director?” he asked.

“Honestly, the best thing to do is to send them an email. Tell them how you know Haidar, and include your.. how do you say it in Kurdish.. [résumé]?”

“We just say ‘[résumé],’ he said with a slightly French accent.

“Send all that and they’ll probably get back to you. Also, I’d email the University of Central Florida and Arizona University. They have Kurdish too.”

In exchange, he gave me the information for the foreign student department at Salahhadin University. Agreeing to meet again in a few weeks, we shook hands and I took my leave.

Unfortunately for both of us, not much came of either of our efforts.

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Beyond the topic of government corruption, my experiences with Rastam, the Peshmerga cabbies, and professors all had one thing in common. As time went on, it became more common and more visible as I realized what I was seeing - humiliation. The humiliation of working for a government that defunded their army during war-time, the humiliation of driving a mostly-empty cab among the throng of mostly empty cabs, and the humiliation of being so highly educated yet so unable to find work. It became one of the central themes of my research on Iraqi Kurdistan – how their cultures defined humiliation and the ways in which Kurdish men coped as they were faced with cultural and personal humiliation over and over again.

## 1968-1991 – Ba’athism

In 1968, the ‘Arif-Yahya regime was overthrown in a bloodless coup. This was less a sign of favor for Ba’athists, and rather a lack of favor for the *ancien* regime, having spent too much money on arms without making headway on either the Kurdish issue or making an effectual impact on the Six-Day War against Israel in 1967. Furthermore, they did very little to include Shi’ites in governance (Davis, 2005). In its initial years, the Ba’athists relied heavily upon an anti-imperialist, “pan-Mesopotamianism” to gain support. This meant balancing leftism without alienating the middle class and Shi’ite *marji‘iyya* (the Shi’ite clerical institution). They made inconsistent efforts with the ICP, trying on the one hand to incorporate them while making mass arrests of their members in 1970. The Ba’athists even explored forming a relationship with Kurdish factions that were more socialist/nationalist than tribalist/nationalist as was Barzani.<sup>188</sup>

On March 11, 1970, Saddam and Mahmud Uthman signed a manifesto granting large amounts of autonomy to the Kurds in northern Iraq.<sup>189</sup> This included Kurdish language being used in Kurdish schools and government, the implementation of the Agrarian Reform, and turning over the Kurdish radio station and arms to the government, having a Kurdish vice-president, and the creation of a proto-Kurdish Regional Government. However, the Ba’ath-Barzani Accords had little follow-through, and tensions resumed. First, they tried to assassinate Mustafa Barzani’s son Idris late 1970. In September 1971, the Ba’athists attempted a rather

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<sup>188</sup> These Kurds that later went on to form the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in 1975.

<sup>189</sup> On March 1, 1969, the Shah had ordered Iraqi Kurds under his patronage to attack Iraqi Petroleum Company stations near Kirkuk and Mosul. The damage was quickly contained, but it set off another round of fighting between the central government and the Kurds that lasted most of that year (Gibson, 2015). The “March Accord” was the Ba’athist attempt at securing their Kurdish areas against Iranian exploitation.

cinematic assassination of Mullah Mustafa himself.<sup>190</sup> Almost every Kurd that has spoken on this has placed responsibility for the attempt on Saddam.

During this same period, the Shah was using his leverage to make a bid for the greater and lesser Tunb islands as the British were leaving Bahrain. This would give them an increased presence in the Gulf, which Baghdad was loath to see. The Iraq government responded by expelling many Iranians and reviving the argument that Khuzistan should be part of Iraq.<sup>191</sup>

1972 was an eventful year in Iraqi politics. On April 9, Iraq signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the USSR. This included Iraq receiving experts and arms in trade for use of their ports for Soviet ships. On June 1, the Iraqi Petroleum Company was nationalized. Between the effect this could have on oil prices<sup>192</sup> and Iraq's definitive shift in Cold War arithmetic, both Iran and the US were sufficiently piqued. By the time the 1973 oil crisis hit, Baghdad owned 85% of the country's output. Flush with cash, the central government was less constricted by the need for support from the ICP or the Shi'ites. They amped up their Arabization efforts to de-Kurdify areas like Kirkuk, sending entire villages to the south.<sup>193</sup> Others they coopted by creating their own versions of the Turkish Village Guard or other means of direct patronage.

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<sup>190</sup> Reports on this are somewhat mixed. Quil Lawrence wrote that the explosives were hidden within a suitcase carried by a delegation of visiting clerics (Lawrence, 2008: 22). Men that were in the room at the time claim it was an explosive device attached to one of the clerics, who was told it was a recording apparatus for the central government ("Interview with Dr. Makhmoud Othman," Frontline). When the explosion failed to kill Barzani, someone tried a grenade.

<sup>191</sup> Khuzistan is the southwestern-most province abutting Iraq and has long been populated by Arabs, being nicknamed 'Arabistan.' These demographic and ethnonationalist elements have been problematic for every Iranian regime since the Pahlavis in the 1920's.

<sup>192</sup> The rise in oil prices allowed Iran and Iraq patronage funds for opposite sides in their own Cold War-esque conflicts within the Middle East, particularly in Yemen and Oman. Iraq would later use these as leverage in a bid for the Bubiyan and Warba islands so Iraq could have a deep sea port.

<sup>193</sup> This can be considered 'aggressive gerrymandering,' which instead of redrawing borders is rearranging the color-coded ethnic map within those borders.

All of this was directed against the Barzanis, who had been earnestly imploring the Shah and President Nixon for help throughout 1972.<sup>194</sup> In that same year, the US sent Henry Kissinger to meet with the Shah in Tehran, at which point he pledged to support Iraqi Kurds against the Iraqi central government. Even in those early years, the Kurds did not trust the Shah and asked instead for the US to act as guarantor. Most of the support – which totaled some \$16 million (over \$77 million adjusted for inflation) – came in the form of Soviet weapons procured by Israel (Schorr, 1991). Talks for a proto-federal system between the KDP and Baghdad collapsed when only half of the land the Kurds requested was offered, and this excluded the entirety of Kirkuk.

#### *The Algiers Accord*

In 1973, Mullah Mustafa is quoted saying, “We do not trust the Shah ... I trust America. America is too great a power to betray the Kurds” (Yildiz, 2004: 23). They were, in spirit, ready to “become the 51<sup>st</sup> state,” (Schorr, 1991). That same year, Barzani sent Kissinger three rugs and later a pearl necklace as a wedding gift. The backdrop to all of this was preparations and quiet overtures between Iran, Iraq, and the US toward settlement. The Kurds in this case were simply “a card” to be dealt out.

In March 1975, Barzani and his retinue had travelled to Tehran for a meeting with the Shah. Part of what they wished to discuss was the troubling rumor that there was about to be some kind of settlement. The delegation had to wait, as the Shah was at that time in Algiers carrying out business. They learned of the Algiers Accord signed between Saddam Hussein and the Shah of Iran over the radio in Tehran (“Interview with Dr. Makhmoud Othman,” Frontline, 2000). The Accord traded a total cessation of support for Iraqi Kurds in return for realigning the borders of the Shatt al-Arab. Soon after, Barzani sent a personal message to Henry Kissinger,

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<sup>194</sup> Barzani had entered into a relationship with Iran and Israel back in 1966 (Stansfield and Anderson, 2004: 74-75).

stating, “Your Excellency, the United States has a moral and political responsibility to our people,” (Schorr, 1996). It’s quite clear the US and Iran had no real desire that the Kurds succeed in getting what they wanted, much less make an independent Kurdistan. For the US, it was a matter of tying up an unruly neighbor of a key ally as part of the larger Soviet containment strategy; for the Shah it was a matter of pressuring Baghdad to make changes with respect to the borders, bringing it back to the 1913 lines.

For however complex the motivation for Kurdish nationalists, their pursuits are inevitably tied to maintaining – or salvaging – perceptions of dignity, which is a form of empowerment. The early 1970’s resistance against the Ba’athists was the first substantive interaction between the Kurdish leaders and the United States, and it ended in a most undignified manner for the Kurds. From this perspective, the most important aspect of the Accords and their repercussions on Kurdistan was personal and cultural humiliation. As a driving force, humiliation is a powerful and motivating emotion that is all too frequently undervalued in understanding policies and leaders (Fattah and Fierke, 2009). For as many Kurdish, Iranian, Israeli, and American middle-men and covert operatives enacted the everyday functions of resisting the Iraqi regime, the whole affair came back to the Kurdish leaders and their relationships with the men leading the American administration. Everything else was contingent upon to this. From that perspective, this was a direct humiliation of the Barzani family and their retinue – it pushed them from partner-status to expendable pawn in the ever-evolving Great Game.

Dr. Sami Abdul-Rahman, who was with Barzani at the time of the Accord’s announcement, said,

[The Algiers Accord] was the most cruel betrayal in our history--which is full of betrayals.

Kissinger was instrumental in this betrayal. And it was totally unfair to promise the Kurdish people help and support and to give the impression that if the Iraqi government attacks we will



help you--which they did at the beginning. Then in the middle of the road, to drop you. ("An Interview with Dr. Sami Abdul-Rahman," Frontline, 2000)

While the Kurdish leadership was institutionally stagnant, the figureheads directing policy in America or Israel might change between electoral cycles. Henry Kissinger was the closest thing to continuity in responsibility between administrations for what happened in 1975.<sup>195</sup> Given the deeply interpersonal dynamic, I suspect that the humiliation was all the more poignant at the time with the KDP leaders being gathered *in Tehran* when the deal was announced (less painful than Baghdad, though). After the shock wore off and the realities of their new situation set in, it no doubt became all the more bitter. Certainly, not the first time Kurds have been humiliated, but it's the first with the US and has a bearing on every subsequent interaction between the two; the White House may change hands, but in Kurdistan it's the same men carrying the history and scars with them.<sup>196</sup>

Despite having the arms and the money, the Kurdish Revolution surrendered to the Iraqi army and the KDP lost its governing position as it fled to Iran. Some 600,000 Kurds were evicted from their homes and villages, either fleeing to Iraq or being deported to southern Iraq (Stansfield and Anderson, 2009: 79). The terms had now become the Iraqi regime's to dictate, and this precluded any Kurdish sway, much less control, over Kirkuk.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> The Shah too was a static figure, but in many respects, he could be considered an American satellite after his re-installment in the American-led 1953 coup.

<sup>196</sup> "The power of humiliation lies in a public exposure, and acknowledgement by an audience that humiliation has taken place. Betrayal is a more private experience that silences and thereby obliterates the agency of the betrayed. While often used interchangeably with humiliation, betrayal is distinct. Like humiliation, betrayal is a relational concept and it is this relationality that is damaged in the act, when an expected trust or a sense of belonging to a family or a nation is threatened or turns out to be unreliable (Edkins in Bell, 2006)... An act of betrayal can in fact serve to strengthen the power of a corresponding humiliation," (Fattah and Fierke, 2009: 72).

<sup>197</sup> Kirkuk had been a sticking point during every negotiation with the regime.

In many aspects of Saddam Hussein's rule he mirrored his predecessors' policies – he exploited differences between tribes and parties to prevent unified threats to state power, doling out positions of power and money to some and employing force against others. Where he departed the most from other leaders was the combination of paranoia and thuggish, albeit well-directed, use of violence. He had spent three years in prison under 'Arif's regime and was an uncanny student of the Stalin-school of strongman politics. The Iraqi state he forged was filled with Soviet-esque purges, gulags, personality cult propaganda,<sup>198</sup> and mass burial sites. He used oil profits to increasingly create a coup-proof regime<sup>199</sup> consisting of multiple layers of security apparatuses spying on each other in addition to the civilian population. He also limited access to ammunition to military units while moving about in-country. History books are replete with pictures of him smiling and shaking hands or embracing leaders with whom he had been or was yet to be in deadly contest. This included many Kurdish leaders, including Barzani and Talabani. The latter of these said, in a highly understated manner, that, "When [Saddam] is in need of us, he will be ready to deal with us. When he is in a strong position, he is not ready to listen to us," ("An Interview with Jalal Talabani, Frontline, 2000).

I repeatedly say 'he' – Saddam – rather than 'they' – the Iraqi Ba'athists – because so much of post-1978 Iraqi politics came back to him. He filled the upper echelons of state apparatuses with family members and fellow Tikritis. Anyone who rose to public renown and prominence or openly challenged Saddam's grip was killed via arranged accidents or otherwise

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<sup>198</sup> There were multiple stages of focus for this propaganda – Saddam as the successor of Nebuchadnezzar, Saddam as al-Qadisye (defeater of the Sassanians) against the Persian *shu'ubiyūn* (movement that opposed Arab primacy in Islam), etc. Two things remained constant in this process. First, they were all massive rewrites of history depending *entirely* on invented continuities, primordialization of contemporary conflicts, and pseudo-histories. Second, Saddam Hussein was *always* the locus of national being.

<sup>199</sup> A frustrating fact for many foreign spymasters that would have loved to see him fall long before 2003.

disposed of.<sup>200</sup> From his ousting of President al-Bakr in 1978 (having consolidated his power from the start of the Ba'athists reinstatement), he ran the country like a mafia boss.

### *The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan*

The seeds for the break-off of Jalal Talabani and his fellows to form the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in June 1975 were sown in the very founding of the KDP. The Talabani family were a Qadiri Sufi family that rose to prominence in Sulaymaniyah in the eighteenth century, and in 1946 Jalal Talabani was a protégé of Ibrahim Ahmed, the leader of the leftist intellectuals that banded with Mustafa Barzani, a tribalist/nationalist. Between 1964-1966, 'Arif's government had managed to accentuate the wedge between the two, the result being Ahmed and his Kurds fighting alongside Baghdad against the Kurds aligned with Barzani. After the Algiers Accord concluded and the KDP surrendered, Talabani fled to Damascus, and the PUK came into being thereafter. Its founding doctrines were highly Marxist/Maoist-oriented, and operations were split between its three branches – Bizutnawa (Movement), Heshtigishti (General Forces), and Komala (Association; Anderson and Stansfield, 2009: 80).

As for the Barzanis and the remainder of the KDP that came with them, there was a conflict over its own founding principles. Idris headed the conservatives, Massoud the centrists, and Dr. Sami Abdul-Rahman the left-leaning progressives (87). Given the leftism of the PUK, the positions of Iran and Turkey in the Cold War conflict, and the Barzani KDP's attitudes toward Talabani, it didn't take long for the battle lines between the two Kurdish groups to form as the KDP moved back into Iraq with the help of Iranian SAVAK and Turkish MİT.

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<sup>200</sup> An example of an 'accident' was the death of the popular Iraqi Defense Chief and Advisor – and Saddam's brother-in-law – Adnan Khairallah in a helicopter 'accident,' (Harding, 2003). He also had two sons-in-law and a number of their family members gunned down (by their fellow clan members) after returning from their defection in Jordan, for which they were promised pardons (Ibrahim, 2006). This latter incident was essentially the ending sequence of Frank Coppola's "The Godfather," minus the subtlety and cannoli.

In 1978, seven hundred PUK Peshmerga and three major leaders of the Bizutnawa were turned upon and massacred by KDP Peshmerga in Hakkari, Turkey.

#### *Iran-Iraq War and Kurdish Divisions*

Following the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Saddam saw a chance to reverse Iraq's fortunes with regard to territory loss. He initiated the Iran-Iraq War for several reasons – the first was to gain territory and the second was to gain credibility in the Arab world. He justified the invasion on the manufactured complaints of Arabs living in the western Iranian province of Khuzistan. This area was rich in oil and gas reserves and would help reverse the humiliating border truncation that came with the Algiers Accord. On the Arab leadership front, Saddam probably wanted to manufacture his own Suez crisis and gain the kind of credibility that Nasser had in 1956 (Potter and Sick, 2004).

As in previous conflicts, the Iraqi and Iranian governments tried to leverage Kurds in opposing territories to fight for the interests of the governments. For instance, the Ba'athist government provided KDP-I with weapons to establish military depots within Iranian borders (Entessar, 2009). The KDP-I hoped to use these same weapons to secure their own autonomy. The Iraqi army planted countless mines on the border with Iran, the majority of those being on the borders in Kurdish territory (Ali, 2017). Simultaneously, the Iraqis reached out to the KDP and the PUK to prevent a united Kurdish effort against the regime, which would force Baghdad to fight two fronts instead of one.

The KDP revolted against Baghdad in 1983 while the PUK came to the aid of the KDP-I.<sup>201</sup> With the help of Iranian forces, the KDP gained more territory while the PUK received arms

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<sup>201</sup> While the combat between Iranian Kurds and Khomeini's regime differed very little in most respects, one particular detail stuck out to me as being particularly indicative of official attitudes at the time – Prosecutor General Ayatollah Khalkhali made it a policy to exsanguinate condemned Kurds before their execution and use the blood to treat wounded Iranian soldiers (Potter and Sick, 2004: 84). 'Peace talks' in 1989 with KDP-I leaders in Vienna came

from Baghdad to fight with their Iranian brethren. The détente between the PUK and Baghdad lasted until 1985, at which point discussions failed and forced the Kurds to face the Iraqi central government together.<sup>202</sup> A year later, the two reached a truce brokered in Tehran. In 1988, the KDP, PUK, and most every other minor Kurdish party formed the Iraqi Kurdistan Front for this purpose.

#### *Halabja and the Anfal Campaign*

The international support and politics of this war were complicated (morally and logistically), particularly in the West.<sup>203</sup> The Gulf states threw massive amounts of money toward Baghdad (which Saddam regarded as a ‘gift’ and states like Kuwait regarded as a ‘loan’), and it wasn’t until the end of the war that there was any open acknowledgement of Iraq’s using chemical weapons. In the war, one of Iran’s greatest assets was its massive population. Where they may have had fewer weapons per soldier, they could simply throw massive numbers at the enemy and empower their own with rhetoric aggrandizing martyrdom. Iraqi forces’ use of chemical weapons was a kind of martyrdom-retardant; it lacked the ‘flashy’ cinematic death under a hail of bullets on the field of battle.<sup>204</sup> It offered instead a slow death with blistered skin and clotted airways in a cramped camp full of the rotted and dying.

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to a violent end – perhaps it’s more accurate to say ‘a violent false-start’ – when the Iranian envoy gunned them down in their hotel room.

<sup>202</sup> Saddam had made promises to Jalal Talabani regarding oil revenues and remapping of Kirkuk, but these concessions became unnecessary after the Reagan administration put its open support with the Iraqi state (Kakei, 2012).

<sup>203</sup> Beyond the obvious issues such as the U.S. arming Iraq while being surreptitiously engaged in arming Iran vis-à-vis the Iran-Contra Affair, the Reagan and Bush’s administration’s ambivalence was staggering. Multiple medical reports from international agencies produced evidence to the effect that chemical weapons were used on Kurds by the Iraqi government, and a symbolic condemnation was issued by the UN against the attacks – unsurprisingly, they had no effect. In the US, a bill was proposed that would have amounted to \$800 million in export guarantees to Iraq being cut. However, the Bush administration fought against this at the behest of various domestic agricultural lobbies which would have been hit by this divestment in exports. (Potter and Sick, 2004; Sciolino and Wines, 1992; Harris and Aid, 2013)

<sup>204</sup> This is a statement of fact, *not an endorsement*.

In addition to using chemical weapons against Iranian forces, Iraq turned them on its Kurdish population as part of its Anfal Campaign. On March 16, 1988 Iraqi forces employed mustard gas against the city of Halabja. Somewhere between 3,200 and 5,000 were killed, and another 7,000-10,000 injured as a result of the attack. Altogether, Anfal resulted in 3,000 villages destroyed, 180,000 people killed (almost all of them being non-combatants), and 1.5 million displaced (Yildiz, 2004: 25).

Halabja wasn't the first nor the last act of genocide against Kurdish populations. We've already spoken of the Dersim Massacre among others, and we have yet to reach al-Qaeda in Iraq and later Da'ish's campaigns against the Yazidis. While it took time for the details and scale of Anfal to come out,

the cross-border Kurdish solidarity created by the attack on Halabja and its aftermath is a salient example of 'groupness as an event.' It was a solidarity reinforced by physical contact when previously divided populations encountered each other, sharing their stories and rediscovering the things they had in common... It further prompted discussions of Kurdish identity to spread. Kurdishness expanded beyond a topic of discussion among an intellectual cohort to be something discussed as a collective identity among the masses in everyday contexts. In this sense, Halabja facilitated a burgeoning sense of 'we-ness' among Kurds. (Gourlay, 2017: 31)

## Negotiating Islamic Identity

### *Yazidis*

In many respects, the Islamic issues for Kurds in Iraq are quite different from those of their brethren across the border in Turkey. I never met a single Alevi in Iraq. I'm sure there must be some that came in from Turkey and live in Duhok or perhaps Sulaymaniyah where a large

number of Turkish businesses have set up shop, but they lacked a real social presence.<sup>205</sup>

Certainly not in the same way they were in Turkey.

The inverse is true of the Yazidi.<sup>206</sup> Particularly in Erbil, they were an obvious presence, almost all of whom migrated (read: ‘fled’) from the Sinjar region. Within most visible layers of Kurdish society they were treated well. I say ‘visible,’ because the overlapping economic and political situations lend themselves to all sorts of problems that are unacceptable in the open discussion. Yazidi communities are highly insular, endogamous, and are easy enough to spot because of their localized accent. What you end up with are clusters of Yazidis all employed together. It may not be great work, but it’s work.

As we’ll see shortly, the government keeps a tight collar on what is stated in public forums regarding religion.<sup>207</sup> Despite these efforts, there are always gaps, particularly the internet, imperfect human interactions, and the rumor mill that keep small streams of anti-Yazidi feelings alive.<sup>208</sup> The intimidation, killing, and enslavement of Yazidis by violent

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<sup>205</sup> I also never met any Yazidi in Turkey, though they apparently exist – see Jenkins, 2009: 27.

<sup>206</sup> While I won’t get into the theology of Yazidism, I will mention an interesting fact regarding their being known as ‘devil worshippers’ that I’ve not seen anywhere in English literature. One of their older nicknames was *şayd*, which in the Persian plural is *şaydān*. In some places, this morphed into *şaytān*, which is phonologically equivalent to Persian pronunciation of the Quranic word for Satan (*şaytān*) (see Tavakkulī, 2000: 15-17).

<sup>207</sup> Part of this is to counteract Ba’athist policies of requiring Yazidis to register as Arabs and cease speaking Kurdish.

<sup>208</sup> Kurdish folk stories pre-1950 cast Yazidis in a very negative light, filling in the role of the trickster/cheater that gets their comeuppance in bad fortunes as a sign of divine rebuke. I say this just to give context rather than smear Kurdish culture with a racist brush; every culture has their own folktales full of embarrassingly anachronistic attitudes. Unfortunately, these prejudices still exist. I was speaking with a friend from an NGO that had built a school in one of the camps outside of Sulaymaniyah. They told me that some people in the camp had broken its windows and graffitied its exterior. The camp director said the responsible parties were, “uneducated individuals.” When my friend asked my opinion, I asked what things were like when they were, particularly with the kids. “They definitely treated the Yezidi kids badly – they yelled and cursed at them when they got in our way as they led us to the school.”

“Aaand there you have it. \$20 says they get the same treatment in class from their non-Yezidi peers and teachers, and these kids who have no other levers of control lash out at the symbol of their oppressors – the school they’re required to go to. What you’re seeing is endemic sectarian issues playing out in real-time.”

fundamentalists is the subject of no small amount of media and academic attention starting in the Second Gulf War.

### *Christians*

The same is true of interactions and perspectives on the Christian community. As I've mentioned previously, Ankawa is a communal node attached to the north side of the circular city. It is populated almost entirely by Christians – Assyrians, Chaldeans, Lebanese Maronites, and Kurdish Christians. Walking through Ankawa neighborhoods at night looks like Christmas, every house having some version of the cross formed with strings of bright lights. Despite being a pagan deity from antiquity, many Assyrians use the Lamassu icons as a token of their Assyrian heritage. The large Hotel Lamassu is one of the first things you see coming off of the 120m road to enter Ankawa. Due to the fact that many Muslim women in Erbil don't wear a hijab, items like these facilitate easier differentiation.

The liquor stores and bars that attract customers from all over Erbil are concentrated in Ankawa. While a number of my stories feature Muslims in varying states of inebriation, the presence of so much alcohol in Erbil is a source of friction for segments of the most conservative Muslims in the community.<sup>209</sup>

Normally, this is where an introduction into Zoroastrianism would fit. The reason it doesn't has to do with its notably distinctions from Christianity and Yazidism.<sup>210</sup> In most cases, modern Zoroastrians are more of the adopted, converted, 'born again' variety. Only in the most insular families or secluded communities would you be able to find individuals and families that

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<sup>209</sup> It also made it extremely popular with ex-patriots and military contractors. Whenever I talk about Erbil with people who have been stationed there, the German bar in Ankawa always comes up. It's always a shock to them that I never went to it.

<sup>210</sup> One more aspect of Yazidism that disqualifies it as a protest identity is its lack of mechanisms for or acceptance of 'conversion,' ergo no proselytizing.



can trace their Zoroastrian identities back in an uninterrupted line. More than simply being a minority, Zoroastrianism is a *protest identity*..

#### *Kurdish secularism?*

In terms of institutions and attitudes, there is a general, open tolerance of religious diversity that exceeds that in their neighboring cultures. Some of it is top-down, particularly the policing aspect, but others are entirely ground-up. With some notable exceptions, everyone I spoke to genuinely wanted to get along with everyone else. When I asked why this was, the overall feel of their response was, “we’re sick of the violence. We’re tired of the divisions.” I saw a lot of people who worked with different religious groups with no ulterior motivation that I could see.

Only days after the October 2016 conflicts in Kirkuk, I was in the gym, channeling all my stress and pent-up frustration through my core, limbs, and hands into the heavy bag. I was alone, save the two attendants at the front desk. One was reciting Quranic verses (which were in Arabic) from memory, letting the large warehouse setting produce pleasing acoustics. His companion gave him feedback (in Kurdish). The first was obviously a Muslim, but his friend was an Assyrian Christian. This kind of thing happened all of the time. I suspect there are many such individuals, the violence having created a numb, hollow space within themselves that functions as a defensive layer. In places super-saturated with harrowing events, this is healthy behavior. You can only absorb so much.

Unfortunately, there is a flip-side to all of this brotherly love. To be fair, this is at least partially a confirmation bias. I came looking to prove that the situation was far more complicated than ‘Kurds are secular.’ If my time in Turkey had taught me one thing, it’s that if you want to really see who people are, you need to see them in crisis. The more extreme the crisis and

turmoil, the more social filters break down. I expected to find cognitive dissonance between these ‘live and let live’ attitudes when confronted with identity-centered violence. Sure enough, there was plenty cognitive dissonance to go around. I’m happy to report that it wasn’t universal, and in cases where it was prevalent, some of it was subject to major events like the invasion of Kirkuk.<sup>211</sup>

As I said, some of the religious tolerance is government enforced; the ‘force’ in that word wouldn’t be required if there weren’t divergent attitudes on the subject. It’s difficult to say how much of what happens on the ground is unofficial policy and how much of it is a result of unchecked environmental pressures. If you have a beard or if you look Arab, I guarantee you will get stopped much longer at checkpoints than a clean-shaven Kurd.<sup>212</sup> I know for a fact that there are upper members of the Kurdish Regional Government that have no love for Islam and are constrained by social factors to keep up a pretense in public. If you want to see evidence of those social constraints, simply attend Friday prayer at any mosque in the city. Erbil has its fair share, and I never went to one that wasn’t nearly-capacity for Friday sermon.

Similar to Turkish mosques and the Diyanet, the topics of mosque sermons (*watārī haynī*) in Kurdistan are dictated by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.<sup>213</sup> For whatever a sermon itself may say, it’s being given to a room full of men with a lot of different ideas on how one ought to be a Muslim. This presented me with many opportunities to explore the problematic nature of the borders of the ummah. I made probing attitudes and definitions of the

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<sup>211</sup> It never ceased to amaze me how people’s recollected memories differed based on their interpretations of current realities.

<sup>212</sup> See p.356.

<sup>213</sup> This is a fact that I’ll return to again and again as it colors everything that happens in the mosque, particularly in what goes unsaid.

ummah my go-to tactic for gauging Kurdish attitudes. Every chance I got, I asked what people thought the role of Islam in Kurdistan should be and who was or wasn't a good Muslim.<sup>214</sup>

*Negotiating Islamic Identity: "Who is a (Good) Muslim?"*

The following anecdotes are just a sample of the conversations I had, but they buttress the main themes of what I saw in Iraqi Kurdistan. The first and most common leaned on a more humanist approach to religion, essentializing the cores of both Christianity and Islam into the phrase, "Islam and Christianity – brothers," a statement I've literally heard more times than I can recount. The second is a drawn-out version of the *takbīr* – God is great – manifests Muslim pride in the Quran, Muhammad, and the elevated way of living provided by Islam. The third defined Islam by its limitations, which almost always meant discussing alcohol consumption. Ankawa must have felt uncomfortably close in the minds' of the latter two categories in Erbil.<sup>215</sup>

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"I am a Muslim, but.." Rostam said, trailing off as he picked up an open can of beer from the center console. He took a drink, then continued, "but in my heart, I love all people. Muslims, Christians, Jews.. all people."

*\*sip\**

I refer to approaches like Rastam as 'the qualified Muslim.'

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"What do you think about Islam in Kurdistan?" I asked Soran, a young, unmarried 30-year old Muslim man.

"It is more free to be Christian," Soran said.

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<sup>214</sup> Despite the fact that most of my subjects were taxi drivers (i.e. a potential sampling error), the nature of Iraqi Kurdistan's taxi economy gave me a fairly wide variety of experiences.

<sup>215</sup> While I had far fewer interactions further east, I know Sulaymaniyah has its own 'Ankawa' – Salim Street is a major thoroughfare, and it has at least two solid blocks of liquor stores.

“For example?” I asked.

“You can drink when you’re Christian,” he said.

“I’m a Christian and I don’t drink alcohol.”

“What?” he asked, his incredulity feeling more a probe to see if I misspoke.

“I’m a Christian and I don’t drink alcohol and don’t use drugs.”

“But Christians can do that,” he said, clearly confused.

I shrugged.

“Certain kinds can’t.”

Usually the only Kurds that envied the Chaldean and Assyrian populations for their publicly accepted consumption of alcohol were the same ones that had consumed enough in secret to know they liked it.

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“What will the role of Islam be in the Kurdish state?” I asked Rajan as we drove. This question was one of my go-to prompts for trips long enough to get an answer. More often than not, the answers were a bit vague.

“A big one; Islamic law is beautiful, and it will be the law,” he replied. Vague. Try control question #1.

“Do you think the Barzanis good Muslims?”

“Absolutely,” he said without hesitation, “They are upright (*čāk*).”

I nodded, following up with my contrast question,

“Is Erdoğan a good Muslim?”

Erdoğan, leader of the Muslim-oriented Justice and Development Party that has put many tens of millions of lira into Turkey’s Islamic outreach.

Rajan's reaction mirrored that of many of his countrymen, "We are surrounded by *bad Muslims*... Bashar al-Asad, Erdoğan.. you are a Muslim, right?"

"No, I'm Christian."

"Ok, you're a Christian. But you can't go four days from now and say you're Muslim. You can make it say so on your (ID) card, but that doesn't make it so. I could say I'm a Christian but it wouldn't be so. Erdoğan says he's a Muslim, but he isn't. Barzanis are good Muslims."

Nearly everyone I ever asked about the Barzanis, neighboring leaders, and Islam responded the same way; a) there was nothing in Islam that forbade Kurds from being independent; b) the Barzanis were upright Muslims; c) Erdoğan, Assad, and al-Hašd al-Ša<sup>c</sup>bī, were bad ones.

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Muhammad, who was at least in his sixties, had been driving a taxi for the last year and a half. A perfect example of the economic crisis changing 'retirement' to 'chauffer.' He was born in a small village north of Sulaymaniyah, and had lived in Erbil for 45 years, during which time all six of his children were brought into the world.

"45 years! That's a long time," I said. "You've seen a lot of changes in that time."

"Yes," he replied in a voice worn through with age and smoking, "there are a lot of changes."

Muhammad spoke to me about the referendum and Kurdish independence similar to many of his generation – a man who was born into conflict, lost male members of his family in those conflicts, and talks about further conflict with the same expression of weary acceptance. Iran, Iraq, Turkey – one by one, they all featured in his recitation of state actors with whom he has seen his people fight.

"What do you think the role of Islam is in Kurdish society?" I asked him.

After a moment to reflect, he said, "Islam is pure. Everyone is a brother."

“What do you think the role of Islam is right now in Kurdish society?”

“It is very important. But you can be a Christian and I can be a Muslim, yet you could be good and I could be bad. It has to do with what is in you.” He continued on in this, more or less repeating the same concept a few times until I switched tracks.

“What do you think is the role of Islam in the politics of Kurdistan?”

“Well, there is very little of Islam in the parliament. Very little.”

“What do you think its role *should* be? I mean, what do you think it would be if Kurdistan became an independent state?”

“It should be the law. For example, stealing. You take something,” he says, sticking out his forearm, “and you lose it,” he then punctuates the statement by mimicking the hand of that arm being severed by his other hand. “You’d only steal once.”

I didn’t have a great response to this. On the one hand (pun intended), I suppose it could be true. On the other, if there’s one thing about systems of governance and punishment, it’s that people will find a way around it. However, my very first thought, which I probably would have crafted into a slightly more diplomatically phrased question if I had more time in the taxi, was, “How is this different from Da’ish?”

*Negotiating Islamic Identity: p.II – The Da’ish Dilemma*

*Renas, a Pious Kurd*

“It is Islam, not ‘Izlam’ ... I know it is just the American accent, but ‘Izlam’ means ‘in error,’” said my new acquaintance. “It is important not to mix the two.”<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Despite the fact that he had wanted me to speak in “American English” for the practice, I simply took the correction with a nod.

This, and his asking me to not record him, more or less dictated the mood of our proceeding communications. I'd met 'Renas' through a mutual friend and had communicated with him once or twice before coming to Kurdistan. He'd agreed to meet but was quite adamant that it be in a public place.

"Tell me, what do you think of Islam?" he asked. Later, it was obvious that this was a control question of his own.

I don't remember my exact response, though given my audience I gave an honest and less academic (less confrontational) answer than Zein's "islams." Whatever it was, it satisfied Renas enough to not cut our conversation short. Of all of my interviewees, he was *by far* the most skittish, and this list spans the entirety of the social spectrum.<sup>217</sup> I'm not certain he seriously considered me as a possible spy or provocateur, but it took a good while for him to loosen up. The one point upon which he was clearly happy to be together for was the opportunity it gave him to use his English with a native speaker. Generally, I prefer working on my Kurdish for the same reason, but if the only way I could get material from an interviewee is doing it in English, then so be it.

One of the first significant subjects we managed was his upcoming nuptials. Apparently Renas had been trying to rent part of an apartment out in order to have money to get married. When I congratulated him and asked how he met his fiancée, he said he didn't have one yet. He was not engaged, but he was all but ready financially to be wed and had joined that particular market. By 'market,' I mean to say that his mother was working through the Muslim social fabric for suitable candidates.

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<sup>217</sup> I speculate that people in Renas' position – educated, English-speaking, rising middle-class Kurds lacking independently wealthy families or important political connections – have the most to lose by getting into political trouble. These hesitations and self-censorships have fewer drivers in the incentive structure for the very top and very bottom of the social strata.

“But not all Kurds here are like this. Some do it how you do it,” meaning Western courtship rituals proceeded by a long engagement, “but many still do it traditionally. Erbil is changing, uh, how do you say it?”

“In transition?” I proffered.

“Yes, Kurds are in transition.”

Marriage and gender relations were big parts of this transition, but on a personal level there was only one real point of friction for Renas. As we kept talking about the differences in our languages and cultures, we came to music.

With a look of mild embarrassment, he confided, “The truth is I love Lil’ Wayne.<sup>218</sup> Not all of the blasphemies and things about girls and drugs, but I love Lil’ Wayne.”

I got a good chuckle out of that one. I would never have pegged him as a rap fan, much less Lil’ Wayne. We came back to his love of rap a few times, and in each subsequent mention, he seemed more and more at odds with himself over the normative implications of his musical preferences. It made him uncomfortable that music with a message so contrary to his core beliefs was so resonant for him.

Like water down a long funnel, our conversation circled its inevitable way down to Da<sup>c</sup>ish. What followed is something that I still am not sure I’ve got a full grasp of.

The single, best word to describe Da<sup>c</sup>ish in Renas’ mind is ‘dilemma.’ On the one hand, they quite clearly fought against his people and he knew people who had died in the conflict. He was always fiercely protective of the image the Peshmerga and Kurds place among other Middle Eastern military forces. As such, Da<sup>c</sup>ish had struck at something dear to his heart.

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<sup>218</sup> An American rapper born in 1982 in New Orleans, Louisiana.



On the other hand, any time he condemned Da'ish for what it was doing, he did so by referring to what Ali Bapir<sup>219</sup> or some other cleric wrote to prove that they were not following correct Islamic law. The closest thing to an outright, personal condemnation he made that evening was,

“They murder, and Muslims aren’t supposed to do that.”

A short time later, he suggested we take a trip to the local book shop that specialized in Islamic materials. He showed me an entire shelf dedicated to the writings of Ali Bapir.

“Ah, this here is a good book, do you know these words?” he asked.

I peered at the cover.

“I think I do. Minimalism? Extremism?”

“Yes!” he said, a certain pedagogical pleasure the word, “It is, “The Least Amount and the Extremist.””

The Minimalist and the Extremist.

While I worked through other titles, he grabbed a copy of Ali Bapir’s book dealing with the permissibility of modern music.

“I don’t know where my copy of this has gone. I’ll just buy it again.”

I followed suit by buying a copy of Bapir’s Khwānāsī, Ayyūn, Īmān (Theology, Faith, Belief).

After the shop, we said our goodbyes and agreed to meet the next day. Later that night, he changed his mind, telling me that he couldn’t believe that I would take his words and put them in a negative light about Islam. I suggested he take a look at some of the papers I’d written and had posted on academic social media platforms, including one that was published by the University

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<sup>219</sup> See pp.245-246 for more on Ali Bapir.

of Chicago, and make his judgement from there. This seemed to settle him somewhat, but he refused to talk about anything religious from that time on.

The best I can come up with is the following. The reliance on the opinion of Ali Bapir and repurchasing his book seemed textbook acts of self-reassurance. On the one hand, he is faced with a society that is “in transition” from more traditional Islamic values to Western practices which are frequently in conflict with the core of those values. Particularly on account of his deep love for Kurdistan, I think this pains him greatly. While I have no doubt he hates Da‘ish for what it’s done to Kurds, it does put itself forward as the strict embodiment of Islamic law, the only cure for the moral cancers that pollute modernity. Da‘ish is a literal black and white representation of life that sweeps away internal debates. Its banner reflects this perspective – written in non-decorative, white script on a pure black background, “There is no God but God - Muhammad is the messenger of God.” As we’ll continue to see, this has intense drawing power to young men in search of stability.<sup>220</sup>

While I met others who showed similar traits concerning the love of one’s people and family, moral conflict over social transitions, and the fear of what the latter will bring to the former, they were the most clear in Renas.

Protective. Wary of misuse. Conflicted.

*Kurds Away From Islam – Protest Identities*

In one of my series of interview seeking, I was connected to a young Kurdish woman named Peri. As a young professional woman in the KRG, she was yet another example of the ‘transition’ that was taking place within Iraqi Kurdistan. She was supposed to be my go-between

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<sup>220</sup> In many respects, this goes beyond Da‘ish and speaks to the power of any extreme ideological group that mines the insecurities of young men and offers a path (ostensibly) clear of ambiguities.

for the people I was trying to interview, but she turned out to be more interesting and informative than her superiors.

One day we were both waiting for her boss to be free, and we had gotten talking about my research topic. I told her that I'd met a fair mix of attitudes regarding Islam. For some it was an absolute given that it was part of the culture. Others, like Peri, felt it was an involuntary adoption.

“We were forced to become Muslim... my great-great-grandparents, they were Yazidi. One of the Muslim rulers that came in wanted a castle built of Yazidi skulls.”

The coming months were filled with iterations of this statement – first, a citation of ancestral heritage, then the statement that Islam was forced, followed by an example of Islamic brutality. A younger teen that worked with one of my roommates told me his grandmother was Jewish. In other cases, the only thing the informant was (adamantly) clear on was that they *weren't* Muslim.<sup>221</sup> The Kurds with the most open disdain for Islam were generally in their late teens to mid-twenties. It may very well be that there isn't necessarily an age divide, but that the operative difference between these groups is their willingness to talk about it.

Other young Kurdish men I spoke to had different reactions to the religious polarization, most recently embodied by Da'ish and Iranian-backed militias.<sup>222</sup> A group at the gym once told me, “the next generation [of Muslims] will be better,” he said in polished English. “This generation has seen many bad things from Islam.. the next will be better.”

Whatever lay at the end of this transition, it would be better than what they were seeing. Other people, like my roommate Yaran, openly flouted religious norms and declared themselves

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<sup>221</sup> “His name isn't actually Četo,” Baho told me as we walked back downstairs from helping ‘Četo’ move a mattress. “His actual name is Muhammad. But he doesn't answer to it. He wants to be *super* Kurdish.”

<sup>222</sup> Namely the Hašdī Šaabī (in Kurdish) or al-Ḥašd al-Ša'abī (“popular troops” in Arabic) which we'll get to later in far greater detail.

atheists or agnostics.<sup>223</sup> Still others looked back to what they believed to be Kurds' roots – Zoroastrianism.

### *The 'Rebirth' of Zoroastrianism*

In my time in Kurdistan, I met many Yazidis, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, and a number of other groups, but no Zoroastrians. Every one of them I 'know' of is second-hand. So-and-so's friend or neighbor that converted. Articles aplenty in English and Kurdish amounting to the same thing. I honestly don't know if this is a product of Erbil having fewer than Sulaymaniyah or if it was a simple roll of the dice and the topic of someone's being Zoroastrian simply didn't come up. The number of Kurdish converts to Zoroastrianism in 2015 is anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 (Smith and Shadarevian, 2017).

Edith Szanto, a brilliant ethnographer on Kurdish culture, has written a good deal on this subject,

In the modern period, the earliest claim that Kurds were originally Zoroastrian was put forth by the Badr Khan brothers in the 1930s (Allison 2009: 285-290). The Badr Khan brothers claimed that the Kurds originally were followers of Yazidism, which they considered as a Kurdish version of Zoroastrianism. In the 1970s and 1980s, the idea that Kurds were Zoroastrians became a central tenet of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey, further gaining momentum also in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Abdullah Öcalan ... openly taught that Zoroastrianism is morally and intellectually superior to Islam. Öcalan popularized Zoroastrianism as a liberating force, which could free Kurds from their oppression by Islamic, feudal enemies both within and without. For Öcalan, Zoroastrianism is a crucial part of the Kurdish past...

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<sup>223</sup> One notable manifestation of the conscious act of moving away from Islam is in the ways names are changed. For instance, some Islamic names, like Ahmed and Mustafa, are changed in Sulaymaniyah to the nicknames of Aha and Miçû, respectively. Others are more straightforward in their approach. Baho and I had a neighbor that refused to go by his legal name, Muhammad, but rather Kobān Kūrdī, which he had selected entirely for himself. (Apo the Kurdish abbreviation of the longer name Abdullah, like Memo for Mehmet and Hemo for Hamit. "Memo, Hemo... We don't call them by their proper names. It's very Sulaymaniyah.")

Disgusted with ISIS, some Kurds turned away from Islam following the fall of Mosul in 2014. Many became atheists, while others sought comfort in Zoroastrianism (Fattah 2015; Latif 2015; Khalil 2016; Salloum 2016; Neurink 2017).” (Szanto, 2018)

In her Kurmanji article on the same subject, she wrote,

[According to Kurds that became Zoroastrians, Zoroastrians are the “true” religion of Kurds before they became Muslims... their own version of created Zoroastrianism is nationalist, post-modern and liberal. Kurdish Zoroastrians hold that the argument of the religion of Islam is that Kurds are backwards...]” (Szanto, 2018)

Szanto went on to illustrate the interesting contradiction to the claim of authentic roots, namely that what is actually being promoted is not a replication of ancient practice, but rather a “nationalist, postmodern, and liberal” Kurdish Zoroastrianism (p.97).<sup>224</sup> Her informant, “Yasa,” arranged for her to view several Zoroastrian rituals, but the participants were actors.

“Yasna,” in contrast to Pir Luqman’s organization, does not actually value ritual. Awat has stated a number of times that for her Zoroastrianism is primarily a philosophy and that she rejects “superstition,” which for her includes ritual and theological thought. Nevertheless, she supports and arranges ritual shows in order to demonstrate to others, both Kurds and foreigners, lay citizens and government officials, that Zoroastrianism is a religion with recognizable traits, which is able to attract adherents, or at least sympathizers, in Kurdistan.

In this latter example, it is more reminiscent of the counter-culture Zoroastrian ethic espoused by British singer-songwriter Freddy Mercury of “Queen.” In the setting of photographs, filming, and interviews of actions carried out by actors, it is a statement of presence, of appreciation for a past that can be reconfigured to reflect the present. From the perspective of converts, or perhaps more accurately, ‘reverts’ – Zoroastrianism in particular has the gravitas of antiquity. Despite the modified orthopraxy and focus, the claim for Zoroastrian roots far precedes that of

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<sup>224</sup> For anyone interested in the topic of Kurdish Zoroastrianism, I highly suggest you read Szanto’s article. It’s relatively short, but very informative.

Islam, and by connection, putting their Zoroastrian Kurdish ancestors directly connected to a chain that precedes the Arab Islam. The socio-political struggles of the now given legitimacy by connecting it to the ‘then.’

The bottom-line is that movement away from Islam by Kurds is the product of one or more of the following – a statement of Kurdishness/Kurdish nationalism, an invented nostalgia for a past free of the ‘trappings of Islam’ (i.e. honor killings, polygamy, separation of genders, etc.),<sup>225</sup> and a frame of self-definition that isn’t dictated by outside sources, particularly those many Kurds view as their conquerers.

#### 1990-2001

On August 28, 1990, Iraqi forces invaded and annexed Kuwait. The UN passed Resolution 678 which stated that Iraq needed to withdraw by January 21, 1991. They didn’t. Four days before the deadline, the US commenced air attacks. By February 28 the fighting stopped. UN Resolution 687 placed the economy and military under international control.

On March 1, the intifada started against Saddam’s government. While many of the forces involved had tentative support from the US and Saudi Arabia, the heavy influence of Iran vis-à-vis the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and their military wing in Iraq, the Badr Brigades, deterred further involvement and gave Baghdad the kind of ideological ammunition it needed. The rebellion was crushed in short order.

In terms of Kurdish affairs, the invasion of Kuwait, the 1991 intifada, and the no-fly zones established by coalition air forces created a situation wherein the Kurds of northern Iraq could set up a local self-administration. It wasn’t without a high cost. Baghdad’s reprisal against

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<sup>225</sup> In a podcast by Pir Luqman, leader of a Zoroastrian center in Sulaymaniyah, claimed that “the Kurds don’t know violence,” except through the inclusion of Islam into their culture.

the north generated over a million refugees pouring into the Iranian and Turkish borders. The no-fly zone at the thirty-sixth parallel created the launching point from which the KDP and PUK could fight to regain Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, respectively (Allawi, 2007: 50).

In May 1992 a group composed of eight separate Kurdish parties formed the Iraqi Kurdish Front held elections. For two years after the formation of the quasi-autonomous federal government things remained stable between the KDP and PUK (Gunter, 1996: 226). Power sharing had been divided equally between the two, but the combination of past grudges, institutional and environmental deficiencies, actual power (read: revenue) sharing was more a wishful idea than a reality. The KDP and PUK split apart over how to deal with minor Kurdish parties under their wings that betrayed and attacked their respective leader party.

In 1994, representatives of the two parties met in Paris to form a working constitution to quell the violence. The Turkish reaction, led by foreign minister Mumtaz Soysal, heavily blockaded these efforts and worked with Iraq, Iran, and Syria to economically and politically blockade the KRG. In the meantime, they also worked to play the two Kurdish parties off of each other to maneuver a conclusion that worked in their own favor. For example, Talabani claimed that Turkey was giving weapons to the KDP and using the PKK as an excuse for direct interference (Gunter, 1996: 239). Fighting between the two reignited in earnest in 1995 over a land dispute in Shaqlawa (north of Erbil).

Herein lies one of the more important aspects of the civil war – both the Barzanis and the Talabanis demonstrated that their personal feuds for hegemony was their true priority. Talabani, having been cut out of smuggling in the KRG, engaged Iranian support and pushed the KDP out of Erbil and all the way to Turkish border. In response to this Barzani turned to Hussein. In 1993, Iran was the primary supporter of the Islamic Movement in Kurdistan, whose attacks against the

PUK helped spur the civil war in the first place. Saddam enacted the Anfal Campaign a mere seven years prior to helping the Barzanis fight the PUK. That same year, the PKK came in to aid the PUK against the KDP.<sup>226</sup>

After 15 months of bloody warfare, the two sides met (with pressure from Iran), and a peace was brokered by the US in Drogheda, Ireland. During that period, most of the opposition elements that had been uprooted in the south and re-rooted in the north once again found themselves without a base of operation. The CIA opted against backing Ahmad Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress' offensive against Baghdad in 1995 and it was swept out of Kurdistan. The Iraq National Accord, led by Ayad Allawi, had more American support for their coup attempt, but were foiled by agents from Baghdad a year later.

On October 31, 1998, President Bill Clinton signed the Iraqi Liberation Act which put forward some \$97 million for those opposition parties working toward 'democratic change' in Iraq. These included the KDP, the PUK, and the IMK (Allawi, 2007: 67). Representatives from the KDP and PUK were present at the INA's meeting in New York in 1999.

The behavior of the major Kurdish players stood in sharp contrast to those of the Shi'ite alliances, a pattern that would stay consistent for the better part of a decade. Between the mass emigration of Iraqi Shi'ites during and after the Iran-Iraq War and the 1991 intifada's failure, the Shi'ite leadership was embittered and suspicious of further reliance on American aid. The Grand Ayatollah al-Khoei had been under house arrest until his death in 1992, and his successor Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani was prevented from preaching in his own mosque until after Saddam fell. On February 19, 1999, Saddam had Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr and two of his sons assassinated after giving a Friday sermon in Najaf, Iraq. Everything came down in a line, and

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<sup>226</sup> 1995 was the same year the CIA started its off-and-on support of the Iraqi National Congress (INC)-guided programs against Saddam.



this last insult was sorely felt amongst religiously active Shi'ites. Organizations like SCIRI and Da'wa refused to participate with the INA.

From 1999 to 2001, lower-level conflict continued on the ground. Saddam's forces continued with Arabization policies in Kirkuk and sporadic shelling of Kurdish forces. While the armed conflict between the KDP and PUK was contained, the polarization of administrative powers essentially solidified their respective fiefdoms.<sup>227</sup>

*Kurdish Islamists in the 1990's – northern preludes to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)*

*The Islamic Movement of Kurdistan*

In 1987, Iran worked through Kurdish refugees to train and arm Kurdish Islamists to act as their proxies within northern Iraq. This was the foundation of the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK). Its leader was Sheikh Othman Abdul-Aziz, a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood from 1960 to 1980 (Kakei, 2013),<sup>228</sup> and many of its most prominent members were Kurds who returned from fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. After winning too few votes for a seat in the 1992 elections, the IMK decided to do what it could to destabilize the KDP-PUK relationship and establish its own ends. By 1993, the IMK had declared its intention to establish an Islamic state and was in control of a string of villages along the border with Iran.<sup>229</sup>

IMK control came to a swift end as the PUK Peshmerga routed them and captured Sheikh Othman. This broke the IMK into its constituent pieces; some changed their tactics to unarmed, political resistance while others, such as the forces of Faraj Ahmad Najmuddin and Ali Bapir,

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<sup>227</sup> To their credit, both Nechirvan Barzani of the KDP and Khosrat Rasul (then) of the PUK owned up to the massive deficiencies in how UN funds were administered during the 1999-2002 era and were trying to increase accountability, (Stansfield, 2003: 166).

<sup>228</sup> He was also responsible for the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, but later became disenfranchised with the Brotherhood's pan-Islamist nature conflicting with Kurdish nationalist aspirations (Romano, 2007: 8).

<sup>229</sup> "If you're looking for Islamists, you just need to go to Tawela and Hawraman." While this statement was made by my friend Muhammad the grocer in 2017, it was apparently true in 1993 as well. Both were under IMK control at that time, along with Biyara, Khormal, Gool, Panjwin, Sargat and Said Sadiq (Romano, 2007: 9).

fled to Iran. The Kurdish civil war gave the latter groups their opening to reassert themselves in eastern Iraqi Kurdistan. Portions of the IMK, including veterans of Afghanistan such as Hassan Sofi, Omar Barziani, and Mullah Krekar, broke off when the IMK did not assert Sharia law in towns they occupied. This splinter group formed Kurdish Hamas and went about the kinds of virtue-signaling violence that have become the hallmark of such groups, such as throwing acid at unveiled women and attacks against secular and irreligious institutions.

Following the KDP and PUK settling their differences for the time, the IMK made the decision to realign itself. IMK forces attacked Hamas territory, successfully killing its first leader, Hassan Sofi. As the more radical elements were culled, the IMK succeeded in its rapprochement with the PUK and even entered into the governing cabinet.

In 1999, the IMK splinter groups attempted to reunite with the IMK under the banner of the Islamic Federation of Kurdistan. This lasted until mid-2001, with Ali Bapir's creating the Islamic Group with the former-members of al-Nahḍa and Mullah Krekar with the Reformist Group.

#### *Ansar al-Islam*

Tawheed, an Erbil-based Islamist group responsible for attacks against the KDP, joined with the remnants of Hamas to form Jund al-Islam ("Army of Islam" in Arabic, not Kurdish). There is evidence that by early September, 2001 several dozen Jund al-Islam fighters had been trained in Afghanistan and Osama bin Laden had transferred \$300,000 to its leadership, and the organization changed its name to Ansar al-Islam ('Supporters of Islam,' AI; Romano, 2007: 13; "Ansar al-Islam," Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). While AI initially vied against the Islamic Group, the two managed to set aside their differences and cooperate.

Based on available sources, AI took support and direction from a slew of actors. They operated on the ridge of Iran, had Iranian passports, and their fighters from Afghanistan travelled freely through Iran to reach Iraq. While the exact ties to al-Qaeda and bin Laden are anything but transparent, the weight of evidence lies in there having been significant interaction between the two (Gregory, 2008).

#### Dealing with Extremists and Problem-Makers

“If you were the government, how many mosques would you have?” Professor Amir asked me in a quasi-conspiratorial tone. After a pause for affect, he held up his forefinger. “One. You would have one mosque. It would be easy to control.”

It was a simple statement, condensing an immense amount of conflict into a single locale. The mosque. There are hundreds of mosques in Erbil alone, and many hundreds more spread between the villages and cities between larger destinations like Duhok to the west and Sulaymaniyah to the east. We’ve already talked about the importance of mosques with respect to Turkey, namely the Diyanet and its roles in domestic and foreign affairs and what amounts to anti-Diyanet practices. I thought, correctly as it turned out, one of the best lines of inquiry to follow was finding what kind of mechanisms were in place within the Iraqi Kurdish context.

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In my first two weeks of being in Erbil, I was able to have a meeting with ‘Rastam,’ a friend of a friend of a friend that worked at the KRG Department of Foreign Relations. He spoke to me with the understanding that my record would bear out that what he told me were his opinions, not official policy.

We met at a nice café not far from my new apartment. He spoken excellent English and was quite open to questions. A while into our conversation, I asked him,

“So how does the upper leadership regard Islam?”

“Oh, they hate it,” he said, “But they can’t come out and say that.”

I wouldn’t describe my reaction as one of ‘shock,’ as the last several decades of Barzani history with Islam is an awkward one.

We continued on to the topics of Kurds joining/not joining Da’ish and attitudes toward Islamism in general. As it turns out, his mother had lived in Mosul up until 2014.

There are a few things that you must understand. First, Kurds do not rob each other. Because of, well, banking issues, everyone keeps their money in their home. But Kurds do not rob each other.<sup>230</sup> Things under the Shi’ite security forces were not good. What they would do is this – they’d go to a Sunni home, even more if you’re a Sunni Kurd, and they’d say, “We know there is a terrorist in this home. Everyone go into this room while we search the premises.” They’d stick everyone in the same room, lock it, and then go through the whole house. The police would find the money, take it, and then let the family out, telling them, “you are lucky we did not find the terrorist this time. You’d better watch out!” They’d have taken all of their money... people hated them... So when ISIS came, things had been bad enough that they really didn’t think it could be worse... [My mother] came to Hewler several months ago. Back then you couldn’t just get out of Mosul and get to Kurdistan. No, you had to be guaranteed by someone at the checkpoint, and I was able to guarantee her [passage]. I had to drive over to the border, not far away [from here], and show the Asayish<sup>231</sup> that I worked for the government and that I could guarantee her.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> While this sounds like an overestimation, it’s quite accurate. Only rarely do break-ins occur – not in homes, cars, or work – and when they do, it’s usually by family or other people connected to the victim. “If someone steals something else from another Kurd, it’s because they know them and knew what they wanted. People just don’t randomly break into homes here. And it doesn’t happen often,” Baho told me.

“Why do you think that is?”

He paused and thought for a moment.

“I don’t know. Maybe because the government already steals so much we just say stealing from each other directly off-limits,” he said, laughing despite (or because of) the uncomfortable truth of the statement.

As for keeping money at home due to ‘banking issues,’ see pp.278-280.

<sup>231</sup> The Kurdish internal security forces.

<sup>232</sup> Even three years later, it was incredibly difficult to move anything in Kurdistan. It took almost a month for Samir to get the authorization to have his large, flat screen tv moved from Duhok to Hawler.

*1st Meeting at the Wazāretī Awqāf ū Kārūbārī Aynī (Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs)*

On the morning of November 27, I rolled out of bed and set to my routine. Send a few emails, check American news outlets, and then go through Twitter for Kurdish, Turkish, and Arab news. More politicians and movie moguls accused of lecherous behavior, Black Friday was a bust, Cyber Monday will be record-breaking, and the latest batch of Tweets from President Trump. Of greater interest was Muqtada al-Sadr announcing his support of Haidar al-Abadi's seeking a second term in office. Only hours away from what might send waves through Turkish-US relations, I could find nothing on Reza Zarrab, interestingly enough. My information reverie was broken as Baho emerged from his room, which set off stage two of the routine, namely breakfast.

We ate our usual – eggs, yogurt<sup>233</sup>, cheese, and jam. We chatted about our dreams from the previous night and how things were going for the day. Despite having my iqāmāt<sup>234</sup> in hand and having settled a schedule of places outside the city I needed to visit, I decided to try the Ministry of Awqāf and Religious Affairs in-person (email culture is still catching on in Iraqi Kurdistan). I'd tried to do this the day before, but by the time I was heading to the ministry it was nearly lunch, which is to say that I had no idea if they would be there when I came or whether they'd come back to work from where they'd gone. Salary issues being what they are, this is a very real logistical problem for everyone here.

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<sup>233</sup> Baho once worked at a store that sold different kinds of yogurt. He picked up a large tin of upper-end yogurt for us to try. However, he was quite disappointed, as “[it wasn't] *jamūs* (Asian water buffalo), even though it says it is,” he said, sighing.

“False advertising, huh?”

“What is false advertising?” he asked.

“Selling something represented as one thing while in reality it isn't what they say.” If I'd been a little quicker with my quips I would have said, “It's the fake news of food. Fake food. Sad.”

“Ah, yes, we have a lot of false advertising here.”

<sup>234</sup> *Iqāmāt* (despite being an Arabic plural) is the shorthand for a residency card and anything to do with the residency process.

I had also tried to work through the *wastā* system to get an interview, but none of my contacts had yielded anything, and it's nearly impossible to know when showing up somewhere will result in an open or closed door. I was nervous at the prospect of being treated like I had been at the Qushtapa refugee camp or Salahadin University,<sup>235</sup> so I was putting both the Ministry of Awqāf and myself to the test.

I arrived at the Ministry rehearsing key words and terms in my mind as I approached the guards. I introduced myself and announced that I wanted a meeting with a representative from the Islamic segment of the Ministry. The bemused guards made a few call outs with their walkie-talkies, and in less than two minutes I was on my way in to a meeting with Barzan Salah Barzani, who was precisely the kind of person I was hoping to meet.

Speaking in Kurdish, we went through introductions and he asked me to sit. The office was a good size with seats for at least nine people. One of these was occupied with a man I later found out was Mr. B. Barzani's assistant, and a few others were occupied by onlookers curious to see what the American was all about. While I described my basic credentials, for whatever

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<sup>235</sup> Both of these involved me offering my services as a volunteer English tutor. Their first reaction was more or less being scoffed at for not having a program all put together, and then upbraiding me for thinking that I could simply show up and expect to be able to work. This wouldn't have bothered me so much had it not been the fact that I had been sending them emails every month or two for over a year.

"You must send in an email."

Silence on my end, minus the mild teeth grinding.

Ultimately, it was a mismatch of cultural expectations. I expected to find mechanisms flexible enough to incorporate new resources (especially free ones!) that could be applied where there was demand. On their side, the concepts such as 'quid pro quo tutor' and 'open office hours' do not exist in their system. Teachers and students come, teachers teach, and teachers and students go. Veni, vedi, vici. Furthermore, the teacher and the administration negotiate the specifics of the program that the teacher came ready to propose. Only after this is settled do they check for existing demand. It was a "Who's on first?" scenario, my question being "well, what do you need?" being met with "well, what is your program?" to which I respond, "my program will depend on what you need," and their reply of "we can't tell you what we need until you give us a program." This loop repeated itself until they simply ask, "Do you have a program to show us?" to which I sigh and say, "No. I don't have one yet," and the conversation ends with, "You can't just walk in here without a program and expect to work! Now go make a program and come back when you're finished." My American pedagogical mind wondering how I'm supposed to meet student needs with zero information and their Iraqi pedagogical minds wondering how anyone could teach a set course without a program proposal. For all their informative aspects, these experiences were equal parts frustrating and embarrassing.

reason this never seems to convey the fact that I'm very familiar with most aspects of Islam and Islamic societies. Normally, I'd say there are pros and cons to playing dumb or not letting someone ignorant of what you actually know, but when it comes to my formal training, I'm representing my university and program in addition to myself as a student. As such, I try to wear what I know on my sleeves, so to speak. In any case, we fulfilled the requisite formalities, I made my basic intent clear, and my host asked if we could switch to English.

Before I asked my questions, he wanted to make a preamble to how I should understand Islam.

"First, there are two Islams. There is the Islam of the Quran. And there's the Islam of the culture. Groups like Da'ish and al-Hašd al-Ša'bi come from the culture," he said, lighting up the first of his cigarettes for the meeting.

"In 1572, do you know what was going on during that period?" he asked.

My mind raced through history classes. Safavid Empire in Persia, Ottoman Empire during the first phases of territorial loss, Kurds centuries away from any kind of cohesion...

"In Europe, there were the Protestant Reformers and the Catholics. They were killing each other. Thousands and thousands died because, 'You are a Protestant, I must kill you!'"

Contextualizing current issues with European Reformation in-fighting? Not the first time I've seen it, but not what I was expecting. In any case, it was the basis to which we'd return again and again throughout the discussion.

"What they were fighting for was interpretation of their own religion. Why would [anyone else] interpret the Quran for me?... If God guides you in the right section [in the Quran], you can understand."

He stubbed out his cigarette and lit a second.

“What is the Hadith? It's a conversation between two guys.”

As a student of Islamic studies that has spent many, many hours on Hadith, I had to put a conscious effort into not letting my jaw hang open. It's important to remember that he's not the only one in the room, and it's clear that the others understand enough English to know what is transpiring and it was equally clear that they agreed.

“It only works for that time. *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyyā* are just stories ... but it is not for our time.”

I was having a difficult time accepting this, and probed to see if I understood him fully, “So, does this depend on the strength of the *isnād*?”<sup>236</sup>

“No. No it doesn't matter, who told you this?”

I held back from sarcastically replying, “Well, everybody,” and instead reiterated my credentials, giving a few examples of the kinds of classes that I have taken in the last nine years, many including discussions on *tafsīr* (interpretation of the Quran), *isnād*, and *fiqh* (jurisprudence).

Nodding amiably, he continued, “There are things that won't change... Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Hindus, they all believe in the God and tell you to be human, not like a beast. There are 964,000 Hadith, and where did they come from? Some man named Bukhārī? Who were these Arab men? Were they from Mars?”

At that point he had to pause for a phone call, and I let myself take that time to get the laughter out of my system. I'm not sure how much of it was a reaction to his sarcastic Martian postulation and how much was a product of hearing Bukhārī<sup>237</sup> referred to as basically being ‘some Arab guy.’

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<sup>236</sup> *Isnād* is the line of transmission of a given Hadith measured for its strength; a strong Hadith has a higher likelihood of and acceptance for being a true saying of the Prophet, a weak Hadith has a higher likelihood of being manufactured.

<sup>237</sup> Muhammad al-Bukhārī is an Islamic scholar from the ninth century who compiled one of the foremost collections of Hadith.



Concluding his call, he lit another cigarette and picked back up his stream of thought.

“You must choose your way, and the only way [in Islam] is the Quran... it says in the twenty-second Aya,” of a Surat he didn’t specify, “that you can change your religion... [but] if you go to the Hadith, then [changing religions is] kāfir!... These terrorist groups, what do they believe? They believe the Hadith. More than half of our people don't believe the Hadith.” I made a mental note to start asking about this. Not that I thought to prove or disprove whether or not half of Iraqi Kurdistan puts credibility in Hadith, but to start getting some ground samples.

One more cigarette into the tray and another from the pack.

“There is the Sunna of God and his Prophet, not the Sunna of God and the Sunna of his prophet! The Sunna is how Muhammad lived, God bless him, but what about Musa or Jesus?” My note-taking at this point suffered from the degree of surprise I was feeling at the continued direction of our conversation. ‘Hadith and Sunna – untrue or expired.’ The gist of the rest of this particular point was that there might have been things the Prophet Muhammad lived that were not required of other Prophets and were not necessarily the Sunna of God.

“You must use full context of the Quran, not just an Aya. You must take not just from the middle, but the beginning and the end as well. Taking one Aya? Much of this, excuse me, is bullshit... They tell you that the best thing in the world is that you're a Muslim. No. Best thing is being a human.”

Our conversation was interrupted briefly by a collegiate-looking young man who had some papers to submit to Mr. B. Barzani. I made a mental note to learn more about what he actually did in this department beyond kindly taking two hours for a rogue American graduate student with lots of questions and a varying grasp of Kurdish conversation.

His task done, he continued, “The *turāth* (legacy or history) is like Harry Potter... it's good for a movie, not reality... like stories you tell your children at night. Did your parents tell you stories at night?”

“Yes, they definitely did.” Memories streamed in hyper-speed through my mind – Treasure Island, The Tripod Trilogy, The Hobbit, and yes, Harry Potter. Even though I was a young teen at that point we still read together.

“These are stories, nice stories to tell a message.”

“Like fables, or allegories?” I suggested.

“Yes. Eight hundred people fitting into a small room, men in a cave... these are stories.”

“Things got copied and pasted from pre-Islamic practices into Hadith... [for instance] the *ḥūrī c'ayn*<sup>238</sup> - you and your wife will be *ḥūrī c'ayn*, changed from the better to the [physically] best [self]. It's not for sex, it's a mechanism of change. They're not female for fucking...”

Inevitably, the subject of what is promised in paradise led to an indirect conversation about Da<sup>c</sup>ish.

“The Sabia...” he said, referring, I believe, to the *ṣābi 'a*, an under-described sect that converted to Islam during the time of Muhammad, though the context makes me think it might be something else, “for Da<sup>c</sup>ish fighters to choose when you're fighting and take [the wives and children of your defeated foes] to yourself [for sexual purposes].”

He punctuated this last sentence by stabbing out his cigarette into the tray.

“That's from the *turāth*... The *mulk al-yamān*, you know that that is?”

I did – ‘that which is owned by your right hand,’ which is usually a reference to female slaves rightfully taken during war and are permissible to bed.

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<sup>238</sup> *Hūrīya* (pl. *Hawra*) being a very contested subject in Islamic scholarship and cultural beliefs.

Seeing my assent, he continued, “They are the children are under your hand... all of Kurdistan is *mulk al-yamīn* of Masoud Barzani.. America right now *mulk al-yamīn* Trump.”<sup>239</sup> I wasn’t sure if the reference to Masoud Barzani was a holdover from the many years of having him as president or if Mr. B Barzani still considered him to be the leader of Kurdistan. I made a mental point to ask him about this later. Regarding *mulk al-yamīn*, he went on to state that its intended purpose was for providing a support system for widows and orphans, as opposed to satisfying one’s sexual urges.

“Ninety-eight percent of Hadith wrong, it came from other cultures. As it says in Surat al-Nisah Aya 122 to 123,

<But the ones who believe and do righteous deeds - We will admit them to gardens beneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide forever. [It is] the promise of Allah, [which is] truth, and who is more truthful than Allah in statement.

Paradise is not [obtained] by your wishful thinking nor by that of the People of the Scripture. Whoever does a wrong will be recompensed for it, and he will not find besides Allah a protector or a helper.>

Mr. M.S. Barzani’s Arabic diction was flawless, and I noted that the guard in the room whispered the same verses under his breath as his boss said them aloud.

“This is the real face of Islam. These others,” specifically meaning Da‘ish and its affiliates – either because of the subject or because of the politics, he never talked about al-Hašd al-Ša‘bī, “give Islam a black face. God made us not to worship but to live, to be human, but don’t make bad things to your friend or neighbor or others... [This means you are here] to enjoy your time.

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<sup>239</sup> See pp.306-307 for Masoud “stepping down” as leader of the KDP.

There is no Sunni or Shia, there is just Muslim. We make the *madhahib* (schools of Islamic jurisprudence). The Khurafiyat believe in the Hadith... they only tell us about the past.”

The past. Now there’s a rabbit hole worthy of exploration but impossible not to get lost in.

“The past is *gone*. Let the past go. You cannot make today into the seventh or eighth or eleventh centuries. How can I be your friend? How can I say I am better than you and you must convert to my religion? The political makes the mess... only like big bullshit. God is not something you can imagine. He is in all times.”

He paused for another cigarette and an aide brought me another water.

“[These groups] brainwash with expired *turāth*... I really don’t like the Salafi. They think they’re better than us, but they don’t know everything. They don’t know anything,” he said, outlining with his hands the area of his face and neck where a traditional beard would be, then reaching down and touching an invisible hem line high on his ankle. His assistant, Ibrahim, chuckled in agreement.

At this point, both Ibrahim and Mr. B. Barzani chimed in at once. Between splitting my attention and code-switching to Arabic (which I use almost as infrequently as Persian and Turkish here), I didn’t get very good notes on the ensuing statements. However, the essence of it was that while the Quran was revealed in Arabic, it does not make all Arabic-speakers spokespeople of God.

Taken in the context of what I believe to be his genuine interest and respect for other religions in the area, I took this as less racially charged anti-Arab or anti-Arabic and more anti-Arab chauvinism.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> To clarify on this point, Arab chauvinism is not referring to the pride of Arabic speakers in their ethnicity or language, which is extremely common and a hallmark of the culture. Rather, it is the attitude that their status as Arabs or Arabic speakers puts them a step closer to God vis-à-vis the virtue of having their mother tongue be that of the Quran. The necessity and imbued virtue of familiarity with Arabic, specifically that of the Quran, is a point of contention. I’ve seen many instances of what I consider to be unintentional racist attitudes towards Arabs in Kurdistan, but this didn’t feel like that either.

“Do you have any questions?” he finally asked.

“Actually, I do,” I looked down at my list, but decided that simply riding the tide would be far more beneficial. So, I tried to pick a middle ground. “Kurdistan is rather unique within the Middle East. I’ve lived in a few other countries here, and if you changed religions there,” I said, letting loose a humorless laugh, “not so good. But here, you can just change from Christianity to Islam, or Islam to Zoroastrian and you simply have to register it with the government. What do you think it is about Kurdish culture makes that possible when it’s such a difficult process elsewhere?”

“[Those other countries] don't understand the Quran... In the past, we lived together. In my village (Barzān), [there were] Jews, Christians... they used to marry each other until 1975 Saddam destroyed the village.”

Regarding those Kurds that were resistant to the easy process of conversion, Mr. B. Barzani told me, “Every home has a WC... If they [believe this], they belong to the *turāth* peoples.”

My laughter subsiding from the toilet imagery, I proceeded to my next question.

“One thing I’ve found very interesting with the Referendum was the reaction al-Azhar had and the [statement] they issued about Kurdistan being in the control of colonialists and Zionists..<sup>241</sup> I also read the answer that your ministry issued, and it’s always funny to me that they never have a good answer for why they say it is *fitna* (dividing the Islamic community) to ask for a Kurdish state when there are twenty-two Arab states,” I said, giving a bemused smile.

He nodded his agreement, then replied “Yes, there are over 200 million Arabs, [tens of millions] of Persians, and [tens of millions] of Turks, but [in Iraqi Kurdistan] are only five million Kurds. How are we going to be the next Israel, here in the middle of all of them?”

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<sup>241</sup> See pg.374.

After it became clear that there wasn't really anything more to add about the spat with al-Azhar, I moved on to how the government deals with Friday sermons and rogue imams.

Not the least bit squeamish about the subject, he launched right in, "There is a section here that goes throughout Kurdistan attending mosque to report back."

"And if there are issues?" I ask.

"We give them a call and ask them 'why they say that?' We have eyes in every mosque.

[We watch] how they deal with the culture, how they deal with the people. Sometimes they are in the brain-washings, and teach them all sorts of bad things... Since 2007 to now, 85% is working."

Before I could ask for a clarification on what he meant by that, he continued, "The ministry will punish them for teaching wrong."

Lighting his last cigarette of the meeting, he threw his hands into the air, "'Israel must die!'"

Why he say that? They didn't do anything to you!" Everyone else in the room laughed and shook their heads.

"Yeah.. I'm honestly not sure what most regimes in the Middle East would do if they suddenly didn't have Israel to blame for their problems." For as much as I wanted to talk more about Israeli-Kurdish relations, I wanted to go back to the 85%.

"You mentioned that since 2007 85% have been working. What did you mean by that?" I asked.

"In Duhok and Erbil we control 100%, in Suli 85%. Rest don't belong to us," he said, looking serious.

"How so?"

"They are private mosques the government didn't approve of. Those mosques we report to the anti-terrorist section of the government. Many are owned by Iran."

My time was running out, but I mentally underlined that 85% as a topic to come back to with better questions whenever we next met.

Mr. B.S. Barzani continued, "In the past we didn't have *madhab*," then, sarcastically, "there's the *madhab* of Barzan and his lieutenant, Ibrahim," he said, gesturing to his aid, who responded with an appreciative laugh.

"You don't need all that. You have a vertical [relationship] with God," he concluded.

Stubbing out his cigarette, he turned to me fully. "Everything comes [back] to Israel!" he said, once again dramatically throwing his hands up in the air. "That's our problem, we depend on the past... "in the past, my father, in the past, my grandfather, in the past, Harry Potter..."

And with that, the spokesman stuck so much of Islamic culture on a Firebolt 3000 broomstick and sent it on its way.

"Who is this *fulān*?<sup>242</sup> Maybe he's the devil... There's no maybe of the Quran." Pulling out a cigarette from a new packet, he continued, "Why is the cigarette haram? You can also eat too much meat. If you eat too much meat, it too can kill you. Al-Qiṣaṣ, al-Sunna, all of these," he said, concluding his thought with a dismissive hand.

Having run well into lunchtime for most government employees, I thanked him for his time and arranged for a return meeting the following week.

"Come in next Monday. What do I have Monday? Oh, just the mullah.." he seemed none too excited at the prospect.

"Monday it is," I agreed. "Thank you so much for this opportunity!"

His assistant Ibrahim showed me out while the two of us spoke in Kurdish. I thanked him as well and immediately set to making sure I wrote down the last of my notes. The meeting was

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<sup>242</sup> Arabic for 'so and so.'

definitely a good one, and for as many failed tries as I'd had by that point, the feeling of victory left with me an emotional high that would carry me through the rest of the day.

In thinking of how to approach everything we talked about, I borrowed a page from anthropologist rock-star Lévi-Strauss and focused on the changes in the narrative structure compared to those in the region at large. For as tempting as it is to say that the contempt for all non-Quranic sources for guiding Islam was simply one opinion among many, it's harder to discount given the situation. First, he was the man I was directed to for Islamic affairs, an official representative of the ministry. Second, I saw no signs of disagreement from anyone else in the room.

There are a number of things I believe are safe to draw from this, which I tried to test for as much as possible in proceeding interactions, both with the ministry and outside of it. The first is the official prioritization of defusing narratives that use a specific mythology built up from views on the past in order to guide the present and future. While countering the mullahs and imams that tout the likes of Ibn Taymiyya is the battle of so many Islamic ministries throughout the Middle East, I hadn't spoken with anyone that so thoroughly dismissed so much Islamic culture.<sup>243</sup>

Certainly, he knew how to approach a Westerner with this. Not just speaking in English, it was the number of subtle and not so subtle ways he tapped into the culture. Before anything

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<sup>243</sup> While the KRG official approach may be unique among Middle Eastern governments, "Islamic Protestantism" is nothing new. In the words of Prof. Mucahit Bilici, "...the increasingly popular "Quran-only" movement and historicist school of theology (exemplified by such authors as İhsan Eliaçık, Mustafa İslamoğlu, Edip Yüksel, Mehmet Okuyan, Caner Taslaman and Mustafa Öztürk) have significantly undermined the credibility of Sunni orthodoxy. Although not, perhaps, potent or resourceful enough to offer full-blown alternatives to that orthodoxy, their criticisms chip away at the received wisdom of traditional religion. Individuals like Edip Yüksel, who utilize the power of social media to expose inconsistencies in the hadith literature and practices of the *ulema*, can launch attacks on Sunni orthodoxy that garner followings in the thousands. Popular exposure to marginal yet startling bits of information about early Islamic history, and newfound access via social media to critical theological perspectives previously accessible only to Islamic scholars, have all transformed the landscape," (2018).



else, he rooted our conversation about Islam and the Middle East with the example of violence between sixteenth century Protestant and Catholic Europe. Not only did he dismiss what he saw as Islamic cultural trappings, he did so by frequently referencing Harry Potter. That I'm a J.K. Rowling fan isn't a rarity for Americans, who, if they haven't read the books, have probably seen the movies or at the very least the merchandising. As an aspiring author myself, I'm loath to reduce the 'magic' of good story-telling to such a degree, but for our purposes, Harry Potter is essentially a series of allegorical stories with fantastical elements outlining normative world-views. Reduced even further, it's magic and broomsticks. It seems Mr. B. Barzani employed a similar reduction. *Turāth, qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, Hadith, Sunna – beards and caves, a mythos that has been used time and time again in this region to justify everything from petty prejudices to ethnic slaughter.

## 2001-2011

Another mistake I think in American policy is thinking that there will be a military coup in Iraq. But it is impossible. A military coup needs a sacrifice and courage that you can't find in an army without morale. We are a poor army, an army which was defeated... And when the units are transferring from a place to place in Iraq they are without real arms. Without bullets at least. The regime always has very strong measures to protect itself. So I think, to depend only on the hope of military coup, a palace coup, is useless. ("An Interview with Jalal Talabani," Frontline, 2000)

If you went through the Middle East anytime after 2003 and casually surveyed opinions on George W. Bush, you'd find some version of "he's no good." That is true everywhere except for Kurdistan.<sup>244</sup> There, many Kurds consider him to be a hero as the American invasion opened up the KRG to a whole new vista of self-governance. For both the Barzani and Talabani factions,

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<sup>244</sup> This is true, but for reasons ranging from hindsight to the effect of time on pain perception, there are also plenty of Iraqis, including Kurds, that look back at Saddam as being a symbol of stability.

there were very few trajectories in a post-Saddam Iraq that would not lead to greater autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan. For both Iran and Turkey, this was equally obvious and a cause of concern. While both of these ended up benefitting from the fall of Saddam, the initial years in particular were problematic.

### *Iraq's Neighbors React*

#### *Turkey*

In the mid-1950's, Turkey allowed US forces to establish air bases in Izmir and Incirlik as part of the Soviet containment strategy. Forty years later, these bases were the primary hubs for Operation Provide Comfort that provided ground and air forces to enforce the No-Fly Zone after the First Gulf War. Ten years after that, they served as refuel depots in the war in Afghanistan. During the initial invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Turkey refused to allow American forces to enter into Iraq through its territory (Harding, 2003). They even went so far as to send in Turkish troops over the border at Çukurca, some seventy-five miles north of Erbil (Bruni, 2003).

The 'why' of this should be fairly obvious – the status quo up until then had been keeping Turkey's neighboring Kurds in a manageable state (i.e. contained in-fighting subject to outside manipulation). It became quickly apparent that preventing Western boots on the ground was coming at a cost to Turkey's interests.

To understand the collapse of the Iraqi state, we must first understand that it was little more than a sprawl of security apparatuses<sup>245</sup> fueled by oil money (which was massively reduced due to sanctions) that served the needs of a strongman whose sole objective was maintaining

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<sup>245</sup> All of which were built to spy on each other in addition to the populace at large. See Kanan Makiya's Republic of Fear (1998).

control. When Coalition forces entered the country after the pyrotechnics of “Shock and Awe,” there was virtually no resistance. When the Peshmerga came into Kirkuk and Mosul, ‘resistance’ from the Iraqi army ended in less than a day.

Looters came in earnest to sack homes of fleeing Ba’athists, wealthier citizens, and Arabs fearing retaliation. The same thing had been happening in Baghdad, though Coalition only turned a blind eye to it only for a short time, somewhat limiting the rampant banditry.<sup>246</sup> Without the buffering influence of the American military, conditions were highly uncertain for anyone unaffiliated with the incoming Kurdish forces. This included Turkmen, a Turkic-speaking ethnic minority who make up a sizeable portion of Kirkuk.<sup>247</sup> Whether for reasons of politics or conscience, the AKP has long claimed interest in their continued well-being. Incirlik soon became a massive hub of Western military activity in the occupation of Iraq.

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It is sufficient to say that Turkish policy between 2005 and 2011 was significantly different from what came before. There is an aphorism in international relations that ‘democracies don’t fight each other;’<sup>248</sup> Turkey’s logic could be summed up as ‘close trading partners don’t fight each other,’ and it fit very well into what former-prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu later described as Turkey’s “Zero Problems [with neighbors]” policy (Hounshell, 2010). For Turkey-KRG relations, this turned into a massive amount of construction contracts

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<sup>246</sup> I say ‘somewhat’ because even in a short amount of time, a *lot* changed. Most Westerners will recall two things about the looting— the first is images of Iraqi antiquities being stolen and reappearing over the next decade and a half on the black market. The second is government offices ransacked of all things administrative, leaving behind a ship with no oars, no sails, no rudder, and quite a few large holes in the hull. What is less obvious is how much this initial period of looting effectively reassembled much of the social pyramid. See pp.275-276 for some interesting examples (and consequences) of the *riche nouveau* from 2003.

<sup>247</sup> Censuses being what they are, there were little more than politicized statements regarding facts on the ground. Turkmen claimed to make up seventy percent of Kirkuk’s population with the Kurdish counter-figure putting it at twenty-three (Mite, 2003).

<sup>248</sup> “Democratic Peace Theory”

and investment as the north proved itself more stable than the rest of the country. As for Turkey-US relations, the events in 2003 were a noticeable mile-marker in the former's redirection away from Western orbit.

### *Iran*

The American approach to Iran after 9/11 was somewhat schismatic, owing to the different schools of thought then vying to direct American action. On the one hand, American representatives approached the Iranian ambassador to the UN, Mohammad Javad Zarif, in Geneva prior to the invasion. They wanted to confirm with him that there would be no hostilities were American warplanes to accidentally cross into Iranian airspace (Gordon, 2016).

Based on conversations with Zarif, Iran would deal with the US were it to engage in the game on existing terms, namely that 'support' and 'shelter' for political pariahs came with a mystery expiration date that depended entirely on what the other players could give in exchange. For example, Iran was willing to give up a number of al-Qaeda 'shelterees' were US forces to push the Mujahideen-e Khalq out of Iraq.<sup>249</sup>

As we know, this school of thought did not win out. On January 29, 2002, George W. Bush gave the now infamous "Axis of Evil" speech. Two months after the invasion his administration accused Tehran of harboring al-Qaeda operatives. What under a different administrative approach could have been a partnership of convenience<sup>250</sup> became open antagonism that ended up costing the lives of American soldiers.

For the Kurds, the newly enflamed antagonism between the US and Iran presented an awkward situation. The PUK was allowing the Badr Brigade to station a thousand of their troops

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<sup>249</sup> See Masters' article on Mujahadeen-e-Khalq (2014).

<sup>250</sup> It would have been a distrustful relationship along the lines of US-Pakistan or US-Saudi 'joint anti-terrorism efforts,' but that's par for the course.

in their territory, ostensibly to combat a Turkish invasion (Chivers, 2003). Like its border with Turkey, Iraqi Kurds intensely rely on the legal and illegal stream of goods. When events within the KRG went against Iranian interests, they exerted pressure on the border.

As the war progressed and evidence of Iranian funds and arms to groups that fought US occupation surfaced,<sup>251</sup> the tension increased. For example, in 2007, American forces arrested a number of Iranian diplomats in Erbil and detained the head of a trade delegation in Sulaymaniyah several months later. In both cases, Iran responded by shutting multiple border gates with the KRG in PUK territory. As we've seen, the KRG's geography makes it particularly susceptible to this kind of economic pressure. In short, for as much as the Iraqi Kurds wanted to maintain strong relations with the Americans, they couldn't let it overly unbalance their relationship with Iran.

#### *Kurdish Islamists, al-Qaeda, and Baghdad?*

Among the many rabbit holes and unproved (and unprovable) theories that led to the American invasion of Iraq is the relationship between the Kurdish Islamists, al-Qaeda, and Baghdad. As we've already seen, AI had definite connections with Iran and probable connections with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Between 2001 and 2004, accounts started to emerge regarding an agent named Abu Wael. These accounts originated from members of AI captured by the PUK, all of them painting the portrait of a *mukhābarāt* member who acted as the middle-

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<sup>251</sup> Explosively-formed penetrators (EFPs) are a far more complex version of the IED; IED's require very little expertise and materials to create, whereas EFP's require complicated manufacturing capabilities. Da'ish was later able to adapt the design and create cruder versions of those used by Iranian-backed Shi'ites, (Fahim and Sly, 2017). In 2007, American forces captured more than one hundred Steyr HS50 Mannlicher sniper rifles from an insurgent arms depot. These rifles were made in Austria and were part of a shipment of eight hundred sold to Iran ostensibly for border patrol duty combatting drug smugglers (Foreign Staff, 2007). The fifty-caliber rounds are designed to blast through concrete and armor, including tanks and helicopters.

man arming Kurdish Islamists against the KRG. He was also perported to be a member of al-Qaeda (Schanzer, 2004).

On the one hand, it would hardly be surprising if Saddam funded groups to harrass the KRG. It's also arguable that funding Islamists would disincentivize turning their forces against Baghdad. It wouldn't be the first time that Saddam used people he despised and didn't trust because they had the same temporary interests. On the other hand, villagers who fled from areas controlled by AI reported the presence of Iranian agents, though their roles and relationships with the group were unclear ("Ansar al-Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan," Human Rights Watch).

Proving any of this with nothing beyond a few pictures and testimonies from Islamist captives in Kurdish prisons is an entirely different matter. There is no definitive proof of coercion on the part of the PUK, but plenty of reason for them to have done so. Neither is there proof that the prisoners were telling their captors a narrative that they might want to hear, but again, plenty of reason for them to have done so. As of 2018, there is nothing concrete on this critical link in the Bush administration's justification for invasion. In any case, once the invasion began, AI was a high priority target and summarily engaged.

#### *KRG Autonomy\**

Earlier, I noted that most every projected trajectory after the fall of Saddam would lead to greater autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan. This ended up being true, but the nature of that autonomy requires some addendums. First and foremost, it did not solve the underlying issues that divided Kurdish territories between the KDP and PUK. The fall of Saddam opened up greater opportunities for both of their respective hierarchies to expand their power via border customs and increased international trade, particularly for oil.

Another thing that did not change with this new autonomy was the porousness of borders and KDP and PUK abilities to monopolize the use of force within them. Smuggling was still a major fact of life, and the regional security was divided between the two parties. The number of attacks that the KRG experienced is absolutely dwarfed in comparison to those in Ninewa or any of the provinces in central or southern Iraq. Part of this was the Peshmerga and Asayish (Kurdish civil security forces) having played much more stalwart roles in maintaining control in comparison to their Iraqi compatriots employed by the federal government.<sup>252</sup>

There are several reasons for this. On May 23, 2003, Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Order 2 dissolved the army. For as broken as the institution already was, sending disgruntled, freshly unemployed men who *took their guns with them* was a recipe for disaster.<sup>253</sup> The intelligence agents and military higher-ups knew where the ammunition depots were, and those who weren't arrested had gone into hiding, whereupon they started the process of fomenting the anti-Coalition insurgency. Iraqi army and Ba'athist presence in the KRG before May 2003 was already at a minimum, so the de-Ba'athification policies and disbandment of the army were less momentous by an order of magnitude.<sup>254</sup>

#### *Islamists Insurgents in the KRG after the Invasion*

While the KRG was spared the worst of the civil war, it had to work to keep it that way as Islamist insurgents acted against Coalition forces, their allies, and non-Muslim minorities. Among the hundreds of attacks that took place during this period, there are two that stand out in

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<sup>252</sup> This should not be seen as an effort to overly lionize either the Peshmerga or the Asayish. Without insult to their accomplishments or my Kurdish friends, their organizations have their own flaws.

<sup>253</sup> "Asked today whether Iraqis would be allowed to keep assault rifles in their homes, a spokesman for Mr. [Paul] Bremer [III] said, "Yes, they will be allowed to keep their AK-47's,"" (Andrews, 2003). This was designed to allow private citizens to defend themselves and their businesses and was a sticking point for many Iraqi's involved in drafting directive. The first version banned automatic weapons of any caliber.

<sup>254</sup> See pg.444 for an example of what happened to Ba'athists in the KRG region after 2003.

particular. The most deadly attack was on February 1, 2004, when AI sent multiple suicide bombers against PUK and KDP officers as they officiated a gathering in Erbil for Eid al-Adha.<sup>255</sup> One hundred and one people were killed and approximately two-hundred and fifty were wounded (“February 1 Will Forever Live with Us’ - Survivor of 2004 Erbil Attacks,” Rudaw, 2018).

In April 2007, a Yezidi girl married a Muslim man and rumor spread that she converted to Islam. She was forcibly returned to her home village of Bazan and stoned to death (Howard, 2017). Islamist insurgents increasingly targeted Yazidis in the Ninewa province, and on August 14, 2007, they sent fuel trucks loaded with explosives into two towns in Shingal near the KRG border. Over five hundred Yezidis were killed and many hundreds more injured in the blasts. While al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) didn’t come out and claim responsibility, everyone from the PUK to the US place the blame on AQI operatives.

Despite the overlap in motivations, strategies, and goals, disunity and competition for resources plagued Islamist insurgent groups just as much as it did every other major state and sub-state actor. It’s more accurate to think of every iteration of al-Qaeda after 2002 as being part of a confederation of franchises rather than a unified organization led directly by Aiman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden. AQI’s leader, Abū Musa‘ib al-Zarqāwī, gave his *bay‘a* (pledge of allegiance) in 2004 and subsequently led his ‘co-enfranchised’ insurgents against the government, security, and non-quiescent civilians (The Editors of the Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015). During the civil war, al-Zawahiri went so far as to write al-Zarqāwī a missive stating that they did not endorse the techniques AQI was using as it generated far too much collateral

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<sup>255</sup> The Islamic holiday commemorating Abraham’s sacrifice of a goat instead of Ishmael.



damage that endangered their local support (“Zawahiri’s Letter to Zarqawi,” Combating Terrorism Center).

Despite the high probability of their being a relationship between AI and al-Qaeda up to 2003, AI refused to join AQI in the Islamic State of Iraq in 2004. In 2007, AI joined the Reformation and Jihad Front (RJF) along with several other Islamist splinter groups. Over the following year, it distanced itself from the RJF and closer to AQI. As the fight branched off into Syria after 2011, AI fighters aligned themselves with Jabhat al-Nusra, who were fighting *against* Da’ish as well as the Syrian Kurds and Assad’s forces (“Ansar al-Islam,” Mapping Militant Organizations).

Dealing with Kurdish Extremists and Problem-Makers – p II

*Mullah Krekar – Extremist in Asylum*

Not all of the most notable Islamist Kurds remained in Iraq, and the prime example of expatriate influencers is Najmuddin Faraj Ahmad, better known as Mullah Krekar. Krekar was born in Sulaymaniyah in 1956, and after receiving a college degree in Iraq, went to Pakistan to be under the religious tutelage of Abdullah al-Zam, who also mentored Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri (Stanley, 2005).<sup>256</sup> He participated in the conflict against the Soviets in Afghanistan, returning to Iraq in 1988 whereupon he joined the IMK. He fled to Norway as a refugee in 1991, but a year later was appointed as head of AI’s military wing, and then as the head of the office of planning and implementation three years later (which he refers to as “the army of the Qur’an;” “An Official from the Islamic Movement in Kurdistan Provides: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Kurdish Cause,” islam.org/au). According to his statements in

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<sup>256</sup> A hallmark of his teachings was the ‘lost minaret,’ a reference to the fall of the Caliphate and the subsequent need for its reestablishment.

1997 he was engaged in, “good efforts in Da’wa.” Da’wa means ‘the call to Islam,’ but in this case it goes well beyond the conventional sense of the term. In Iraq, Abu Abdullah Shafi (Worba Holirī al-Kūrdī) ostensibly took his place directing the organization.

Some of the contents from his 1997 interview with the Islamic publication Nida’u Islam shed light on his perspective on Kurdistan and Islam. Krekar argued that the continued oppression of Kurds was a result of the loss of the Khalifa, incorporation of Western nationalism, and subsequent dispersal of Islamic authority between different countries. He did not believe that any of these imported ideologies were fit to create harmony and address the needs of so many different peoples (see Appendix: Item 2 for full transcript).

Similar to other Kurdish nationalist narratives, the problems faced by the community were imported products of neighboring peoples who in turn were influenced by yet more outsiders. Essentially, ‘Kurdish hardships are the result of Western and Eastern ideas – i.e. nationalism, capitalism, leftism – infiltrating what used to be a peaceful – i.e. Islamic – people, the Kurds.’ AI acknowledges the question brought up by Kurdish nationalism but differs on the answer, which is bringing in God’s law vis-à-vis an Islamic state and return to God’s intended community.

In terms of why such a state cannot be established through existing governments, The Iraqi Kurd when fleeing, may flee to Iran, to Turkey or to Syria; Syria will not give him an opportunity unless he belonged to a certain Iraqi opposition party. Iran also places importance on issues to its interest, either because of its war with Iraq, or with a view to its future plans for Shi'a dominance, looking for a foothold in Northern Iraq. As for Turkey, their direction is a secular nationalistic direction which is most grudging against the Kurds. This has also reflected against the Islamic tides within Turkey itself, so much so that even individuals in the Tabligh movement do not like the Kurds or believe that there are no pious Kurds in Eastern Turkey.

...The secular nationalism which emerged in Europe after the weakening of religious sentiments are idols, being worshipped without regard to Allah, as Sayyid Qutb -may Allah have mercy on him- stated. In this respect, the Kurds do not support secular nationalism, not even to the extent of 1 in a 1000.

As for the extent of their adherence to Islam, all gratitude to Allah, their adherence is good, and the people know that the solution is Islam. (“An Official from the Islamic Movement in Kurdistan Provides: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Kurdish Cause,” islam.org/au)

*The address and account number for those who wish to make donations to the Islamic Movement in Kurdistan:*

<b><u>Address:</u></b>	<b><u>Bank Account:</u></b>
AZMR Information Senter	AIS
STORGT 41	SPARABANKEN / NOR
0182 0510 - Norway	Konto nr: 1607.56.99267
Fax: (0011) 4722207247	OSIO - Norway

*Figure 14 - Donation information for the IMK, now known as AI*

We know that Mullah Krekar managed to travel to Iraq before the invasion, sufficient enough for the Norwegian government to revoke his refugee status. In 2003, the CIA had inserted a team of Navy Seals to kidnap Mullah Krekar to be brought to Guantanamo Bay (Journeyman Pictures, 2007). The plan failed when a member of the Norwegian government gave Krekar’s lawyer a warning that his client should be kept under close monitoring. Between that time and 2018, he was tried multiple times for charges related to financial crimes, supporting terrorism, being responsible for the murder of an Australian cameraman in 2003, and making death threats against Kurds in Norway and multiple Norwegian politicians, including a former prime-minister of Norway (“Ansar al-Islam Founder Gets New Jail Term,” ABC Australia, 2012; Corcoran, 2012). He was only in jail for a small portion of the five years he was initially given.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> He also was uninjured by an assassination attempt in 2010, ostensibly by Kurds living in Norway.

As of mid-2019, he's still living, unincarcerated, in Norway. Every attempt to permanently jail him or deport him to a country that would have been side-stepped due to Norway's laws regarding exporting criminals to countries with poor security conditions and weak safety guarantees. Krekar has maintained his freedom by balancing on the thin line of legality which, precarious though they may be, have served him well.<sup>258</sup>

### *Ali Bapir*

Ali Bapir was born in north eastern Iraq near Qaladize in 1961. In 1980, he moved his fiqh studies from Sulaymaniyah to Najaf. Shortly thereafter, he discovered the Ba'athist regime were going to arrest him, so he fled to Rania. Within less than a year, he was forced to bring his family into Iranian Kurdistan and then Tehran.<sup>259</sup> Throughout the mid-1980's he more or less split his time between collaborating on religious texts, guerilla fighting against Saddam's forces,<sup>260</sup> and moving his family from safe-house to safe-house (“[Biography],” AliBapir.net).<sup>261</sup>

Like other Islamists with poor relationships with their home governments, Bapir made his way to Pakistan to rally support for Kurdish Islamist efforts to improve the situation of Kurdish Muslims in Iraq. While in exile, he continued to rally support and network throughout the Middle East, including with groups like Lebanese Hizbullah, Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and other Islamic groups in Syria, Libya, and beyond.

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<sup>258</sup> Watching the interviews with Mullah Krekar feel uncomfortably close to some I had in Iraq. The thing about ‘gut instinct’ is that a) it's entirely unempirical and b) it's impossible to sort out from preexisting biases. Knowing this, I still submit that my ‘gut instinct’ was that these kinds of folks are so duplicitous it's almost not worth taking the time to interview them. They take a certain glee in the perversity of beating the progressive West using its own laws and norms.

<sup>259</sup> In Bapir's biography, the terms *Kūrdistānī Īrān* and *Kūrdistānī Irāq* are used as opposed to *Rojhallātī Kūrdistān* or *Bāšūrī Kurdistan*, the former avoids disputes against Iranian sovereignty over their current borders and the latter refers to the greater Kūrdistan as a partitioned state.

<sup>260</sup> He may even have executed his own brother for being an informant for Baghdad (McDonnell, 2003).

<sup>261</sup> One note on the (Kurdish) bibliography of Ali Bapir available on his website – it is quite thorough with documenting many aspects of his life, but it ultimately feels white-washed. When combined with the portraits painted elsewhere, including statements made by his rivals like Mullah Krekar, the resulting picture is far more complex with respect to Bapir's role in Iraqi conflicts and politics. Further footnotes will reflect this.

In the early 1990's, he created the Islamic Youth group under the IMK (Romano, 2007: 9).<sup>262</sup> In 2001, he quit leading the IMK and created the Komalī Īslāmī Kurdistan (Islamic Group of Kurdistan, though they are simply referred to as 'Komala' most of the time), which was separate from Ansar al-Islam even though their territories abutted each other on the Iranian border.<sup>263</sup>

Despite public statements indicating passivist, pluralist approaches to governance,<sup>264</sup> the PUK greatly distrusted the sincerity of both Komala and Bapir. During the invasion, American forces bombarded Komala territory. Bapir and his fighters surrendered. Bapir was promised a meeting with US forces, but was captured and put in detention under the Coalition. He remained in captivity – much of that in relative isolation and physically unpleasant circumstances – until March 2005. He immediately reintegrated into the Iraqi religious and political scenes, participating in an anti-sectarian conference in Mecca in 2006 and a pro-Palestinian gathering in Tehran in 2007. Later that same year he joined with representatives of the KDP, PUK, Socialist Party, and the Islamic Union to Turkey to mitigate issues between that country and the Kurdish region. He also joined a similar group soon thereafter traveling to Iran to discuss regional security issues.

In 2010, Bapir ran as a candidate for Komala in the 2010 Iraqi parliamentary elections on the basis of conforming national laws with Islam and sorting out the Kirkuk and Article 140 issues. While Komala was offered a place both within the pan-Islamist bloc led by the Kurdish

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<sup>262</sup> It was kind of like Bible summer camp, but with more automatic weapons training (Romano, 2007: 9; Muhamed3, 2006.)

<sup>263</sup> While I can't find corroborating sources for this, a Los Angeles Times article reported that the PUK had been giving large amounts of money to Bapir in order to sway him away from what would later become AI (McDonnell, 2003).

<sup>264</sup> In contrast to Islamists like Krekar, Bapir was vocal in his support of using democratic means to work through social issues. For instance, one of the books he wrote in 1992 was "Solving the Kurdish Problem through Islam and Parliament," (AliBapir.net).

Islamic Union (which won five seats) and by the Kurdistan Alliance Bloc (forty-two seats in addition to a compensatory one), they decided to run separately. They won two seats – one in Erbil, and the other in Sulaymaniyah.

In 2011, Mullah Krekar criticized Ali Bapir and Komala, claiming that they were assisting Iranian government efforts against Kurdish Iranian groups (Rahim, 2011). He further stated that since the early 1980's, "how he can't let go of [the Iranians]. They have invested a lot in him and made him their paw." The belief that Komala is an Iranian cat's paw is an image that persists to the present; how much truth there is to it is far more difficult to discern.<sup>265</sup>

*Empowering Insurgents through Neglect and Posturing – Halabja*

On days when I had no appointments (or none that I was scrambling to get), I used to go to chat with Šerwān, an employee of one of the small shops near my home. He was almost always there and happy to talk when he wasn't helping customers. One day, the topic of my attempts to interview members of Islamic parties and Kurdish Islamists came up. He raised his eyebrows, and said, in a tone of absolute certainty,

"If you want to find radicals (*tūndrawī*), you need to go to Tawela and Hawraman."

"Where are they?" My Kurdish geography wasn't bad, but I wanted to make sure. I pulled out my phone and opened up the maps. Within a few seconds of zooming in, Šerwān had them front and center. Tawela and Hawraman, border towns with Iran inside of the Halabja province<sup>266</sup>

close to Halabja itself. As we started to look up accompanying photos, Šerwān continued,

"All of the radicals live over there. Rania too, but mostly there."

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<sup>265</sup> Particularly when Ali Bapir came out multiple times before and after the 2017 referendum in favor of independence, it's difficult to see him as Iranian ventriloquy.

<sup>266</sup> Halabja was made into an independent province on February 8, 2015, fulfilling a promise that had been made off-and-on since the 1960's.

From the photos we found, there were two things that stood out the most. First, like everywhere in Kurdistan, they're far more beautiful in the spring – the combination of rain and snow runoff curtain the stark mountain villages with greenery. Second, they were *villages* in the sense that they were obviously far behind other cities I'd been to in terms of infrastructure development. I thanked my friend, paid for the items I had nominally come there to get, and went home to eat lunch and do a little more research.

There are two contradictory realities that describe Halabja. On the one hand, Halabja is the odd-man out. Beyond being a border city, it is of little geographic and strategic importance, and as such it is not on the receiving end of the competing patronage systems. This makes the region ideal for groups that want to avoid competing with the PUK, KDP, and Iraqi federal government for local control, much less to continue existing. IMK in the 1990's is a perfect demonstration of this.

On the other hand, Halabja is critical to post-1988 Kurdish nationalist discourses. As we discussed in the literature review, Halabja and the Anfal Campaign became a shared trauma for Kurds everywhere. What has not been discussed is the political complexity of the memorialization process.

Memorialization is a process that satisfies the desire to honor those who suffered or died during conflict and as a means to examine the past and address contemporary issues. It can either promote social recovery after violent conflict ends or crystallize a sense of victimization, injustice, discrimination, and the desire for revenge. (Barsalou and Baxter, 2007)

In the case of Halabja, that “promot[ing] ... a sense of victimization, injustice, discrimination, and the desire for revenge” extends beyond the initial trauma to the way in which that trauma is appropriated into political action.

In 2003, the US military proposed a modernization project for Halabja's water system. The PUK convinced them to divert that money – some \$20 million – from that the water project to erecting a memorial in Halabja. Furthermore, the monument is a bit of a hike from Halabja-proper, effectively divorcing the inhabitants from official uses, such as visits from dignitaries and other government leaders. On March 16, 2006, protestors – most if not all of whom were students from Halabja – pillaged and set fire to the monument. Simply put, they were expressing their extreme displeasure at the government having erected a sprawling memorial instead of meeting the basic human needs of the people. Clean water, electricity, and public services were absent from Halabja (Kakei, 2012). The protest resulted in the death of one student at the hands of security forces.



*Figure 15 - A view from the bottom of the Halabja memorial complex*

For as much as the monument is a remembrance of all that happened in 1988, it is also a monument to the process of abstracting personal losses,<sup>267</sup> which in this case doubly insulted

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<sup>267</sup> To be fair, this is an easy, if not entirely natural, trap to fall into. It is the nature of politics that tragedies are incorporated into shaping desired narratives, and the nature of historical memory to treat effected communities in the



Halabjans with the misallocation of resources. It is no wonder that neither the KDP nor PUK were able to grow any lasting roots in the region. Another fruit of this alienation is in 2007 wherein a group emerged calling itself the al-Qaeda Kurdish Battalion. Its stated purpose was to “[defeat] the plans of the apostates and the infidels [the KDP and PUK],” and it carried out attacks in both Erbil and Sulaymaniyah (Khalil, 2007).<sup>268</sup> Its membership was composed almost entirely of former-IMK members and Halabjans (“Al-Qaeda Kurdish Battalion,” Mapping Militant Organizations).

So, if you want to find radicals, go to northeastern Iraq. They are alienated in equal parts by the largest Kurdish parties (Kakei, 2012), the federal government (Hauslohner, 2014), and the Shi’ite militias in Iraq and Iran. This alienation feeds directly into the argument made by militant Islamists that the only thing to come from liberalism in Iraq is a weakening of Islamic values and empowerment of the apostate mafias.

### The Murdered Imams

According to both KDP Interior Minister Karim Sinjari and PUK Chief of Security Dana Majid, the moderate Islamist groups act like a ‘kindergarten,’ introducing people to the Islamist perspective and allowing them to make the first necessary steps towards becoming committed jihadists [58]. Minister Sinjari adds that “Ninety-five per cent of Ansar al-Islam members had been part of the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan, the Islamic Group, or the Kurdistan Islamic Union. The way to stop the radicals involves devising strategies to stop the ‘kindergartens.’” (Romano, 2007:15)

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singular and/or crystalize around individual cases. For Americans, examples of this are the Holocaust being taught in primary and secondary schools as involving ‘the Jews’ and reading the diary of Anne Frank. The tragedy of the six-million Jews killed – much less the other groups forced into concentration camps (such as homosexuals, Roma, communists, handicapped persons, etc.), in addition to all of those individuals that survived – is well outside of human range to fully process without such conceptual short hands.

<sup>268</sup> It is no wonder that they emerged when and where they did; AQI was facing more resistance with the 2007 American “Surge” and the emergence of the Sons of Iraq in the central-western provinces. Also, the referendum on Kirkuk becoming part of the KRG was a strong incentive to destabilize the KRG or at least project instability prior to the vote.

On July 7, 2017, Mullah Ahmedi Dere was shot dead outside of his mosque after giving the Friday sermon. According to Rudaw,

The deceased man was identified by Mohammed as Azim Sidiq Ali, known as Mala Ahmedi Dere, aged 45. “The imam was married. The reason behind the incident is still not clear. The investigation by the security forces is ongoing,” Rizgar Qadir, head of the main headquarters of the Islamic Group (Komal) in Rania, told Rudaw.

“Mala Ahmed was a member of the Islamic Group’s fifth center and was the head of the party’s union of [Islamic] preachers,” he added. The Kurdistan Region’s ministry of religious affairs condemned the killing. “We strongly condemn the killing of this religious preacher. These kinds of heinous acts endanger peace in the society. We therefore call upon the security establishment of the Region and other relevant departments to find, arrest, and try the culprits of this heinous act,” the ministry said in a statement. (2017)

The demise of Ahmedi Dere is far from unique – there are a number of similar incidents in the last few years within Iraqi Kurdistan, and far more from throughout Iraq starting in 2003. Most of these have absolute dead ends in terms of investigations. Sometimes it’s because there is genuinely too little to work with, but often it’s because of the politically-motivated nature of the incident. In either case, finding ‘witnesses’ is a tricky business and often self-defeating.<sup>269</sup>

I knew all of this long before I came to Iraq but being on-the-ground presented some opportunities I would have loved to have had as an undergrad at BYU researching Iraqi electoral violence. I decided to start doing some field work about these murdered imams.

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<sup>269</sup> For instance, I was watching a live broadcast from Rudaw in early 2017 and the newsman was reporting from the location of a shooting. It was directly outside of a restaurant, and the anchor approached a worker, asking point-blank,

“Do you remember what you saw yesterday?”

The man kept his eyes glued to the ground.

“I didn’t see anything, I was working,” he mumbled, backing away from the camera.

Whether you’re in Rania, Iraq, or Chicago, Illinois, the incentive structure for situations like this is fairly straightforward – witnesses have far more to lose than to gain by cooperating with authorities in reprimanding shooters. Being recorded on television as a ‘snitch’ can amount to assisted suicide. ‘Keep your head down and your mouth shut’ is the universal modum vivendi for civilian conflict management in high-violence regions.

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While none of the murders I was investigating took place in Erbil, being in the capital meant proximity to the KDP security headquarters. With my own limited *wastā* connections, I asked a friend of a friend to bring it up the next time he was there.<sup>270</sup> Luckily for me, he soon thereafter reported to his friend that he brought it up with a high-ranking security official in the KRG. The man's reply was along the lines of, 'Oh yes, we caught the perpetrators very quickly. Both cases (Ahmedi Dere and another dead mullah) were nothing more than neighborhood disputes.'

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"So, who do you think killed the imams?" I asked Muhammad R<sub>x</sub>.

"The government. The Barzanis. They killed them."

I already knew from a mutual friend what he was going to say, but I wanted to hear it from him.

Despite the morbid nature of our conversation, I couldn't help but laugh at his bluntness.

"Why do you think they did it?" I prompted.

"In Kurdistan, if you make problems for the government, especially if you're religious, they'll have you killed. Any extremists and they'll make sure you don't last."

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Suspecting that I'd be able to have better luck on their home territory and be closer to where the incident took place, I went to Rania to try to meet with a representative of the local branch of the Kurdish Islamic Group (Komala). Before I left, I told Baho where I was going and why.

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<sup>270</sup> This friend and his friend were in positions where casually dropping such a question would not have posed any awkwardness for either of them.

“You’re meeting with them? They’re kind of scary, and you don’t have a beard,” he said, laughing at the end. I laughed with him, but the small ball of tension that had been building at the prospect of all the potentialities got that much bigger. I thought of Ali Bapir’s most formative experiences with Americans and wondered how much this still affected Komala employees’ attitudes.

Baho continued, “I need to have your GPS or something! Give me updates whenever you’re in between things.”

He wasn’t kidding, and neither of us resumed our laugh. I made sure I ditched my ‘probably a contractor’-look in favor of local professional attire. During the three-hour drive (which I kept in touch with Baho via text) I prepared myself for the potential of being turned away. I’d been told by multiple people on multiple occasions that out in Rania everyone is a bearded, wife-beating, Islamic supremacist (see Satkunanandan, 2012). While I hope that repetition did not entirely erode my objectivity, I definitely admit to having very low expectations regarding my reception.

It took me little time to find the office, and within a minute of introducing myself, I was welcomed to the second-story of the Komala building. They asked me to remove my shoes as I would entering a mosque. No security pat down, no armed guards, nothing. The first person I met was Mullah Slemani, who is responsible for a mosque in Sangasar (see Fig.18), which is twenty minutes or so from Rania and had come to the office to conduct some business. A minute or two after that, I was in Mr. Rizgar Qadir Pirot's office (Fig. 16).



*Figure 16 - Rizgar Qadir in his office in Rania*

He greeted me kindly and agreed to let me record our conversation. While he spoke perfect English, he was kind enough to let me conduct the interview in Kurdish.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> On the one hand, the perennial language student in me wanted the opportunity to practice. On the other, I didn't want to lose out on authentic reactions due to mental code-switching and other linguistic interference. I knew there would be bits of our conversation I'd miss the first time through, which is where my recording device earned its keep.

“I had a meeting with the Ministry of Awqaf and they told me their ideas about Islam [which were] very different... they don’t believe in the Hadith or Sunna... what do you think the role of Hadith and Sunna is in Kurdish [society]?” I stumbled out.<sup>272</sup>

“We are of the Sunni sect, and we have two sources – the Quran and hadith ... we have hadith on the subject of morals, and lofty things, and if it’s weak, we disregard it. But there are other subjects, subjects like judgments, beliefs and faith that are solid [*ṣahīḥ*]... the Quran is the word of the Rab al-‘Ālimayn. And how do people understand this word? It must be translated,” he paused, switching to English, “you know [translate]?”

“Yes, and it’s translated into Kurdish, right?”

“Yes, yes,” he affirmed. “And this is to assist in understanding the Quran correctly.”

I proceeded to my second question,

“So with all of the, uh, many political problems between Baghdad and Hawler, many people have told me that they are.. *za‘lān* in Arabic.. how do you say it?..”

“In English?” he offered.

“*Angry.*”

“*Tūrān.*”

“*Tūrān, tūrān!* Yes, many people are angry with the Shi’ites, they are displeased. How, as Komala, do you deal with groups like al-Ḥašd al-Ša‘bī and other violent groups?”

“The Shi’ites are a sect, and they have their own doctrine *and* their own politics.”

“That’s an important distinction,” I chimed.

“And there are many types. Some of them are extremist. But many are very good and are friendly with Sunnis. Most people, Shi’ite or Sunni, are simply Muslims. In all times, everyone,

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<sup>272</sup> While the transcript may not reflect this, my questions involved a lot of fumbling before I got many of them out correctly. I am very grateful for Mr. Qadir’s patience.

Sunni and Shi'ite, from throughout the four corners of the Islamic world are upright and righteous, or not upright and bad. Sunni or Shi'ite. We, Sunnis, also have our own sectarian and extremist segments ... Differences between Turks and Iranians and Kurds, these are not doctrinal differences, they are political.”

We talked for a time after this, wending our way down to my core question.

“My last question.. I know that [in July] Mullah Ahmedi Dere was killed.”

“Yes, yes,” he affirmed.

“And that several times before that, other imams have been killed. Do you feel that there is fear, I mean, danger for imams?”

“In a way, no. Let’s talk honestly about this and give it its proper value. We are a massively safe country, and the people, government... the good character of Islam is recognized in Kurdish culture... That is what we’re trying to protect or we’ll lose it. They face murder, terrorism... for every case there’s a reason, not only imams are facing fear, every person with a free voice, or with a brave voice, imam, journalists, and other people, depends case by case. Sometimes these people get in trouble with people in high positions, this isn’t the case that the KDP and PUK get together and kill any imam with a free voice. They might investigate one, [like] Mullah Šwan<sup>273</sup> in Hawler or Mamosta Ahmedi Dere they bring an excuse (i.e. set up to kill), how they kill a journalist is how they’ll kill a professor of religion, or women with different excuses. But we are against killing women, journalists, and imams. The reason we are responding when an imam gets killed is because they’re related to us, but we don’t like anyone getting killed. If someone talks in a free way, we don’t like others to insult or humiliate. We don’t like anyone to say bad things even against the government, but we do support criticism. Sometimes it is good to say criticism

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<sup>273</sup> See pg.304.

for the sake of society but not for individual interests, because this happens to journalists and imam and activists... this is a bad thing and sometimes imam will also get killed for these excuses. There may be problems within the extended family or problems with certain people in power... If you say bad things to individual politicians, you will get killed.”

And there we had it. I couldn't get him to say what Mullah Ahmedi Dere had said, but the implication was clear, even if most of our conversation was not.<sup>274</sup>

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After my interview ended, the office staff invited me to join them for lunch. Mr. Qadir had to leave, but he introduced me to all of his colleagues before he made his leave. Together, we ate rice, apricot stew, and local flat bread (well, not me on that last bit) as they asked me questions about what I as an American student was doing in Iraq. They were surprised that I was not nor ever had been with the US military – that question having had a particular electricity that hung in the air until I answered in the negative – and pleased with the fact that I was so interested in their culture. We then went through a familiar song and dance – they asked some general questions regarding my views on Islam, and I gave my answers which diplomatically (though honestly) described my appreciation of Islamic values and recognition of the complexities of politics and religion. When we were through, I thanked them for so graciously sharing their time and food with me and made my way back to Erbil.

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<sup>274</sup> Baho, who helped me with a few of the trickier items in my recording that I didn't understand the first time through, said at the end of the twenty-minute interview, “he says a lot without saying much at all. Do you know what I mean?”

“Oh, I get it. Glad it wasn't just me that felt that way,” I said in reply.



Particularly in contrast with the expectations I had built up about this visit, I was shocked at how non-problematic the whole trip turned out. On some levels, this shouldn't have been shocking at all – it was a textbook example of how a Muslim should treat a guest. I've revisited this experience often, adding additional context from things I've seen and read to try to make sense of these paradoxical accounts.



*Figure 17 – above: Office Assistant (left) and Mullah Slemani (right) outside of the Komala office in Rania; below: lunchtime in the Komala office*



*2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting at the Wazāretī Awqāf ū Kārūbārī Aynī*

After doing the basic transcription from my time in Rania, I prepared a few questions and scheduled a return interview with Mr. B. Barzani. He readily accepted, and less than a week later I was back in his office. While my main purpose for the visit was learning more about the incidents near Rania, we started more or less where we left off the previous visit, adding to it the recent announcement from the Trump administration regarding the American embassy being moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.<sup>275</sup>

“It belonged first to the Jew, then the Christian came,” Barzan Barzani told me. “Then the Muslim, which is really... political and military... The commander Abd al-Malak al-Mawad, he built al-Aqsa there. Only for political and business reasons. Business. Against who? Against Yazid al-Mu’awia, nobody flew from there. No one... they think the temple of Herod is there, some they think that temple of Sulaymaniyah, no one is there – no land is holy. If some place is holy, that makes God [unjust]. Why you make a difference between people? Why is this place holy? When Trump says that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, this is normal, we don’t care.”

“I went to the [Friday sermon],” I said, “and I thought they did a good job handling it, talked about it as a shared city, and it was important to many peoples.”

“Salahadin Eyubi, is a murderer,” Mr. B. Barzani resumed, “A big killer. Why? Who told him? Did God tell him? No. Did Muhammad tell him? No. For power. For money. Political. He killed them and took them and bought it for another,”

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<sup>275</sup> Not long before the interview, the Trump administration announced the building of a new embassy in Jerusalem. While we won’t be talking about the Kurdish-Israeli connection until pg.318, it works best to leave our conversation in its entirety here.

We were then interrupted by a petitioner with some forms to be signed. I waited while he took care of what his regular duties were, having to bite my tongue and not ask what it was that he was helping our rather harried looking visitor with.

His business concluded, Mr. B. Barzani turned back to me.

“Where were we?”

“We talked about how Jerusalem is a lot of politics.”

“Ah, yes,” he said as he picked back up on his track. “Money, power, woman, you know... The character of Arab, they don’t think with their brain. They think, or their mind, is between their legs.”

While I had no interest in ‘stirring the pot’ with respect to ethnic tensions, my job there was to get as candid perspective as possible and not impose my own normative views. This degree of candidness caught me off-guard, and I couldn’t help but laugh. He may have interpreted this as a sign of agreement, and I didn’t feel the need to contradict him.

He continued,

“Really, read the history. Everything in their culture – money, sex. Nothing, only. How they get this country and destroy it and take life and take money and take woman. All the *futūḥāt* was taking this kind of... what is the word..”

“Mentality?” I proffered.

“Yes, that is it.. After Muhammad died, there were khalifs. They are not holy. You can read the history. They have 500, 400, 100 women. *Mulk al-yamīn*. They don’t know what this word means. Why? Because they don’t go to the Qur’an, they go to hadith. Sorry it’s bullshit.”

Before he could continue, we were interrupted by a phone call. I figured I’d heard enough about Jerusalem for the time being and had other (literal and figurative) territory I hoped to cover

before our time was through. He finished the phone call, and I moved on to the subject of Turkish Islam.

“On kind of a random note, how much do you know about the Turkish Diyanet? It’s kind of their version of the Wazāretī Awqāf, except it’s just the, uh, just *vaqif*.”

Mr. B. Barzani nodded.

“Turkish Diyanet, it works on a special system. Not like us. They don’t work in, with Jew, or Christian, or Sabea like we have. We have, for example, waqf for Christian, Jew, Sabia, Manda’i, Kaka’i, but in [Turkey, they have] another system. This system is between the Sufi *madhhab* and the Atatürk *madhhab*. They have the both and they succeed. They make an army from the Sufis, because they hate ISIS and Salafi and these things. They can fight against them... In 2010 I was there, I was invited along with me and his excellency Baita Masbuka Haji ... of the Islamic Movement. When I [got] to Turkey, first thing I noticed, I said, ‘do you go [into] the army?’ They say no, I ask why? All of them, they have to join the army. When you’re 20 years old, you enlist. They told me no. Why? Because we work here. Only the [Diyanet] of Turkey, they never join this army. Why not? Because the president told us that we belong to him. And we study religion and religions and *turāth* and so on... after those two years or three years out of the system, they go on, and you go back and they have everything. But they don’t know why. They belong to the government. The government supports them. They want to make an army against this kind of Islamic Movement, like ISIS. They have been against the Fethullah Gülen Movement. Gülen has been part of ISIS, [Muslim Brotherhood] of Egypt, they read the *turāth*, Ibn Taymiyya, but no, they are Sufi. When I visit[ed] them they haven’t.. they don’t have TV. They don’t have internet.”

“The Gülen?” I asked.

“No, the Diyanet. The Turkish schools belonging to Erdoğan. They make a kind of Islamic group, when ISIS comes, no, more than 5000 schools in 400 countries. In Istanbul alone, 521 or 29 children’s, teenage, and women’s schools.. 9 women’s schools in Istanbul. 400 countries they come to study there and after that they send them out of Turkey to work like a teacher... Starting up these Turkish schools, a lot of Turkish schools... But after that, a lot of groups, they work with Jihadi of Syria and [Saudi Arabia] and Egypt, they make a bigger and they can’t win, but what happened after last year... they uh, they lose. One thing, an important thing in *turāth*, don’t go after these things. Because they’re only legend. You have important things with Quran, and Bible... When you want to read about [religion], you must have the books. In the Bible and Quran and Torah, I see the ayat, and I know they are from God. I know that, I’ve seen that.”

Here we were interrupted not by a telephone or a petitioner, but a security guard. Apparently, there was some kind of marital dispute that had made its way out of the house and into the ministry building. Mr. B. Barzani switched the camera feed on his monitor to show the front lobby, where the trouble-making husband was trying to get past a receptionist. He excused himself from his office and oversaw the problem in-person. As I waited, the guard, whom I had met on my first visit, decided to give me a small piece of his mind.

“*Amrika khaiyna,*” he said, following it up with something neither my ears nor the recorder could pick up. ‘America is a traitor.’ Candid, but this time I didn’t laugh. Shortly thereafter, my host returned, and we picked things back up.

“Her husband is a fool.. crazy, sick... ok... so what do you want to know?”

“I’m just curious what your reaction is every time that the Barzanis do something that Turkey doesn’t like they call them *dönmes*,<sup>276</sup> you know, they claim that they’re Jews or are being controlled by the outside.”

“We love Jews. We. Are. Human,” he said, punctuating each word for emphasis. “That’s all. I must love Jew, Christian, Buddhist, I don’t care what they go after. What they pray [to]...

Between him and his God, I have no reason to tell him what to do. Or to tell him what is good or no. I don’t have permission to say, ‘what is your religion?’... what I have, is whether he is a good man or not. Can I listen to him? I live in a village in Barzan, in the mountains, the Jew has been my grandfather’s neighbor, and we have in another village, called Bedyal, until now it is there, and it belongs to the Christians. Without any problems. I deal with him like I deal with my brother. When something happens, I go to him. When someone dies, I go to him. Maybe we have, one or three, they have another situation about religion and relations, but I don’t care. It’s only a few... We live like brothers. Since 1,000 years, since 100 years since Barzani has existed. For this they hate us. ‘You belong to Israel!’ Sure.”

Finally, I found the appropriate juncture to introduce my core question.

“How’s the KDP’s relationships with groups like Komala? The Islamic group.”

“I... like Barzani, I don’t like them. They think they are better.. because they, uh, they think they know everything about Islam... They have the clothes, they have the beard... This is the important point in Kurdistan. They think they are better and know everything about [Islam]... but really, they only read a few books and don’t know anything. They think they represent the God and Muhammad. They fight America, they fight the KDP, they fight the PUK. ‘You are

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<sup>276</sup> *Dönmesler* are descendants of the seventeenth-century followers of the leader of the Shabbatean messianic upheaval, Shabbatai Zevi (Scholem, 2007). The accusation was that they remained crypto-Jews simply pretending to have converted to Islam. While we’ll only take a short dip into Turkish-Israeli and Turkish-Jewish relations in pp.318-322, suffice it to say that there has been plenty of awkward history to make this subject a sensitive one.

Kafer!’ Why? Because I have a different ideology. You must forcibly put your ideology in his mind! They have another Islam, we have two Islams. Quran Islam and *turāth* Islam. We believe in Quran Islam. So no, they say if the *turāth* doesn’t exist, you cannot work by Quran, and cannot make law by Quran. Why? This is the Quran, the Bible, the Torah, they come from God. [The *turāth*] came from man. Nobody likes them! God doesn’t like them! Because they, you know, someone tell you ‘me, I am the best,’ you will particularly hate him. Why? Because he thinks he’s the only creature that God made on the earth. But you get ill, you get sick, you die. You’re human. Maybe he is a doctor, or a maker of electricity, or maker of database or something useful for humanity. But what do you make? You let people know how to kill, how to do use the WC, this guy is kafer, this guy is, I don’t know what, this guy is Christian, and I can’t tell him good morning... that’s what they think and nobody likes them. I challenge everyone and we make an election for who loved them. Young people, teenage people, and old people. Make election. Do you like Komala? No. Maybe, 20% maybe they like because they work with them. Business. And if, uh, they never succeed.”

“They usually get a small portion of the elections, and that because they group together. I’ve heard a lot of people who are upset with those parties, saying they’re *dūrrū*, very two-faced.” I said.

“Yeah,” he affirmed.

“I’m curious about that. I know that in the past, like this July, Mullah Ahmede Dere, there was a Mullah that was killed in Qaladize, near Rania, I was just curious if you knew anything about that because some imams from these groups had been killed.”

“Mullah Ahmed who?” he queried.

“I’m trying to remember, he’s got another name.. just a moment,” I said, as I pulled out my phone to look up his full name.

“They killed him?” Mr. B. Barzani asked.

“Yeah, well, he got killed. I just wasn’t sure,”

“That’s normal,” he interjects, “I don’t care. I don’t care. Why we care?”

“I just wasn’t sure that because this was the Ministry of Religious Affairs, where that came up on your radar,” I said.

“I do not remember this accident (I think he meant ‘incident’).. this year?”

“Yeah,” then, after finding the report again, “here we go – his name was Hazim Sadiq. In July,” I said, as I passed my phone with the article to him.

“Just a minute I’ll call, uh.. in July?”

“July 6,” I clarified.

Mr. B. Barzani picks up his phone and dials out. A few rings in, someone answers on the other end and he has a conversation in Kurdish.

“Is Mamosta Jalal there?.. Hazim Sadiq killed in Rania, where is he exactly from, do you know?... He was Komal? Did they kill him themselves?.. Oh, oh, alright, alright. Thank you very much.”

He hung up the phone and turned back to me.

“Yeah, he was Komala.”

“Yeah, Komala,” I agreed.

“A woman. Not political,”

“Oh, so it was over a woman?”



“He was being a bad guy. I told you, Mullah means sex,” he stated, flatly. “I don’t care about this news, you know, he is killed, he is killed, but I know, 25% when they have a problem, especially these guys, it’s money, earth.. Land, territory... Or woman, or money.. 25% maybe political, maybe they something about another group, and they kill them. especially terrorist groups. A few. That mullah,” he turned now to the others in his office, switching to Kurdish, “that Shi’ite mullah that was killed? Who was he again?”

They went back and forth for a bit, exchanging information that seemed to range between Rudaw articles and gossip. When they were finished, he went back to English.

“It was over a woman,” he concluded, then went back to asking the others.

“How many Mullahs have been killed?”

Now his office was talking all at once, and I only caught bits and pieces.

“A lot,” said one.

“One in Akre... he came to Iran, then...”

“Komala,” another one interjects.

“This guy, first time – Hazim...”

I didn’t catch everything that was being said, but I got what I needed. So, apparently, had Mr. B. Barzani.

“He [had been] fucking. He went to Iran, joined [a group in] Iran, then he come back and became Komala, and after that he wanted to go to a party, and something happened with another married woman, and her husband saw what happened, and he shoot him.”

“I’ve read that in Rania there are a lot of issues with honor killings and spousal abuse. That does sound pretty consistent,” I said. Regardless of whether or not a mullah picked up a married woman at a party,<sup>277</sup> that much was true.

“In Qaladize, and Rania and that border, more than 65% they belong to Iran.”

“Really, they work for them?” I said, my voice registering the pique in interest.

“They work for Iran’s agenda. A few [Salafis] they don’t like them, they are against them, but at the same time they’re against us too.”

“It’s complicated but it has to do with who pays who, huh?” I agreed.

“Do you know what’s the problem? They don’t know really, they don’t believe God. They don’t believe Qur’an, they don’t believe.. books of all the like Bible and Torah, they only believe what you say to them, what they read in the *turāth*. Only *turāth*. They think this is they make this book, or this *turāth* a big thing, or big map.. future, to them. but really, they don’t know anything about anything. They are like crazy, or someone that sees dreams and tells their dreams. They think they have 72 *hūrī‘ayn*, you must kill, God tell you to kill yourself, and you go to the paradise (*paradīs*), and you make a sex... They don’t care.”

“So how does the ministry, uh, you said last time that if there’s a mullah is teaching some radical things in the mosques, you’ll give them a call and ask them why they’re teaching these things, then how do you proceed? Do you hand them over to the anti-terrorist segment?” I asked.

“We have, eh, an attaché with..” he started, trailing off as he mulled the question over. “I will tell you the mechanism by which we work ... under the hand of KDP, we send our people, especially [for Friday prayer]. We have like a spy, they are not spy,” he clarified.

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<sup>277</sup> Surely there’s a Mullah Nasruddin joke about one of these...

“It’s observing.” I said, shrugging. Standard practice in the Middle East and parts of America as well.

“If you hear something that puts the national security of Kurdistan in danger, you write a report, saying, ‘Barzan, this guy he said this about this thing,’ ... after that..”

We stop as yet another petitioner approaches the door and addresses my host. This is the way things go here – not just in the office, but in Kurdistan. If you want to get the attention you need, you don’t wait. You just go in and ask. They’ll tell you if you need to wait, and even then, unless it’s a closed-door meeting, they’ll just come and wait right next to you with no guarantee that they won’t interrupt to repeat their business.

“Sometimes we are very busy,” Mr. B. Barzani said, apologizing, “Sometimes no one comes to us.”

I took this as an opportunity address my own curiosity.

“You’ve had a lot of people come in and out, and I’ve caught bits and pieces of what’s going on. On a given day, what do you do? Like on a normal day? Your work?”

He didn’t have time to respond when yet another visitor entered his office. Interestingly enough, this one was speaking Arabic. Between a phone call and signing something, he continued, “Christian, Jew, Saba’a, [Yazidis], Kakai, Mandai, I make relation with these groups, like brother, like a family. We talk about everything – our *turāth*, their *turāth*, their books, our books, whenever they have a question about things here,” he trailed off as his phone call was answered.

When it was done, he turned back to me.

“On days when there is no work here, I’ll go and have coffee with them. The Jew, he bring to me.. the tobacco. In Jerusalem, the tobacco is the best.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.” I knew Israel grew citrus, but tobacco? I guess you learn something every day.

“Yes, we smoke and talk about everything. You know, those groups that work against the humanity. In all the world, they are not human, you must say they are murder, they are beast, they live in the jungle, they don’t know anything about God’s law or humanity. They think they are different. I know they are different; they are crazy, they don’t have a mind. But they are not the best. A man he brought me a paper wanting to know how to study at the.. university... when they come here, these, uh, peoples, uh, they look at us like we’re different, you know, you feel, why he look[s] at you differently. Like you’re inferior.”

He stopped, looking down at the paper he was going through, switching back to Kurdish with one of his assistants, “Did I do the wrong thing? Did I make a mistake with him? No...” they consulted for a time, then switched back to English.

“A few years, you go to, eh, our Christian brother before 25 September.. Before the Referendum.. For the Christmas, that time the minister was of the Islamic Movement, Mr. Khalati, [asked] ‘Mr. Barzani you drink?’ [and some Christian staff] brought this,” he said, holding up a small container of water, the complimentary sealed plastic cup offered in every single establishment in the country. “It’s not from USA or from Canada, no it is from Kurdistan. No, [the Christians put] the water [in front of him] and he wouldn’t touch it. I noted this... I told him, why do you not drink the water? Why? This is from here!”

“Huh. It was bottled here, and all they did was pick it up,” I mused, shaking my head.

“I told him, I’ll have coffee, he tell[s] me he will not eat with them. They are like *that*. Allah said in the Quran, <*uḥill lakum al-ṭayibāt ahl al-kitāb*><sup>278</sup> you can join them and you can eat with them.”

“People of the Book,” I confirmed.

“Yes.. they are your brothers, but in *turāth*, no, ‘[the true believers] are the best and ... must kill [all others]!’ Until now, in their minds, they take Christian, Jew, they are kafer. They do not know what is kafer. They believe in God. They believe Jesus. They believe Buddha. They believe Moses. Kafer mean you don’t believe in God, you don’t believe He exist. This is kafer... This is the difficulty. They are never like normal persons. They will never be like us, uh, never. We need a revolution. A mind revolution, not uh, fighting revolution. You must make a generation of a new mind, a new thinking. You must make like schools to study there and tell them, ‘hey this is the humanity, and this is the religion, and this is the *turāth*..’”

For the first time since I came in, we had a few moments of silence. I sensed the end of our time coming but wanted just a little bit more.

“In Kurdistan, you’re in such a unique position in history. Like you described Barzān for me, as being, an ethnically and religiously mixed area. And in between, essentially between warzones as long as there have been Kurds, between the Safavids and Ottomans, between Turkey and Iran, and Syria, and Baghdad, it’s uh, it sounds like that kind of thought process is especially important.”

“We live in a bad place,” he said with a shrug.

“It’s a tough geographical place, it really is,” I echoed.

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<sup>278</sup> I’m fairly certain he meant 5:5, which goes a little differently but says the same idea.

“When we love Jew, ‘oh you’re a Jew, you’re a kafer!’ ‘Oh you’re a Christian, oh what you mean you love USA?’” ... I love, when I want to love, Iran, the Sunna they say they are Shi’a, you are kafer, you are sunna. What did I do?... The Shi’a, Iran.. Iraq is now Shi’a. This,” meaning Iraq, “is only one city of Iran.”

Between everything that had been going on and the tone of his voice, we finally hit a place that was particularly sensitive for him. I couldn’t blame him.

“Part. Of. Iran,” his voice a quiet but definitive gavel strike, “Going under the order of Sistani and Iran. It’s only Abadi and he’s only a cartoon.”

“Like a puppet,” I agreed. “Like al-Sadr announced yesterday that no parties would be running under the title of al-Hašd al-Ša‘bī, and it’s not like they have to run under the title, they’re all connected, like it’s.. you don’t have to put it on your name.”<sup>279</sup>

“You know they think they have like a religion. They think, Muhammad Mahdi, he come back. And he will kill all the kufara, and he will save the Earth, and he is belong[ing] to the Shi’a, and he live under the ground. This is what is in their minds for 1,400 years.”

“He’s in occultation and they’re waiting for him to come back.”

Shi’ite studies 101.

“This the way they think, they think they are chosen from the God. Why are you the chosen? Who tell you? Who tell you that the God tell you, ‘you – you are [mine] ... they want Iranian empire like in the past throughout the Middle East. On the other side you see the [Saudis], they are... Iran, Turkey, Erdoğan think[s of] himself as the khalifa.”

This was my turn to have a nerve hit.

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<sup>279</sup> While Iraqi-Iranian Shi’ite politics can’t take up too much of our time, it’s critical to note that while Mr. B. Barzani treated al-Sadr, al-Sistani, and Iran as being part of a single front, this is *not* the case. While all three have constituents in the PMF, they are hardly simpatico with respect to their visions for the future of Iraq.

“Yes! Very much a Neo-Ottoman...” I said, making sure to stop there so as not to sabotage what little time I had left for the interview. No time for a personal soap box.

“Khalifa but working under the order of Ataturk. Can I say I am Islamic but I am a Jew? Crazy. Or Christian and Islamic? Christian Islamic? Islamic Jew? They say they are Islamic, but they are working under Atatürk. Atatürk was, he [didn't] believe in the God.”

Looking at the clock, he then told me that it was time for lunch break. I thanked him very much for his time, and before I left, he gave me the injunction,

“But only be careful, when you talk to people.. choose, uh, good guys. Be careful of the Salafi, they say Barzani is kafer because he don't believe in the hadith, yeah, yeah.. What does kafer even mean? They don't know. They have their own meaning..” he said, walking toward the door. “It's politics.”

On that point I couldn't have agreed more.

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While there is quite a bit that we will dissect and analyze from these discussions, our current focus is solely on the imams. In summary, the Komala position is that they were murdered because they had spoken against KRG leadership on a personal level. You speak against the leadership or direction of the KRG in general terms, you're still on shaky ground, but if you get personal you'll end up dead. The KRG position is two-fold – first, these Salafi imams are far more involved in sectarian violence than they project. Second, they are often victims of honor crimes of their own making. If you live in really conservative areas and fool around with married women, you'll end up dead.

The following are two articles on a grenade attack on the Rudaw headquarters in Erbil, wherein five individuals were injured. The first article reads,

Two senior members of the Kurdistan Islamic Group, known as Komal, have been detained by the security forces of the Kurdistan Region for ties to the terrorist attack on Rudaw Media Network on June 25<sup>th</sup>.

Early 28<sup>th</sup> June night, the Asayish security forces arrested Sa'di Mustafa on charges of involved in the attack on Rudaw. A moving car threw out a hand grenade from the window in front of the channel's headquarter, injuring five people.

The following day another Komal member, Sarhad Osman, was arrested.

The Ministry of Interior has told Rudaw that the perpetrators have connections to the Islamic State (ISIS) and have conducted the operation under their command.

The Islamic Group denounced the arrests, showing support for their two members...

HawlerTimes has learned that a large number of those young Kurds who have joined ISIS have affiliations to Komal or have been educated in the Islamic schools supervised by preachers who are members of Komal. Komal has six seats in the Parliament of Kurdistan. Since 2014, a number of Komal's members have been arrested on the ground of connections to ISIS or attempting to join the group, as well as several of its preachers have been dismissed from mosques who have taught radical thoughts to their followers. ("Komal Members Detained Over Rudaw Bombing,"

HawlerTimes, July 1, 2016)

The second article continued,

...Asayesh arrested the perpetrator, Rebwar Wriya Salih, three days [after the attack], the security forces confirmed in a statement.

Salih confessed and said he was given the grenades from two men along with instructions of what to do. They told Salih they wanted to cause chaos in the capital of the Kurdistan Region through an act of terror against a major media corporation like Rudaw.

The two who orchestrated the attack are Saadi Mustafa Abdulrahman and Jwamer Osman Abdulla, said Salih. They also taught him how to handle and set the grenades in training conducted outside of the city.



Salih said that Saadi Mustafa Abdulrahman and Jwamer Osman Abdulla are members of the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG, Komal Party). He joined the party in 2008 and met Abdulrahman and Abdulla through the party.

The KIG issued a statement denying their party was involved in the attack and has rejected the accusations made by Salih. (“Perpetrator of Attack on Rudaw Confesses,” *HawlerTimes*, 2016; I can find no further mention of Sarhad Osman beyond the first article).

For Salafis and sexual indiscretion, the following is from Edith Szanto’s aforementioned writing,

...Salafi preacher ‘Abd al-Latif from Sulaimani ... [was] recently at the center of a scandal involving adultery. A tape was released in the spring of 2016 that recorded a rather intimate, romantic conversation between ‘Abd al-Latif and a married female student. A few months later, she became his third wife. For members of the secular intellectual elite in Sulaimani, such as gender studies scholar Choman Hardi, this incident is proof of the moral bankruptcy and hypocrisy of Salafism. His followers, however, are not likely to simply turn away from Islamism just because ‘Abd al-Latif turned out to have a wandering eye (Hardi 2016). (2018: 108)

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After a terrorist attack in Erbil in July, 2018,<sup>280</sup> KDP Asayish officers issued an arrest warrant for Salim Shushkayi, a Komala parliamentarian, with the charge that he was a member of ISIS.

...Shushkayi, who belongs to the opposition Komal party, dismissed the claim as politically motivated.

The Komal party voted against the extension of a counterterrorism law in the KRG parliament on July 1, citing fears that it would target people who are not terrorists.

“Everyone knows that some of the [KRG’s] courts, in times of political rivalry, lose their neutrality and are used to settle political rivalries... I strongly reject these accusations and I consider it an effort to undermine my character,” said Shushkayi while in hiding, reportedly in

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<sup>280</sup> We’ll give greater attention to this particular attack on pg.305.

Sulaymaniyah.

Security forces in Hewler are controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) while those in Sulaymaniyah are under the command of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

“The PUK and the KDP are part of the KRG, which should be in charge of the Kurdistan region but, in reality, on security issues, there is hardly any collaboration between the PUK and the KDP security forces,” wrote journalist Fazel Hawramy for Al-Monitor. (Alabbasi, 2018)

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The last incident is the murder of Sardasht Osman, a student of Salahhadin University and a freelance journalist in Erbil. On May 4, 2010 his body was found in front of the PUK headquarters in Mosul.<sup>281</sup> He had written for an international Kurdish paper for years under the pseudonym of Saro Zardasht and had recently written a poem entitled, “I am in Love with Massoud Barzani’s Daughter.”<sup>282</sup> The poem itself satirizes the rank and wealth that come with being in that family in contrast to the sufferings of the rest of the country (see Appendix: Item 3 for the full poem).

On September 15, the Investigating Committee released a statement that they had a suspect that had confessed to the murder (“Statement by the Investigating Committee Over Killing of Iraqi Kurdish,” Ekurd Daily, 2010). At that time, he claimed that Ansar al-Islam had ordered him to kidnap and murder him because Sardasht had promised to help the group and later reneged. In court, the suspect changed their testimony, denied all charges, and was apparently not convicted. The murder of Sardasht Osman officially remains unresolved (“Who is Sardasht Osman?” Kurdish Policy Foundation, 2017).

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<sup>281</sup> Conveniently enough, his corpse still had his student card for identification.

<sup>282</sup> Text taken from Aryan Baban’s translation posted on Ekurd Daily (Osman, 2010).

2011-present

While the title of this segment ostensibly overviews 2011 to the present, it's really a matter of pre-Da'ish and post-Da'ish, so 2011 to 2014, then 2014 to present. Things were moving along swiftly in Iraqi Kurdistan, or at least catching up to bigger cities in the south pre-2003. Erbil was certainly no longer a 'large village' as some people had told me it used to be, and with the sanctions gone, money was coming in far more openly and abundantly. In short, business was booming, and officials in the KRG were leading the charge. As we know, this was not to last, and the coming storm would once again reveal the underlying weaknesses in the socio-political foundations.

*2011 to 2013 – Foundations of Sand*

*Les riche nouveaux*

"Did you know about the donkeys in Baghdad?" Botan asked me as we drove to Sulaymaniyah. We had just passed a man guiding a loaded donkey down the road.

"Nnnnoooo," I said, drawing out each letter as I searched for a memory I was confident didn't exist. "I can't say I have."

"So, in 2003 after the invasion, all of these people fled from their homes in Baghdad to be away from the bombing. Then from all of the villages from all around the city, poor people started pouring in to loot the abandoned houses. Most of these people didn't have cars, so they came in with donkeys. They came in on donkeys and went home in new cars loaded full of stuff."

"What happened to all the donkeys?" I asked.

"They just left them. All these donkeys wandering around the city causing tons of traffic. They'd get hit, then all of a sudden, the restaurants have all this meat. Where did this meat come from? They were all eating dead donkey!" He laughed, clapping his palm against the steering wheel.

According to multiple Hadith (Bukhārī), eating donkey meat is *makrūh* (hated). That being said, consumption of non-halal meat was hardly the worst crime taking place. Not all of those upper and middle-class residents left, and many of the donkey-riders brought firearms. When they left, some had simply burgled but others had committed armed theft, assault, and murder. One consequence of this was the overnight creation of *riche nouveaux* that defied the social order. They had no notable family lines, no place in government; they were simply rags to riches.

There is one particular case that stands out in my memory. My roommate Samir had already established a franchise location in the Family Mall in Duhok and was trying to do the same elsewhere in the region. While most of his efforts involved the malls in Erbil, he had an opportunity crop up in Baghdad. He travelled back and forth for a few weeks, and during that time he was in the apartment two times, and I only knew that because I saw his shoes on my way out those mornings.

By chance we caught each other. The day previous he had bought a huge bundle of pomegranates and was peeling them into a bowl to share. I sat down to help and catch up on how his business was shaping up.

“It is good,” he said in his rich basso voice. “But I’m still not sure about it. There are details that make it complicated.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Well, mostly the guy I’m working with. Starting out, I asked him for a profile for the mall.”

“What’s a mall profile?”

“Logistical details – how many shops, how many parking spaces, things like that. He should know those things or have them on file. But no, he tells me, “What is this? I don’t need it.” He knows nothing about actual business. He just has the money and bought the mall,” Samir said.

“What are you doing about it?”

“I started asking around about this guy, and it ends up he’s a mobster. Showed up in Baghdad after the invasion with all this money.”

I nodded my head, wondering if there was a donkey involved.

Samir continued, “He started hiring tough guys to patrol a few neighborhoods and take protection money from the shops. He kept making money. I asked my business associate what he knew about this guy. Turns out it used to be he and his brother running all of this. But he got in trouble with al-Sadr. A while back [the mall man and his brother] were killing people by putting them into ovens. The Sadr people didn’t want that..”

I scoffed, “Not like they didn’t do plenty of stuff like that themselves.”

Samir nodded, “Right, but the important thing is *when* the brothers were doing that. It was the wrong time. Things were calming down, and [the Sadrists] couldn’t be letting people burn other people in ovens. So they sent them a message by killing the brother. So, the brother stopped it and now he’s just doing the mall.”

“No more baking.”

“Right.”

Our conversation continued for another forty-five minutes into his situation in Duhok, all of which was extremely interesting. But what stood out was the brothers, the ovens, and the mall. Clearly, the Iraqi state institutions are as weak as ever, but the mafias of Baghdad have coalesced

power and reached a state of equilibrium. The Sadrists, as the most powerful mafia, were acting as regulators of that equilibrium.

Samir ended up going back to speak with mall-owning *riche nouveau* two more times, once with his associate. The latter meeting was at a restaurant and ended up being as strange as the first meeting.

“[My associate] was scared to death. He kept looking at the people whose portraits were on the walls, and he was sweating. We were very polite, but we declined the offer. When we finally left, he told me, “We could have died in there. This guy is friends with the men in those pictures... He’s a dangerous man. We don’t want any part of what he’s doing, I don’t care what the money says.””

Later that day, Samir got back on a plane and made the short flight back into the KRG with no news for his European employers beyond the fact that he was still alive.

#### *Swiss Cheese Banking in Baghdad and Problems of Scale*

Prior to Samir’s time with the European company, he worked with a bank. His boss, who owned the bank, was noticing that there were massive discrepancies in their accounting. Trusting Samir, he asked him to do an audit to see what was happening.

“To understand what was going on,” Samir said, “you’ve got to start at the door of the bank. Before you get inside, you’ve got to pay the security guard. He’s getting a salary from the bank, but he won’t let you inside unless you pay him too. Say you were going to the bank to deposit ten dollars. Before you even deposit, you’re already putting less in. Then you have to pay the person who takes your money, and they have to give a portion to the person over them, and they have to do the same thing for the accounts that they’re managing. By the time it all comes

together, you've got only a tiny portion of what you deposited, with bigger and bigger bites being taken out the higher you go.<sup>283</sup> It's like an upside-down pyramid with bites taken out of it."

"An upside-down pyramid of swiss cheese?" I proffered.

"Exactly," he said with a deep chuckle. "That's exactly what it was. So, after I get through all of this, I bring it to my boss and tell him, 'Sell the bank; you're not making any money. You've got to get out of here.' Not long after, that's what he did."

In his own stores with the European company, Samir had come across many of the same issues, but on a scale that he could manage. He uses a very personal and self-described "Western" touch to manage the myriad of workers' issues in Duhok. In time, he was able to significantly reduce the amount of inventory theft and decrease the turnover of employees as he helped them gain a sense of personal investment in the business. This required him to get involved with them one-on-one. From the way he described it, his job went way beyond conventional management and into life-coaching and psychological counseling. Some of his workers were stealing because of domestic problems. One was having a difficult time keeping up at work because his father was beating him when he was at home. Samir took the time to be not just a boss, but a mentor and a beacon to those in the shop, and it changed everything.

With this in mind, Samir's advice to the bank owner had heft to it.

Not reform, reassess, 'right-size,' or re-task.

Run.

Were Samir to systematically go through and work one-on-one with every single employee at the bank – all of whom were older adults as opposed to older teens and early twenties at the clothing

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<sup>283</sup> One of the more ridiculous examples of excuses money 'disappearing' from banks was in 2013 when 'heavy rains flooded the bank vault,' resulting in the loss of some seven billion dinars (Aldroubi, 2018). It should be noted that the way in which dinars are printed is such that they are resistant to water damage and the pronouncement was met with a great deal of mockery online (see Ali, 2018).

shop – many of the same problems would no doubt crop up. Money issues, domestic violence, lack of personal investment in the business’ success, etc. The problem then was too few Samirs and too many people who could use just such a mentor.

*The “Banking Crisis” in Kurdistan*

The first time I came across any mention of the banking crisis in Kurdistan was in my interview with Rastam, the KRG official. I didn’t get any deeper on this, nor the problem of Peshmerga salaries, as it made him clearly uncomfortable. I shelved the question for then, and periodically brought it back out as I made my rounds. I learned that most everyone has a bank account, but they almost always contain double-digit dollar amounts; enough to keep it open, but not enough to really lose if the amount is subject to ‘unauthorized withdrawal.’ While I cannot find any documentation,<sup>284</sup> it’s an acknowledged fact of life that KDP and PUK officials use banks as their personal money stockpiles. In Sulaymaniyah, Hero Talabani, the wife of the now-deceased Jalal Talabani, is referred to as “*dizzaka*” – “the Thief.”<sup>285</sup>

This culture of corruption highly incentivizes territoriality between parties and undermines foreign perceptions of investment security, effectively raising the price and undercutting the potential for returns. Safe-guarding investments, much less initializing larger projects, requires cementing relationships with one party or the other.

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While in Sulaymaniyah, I was introduced to an architect at a large, high-tech engineering company. One evening, he invited me to come with him to his office to pick up some materials

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<sup>284</sup> Rubin (2012) wrote a fairly succinct article outlining some of the barriers to the introduction of modern, electronic, traceable banking in Iraqi Kurdistan.

<sup>285</sup> See pg.337.



he'd left at work. He called his driver, and ten minutes later we were in an armored SUV driving down Sulaymaniyah's main thoroughfare.<sup>286</sup>

"Look below your seat," my friend said.

I did, finding the black-on-black polymer and metal of a pistol strapped below my seat. Without picking it up, I couldn't tell make or model, but it was new.<sup>287</sup>

"Every businessman in Kurdistan has to do this," he explained. "Even though things are better here, kidnapping still happens. Backseats are equipped with pistols and the driver and front passenger," he said, reaching below his seat to unsling a Heckler & Koch sub-machine gun, "have bigger guns."

It wouldn't be accurate to say that I was surprised by any of this, but it's one thing to know or suspect and another thing entirely to see. From 2003 to 2008, kidnapping was a growth industry in Iraq. Kurdistan had kept a good clamp on the level of violence, but it was impossible to escape entirely. I'd already been playing a mental game of 'I wonder which drawer they keep the gun in' every time I was in an official's office, and now it extended to anytime I saw a nice SUV.

After returning from his work and dismissing the Kurdish-me, he took me out in his own car for a drive. During his tour of Sulaymaniyah, I asked him if his company did business anywhere outside of the city.

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<sup>286</sup> The driver himself was an interesting case study. He was a young Syrian who had fled to Sulaymaniyah in 2014. As it turned out, he and I had studied all of the same Middle Eastern languages, prompting my architect friend to say, "He's a Kurdish you!"

I scrutinized my Kurdish analogue, faced for the n<sup>th</sup>-time with the difference wrought by countries of origin. Sooner or later, I'd be flying back to Indiana while he would stay here with his armored Lincoln.

<sup>287</sup> Just like any commonly possessed item, the origin and model of weapons are useful measuring sticks with respect to socio-economic status and access. Weapons as status symbols is fairly consistent, especially within the Peshmerga. Models with odd calibers are hard to keep supplied with ammo. Captured, refurbished weapons and hand-me-downs are usually less reliable, and certainly lack flair.

“No. It’s not so straightforward as that.. Because we do business here, it means we work with the PUK. If we approached Erbil to see if we could do something there, they’d say ‘these guys are owned by the PUK, we cannot trust them.’ So, no. If you do business, you either do it with Sulaymaniyah *or* with Erbil.”

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Unlike Erbil, Sulaymaniyah had a much more visible Turkish presence in the business scene. Despite the proximity with Iran, I saw more merchandise made in Turkey and met more people who worked for Turkish businesses. Frequently, these Iraqi Kurds made up these businesses’ core workforce, the bottom-most rung comprised of Nepalis and Filipinos, and the top of Turks.

“They take a lot of pride in being Turkish,” a friend told me. “They’ll speak Turkish with each other all of the time, and they look at us like we’re dirty. They don’t like to intermix.”

Were these same workers to turn on the television, they’d see Turkish soap operas dubbed over in Sorani Kurdish with Iraqi censors having blurred out the blood and alcohol.<sup>288</sup> Like it or not, the two sides have mixed and there’s simply too much money involved to incentivize any of the involved parties to un-mix it.

#### *Unauthorized refineries*

One cannot talk about the growth of regional interdependency without once again returning to the subject of smuggling, specifically oil and gas. The percentage of Iraqi government revenue – which is to say, the percentage of Iraqi oil exports – has been a continual sticking point between the KRG and the Iraqi government. In many ways, it’s just like the

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<sup>288</sup> These censors treat a martini or post-punch bloody lip like American censors would an errant areola or ‘f-bomb.’

prostitution problem in Istanbul. The demand and expansion opportunities for suppliers far exceed the bounds dictated by the government.

Within the Erbil province alone, there were over a hundred refineries and only a handful of them were legal. This is to say that only a small fraction of the actual amount of oil extracted and the money generated has been recorded officially. These refineries are privately-owned, and it's accepted as fact in Kurdish society that they belong to KRG politicians. It wasn't until the spring of 2018 (after the referendum and its fallout) that there was any show of accountability – the head of the KRG's Office of Environmental Protection and Correction ostensibly closed one hundred and seventy-two illegal refineries, leaving something between twenty-one and twenty-eight legal refineries in operation (“[172 illegal oil refineries in Hawler are closed],” *Kurdistantv.net*, 2018; “Dozens of Unauthorized Oil Refineries Shut Down in Kurdistan Following New Regulations,” *Rudaw*, 2018).<sup>289</sup>

#### *Wastā*

...wherever institutions exist, they are treated almost as the private property of whoever is in charge of them. Therefore, even the government is just a front of the ruling political parties... (Ahmed, 2018: 73)

There are two institutionalized conceptions that have endured the centuries within Kurdish culture. The first is the top-down mentality of communal control. When Robert Olson wrote of the Kurdish reaction to Ottoman dismissal of their emirs, he said, “The absence of some paramount figure undoubtedly seemed incongruous,” (1989: 5). Were such a thing to happen

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<sup>289</sup> In June, 2014 the KDP seized the Ayn Zalah oil field in northern Mosul from Da'ish forces. Reportedly, Masrour Barzani kept the field pumping and kept the profits for himself (Leezenberg, 2017).

today, and the Barzanis and Talabanis suddenly dismissed by a clearly larger and more powerful patron,<sup>290</sup> the statement would simply require transposition of a few nouns.

The second is the concept of *wastā*; in and of itself, means ‘conductor’ or ‘foreman,’ but in practice means patron, ‘inside man,’ or any other entry point to a desired good or service based on personal relationships. For instance, if someone wants to get a particularly difficult license, most find the right ministry building then go to wait, plead, and pay various fees as they make their way through the multitudinous layers of Kafka’s castle to get there. Or, if you’ve got a good *wastā*, the intermediary could simply walk their friend straight to the correct office where they have a brief conversation with their own connection, then fees are paid and the license is granted. This extends to almost every aspect of life in Iraqi Kurdistan.



Figure 18 - Erbil "White Pages"

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<sup>290</sup> In some ways, we actually *did* see this. Masoud Barzani stepped down from the presidency on November 1, 2017 (taking the office itself with him), nominally handed the responsibilities to his nephew, Nechirvan, and kept his public presence to a minimum for some six months afterward. Jalal Talabani died on October 3, 2017, later (quasi-)succeeded by Khosrat Rasul Ali. When Americans refer to previous presidents, they keep the ‘president’ in the title as an honorific – many Iraqi Kurds simply do that with Masoud Barzani out of habit.

While I'm going to keep most of my interviews from Sulaymaniyah in their own section, there was one in particular that needs telling here. Baho's brother worked with a major construction company, and he invited me to visit his place of business. During the course of our conversation, I asked him if his company held contracts outside of PUK territory.

"No," he said, without inflection.

Methodically, he proceeded to lay out the reasons behind it. The border between the KDP and PUK is a fault line that allows for no overlap. If Company-X has permits to build in Sulaymaniyah, that immediately implies being plugged into the PUK *wastā* system. This ultimately increases your overhead, but allows you to work in the area. Big business in the KRG means business with the Barzanis *or* the Talabanis.

The formation of Gorran in 2009 made things a bit more complicated. Prior to the 2009 elections, a small faction split away from the PUK and called themselves the 'Change Party.' Led by Noshirwan Mustafa Amin, Gorran pledged to break away from the opaque dealings of the past and bring transparency to governing Kurdistan. While criticizing the KDP and PUK corruption remains its main message, Gorran's effect on the political scene and on the ground is mixed. Theoretically, increasing room for civic dissent within such an ossified patronage system has benefits for overall political health. However, in practice this translates into a duopoly within a single region, manifesting most obviously in disrupted civic services, such as electricity.<sup>291</sup> It appears that the 'change' Gorran was seeking was not a synonym of 'modification' or 'alteration.'

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<sup>291</sup> While there are no official numbers I can cite for this, it seemed that electricity in Sulaymaniyah was much less consistent than it was in Erbil. The accepted answer for 'why' is that there were simply 'too many cooks in the kitchen.'

but rather ‘a portion of a larger denomination of currency once it is divided into smaller denominations.’<sup>292</sup>

### *2011 Gas Deal*

The oil supplies of the world were in the hands of vast oil trusts under foreign control. To commit the navy irrevocably to oil<sup>293</sup> was indeed to take arms against a sea of troubles . . . If we overcame the difficulties and surmounted the risks, we should be able to raise the whole power and efficiency of the navy to a definitely higher level; better ships, better crews, higher economies, more intense forms of war power—in a word, mastery itself was the prize of the venture. . . Forward, then! (Winston Churchill, 1923)

In 2006, Norway, Great Britain, and Canada signed deals with the KRG for oil contracts, Norway’s including the first new oil well drilled in the Kurdistan since the fall of Saddam. The future of these and other contracts started to look considerably more grim during the administration of Nuri al-Maliki. To put a long story short, al-Maliki granted what in many cases amounted to a *cart blanche* to certain Shi’ite militias, and violence started to creep back up to their pre-2007 levels. With that forecast making the contracts signed between 2007-2010 look all the more toxic, many oil companies started to look beyond the federal Iraqi government for steadier suppliers who also paid their bills (Ryan and Mufson, 2017).

A number of oil companies, the largest being Exxon and Shell, started secret discussions on oil exploration and development in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2010. From all of the excerpts and statements made in the aftermath, it’s clear that this meant working with the Barzanis through their oil ministry representative, Ashti Hawrami (Zhdannikov, Coles, and Parker, 2011). Shell,

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<sup>292</sup> Lest I come across as a complete pessimist and speaking out of personal bias, I should note that professional business assessments of the situation in 2011 concluded, “Despite it being far from perfect – the endemic corruption, the factionalism – the bottom-line assessment was that Kurdistan was going to be a much better operating environment than the Arab portion of the country,” (Ryan and Mufson, 2017). So, all of the problems I’ve talked about have been and still are there, but they are *far* better than anywhere to their south.

<sup>293</sup> A near-prescient decision made by Admiral John “Jacky” Fisher in 1886.

fearing the loss of a \$16 billion natural gas contract with Baghdad, backed out of the deal late that year. Exxon, then led by Rex Tillerson, proceeded forward.

When details of this became public, the reaction from both Washington and Baghdad were immediate and livid. To the former, Iraq may not have been stable, but it was at least singular. President Obama had been working on an exit strategy from the country and wanted to keep the situation stable. To the latter, division of Iraqi resources was an entirely zero-sum game, and there was virtually nothing in the prospect that wasn't problematic for Baghdad. Among the most onerous segments of the contract was the fact that it included areas in the Ninewah province that, while controlled by KDP Peshmerga, were still contested territories. Even if the KRG lacked the international support to form its own state, that kind of fiscal independence certainly had enough energy behind it to reignite the civil war of 2005.

The deal was scrapped as both Washington and Baghdad pressured Exxon and the rest out of it. It wasn't until 2013 that Exxon was able to reingratiate itself, and then only after an in-person meeting between al-Maliki and Tillerson (Ryan and Mufson, 2017). The loss for the Barzanis deepened when they were cut off from the mandated seventeen percent oil revenue from Baghdad. This in turn increased KRG efforts to a) smuggle and b) simply move forward with the Turkish pipeline deals that had instigated al-Maliki's cut-off order in the first place.<sup>294</sup> The underlying logic to this was that the direct revenues would soon eclipse those that they were being denied by Baghdad. Perhaps it might have worked, were it not for the collapse of oil prices and the loss of Iraqi territory to Da'ish.

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<sup>294</sup> It's necessary to better contextualize the vast importance oil-smuggling has for the KRG – the agriculture sector had been decimated by all of the conflicts of the twentieth-century, and the oil-for-food structure disincentivized any investment in its rehabilitation. History had crafted the KRG into a near-complete single-basket economy (Romano, 2019).

Da'ish

Al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fī al-ʿIrāq wa al-Šām (The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) is an outgrowth of the Jamʿat al-Tawhīd wa al-Jihād (The Tawhid and Jihad Group), an insurgent group that pledged fealty to al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2003. The initial leader was Abū Muṣaʿib al-Zarqāwī, who, before his death in 2006, defined his ‘emirate’ with near indiscriminate violence. This led to the reprimand from al-Qaeda’s number two, Ayman al-Zawahirī (“Zawahiri’s Letter to Zarqawi,” Combating Terrorism Center).<sup>295</sup> Zarqāwī was killed in 2006 via targeted airstrikes.

The Coalition-led Surge and subsequent rise of the Sons of Iraq forced AQI to undergo massive re-branding and re-strategizing. By 2011, the majority of the Iraqi insurgency had been quelled, and AQI, then led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), had gone underground (Shadid, 2014). The porous border between Syria and Iraq made infiltrating the latter’s civil war immensely simple. From there, they further consolidated their position as they battled Syrian, Kurdish, and other Islamist supremacist forces.

While it’s deceptively easy to simply label all of ISI’s members as Islamic supremacists, they included a large number of surviving Ba’athist leadership and other violent pariahs that went in and out of U.S. custody between 2003 and 2011.<sup>296</sup> The base of support for ISIL further broadened when it became obvious that the Iraqi government was unwilling to fulfill all of its financial promises to the Sons of Iraq and al-Maliki’s government began purging Sunni officers

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<sup>295</sup> See Appendix: Item 4 for text from letters between Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abū Musaʿib al-Zarqawi.

<sup>296</sup> While on the face of it, Saddam’s Iraq underwent an Islamic-prioritization stage in the 1990’s (ala “God is Great” added to the Iraqi flag, Saddam commissioning a copy of the Qur’an written in his own blood, etc.), I would argue that it was little more than a desperate attempt at maintaining face and position after two lost wars. From all accounts, there was little change in the actual leadership’s direction and lifestyle. I personally believe that many of the top members are consummate political survivors that simply switched their Ba’athist beret for a black turban and kept on as they were.



from the army (Laub, 2016). As we've mentioned earlier, the antagonisms regularly visited on Sunni inhabitants of multi-sectarian cities by Shi'ite security forces reinforced this enmity.

In June 2014, al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS/Da'ish) after his forces took Mosul.<sup>297</sup> When the Iraqi army fled, they left behind a great deal of military equipment. Between its stronghold in Raqqa, Syria, and Mosul, Iraq, Da'ish had control over a massive swath of land and was able to fund itself through standard black market and racketeering activities, such as seizing crude oil and selling it for under market-value, trafficking stolen goods and antiquities, running protection rackets, and ransom. (Laub, 2016; "ISIS," Counter Extremism Project: 3).

Between studying them from afar, living on the fringes of the battle against Da'ish, and seeing the conflicted role of Islamism in Iraq and Turkey, I've narrowed down two lenses with which to supplement the conventional approach to Da'ish as a network of militant Islamic fundamentalists. The first is looking at Da'ish as a business; it could not survive as it has without marketing strategies, financial networking, and dependency on the world market. The second takes a similar track we had with the Gülenists and Erdoğan's followers – looking at Da'ish as a cult and a mafia. Physical and psychological power over others has a broad appeal – heavenly-sanctioned collective narcissism offered to individual narcissists and personalities in conflict with themselves and their environment.

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<sup>297</sup> In the 'war for hearts and minds' for militant Islamist groups, Da'ish's successes during this time gave it a big boost over its main rival – AQ. I suppose everyone likes a winner, and those open to violent religious enfranchisement are no different.

*ISIS, Inc.*

The number of articles employing corporatist lingo when discussing jihadist groups may indeed rival the number that employs more traditional Islamic studies terminology.<sup>298</sup> They have ample reason for this, as Da'ish behaves very much like any other business in a non-monopolized, zero-sum environment. It has been in competition with its parent company, AQ, over the finite resources of territory, finances, and fighters. For as useful as claiming patronage over lone wolf attacks in Western countries, its stated goal is quite literally more 'grounded' than AQ, which is more focused on the 'far enemy.' Losing their symbolic and charismatic leader, Osama bin Laden, in 2011 and having been unsuccessful in perpetrating anything so grandiose as 9/11 has undermined its credibility. In brief, they've fallen short on their promises to investors, lost their founding CEO, and diminished in market-value. As the factors that created this market had changed very little (the Iraqi civil war may have ended, but the combination of the withdrawal of US forces and Syria falling apart created opportunities for expansion), Da'ish, with its successful visibility in Syria and then Iraq, stood to benefit directly from these events. Disagreements between leadership was the last blow to previous affiliations (Byman, 2015).

As an organization, Da'ish's greatest strengths as a charismatic franchise lay in its capacity to market to a multitude of profiles. Its promises exploit the ennui and purposelessness of upper-class<sup>299</sup> and the desperation and opportunity-impoverishment of lower-classes with equal expertise. To the first, it is the promises of meaning that resound most clearly; the second, a far more palatable present. To both, a future beyond this life worthy of sacrifice. Da'ish by no

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<sup>298</sup> Jihadists as corporatist: ex. Pokalova, 2018; Li, 2017; Byman and Williams, 2015; *The New Yorker* (possibly the best in terms of satirizing the issue); Bruno, 2010; etc.

<sup>299</sup> For example, Osama bin Laden, who was by no means the only wealthy person to fill the ranks of twentieth and twenty-first century militant Islamist movements, was a multi-millionaire through his family in Saudi Arabia. According to data provided by PredictifyMe, some "73% of recruits and likely radicals are middle class or wealthier," (Long, 2015).

means invented these strategies – they are the conglomerated inheritance from movements (both Islamist and secular) past. What they do have is greater access to ever-larger voice amplifiers and forums to exploit conspiratorial thinking.

At the risk of over-essentializing, there is utility in sketching out a few profiles from people we've seen that illustrate the drawing-power inherent in successful Islamist supremacist franchises. For those who already have a deep education in conservative Islamic practices, there is the tension between their notions of orthopraxy and what they see in the world around them – whether that's life within KDP-controlled Erbil or Detroit, Michigan. Navigating in a sea of gray they see something like Da'ish emerge, casting its lights about to reveal life in severe contrasts of black and white. This could have been Renas (pp.207-211) had he gone left instead right sometime back on the road.<sup>300</sup>

A good contrast to Renas' decision-making would be none other than Sayyid Qutb, a 'milestone' in the development of radical Islamic thought in the twentieth century. Qutb was an Egyptian, born in 1906, who received a scholarship to study U.S. educational systems in Greeley, Colorado from 1948 to 1950. What he saw deeply affected him. He was bothered specifically by the frivolity of Western lifestyles (Adam Curtis Documentary, 2016), the looseness of their morals, and the selfishness of their worldview (Calvert, 2010). One particularly telling statement was his take on American women,

The American girl is well acquainted with her body's seductive capacity. She knows it lies in the face, and in expressive eyes, and thirsty lips. She knows seductiveness lies in the round breasts, the full buttocks, and in the shapely thighs, sleek legs and she shows all this and does not hide it.  
(Abdel-Malek, 2000: 22)

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<sup>300</sup> Not that these were deciding factors, but it helped that he had a family network and a previously existing attachment to a charismatic leader close to home – Ali Bapir – whose approach to Islamism diverged from militancy in the early 2000's; see pp.308-309 for more.

One need not be trained in sexual psychiatry to sense that Qutb experienced a great deal of psychic tension between his sexual desires and his religion.<sup>301</sup> As a highly religious person, I've recognized it in myself from time to time, which has made it easier to recognize it in others.<sup>302</sup> Renas, for example. I think he feared his own inadequacies, struggled with his own perpendicular desires (supercharged by the social media loneliness-paradox), and certainly feared the possibility of political powers outside of his control would come crashing down on him for reasons unknown. As a traditionalist, modernity was far more conflict-ridden for Renas (Ernst and Martin, 2010). I think Lil' Wayne's music videos would have simply killed Qutb.<sup>303</sup>

Qutb's writings, both in and out of captivity in Egypt, laid the groundwork used by succeeding Sunni Islamist supremacists and militant Islamists to solve the epistemological crisis with which traditionalists were faced. A 'black and white' world devoid of ambivalences can draw others that have either already had religious instruction with which they live in contradiction or are only just coming into this instruction after having lived in a similarly contradictory fashion. Zaraqawi himself falls under such a category.<sup>304</sup> Before travelling to Afghanistan in 1989 and becoming increasingly radicalized in Jordanian prison five years later, he was a high school dropout that drank, dealt drugs, and was accused of sexual assault

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<sup>301</sup> There's simply too much intimate specificity in his choice of nouns and adjectives in these kinds of moral judgments – having written several such statements over time. They're like reading an anti-carnivore dietician's write up on the evils of hamburgers, 'grilled over mesquite to trap in the juices and achieve that delightful blend of crisp exterior and melt-in-the-mouth interior, complimented by the firm crispness of Applewood-smoked bacon and tangy artisanal sauces. Hamburgers are awful, and you must avoid them at all costs!'

<sup>302</sup> One need not be conventionally 'religious' to have such an experience – I believe that the bulk of the human bell-curve regularly experiences such conflicts.

<sup>303</sup> Qutb had infamously bad health, so I'm only half-kidding with the 'death by rap-video-induced-aneurism.'

<sup>304</sup> He also falls under the same psychological categories as cult leaders like Jim Jones and David Koresh (Olsson, 2008); the difference between the narcissism of individuals like these as opposed to psychologies manifest in leaders of impactful spiritual groups, like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr., lies in the willingness to cause pain to others for their cause.

(Benjamin, 2005; Weaver, 2006). He was, for all intents and purposes, an angry variety of ‘born-again’ Muslim.

For young men like Zarqawi, there are several major selling points that make Da’ish an attractive option. One of the greatest of these is the means by which it cloaks itself in the authority to define the ummah in stark lines of right and wrong. Da’ish also incorporates an artifice of pre-modern Islamic life, ranging from the aesthetic of their fighters and leaders<sup>305</sup> to the equivocation of brutalities committed under their hand to battles fought in the early days of Muhammad’s leadership of the ummah. They further summon up the past with litanies of communal humiliation of the ummah by the West, weaving them in and out of modern conflicts.<sup>306</sup> Their cause (however modified and in-conflict with other contemporary jihadists with whom they squabble for authority) is extemporized and the conflict primordialized.

#### *ISIS as Fight Club*

In my late teens’ a friend of mine introduced me to the novel “Fight Club” by Chuck Palahniuk. The plot revolves around an unstable individual who, through the process of self-destruction and alienation from Western consumerism and corporatism, creates a cult that eventually fuses aspects of Marxism, Buddhism, and nihilism. It promises metaphysical freedom through pain and violence – starting within the group itself then extending to destruction of the symbols of capitalist oppression. It attracts an indefinite number of men from every walk of life that form cells across the country. In their groups, they receive indoctrination sent down from their charismatic leader and are assigned acts of domestic terrorism (“Project Mayhem”). The

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<sup>305</sup> Beyond the white Toyota trucks and firearms, there are niggling things like al-Baghdadi’s foreign wristwatch which in 2014 could have been sold for over \$4,000 (Duggan, 2014).

<sup>306</sup> “It should not be hidden from you that the people of Islam have suffered from aggression, iniquity, and injustices imposed on them by the Zionist-Crusader alliance and their collaborators to the extent that the Muslims’ blood has become the cheapest in the eyes of the ‘world,’ and their wealth has become as loot, in the hands of their enemies,” (Gunaratna, 2002: 119-120).

book's culminating event is the cult's destruction of buildings housing credit card records, which in 1996 precluded such amenities as digital cloud back-ups. What they promised was an absolutist direction 'purified' of the corruption and waste of the world around them.

I'd thought a lot since then about what gears would have to be moving to make such a group exist. As I got older and started studying militant Islamist groups in-depth, I felt a pattern form, and one day it connected to that book I read at age seventeen. Emphasize indignation at Western oppression, put it on a background of Islamic history, take out the Nietzsche and the fist fights and put in Ibn Taymiyya and prayer rugs, and it's suddenly it's Da'ish. Or AQI or Kurdish Hizbullah. The details are modular, but the core idea is the same. Promise that there's more than the world around them that fails to deliver. Tell them their anger is justified, that harnessing it can make them the vanguard to something great just over the horizon, and the answer is to burn the corruption out of themselves and society around them.

The promise of deific-sanction these groups provide acts as either a borrowed narcissism for those that don't already have it or license to exercise their inherent narcissism with impunity. Their brand of absolutism validates preexisting conspiratorial beliefs and paranoias concerning the West, Zionists, collaborating Muslim governments, with a handful of fatwas condemns non-combatants as guilty of collusion with the enemy, i.e. becoming the enemy, and making them fair game. ("Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders," FAS.org, 2018)

*ISIS Cult, Inc.'s Seven Brides for One Brother – the Institutionalization of Rape*

The tensions we've discussed come from three primal desires – power/pride, purpose/belonging, and basic physical fulfillment. One of the constant problems that young men in Iraqi Kurdistan told me about was the high barrier to entry into the marriage market.<sup>307</sup> The

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<sup>307</sup> See section "Sex & the City (& Village)."

combination of religious guilt and purposelessness or opportunity ceilings with singleness can yield particularly toxic results. When it comes to young, unmarried men, they are without peer in terms of social problems (“Of Men and Mayhem,” *The Economist*, 2016; Marcotte, 2014; Diamond-Smith and Rudolph, 2018). Within the absolutist cult context, the promise of women is massively effective and opens a lot of psychological doors for everyone from the hapless single man with no prospects for marriage to the closet sadist (Townsend, 2017).<sup>308</sup>

Some of the wives of Da'ish fighters entered the arrangement by choice.<sup>309</sup> The international Kurdish organizations representing the Yezidi women that have been extricated from Da'ish control allege that most of these women were complicit in the crimes of their male counterparts (March 2, 2019. “Advocates Call for Terrorist’s Orphans to be Returned Home – *Layengîrekan dawa eken hatîwî tîrorekan bigêrênewe mall.*”; “[A Yezidi Girl in Germany Saw the Da'ish Fighter that Sexually Abused Her],” NRT, 2018; The World Staff, 2019). This included acting as recruiters online, abusing the enslaved women mentally and physically, and patrolling the community for standards violations.

In addition to whatever number of willing brides there may have been, there were a great many who were pressured into coming (i.e. Arafat, 2016) or were forced. While Da'ish ostensibly held to Qur'anic guidelines for marriage, what took place in practice was

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<sup>308</sup> Boko Haram, the infamous Islamist outfit in western Africa, had a similar pitch – make some money (pillage) and have a wife (rape). “Some terrorists are born rich. Some have good jobs. Most are probably sincere in their desire to build a caliphate or a socialist paradise. But material factors clearly play a role in fostering violence. North-east Nigeria, where Boko Haram operates, is largely Islamic, but it is also poor, despite Nigeria’s oil wealth, and corruptly governed. It has lots of young men, many of them living hand to mouth. It is also polygamous: 40% of married women share a husband. Rich old men have multiple spouses; poor young men are left single, sex-starved and without a stable family life. Small wonder some are tempted to join Boko Haram,” (“Of Men and Mayhem,” *The Economist*, 2016).

<sup>309</sup> After Da'ish lost its stronghold in Raqqa, many of them wanted to go home (i.e. Jha, 2019; The World Staff, 2019). Those are stories better left for someone else’s dissertation. I do recommend reading some of their stories, such as Bennhold, 2015.

institutionalized rape,<sup>310</sup> sometimes in groups of fighters (Chapman, 2016), other times in front of their previous children and fellow slaves (Craw, 2017). Thousands of Yazidi women underwent such treatment, and those that were deemed ‘unfit’ for such use were killed along with their male relatives to be buried in mass graves. The women were carted in by bus, checked for their sexual ‘suitability,’<sup>311</sup> photographed, marketed, and sold and traded among fighters (“ISIS ‘Slave Market Day,’” The New York Times, 2014). Some of them were as young as eleven years old (Callimachi, 2015). They were not wives, but *mulk al-yimīn* – rightful property and were referred to as “Sabaya [first name],” (“slave \_\_\_\_”). Their primary purpose, according to Da‘ish’s publication “Dabiq,” is to provide men a legal avenue of sexual release outside of marriage and to produce more children for the caliphate (“To Have and to Hold,” The Economist, 2014). From a business perspective, they kept their employees satisfied with a cheap internal market of slaves and made tens of millions of dollars annually off of reselling slaves on the internet, whether as ransom or higher-priced slaves to be transferred into or out of the immediate territory (Malik, 2017).

#### *The Kalamazoo Kid*

...[cult] members have described experiencing feelings of inadequacy, sadness, loneliness, and rejection just before joining... Cults can be powerfully seductive to individuals who have strong conscious and unconscious yearnings to be loved and nurtured. For such psychologically needy persons, cults may provide the guidance, purpose, love, nurturance, sense of belonging, relief from conflict, and self-control that they desperately seek... Religious cults offer direct contact with God through their own charismatic leaders. This appeals to recruits who seek a transcendent or

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<sup>310</sup> “He told me that according to Islam he is allowed to rape an unbeliever. He said that by raping me, he is drawing closer to God” – quote from a Yazidi girl interviewed by The New York Time’s Rukmini Callimachi (2015).

<sup>311</sup> If there was any sign of mammary tissue, they were ‘ready’ regardless of their age or whether or not they’d yet had a menstrual cycle (Mortimer, 2017; Craw, 2017).



enlightened spiritual experience... [the leader's] association with divinity... provides an essential feeling of specialness and importance of cult members.<sup>312</sup> (Simon, 2008: 222)

Samir came home one day and immediately sought me out.

“I just got back from Duhok, and I found this in the mall. I figure since it's an American you might know what to do with it,” Samir said as he handed me a slip of plastic. It was an American-issued ID card, set in the ‘under 17 years old’ vertical. It belonged to Jaylen Abdulla Miller,<sup>313</sup> a seventeen-year old from Kalamazoo, Michigan.

“Huh. This is a long way from home,” I said, as I studied the card.

“Yes, I thought so too. Perhaps you should bring it to the consulate?” he suggested.

“Absolutely. I think I’ll see if he has any social media I can contact first.”

I thanked him and headed onto Facebook, mulling over how and why a teenager would lose an ID in a mall in Duhok. His name popped up in the first half dozen matches. In both his profile and his cover photo he was doing his best to put out the tough guy act – he had the standard uniform, what looked to be a Glock and a cheaper pistol, and smoking something too large and home-rolled to be a standard tobacco cigarette.

Jaylen Abdullah Miller, teenage tough guy from Kalamazoo, MI, who ended up with his ID card on the floor of a mall in Iraq. Not just anywhere in Iraq, but a major city forty-five minutes away from the complicated stretch of territory that stops being Iraq and turns into

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<sup>312</sup> “I see in [the fight club] the strongest and smartest men who've ever lived... pumping gas and waiting tables... If we could put these men in training camps and finish raising them. All a gun does is focus an explosion in one direction... they want to give their lives for something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need. We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression. (Palahniuk, 1996: 141).

<sup>313</sup> Obviously, I am not using his real name – I simply did the same thing I do with most of my pseudonyms and took the elements of the real name and switched them out for others in the same categories. [popular African-American first name] + [popular Muslim middle name] + [common last name of English-speaking Western European derivation] → Jaylen Abdullah Miller.

Turkey on one side and Syria on the other. Any one of these facts on its own doesn't warrant much thought but put together they paint a dismal portrait. I've both read about and met a number of second or third generation African-American Muslims that 'reactivated' after disenfranchisement with their impious pasts. Michigan, particularly near the rust-belt area of Detroit has more than enough economic and social factors present to produce a fair number of young men susceptible to the 'Islamic fight club' message. I'm a critic of most pop-psychology, but it's not much of a stretch to believe that a heavy reliance on firearms as shorthand for manliness correlates with massive social instability and volatile environments.

Jaylen's last recorded activity was in the middle of 2016. I counted the months in my head. One year plus five - seventeen months. More than enough to get radicalized enough on one side of the fence to contact the right (read: wrong) people to get them into Iraq and then to Syria.

I realize just how politically incorrect all of this analysis is. How very white, bourgeois American it is of me to see these correlations and jump to the conclusion that Jaylen was 'up to no good.' American media archives from 2015 to 2018 are replete with articles on law enforcement misjudging the innocent actions of 'people of color' and responding with unnecessary suspicion and force. A deadly application of 'stand your ground' versus a skinny kid with a bag of Skittles and a hoodie. With that lens, it's easy to think "This is racist; simply because he's a minority with a Muslim middle name with guns in a Facebook picture he's automatically a 'bad guy.' Might he be there as part of a humanitarian group? Gotten the itch to do something that 'makes a difference' and simply didn't register with embassy?"

Not impossible - my neighbors had an African-American tutor named Todd who came to teach English in Iraq on an absolute whim. When he first arrived, he could not even speak a word of either Arabic or Kurdish. He had simply read an article about Kurdistan and got an itch to do

something really different and positive with his life. Really nice guy with a semi-permanent glow about him. So, it was possible. But nothing about Jaylen felt parallel to Todd.

Ultimately, all I can say is that you weren't there. Foreigners weren't coming to shop at Iraqi Kurdish malls in November 2017. *Iraqi Kurds* weren't coming to shop at Iraqi Kurdish malls in November 2017.<sup>314</sup> The situation just didn't sit right with anyone I talked to. Not with the Foreign Service officer who called me two days after I dropped the ID card and a note with the Kurdish receptionist. Not the homeland security officer who pulled me aside in the Frankfurt Airport, nor his compatriot that brought me to his office for an hour and a half in the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport. I highly doubt Todd failed to generate an electronic trail of his travel to Iraq. Jaylen had nothing. He was a ghost.

Maybe he felt Islam was under attack by the West and joining Da'ish was an obligation of his faith. Maybe he was incensed by reports of Jihadis raping and pillaging and joined up with the Syrian opposition. The ID card on the ground could have been an accidental drop as he filled his wallet with cash as he prepared to find his 'Purpose.' Or maybe it was last ditch effort to get out of a situation that had spiraled way beyond his control – a message in a bottle reading “*help me.*” Either way, all I could see was a kid who got in way over their head.

I hope he's alright.

Appealing to Kurds in Da'ish

As the years have passed, I've read many official Da'ish releases in Kurdish and they always come across a little askew. The primary reason for this is the small likelihood that the authors aren't actually Kurds and speak it as a second, third, or fourth language. In the case of

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<sup>314</sup> “Welcome to the Suli mall, where we have many shops but no shoppers because no one has any money!” Baho exclaimed as we entered a cavernous, empty-feeling shopping center.

the Mosul release, the syntax feels Arabic, particularly with the verb placement. Near the end, the same spelling errors and Arabic diacritic marks start to crop up. Spelling errors are commonplace with a not-entirely-standardized language like Sorani Kurdish, but they contradict previous spellings. An easy example is references to God as (the very Kurdish) *Xwā* (خوآ) giving way to *Allah* (الله). These articles are always were meant to come across as a Kurd speaking to Kurdish audiences, but consistently miss their mark.

Whatever linguistic awkwardness has persisted in the course of the past few years, it's obvious that these messages<sup>315</sup> found their marks. Since 2014, an estimated 2,000 Kurds have joined up with ISIS.<sup>316</sup> Many of them are from out east, and the following interview from *The Nation* provides an excellent snapshot of this volatile subset of Kurdish society.

Omar is only 23, but there are already large portions of his life he wants to keep secret. I can write that he was studying chemistry in Hewler and that he was blocked from graduating, he says, as punishment for belonging to a Kurdish Islamist party based in Halabja, where Omar is from. I can write that, because of this, in 2013 he went to Syria to join the Nusra Front, militant jihadists who were a precursor to (and now enemies of) ISIS, but I cannot say exactly when, or for how long, or why he left.

Omar does insist that I write *why* he went. "Muslims in Syria were being persecuted by [Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad," he said, his hands wrapped around a mug of tea. "Western countries wouldn't do anything for Syrians except talk about them in the media. I thought that if the people there were not Muslim, if they were Christian, then all the countries would go and support them, and stop Assad from killing them."

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<sup>315</sup> It's entirely possible that this is a function of literacy. In contrast to the awkward writings, there are video's released featuring Kurdish fighters delivering their message in perfect Kurdish (Journeyman Pictures, 2015). The cinematography is actually pretty good. The videos even have their own theme song.

<sup>316</sup> Ironically, these have been in opposition to the remnants of the al-Qaeda Kurdish Battalions (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2017).

We met in an Hewler restaurant specializing in pizza with exotic toppings. Omar refused to eat; it went against his political beliefs, he said. He hates the new Hewler—the wealth and what he considers only a pretense of tolerance. He wore a drab Kurdish suit, his pants ballooning around his legs. “It’s really hard to be a devout Muslim here,” he said. Since he returned from Syria, the Kurdish internal security forces, called *asayish*, have followed him everywhere.

It’s an old story. In the early 2000s, Ansar al-Islam, a militant Islamist group, had its stronghold near Halabja, and the town remains tainted by the group’s history of extremism. PUK and American forces drove them out in 2003, but opposition still took the form of Islamist parties, even if more moderate in their approach.

... Reportedly, a large percentage of Iraqi Kurds who joined jihadist forces in Syria came from Halabja. Locals remember being interrogated and detained during the days of Ansar al-Islam, and they worry that this time it could be worse.

Kurdistan’s anti-terror law allows for extended periods of detention without charges, and officials, concerned about national security, monitor Halabja for people with sympathies for ISIS. Families complain privately that young men from Halabja have been detained indefinitely for suspected ties to extremism. Security officials told one family with a son in detention that he will be released “when things calm down.”

Omar was told that if he returned from Syria and turned himself in, he wouldn’t be prosecuted under the terror law, and so in 2013, he returned home. He was interrogated by PUK security four times in Sulaymaniyah, each time for five hours. His interrogators made him feel helpless. “I went to Syria to help Muslims get their sense of dignity,” he told me. “And now they take away mine.” When his ordeal was over, Omar returned to his school in Hewler, determined to finish his studies. Almost immediately, he was arrested again, this time by KDP security. Omar tried to explain that he had already gone through interrogation. “I said, I finished everything in Sulaymaniyah! The court released me!”

He spent six months in an Hewler prison on terrorism charges. Omar was angry, but more than that, he was confused. He knew why he was arrested—he defends his actions, but he knows that



His successor was Mullah Šwān, an imam from Erbil. Under his direction, the US consulate in Erbil was attacked. article Rudaw wrote garnered the following commentary:

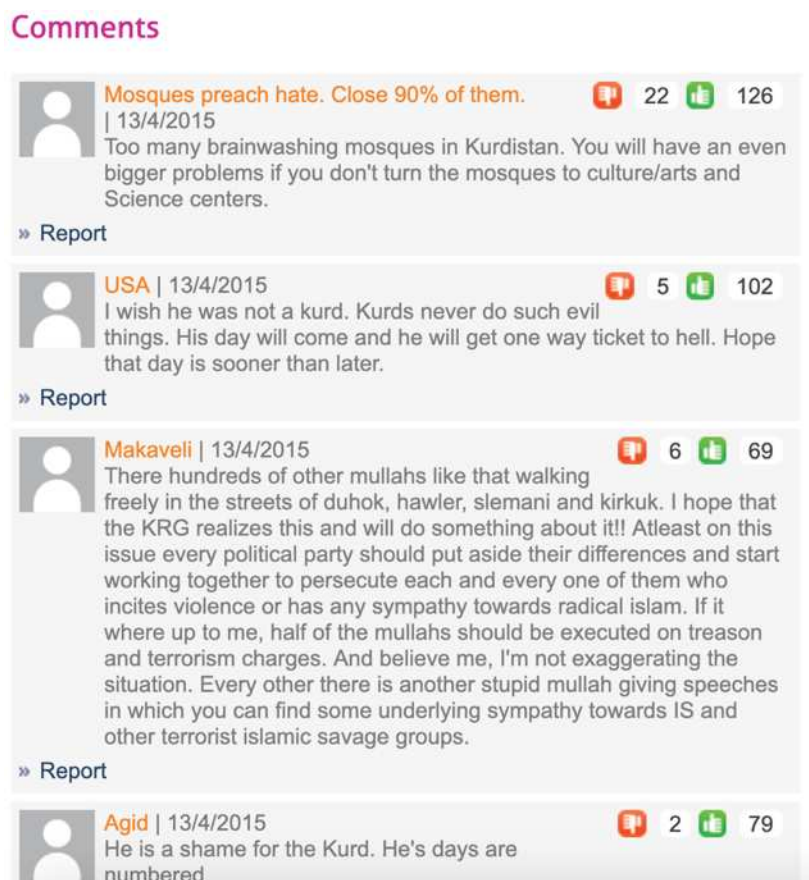


Figure 20 - reactions to a Rudaw article on Mullah Šwān's beheading of Shi'ite militia prisoners in 2015 – “Da‘ish Officially Acknowledges the Death of Mullah Šwān,” Rudaw, 2015

Videos are still available on YouTube of Mullah Šwān giving religious pep talks to fighters. One of these features him slipping between Arabic and Kurdish as he goes between praising the suicide truck driver and addressing the camera expressing his hope that God will accept the driver in heaven, and hoping that he would be successful in killing Peshmerga before they leave the driver to his one-way errand (truth Channel, 2015).<sup>317</sup> After rumors of his death were refuted in the summer of 2015, he was finally confirmed dead a few months later in Kirkuk (Rūstam,

<sup>317</sup> There are also videos of Kurds making fun of Mullah Šwān as a bumbling idiot (Sirwan Kurdistan, 2016). The video cited in the bibliography is actually a pretty good impression.

2015; Rudaw, 2015). While there are other Kurds that have climbed the ranks of Da'ish leadership, few of them have gained the kind of notoriety associated with Khattāb and Šwān.<sup>318</sup>

*Mullah Ismail Sūsay and the Politics of Humiliation*

In 2010, Mullah Ismail Sūsay was removed from his position at a mosque in Erbil after giving several “extreme sermons.” He shifted his efforts to the digital world, and posted sermons on various YouTube channels. In one such video, he said,

[...A father goes to prison for six months... if the girl is unhappy with this, six years in prison. Five million dinar fine. Is that.. is that.. is that our Kurdayeti? Is that what remains of the religion [Islam] amongst us?... I put [all of this] on the head of Masoud Barzani. By God, he killed my father. They're not men... if they don't kill me. There is no change... does our Kurdayeti have a meaning? If in this mountain one hundred men are killed? In this village, six hundred are killed...]  
(EmanKurd, 2011).<sup>319</sup>

Not long after this video was posted, the Asayish arrested him (Hasan, 2018). He was released some time later, and continued to preach on the indignities and humiliations visited upon believers.

On July 24, 2018, five armed Kurdish teens – one of them a sixteen year-old – approached the Erbil governorate headquarters and opened fire on the guards on duty. While the attackers were very obviously amateurs with no training (see Hasan, 2018 and footage from “[The Asayish Council of the Kurdistan Region Announces the Arrest of a Da'ish Group],” Rudaw, 2018), they managed to kill one employee and wound five guards. Mullah Sūsay had

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<sup>318</sup> To be clear, this is *not* an exhaustive list of Kurds in Da'ish – rather, it's a ‘sampler’ of persons and incidents of interest.

<sup>319</sup> As of April 24, 2019, the video posted by EmanKurd that shows Mullah Sūsay criticizing the Barzanis has 69,340 views, 178 ‘likes,’ 28 ‘dislikes,’ and fifty-five comments in Sorani Kurdish, English, or some mix of the two. User ‘Matthew Michaelson’ wrote, “[your words are good, may you be successful],” ‘Salahuddin Ayyubi’ love this brother so much his a great Kurdish man and tell the truth about PDK and PUK which is they are a Israel and American puppet wake up Kurdish people if you love your family honor...”, ‘Jamal Muhammad,’ “he is arab he is not kurd,” with a reply from ‘Ig konto,’ “he is kurd and he is the best not ur thief mas3ud barzany.” Etc., etc.



been arrested before it happened, and was charged as a member of Da'ish and for supervising the youth in their attack (“[The Asayish Council of the Kurdistan Region Announces the Arrest of a Da'ish Group],” Rudaw, 2018; Hawrami, 2018).

Mullah Salim Shushkayi, a former Komala MP, was accused of being connected to the July 24, 2018 attack along with Mullah Sūsay. He and his son (because confronted security forces during the arrest) were arrested (“KIG Member and His Son Arrested in Iraqi Kurdistan After Erbil Attack,” EKurd Daily, 2018). Komala lodged an official complaint and defended Shushkayi's innocence.

*“You're Kafer, right?”*

I can't remember his name nor much more than the fact that he was from Erbil and was listening to a radio evangelist of some sort. We had gone through the normal motions of a Kurdish taxi driver chauffeuring an American, but he took a left where we normally take a right when he asked me about my religion.

“Are you a Muslim?”

“No, I'm a Christian.”

“So you are kafer?” he asked, genuinely listening for an answer, though it seemed like it should have been a statement given the loaded social meaning of the phrase.<sup>320</sup> Still trying to process what this man was going for, I replied,

“No.. Christians are *ahl-ī kitāb*.. *ahl al-kitāb*. That isn't *kafer*.”

Why was *I* the one to be telling him this? He was not a child, nor gave any indication of having any mental handicaps that might explain not knowing something so elementary. The

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<sup>320</sup> Seeing this in writing makes it seem far less abrasive and potentially threatening than it did at the time. The best comparison I can think of is being a Russian student in the US during the '50s and having your taxi driver turn around and ask, “So... you a commie'?” Doesn't matter if he's a yokel with the musculature of a chain-smoker with emphysema, you're in his town, and that changes things.

evangelist droned on, coming in and out of Quranic recitations and what ironically sounded like mild vitriol against non-Muslims.

“But you are not Muslim...?”

“No... but I’m not kafer.”

“Christians aren’t kafer?”

Good grief.

“No. Neither Christians, nor Jews, nor Zoroastrians are kafer.”<sup>321</sup>

He made a noise that might have been assent. I honestly wasn’t sure. He was hardly the intimidating type, but between the conversation, the evangelist with an ax to grind, and a certain *je ne sais quoi* in the atmosphere, I decided that more walking and less riding sounded like a great idea. He let me out, but not before tactlessly wheedling me for a tip. I may or may not have still been kafer in his mind, but dinars are dinars no matter whose pocket they come from.

#### *Compromises*

After seeing all of this, there would seem to be little to nothing gained for the secular KRG actors by not taking a more heavy-handed approach to Islamist parties. Theoretically, they could try to push a for a pre-2003 Turkish model and enforce a definitive threshold on levels of public religiosity, at the very least within their own parliament. They could go full-bore on campaigning to shut them out on the accusation of Iranian patronage. They could try any or all of these, but they won’t.

The reason that they haven’t attempted such steps is that they would, at the very least, be *extremely* difficult to enforce. At its worst, a total disaster. What exists right now is a very logical equilibrium that neither the secular nor Islamist would openly contend with. The logistical

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<sup>321</sup> I admit that the Zoroastrians as *ahl al-kitāb* might be a more layered discussion, but I wasn’t about to have that with this particular fellow.

obstacles alone are formidable. Take a few statements that we've encountered so far. Prof. Amir's, "If you were the government, how many mosques would you have?.. One. You would have one mosque. It would be easy to control." The second came from my second interview with Mr. B. Barzani, "We have eyes in every mosque... Since 2007 to now... we control 100% [of the mosques in Erbil and Duhok], in Sulaymaniyah 85%. The rest don't belong to us... Many are owned by Iran." Too many mosques and no monopolizing patron.

Likewise, Iraqi Kurdistan is too diverse for there to be an ideological monopsony, wherein lies the limits of the top-down leadership model. The reason that a KDP office can get firebombed in Rania and not in Erbil is the same that allows Tawela and Hawraman to keep churning out extremists. The KDP and PUK are unable – and unwilling – to extend themselves so far into areas where they're not popular. The benefits for maintaining such a forced presence are simply outweighed by the costs.

So not only can the KDP and PUK not put the Islamist parties out, they *need* them to be there.<sup>322</sup> After the Referendum, with Massoud's 'stepping down' and Nechirvan's stepping up, there is the matter of one of the dutiful nephew's first meetings.

He went to Komala to talk with Ali Bapir.<sup>323</sup>

'Terrorist Kindergartens' or not, having Islamist parties within the power structure provides a legitimate avenue of participation for 'Islamic-prime' Iraqi Kurds.<sup>324</sup> It's for people

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<sup>322</sup> To quote Stanley Kubrick's masterful distillation of Cold War politics, "It is not only possible, it is essential," (1964).

<sup>323</sup> As we know, Komala isn't the only such party (which in total took 14% of the elections in 2014 – Natali, 2014), just the biggest and most well-known. There are plenty of Kurds that feel as Mullah Krekar does, that Bapir is compromised by Iran (for others, compromised by the KDP) and is not a suitable candidate for representing Muslim Kurds.

<sup>324</sup> Despite the lack of documentation and general opacity of military operating procedures for situations like Bapir's capture, I postulate that this was the same mentality behind his release from American captivity, specifically that the projected benefit of his mediating role within Islamist spheres is one of the reasons that wasn't sent to Guantanamo.

like Renas, that might otherwise be forced to choose between organizations like Da'ish that project an imitation of the original Qur'anic warriors or secularists who make little to no effort to ensure Islamic standards in society. What exists in the KRG is the best solution for all of the 'legitimate' players (as determined by civic participation). The secularists need to balance their relations with the Islamists well enough to continue their game of whack-a-mole against militants and insulters alike while preserving a veneer of tolerance. The Islamists need to contain and/or conceal their less agreeable appendages, balance their public stances, and presumably maintain their own mechanisms for managing relationships with Iran and extremist elements within the parties. By doing so, they preserve their own veneer of independence and insulate their positions in government.

#### *Opportunities*

While the final layout of the situation in Syria still has a high degree of variability, I think the Barzani's viewed the Islamic State as having a definitive shelf-life. Da'ish is effective as a business, a cult, and a mafia, but the approaches required to be *a government* working with other governments are substantially different. Simply put, Da'ish was never sustainable as a conventional state from political and economic perspectives.<sup>325</sup>

Its successes between 2014 and 2016 were a matter of economies of scale rather than evolving sophistication of tactics<sup>326</sup> – they had more oil and larger populations to gouge (i.e.

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<sup>325</sup> This is not to say that they hadn't developed sophisticated means of governing territory (see Revkin, 2016 for more on the legal systems that Da'ish established). Even with that being the case, these could not compensate for Da'ish's repugnance on the international level; having antagonized both the US and Russia limited the open support those forces within the region could give the 'Caliphate.'

<sup>326</sup> By analogy, AQI's going underground to reemerge years later as ISIS, a group with high-profile successes and brand-name recognition, was not so much a caterpillar going into a chrysalis and coming out a butterfly; it was a cockroach coming out as a bigger, but equally belligerent and ugly cockroach. The underlying conditions that would have allowed for any such transition were almost impossible. The 'genetic make-up' of the organization itself and the situation wherein it exists never included functioning, governing organs and no other state actor would deal with it openly. It's a cockroach, and it excels and thrives in nooks and crannies.

more to offer on the black market as opposed to improved relations with neighboring governments). One could argue that this is essentially the same dynamic between Shi'ite police and Sunni civilians in places like Mosul or Baghdad, but the combination of nature of Da'ish and its absolute *persona non-grata* status on the international stage created insurmountable negative externalities. It made a huge mess of things and barring a massive transformation in the political scene that forced enough neighboring countries to treat it as a fellow-state,<sup>327</sup> it would have to go back underground to hibernate.

For as many issues as the Barzani family may have with Winston Churchill, they don't disagree with him on the idea that one should "never let a good crisis go to waste." The following snippet of a a PBS interview with a correspondent from the Wall Street Journal clearly illustrates how things were shaping up in the immediate aftermath,

Matt Bradley: The situation here in Erbil has not really changed, really, since the U.S. invasion in 2003. The Kurdistan Regional Government is in-charge here. And what's interesting right now is that Kurdistan, uh, has been able to advance their soldiers to pick up the slack from where the Iraqi troops have left off. So, they've actually been able to take some territory. And some of the Kurdish officials that I spoke with yesterday said that they're not planning on giving it back, no matter how secure the rest of Iraq becomes.

Hari Sreenivasan: This is an oil rich area, right? I mean, world oil prices have fluctuated wildly and mostly in the upward direction in this past week.

Matt Bradley: That's right. But Kurdistan remains in an oasis of calm interlock as it has for the last more than ten years. And so, they're still pumping oil. But this particular conflict— these victories by ISIS— have basically allowed for the Kurdistan Regional Government to assert... to assert

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<sup>327</sup> Some of these situations require some far-fetched scenarios, like Da'ish taking – and keeping – Kirkuk from the KRG and Iraqi Federal Government (i.e. Iranian forces with an Iraqi flag), much less dealing with the other key players, namely the US, Russia, Turkey, etc.. Envisioning a Da'ish as a successful state requires more imagination than envisioning the myriad ways in which it could fail. Even with the duplicitous relationship Erdoğan's government has with Da'ish, it's quite a jump between enabling Da'ish in Syria in exchange for no attacks on Turkish soil (albeit imperfectly) and open conciliation. As in, 'Olympic gold medal long-jump' distance.

itself where the Iraqi military has... has fallen down, where they've failed. ("Kurdistan Remains an Oasis of Calm Amid Iraq Tumult," 2014)

For as much as they cost, the Barzanis saw Da'ish as an opportunity to benefit from Baghdad losing hold on important cities, namely Kirkuk.

## Referendum

### *Article 140*

On March 8, 2004, the Transitional Administration Law was signed in by the Iraqi Governing Council. Of the problems the new Iraq had to grapple with was the issue of reparations for the forced exoduses and mass graves filled with Shi'ites, Kurds, and other political victims.

In both Article 58 of the initial Transnational Administration Law and Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, the authors decided that disputed territories should be handled by the people it most affected at a later date (see Appendix: Items 5 and 6). Any attempt to resolve these issues by the Transitional Administration would have led to violence and getting the votes to pass the Constitution in 2005 was task enough for the time, much less trying to force through a final decision on disputed territories. They were supposed to perform a census and then a referendum in these areas to decide whether they were to be governed by the KRG or the ICG. For both, the potential political cost of settling the question of Kirkuk was too high and the likelihood of a favorable outcome so unpredictable that neither pushed for the requisite census. Both worked instead to skew the (unspoken) numbers in their favor. The KRG essentially began to import Iranian, Syrian, and Turkish Kurds into Iraq with guarantees of work (Leezenberg, 2017), and all of the relevant militias worked to intimidate and scare off problematic minorities (Amnesty International, 2010: 16-17).

### *The Pathway to the Referendum*

Within the KRG itself, officials had attempted to create a constitution in 1992, 2003, and 2009, the last iteration working in and between the 2005 Iraqi Constitution (Feder, 2014: 100). Between each iteration, the authors waffled between the exact bounds of the document, particularly those people and regions it would have authority over. In a 2002 draft, the official Kurdish capital was to be Kirkuk; this was later revised as Erbil with the caveat that ‘it could be changed.’<sup>328</sup> One thing that is certain is the weight of Article 140 in the Iraqi Constitution on the implementation of the KRG’s constitution. Parts 1 and 2 of the KRG Constitution’s Article 2<sup>329</sup> read,

The Iraqi Kurdistan Region is a geographical historical entity consisting of Dohuk governorate with its existing administrative borders, Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyh, Erbil, and districts of 'Aqrah, Shaikhan, Sinjar, Talkaif, Qaraqush, and township of Zamar, Ba'asheeqa, and Aski Kalak from Nineveh province, districts of Khanaqeen and Mandali from Diyala province with its administrative border before 1968.

**Second:** The political borders of the Region shall be determined through the implementation of Article 140 of the Federal Constitution.

Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution was never enacted, and the KRG Constitution was never ratified in the planned-July 2009 referendum due to foreign pressure, including from the US (Feder, 2014: 101).<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> If degrees of veiled intent were articles of clothing, this would be somewhere between ‘negligée’ and ‘fig leaf.’

<sup>329</sup> In terms of contrasting priority, it is interesting that the Article 2 of the Iraqi Constitution states, “Islam is the official religion of the State and is a foundation source of legislation ... and, moreover, —[n]o law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam,” (Kelly, 2010).

<sup>330</sup> It is unfortunate that we have no record of the conversations that took place between KRG authorities and American personnel representing the Obama administration, particularly whether there was ever an intimation of support in future moves in the direction of increased border definition and gas and oil contracts.

The first movement for a referendum started in 2003, and the Barzanis would later characterize postponing it as being a conscious choice to approach Iraq to create a new country (Leezenberg, 2018).

It is impossible to write about the 2017 Referendum without recognizing its dual nature. On the one hand, it *was* a genuine expression of a Kurdish desire for their own state. For as much as the lingering memory of Saddam weighed in on the decision, everything that came after 2003 seemed to constantly fall on the side of inequality towards Iraqi Kurdistan. They distrusted the Shi'ite militias that fought their own battles in their south and knew the Iraqi army was little more than a mobile Potemkin village. Neither was less willing and able to help defend Iraqi Kurdistan from Da'ish. Sectarianism had reached a crescendo in the administration of Nuri al-Maliki, and I never met a Kurd who felt the relationship between Iraqi Kurdistan and the Iraqi federal government was equitable. There were many, many reasons for this Referendum to have gone forward.

On the other hand, it had nothing to do with Kurdish aspirations and everything to do with the Barzanis. The arguments between the KRG and the ICG regarding oil and the subsequent budget freeze in early 2014<sup>331</sup> had serious repercussions throughout the region, particularly in the public sector where salaries were slashed and frozen (“Kurdistan Government Blasts Baghdad Over Budget Freeze,” Rudaw, 2014; Coles, 2014). While Turkey ostensibly waited for the matter to be settled before they started importing oil through the new pipeline with the KRG, the freeze dragged on into 2015 and beyond. Gorran and the PUK accused the KDP of sending oil to Turkey and keeping the proceeds for themselves (Goudsouzian, 2015).

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<sup>331</sup> In a budget-planning session that Kurdish lawmakers boycotted (Coles, 2014); refer back to the referendum on King Feisal in 1921 and every time after that with respect to the efficacy of Iraqi boycotts.



In 2013, the KRG parliament voted to extend Masoud Barzani's presidency past the two four-year terms he had already had. Supporting lawmakers cited the war with Da'ish while detractors openly worried about the law being overlooked for personal gain. This process was repeated in 2015 (McDonald, 2015).

*1975 = 1989 ≠ 2003 | 2017 = ?*

One of the questions I've gotten many times after September 2017 was, "Why do you think the Kurds pushed ahead with the Referendum?" The more I thought about this question, the more I realized that it's best dealt with as several independent, interrelated questions. Why did the KDP (Barzanis) push forward with the Referendum, especially when their biggest international supporters were saying they would not support them? What were the PUK (Talabanis) doing about it? Did any of the smaller parties matter in this? What did everyone expect to happen?

For the first, the answer breaks down to the following – when push came to shove, the Barzanis knew the US would have to make a choice and projected that between the distrust of Iranian influence in Baghdad, the obvious dependency of northern Iraq on the Kurds for security, the 'credit' built up between themselves and the US, their reaction would resemble 2003 rather than 1975. Masoud Barzani had pushed for a referendum in 2014, but was more or less told 'just wait,' (Klain and Hintz, 2017).<sup>332</sup> President Trump was still something of a new player, and had been making a great show of being President Obama's opposite. In sum, I believe Masoud

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<sup>332</sup> This turned out to be a false assumption with respect to Middle Eastern policy, but the idea floated for a while that President Trump would have already grown sick of the inefficacy and duplicity of dealing with Baghdad that an independent Kurdistan would be good investment to protect. The closest the Obama administration came to supporting the Kurds independence was Vice President Joe Biden's statement in 2014, "If it doesn't work out, we will never again tell you to go back to Baghdad and join the government... This is the last time. Just give it one more chance," (Mylroie, 2017). However, the Trump administration's State Department was full of holes, and Iraq was simply not a priority. It's impossible to say whether or not Rex Tillerson's role as Secretary of State made any difference on the Barzanis' estimated reactions.

viewed all of this as having placed himself in a significantly stronger position than his father had been with Kissinger, the Shah, and Saddam.

Second, they saw this as the critical juncture for the future of their party. They were in an awkward position of weakness and strength, balancing the massive civic unrest and economic difficulties with their successes over Da'ish and the presence of KDP Peshmerga in a significant portion of Kurdish-populated regions outside of their technical administration.<sup>333</sup> In the best of all outcomes, they could maintain that presence and extend their administration. The PUK did not boycott the Referendum as did Komala and Gorran,<sup>334</sup> but it certainly recognized its potential for bolstering KDP power relative to their own. As such, every move to put forward the Referendum only made it with resistance and deliberation from the Talabani. As for Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi's threats to use military force if the Referendum went forward, they simply miscalculated their seriousness.

#### *Cult of Personality, Mapping Irridentism, and Repudiations*

Before the Referendum itself, much of Erbil was festooned with banners supporting independence. There was very little subtlety in the message being sent, as the cult of personality factor was out in full force. Kak Barzani's smiling face was everywhere, the consummate Kurdish nationalist looking toward the future. Prior to the Referendum, I heard a lot of people express genuine admiration and excitement, and I have no reason to believe they were putting on a show. In other cases, the Barzani/Referendum conflation marched well into the zone of conspicuous politicism.

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<sup>333</sup> I may be biased by the clarity of hindsight, but I think they also saw 2017 as a peak in Iraqi Kurdistan's positive presence on the international scene; the burden of the remaining fight against Da'ish was clearly going toward the separatist Kurdish groups operating out of Syria and Turkey, granting them their own limelight (even if it did nothing to redirect Turkish wrath). The longer they waited, the less they could depend on international sympathies.

<sup>334</sup> Both gave up the boycott when the actual vote started (Klain and Hintz, 2017).



Figure 21 – above: vehicle I encountered in Erbil prior to the election; the front window was also covered in similar graphics; below: an advertisement for the Referendum in Sorani Kurdish, Arabic, and Turkmen



Online and off, I tried to find as many maps of Kurdistan as I could. I then compared them to an official map of Iraqi territory partitioned by its nineteen provinces; the differences were subtle, yet vast in their ramifications.



Figure 22 - Electoral map on the outside of the Independent High Elections and Referendum Committee building

In Figure 24, there are five portions that are filled with white zigzags – they are (from northwest to southeast) Shingal (Sinjar), Şexān, Makhmur, Karkuk (Kirkuk), and Khanaqin. These territories are contested and include portions of the Ninewah, Salahadin, and Diyala provinces of the ICG. Beyond the large numbers of Kurds living in these regions, they were also controlled by Peshmerga during and after the fight with Da‘ish in those areas.<sup>335</sup>

Quite naturally, this was met with enthusiastic antagonism from outside of the KRG and all but a few of the major actors in the region formed a stiff line in opposition to the Referendum. Beyond the physical threat of force from the ICG, there were ideological and religious lines of

<sup>335</sup> I should note that as of April 26, 2019, there is still fighting with Da‘ish in those areas (News of Live Iraq, 2019). The only difference right now is which sect is doing the fighting and dying.

offense as well. Much of this came from the Arab nations<sup>336</sup> in addition to countries with Kurdish populations. There were two such criticisms that are particularly informative with regard to religious approaches to intra-ummah political schisms. The first is the Kurdish-Israel connection and the second is the allegation of fitna.

*KRG, Israel, and the (real and projected) Jewish connection*

By the 1950's, there were some 200,000 Iraqi Kurdish Jews who had relocated to Israel. For over a decade, the Israeli government had no recorded covert activity against the Iraqi government (Isaac, 2018). This changed in the 1960's, when the Shah and the Israelis worked with the Kurds in their attempts to overthrow the Ba'ath regime (Gibson, 2015: 123-124). Agents of Mossad have operated within Kurdistan off-and-on since that time, including in 2004 when Israel started funding the Kurdish Independent Life Party (PJAK), an Iranian Kurdish version of the PKK, in their guerilla attacks against Khamenei's regime in eastern Iran (Entessar, 2009). Israeli interests have intersected with those of Iraqi Kurdistan in several respects. One of these is petro-commerce, with Kurdish oil having been transported to Israel and then to tertiary markets in Europe (Zhdannikov, 2015). These were sub-OPEC pricing and as of 2018 some thirty percent of Israeli oil was believed to be from the KRG (Isaac, 2018). Israel is also one of the two governments that recognized the Kurdish Referendum, Netanyahu having called for the creation of an independent Kurdistan in July 2014 (Romano and Rojhilat, 2019).<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Despite Saudi Arabia's extremely complex and competitive relationship with Iran and Turkey, Kurdish independence would be a net-loss in terms of precedents set, so it threw in with its 'Sunni brother' Iraq, as did all of the other Arab nations.

<sup>337</sup> Estonia, oddly enough, was the only other country that supported the referendum (Kent, 2017). In terms of overall strategy, it should be noted that the Israel-Kurdish connection is only one tendril among many with respect to Israeli "Periphery Doctrine" that goes all the way back to the first PM Ben Gurion that attempts to court non-Arab Muslim countries away from the anti-Israeli line. Minus the religious overtones, it has a lot of similarities with the AKP's approach to its own greater economic alliances.

As political rows surfaced between the Turkish government and the KRG in 2003 and 2010, some of the more idiosyncratic claims came to the fore – specifically the claim that the Barzanis are crypto-Jews (Schleifer, 2003; Mirwaisi, 2010; Bozkurt, 2017). The basis of this claim is a book called The Folk Literature of the Kurdistan Jews (Sabar, 1982). Despite the author’s claims that the Jewish Barzanis referred to in his work bear no relation to Mullah Mustafa Barzani or his descendants, the rumor stuck and is bandied about by Turkey’s conservative elements when Turkey and the KRG are out of pace with each other.

During some of the pre-Referendum celebrations, some Kurds brought Israeli flags.<sup>338</sup> Shortly thereafter, Erdoğan said in a televised speech, “This shows one thing, that this administration (in northern Iraq) has a history with Mossad, they are hand-in-hand together,” (“Erdoğan Sees Israel's Hand in Iraqi Kurdistan Vote,” Rudaw, 2017). For Erdoğan, the burden of proof to directly connect the Israeli intelligence apparatus to the Kurdish referendum was as low as the threshold for proving individuals’ complicity with the Gülenists (Hansen, 2017).

On the Iranian side, officials stated that Israel and ISIS were working together toward the same goals. Some in Turkey, among others, have posited that Israel’s stance regarding Kurdish nationalism is all part of a larger plot to either recapture and reoccupy Greater Israel (stretching all the way to the Euphrates, roughly corresponding to what is referred to in Genesis 15:18-21) or secure its longevity by fracturing its Middle Eastern neighbors along their ethnic fault lines.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> I can confirm this, and I tried to get pictures, but there was too much movement and too little consistent light.

<sup>339</sup> It is arguable that a great deal of this obsession from within certain parts of Turkish society stems from the ontological fear of being divided and conquered, known as “Sèvres Syndrome.” The genesis of the Turkish fear of crypto-Jewry in their stems from the Dönme community in the mid-seventeenth century (Nefes, 2013). Within the narratives of those who accuse others of being ‘*dönme*,’ the way in which the interviewees describe the Dönme community is almost the exact language with which the AKP described the Gülenist movement post July 15, 2017. Erdoğan’s own rhetoric feeds into its perpetuation, blaming such things as Turkey’s economic crises (which is a complex of consumer debt, troubled international relations with important actors, the affect of Da’ish on its borders, etc.) on Israeli masterminds (Romano and Rojhilat, 2019: 169-171).

The Peshmerga are also alleged to be the puppets of Israel, accessing Iran and installing sensors around their nuclear facilities.

To illustrate a few more of the more common teleologies rampant in some Turkish academic circles, I've pulled a few quotes from article from Karabuk University in 2007,

From 2003 with the occupation of Iraq by the U.S.A. and the countries supporting Israel, there were a promising atmosphere for the Israel to access Iraq's oil... [Israel] proposed the evaluation of the old Musel-Haifa pipeline.<sup>340</sup> This pipeline will reduce the energy expenses of Israel as now it is dependent on Russian oil. In 2006, there were 3 oil bases under construction in Kirkuk connected to the shipping port and refinery city of Haifa to make it to another Rotterdam... So, *it is completely natural that some Jewish in the U.S.A. government were the causes to start the war and to make possible for Israel to access Iraq's oil resources... naturally facilitating Israel's influence in this country and securing a communicatory path the Persian Gulf as the largest oil resource will increase the International Zionism's capability to secure its energy demands. One of its strategies in this regard is supporting the Iraq federalization and independence of Iraqi's Kurdistan...*

Today's Israel has started a lot of activities in the northern parts of Iraq and provides ground for and *controls the insecurity in Iraq itself and in the neighboring countries as well.* These relationships which have been established according to the common mutual interests between Israel and the Iraqi's Kurdistan have some political, security, economic and social consequences for many of the regional countries specially Iran. (Latifi and Jalalpoor, 2017: 869-870, 876; emphasis added).<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Many of these events did actually take place. Netanyahu said in June 2003 that Israel was seriously working toward reopening the Mosul-Haifa pipeline that had been closed since 1948 and various Haaretz articles are filled with supporting statements ("Netanyahu Says Iraq-Israel Oil Pipeline Not a Pipe-dream," Reuters, 2003). I've looked up several of the other larger claims, but the sources that agree with the Latifi and Jalalpoor article are questionable, and I have no interest in being sucked down the ('peer, what peer?'-reviewed) YouTube, blog, and quasi-news-site vortex of 9/11, US-Israel conspiracy theories. Tinfoil hats never looked good on me, anyway.

<sup>341</sup> Two addendums on the source cited. First, I'm not trying to say that all academics in Turkey rely on weak proofs ('this could be, so naturally, it is so'); but when it comes to some of the more ideologically sensitive issues, there seem to be greater incidence rates (I'm not kidding about the existence of Sèvres Syndrome). However, I can look outside my office window at the time of this writing and know that some of those students might be unvaccinated



*Figure 23 – This is a banner placed in downtown Istanbul in September 2017 before the Kurdish referendum. It reads, "[Barzani is of Jewish Origin; we know who you are and your purpose is not Kurdistan [it is] Greater Israel; one night we will suddenly come"; source: Evrensel, 2017*

Applying our primary lens of for viewing Kurdish politics in light of existing Islamic societies, there are two main points this reveals about the 2017 Referendum. While the personalized Barzani-Referendum connection was not used to market the idea outside of Kurdistan, it was fairly obvious even if you weren't surrounded by the merchandising. Therefore, casting the Barzanis as crypto-Jews goes beyond any simple political dismissal of the Referendum. It would have been an equally easy sell to write the whole thing off as Barzani self-interest. Marking them as Jews *pretending* to be Muslims makes them the worst kind of enemy – the one that attacks

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and contributing to the recent mumps outbreaks. Faulty reasoning is common-place and the only real differences lay in the cultural details. Second, it is not my intention to mock the authors' command of English by keeping the errors. Their English is far better than my Turkish will ever be.



from within the confines of the community itself,<sup>342</sup> creating divisions while the enemy from without prepares for invasion. It connects the Barzanis and the Referendum to the vast chain of primordialized, Manichean battles of Islam versus the world,<sup>343</sup> which isn't a hard sell for groups in an environment rife with conspiratorial thinking.<sup>344</sup>

### *The Vote*

On September 22<sup>nd</sup>, I went with a fellow academic from France – a Kurd from Turkey – to the Referendum concert. It was a massive outdoor venue that had traffic backed up for miles. Long before our actual stop, we paid the taxi and decided to walk. In the throng I saw girls and boys, men and women old and young, though the most raucous were the young men (no surprise).<sup>345</sup> It reminded me of video clips from countries celebrating their national team winning the soccer world cup.

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<sup>342</sup> Such a reaction to pretenders is hardly unique to Muslims; I'd argue that there is a unique sense of violation for most people in the prospect of one's compatriot feigning a shared faith (be it theistic, secular, etc.) while exercising an unfriendly agenda.

<sup>343</sup> I sometimes wonder if President Erdoğan and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu ever realize how similar they are in their rhetoric; both rely heavily on simple language that 'makes things clear' and reminds their country that they are under attack by sinister forces.

<sup>344</sup> In an odd way, the Barzani government gave fuel to this concept by making efforts to promote the existence of the Jewish community in Iraqi Kurdistan. I've read mixed accounts of the first leader, Sherzad Omer Mamsani (Lieber, 2016; Isaac, 2018), and am frankly uncertain as to how accurate any statement is regarding the presence of Jews in the KRG. The debate regarding the residual community revolves around whether or not the government is artificially bolstering its multi-cultural nature as an additional leverage point for independence or if there really is a communal resurgence.

<sup>345</sup> The Islamic studies student in me made note of the pockets of middle-aged and older men that had formed on the periphery, having pulled together cardboard and prayer rugs to perform the necessary *nuwezh* (prayer).

On Friday, September 23, the sermon was upbeat, patriotic, and extremely careful not to frame their support for the democratic process in sectarian terms. No one and no groups were named. Granted, they didn't need to be, but I was extremely appreciative all the same.



*Figure 24 - "[Yes to the Referendum]."*

After all the festivities, the vote went forward on September 25, 2017. Everyone was wearing their voting ink proudly, feeling as much like wedding henna tattooing as anything else. It was true even for Kurds who I know for a fact voted against the referendum. Regardless of all that had been going on, and all that was to come, in that time and place it was a symbol of their freedom, plain and simple. It made me think back to the elections I had participated in at home. Find your voting station, wait in line, show your ID, get a paper, fill in the bubbles, put the paper

into a machine, and walk away with a sticker proclaiming, “I Voted!” Demure and easy to take for granted. What I saw in Iraqi Kurdistan was a different beast altogether.

It didn’t take long for the results to come in, revealing the 92.73% that voted “yes.” Rudaw had a map online that included all of the areas where votes were being tallied, in and out of the actual KRG. The turnout in the Sulaymaniyah and Halabja provinces was predictably low (Palani, Khidir, Dechesne, and Bakker, 2019). Based on the conversations I had, it seems that it was less of a straightforward boycott and more of a mentality that they had no need or desire to participate in the Barzanis’ plan. It’s a subtle but important distinction.

On the whole, the Christians and other minorities also stayed home.<sup>346</sup> From what I gathered, their inaction was borne of a desire to ‘stay out of things’ – a kind of communal plausible deniability for whatever would come next. Particularly if all hell came down on anyone that voted, their hands would be (literally) clean.<sup>347</sup>

92.73% from 76.13% of registered voters (Independent High Elections and Referendum Committee, 2017). Everyone waited to see what came next.

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Some of the responses were measured and diplomatic. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani encouraged temperance, dialogue, and ensuring constitutionality (“Erbil Welcomes Initiative by Iraq’s Ayatollah Sistani for Peaceful Negotiations,” Rudaw, 2017). That same day, Rafi al-Rufai, a prominent Sunni mufti from Iraq, said,

...When oppressions accumulated against the Kurdish nation, they began holding a referendum to stay away from these tyrants... If the [Iraqi] judges were just for the people preserving their homes

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<sup>346</sup> September 25 was one of the three days that Black Mamba MMA Gym closed down. I asked our (Arab) coach if we were doing class the next day. With a reserved expression, he just shook his head and said, “No, we’ll be at home.” The other closure dates were October 17 and 18, reacting to the invasion of Kirkuk.

<sup>347</sup> The Yezidis, Shabak, Assyrians, and Chaldeans have on multiple occasions voiced their belief that they were “second-class citizens” within the KRG (Leezenberg, 2017).

and dignity...the Kurdish nation would not hold the referendum to determine their fate. But they continued their tyranny... The main dangerous thing that these governments carried with them was the disgusting sectarianism which partitioned the integrity of this country and spread hatred among the components of this country... Those running and ruling Iraq are associated with Iranian politicians... Among those is Qassem Solaimani... [Shi'ite militias are] destroying Sunni cities and homes, all of this under the pretext of liberating them from ISIS. ("Iraq's Mufti Says Baghdad's 'Oppressions' Pushed Kurdistan to Seek Independence," Rudaw, 2017).

Other than Al-Rufai and al-Sistani, there were no other notable non-Kurdish Islamic leaders who showed sympathy.

#### *Al-Azhar's Fatwa*

On October 2, 2017 al-Azhar<sup>348</sup> produced a statement against the Kurdish Referendum. It began with Quran 11:113, <And do not incline toward those who do wrong, lest you be touched by Fire, and you would not have other than Allah any protectors; then you would not be helped.>

They immediately set in on condemning the

increasing calls for the separation of these regions from [our] blood brother, Iraq... calls like these lead to an increase in division (firqa) of the Arab and Islamic community,<sup>349</sup> which justifies the colonial machinations of dividing the states along sectarian and ethnic bases... it is unfortunate when the media and social media sites transmit it [to] promote the Zionist entity [Israel] and its partners in celebrating the secession, which confirms the immutable truth that their hidden hands laid bare, playing openly behind the secession project... al-Azhar calls on the sons of the Iraqi people of all sects and compositions to stand in one line for preserving the unity of this ancient state, which has always been a permanent example of peaceful living between different schools

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<sup>348</sup> Al-Azhar University is one of the premiere institutions of Islamic learning and has been producing Sunni scholars since the twelfth century.

<sup>349</sup> Secular leaders used similar language, such as Ghazi al-Yawar, former-president of the Iraqi Interim Government, claiming in early 2005 that calls for Kurdish secession were, "an act of treachery," (Feder, 2014: 114). The state being the focal point of national ideology, this amounts to the same thing as 'blasphemy.'

and ethnicities up until the hateful occupation which was worked to excite sectarian and ethnic strife. (°Alā', 2017)

The KRG's Ministry of Awqāf responded to al-Azhar's statement with seven points that can be summarized as the following: first, the Peshmerga have been a safeguard of Sunnism within Iraq. Second, al-Azhar has no place in advising the KRG with regard to how it deals with the sectarian government in Baghdad. Third, al-Azhar has made no moves against the oppressions heaped upon Sunni Kurds in the past. Fourth, the blood of Kurdish martyrs has paid for their independence and al-Azhar has never expressed concern over Sunni Arabs being divided into so many states. Fifth, al-Azhar has never addressed the acts of Shi'ite militias against Sunni mosques or Sunni practitioners. Sixth, al-Azhar is ignoring all of the times the KRG has voiced support for Palestinians. Seventh, the only way they can keep harmony in the KRG is within the framework of an independent state (available via "[The Ministry of Awqaf Gives Answers in Seven Points to al-Azhar Regarding the Referendum]," Rudaw, 2017; see Appendix: Item 7 for full statement).

Other than imams mid-sermon and officials of the Ministry of Awqaf, I'm the only person I know that was as wrapped up into this particular war of rhetorics. Everyone else was waiting to hear what the real decision-makers were going to say. The first such response came not from within Iraq, but Spain.

### *Catalan Referendum*

In 2015 I told President [Barack] Obama ... that the partnership with Iraq had failed. At the time we agreed to concentrate on the fight against ISIS, so we left it at that... Is it a crime to ask our people to express themselves over what they want for the future?... It was surprising to see the reaction from the international community. Where is your democracy now? Where are the UN charters? Where is the respect for freedom of expression? After the big sacrifice of the Peshmerga

and breaking the myth of ISIS, we thought they would respect this right. (statement by Masoud Barzani; Chulov and Johnson, 2017).

On October 1 (exactly one week after the Kurdish Referendum), everyone was tuned to their radios. 2,240 miles away, Barcelona was heading the Catalan Referendum. For Kurds, it was a litmus test for international attitudes. Certainly, they had all said ‘no,’ but what did that translate to in practice? At the time, international reactions and policy suggestions were mixed, and Catalonia was something of a canary in the coal-mine. Nearly every Kurdish news site was updating their page by the minute as results came in. The taxi drivers, who were normally fantastic sources of scuttlebutt, rumor, and opinions, were reluctant to do anything other than listen to the radio. 43% turnout yielding 90.18% for “yes” and 7.83% for “no,” with the remainder being blank (“El Govern Trasllada Els Resultats Definitius del Referendum de l'1 d'Octubre al Parlament de Catalunya,” [govern.cat](http://govern.cat), 2017).<sup>350</sup> As we know, the Catalonian canary perished.

Due to the time constraints involved in catching people for interviews, I mostly kept my interviewing to Kurds and Kurdish parties. However, I had on occasion noticed the offices of the Irak Türkmen Cephesi (Iraqi Turkmen Front) in downtown Erbil. To get some different perspectives, I made my way south and introduced myself and my reason for being in Iraq. To

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<sup>350</sup> Looking objectively at the issue of state-creation, there are a few obvious facts. First and foremost, it's a fairly exclusive club. Most academic authorities on the definition of statehood refer to the KRG as a *de facto* state seeking *de jure* status (Palani, Khidir, Dechesne, and Bakker, 2019). Second, it takes a great deal of international inertia to complete the process. Many intra-state actors try and very few succeed, and that's because the energy demands to create that inertia are enormous. The creation of most of the new states in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was the result of such massive events as WWI, WWII, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even in the ‘smaller’ scale, it requires years-long civil wars, such as the case in post-Tito Yugoslavia or Sudan. Kurds would argue that their situation definitely falls within that category. In some respects they're absolutely right; however, neither Kosova nor South Sudan were directly in the middle of so many massive power-plays and so many efforts to keep an unstable situation together.<sup>350</sup> As for Catalonia, it is in the middle of the European old-boys' club, and there is so much tumult in the EU boat that the last thing they want is an upstart country creating problems for an already troubled Spanish economy. Additionally, Catalonia is several magnitudes away from being Great Britain.

my surprise, within five minutes I was sitting down with my recorder out, speaking with Bedir, the assistant to an Iraqi Turkmen Front minister in Erbil.<sup>351</sup>

Our topic encompassed a good range, one of the most important was Kirkuk.

“Are there any mosques in Hawler, or in Kurdistan, that give the Friday sermon in Turkmeni?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Where?”

“In Tajila ... we requested permission from the ministry to build a mosque in a Turkmeni area and they agreed.”

“Is there a Turkmeni mosque in Kirkuk? That’s where most of the Turkmen are, right?” I asked.

Later, I looked this up, and while it seems that Kirkuk is more or less what they consider the capital for Iraqi Turkmen, there are probably more Turkmen in Baghdad and Mosul in terms of numbers, and a much higher population density in Tel Afar (Hashim, 2005: 370).<sup>352</sup>

“Well, it’s hard to determine how many people live in a certain location... There are definitely a lot of Turkmen who have come there,” he said.

Soon, the topic of being a minority in such a tumultuous area came up.

“We keep our security by not having guns,” he said.

I nodded, recalling the lack of security guards throughout the multi-floor Turkmen offices.

“I don’t even have a gun.”

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<sup>351</sup> The interview took place on December 17, two months after the events in Kirkuk, so there might be some hindsight in his perspective. The minister was out, and Bedir was just as helpful and accommodating. Initially he humored me as I asked some questions in Turkish, but it quickly became obvious that we needed to do it in Kurdish or call it a day.

<sup>352</sup> Again, the last real census was in 1957.

*This* I wasn't sure about, my mind wandering the office, guessing which drawer held Bedir's emergency pistol. Firearms went hand-in-hand with the professional community here.<sup>353</sup>

"The al-Hašd al-Ša'ibī are an armed sectarian group... We don't have armed groups."

True. But what is also true is the fact that this isn't a voluntary status (Mistefa, 2014). The KRG has kept the ITF from forming its own militias for years, knowing that events in Kirkuk could easily sway those Turkmen against the Peshmerga.<sup>354</sup> Like everything else in that troubled city, it's a matter of monopolizing control over as many variables as possible.

'It's Kirkuk, stupid.'

#### *The Popular Mobilization Units*

The Popular Mobilization Forces – al-Hašd al-Ša'ibī – is an umbrella organization for approximately forty different militias operating in Iraq. While there are minorities operating under its auspices, such as Christians, Turkmen, Yezidis, it is mainly Shi'ite in composition. It was initially formed after Ali al-Sistani released a fatwa calling upon all able-bodied Iraqis to fight Da'ish after the fall of Mosul in 2014 (Alaaldin, 2017). Many Iraqis took up the call, and this included many sectarian militias, such as the Badr Brigades (a direct Iranian proxy; "Badr Brigades," Counter Extremism Project), Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq (a break-off from the Sadrists in 2006 and loyal to Iran), and Kata'ib Hezbollah (Iranian funded).

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<sup>353</sup> I had the same mentality any time I went to an interview – I always left my preferred items – a kubaton and spring-assisted karambit – at home. Aside from interviews and mosque visits, I kept one or both on my person when travelling for any extended period. Kidnapping in the KRG wasn't *anything* close to what it was down south, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

<sup>354</sup> Following the coup in 1958, Qassim allied himself with the ICP, which in the north was made up of mostly Kurds. Both Mustafa Barzani and the ICP viewed the Turkmen in Kirkuk as rivals, and the Turkmen were afraid of being supplanted. On the celebration of the July 14<sup>th</sup> revolution, tensions came to a head, and twenty Turkmen were killed in the proceeding violence. For the next two days, Kurdish brigades of the Iraqi army mortared Turkmen neighborhoods before less ethnically-motivated units came in and reestablished order. The exact numbers and composition of the dead is a matter of debate, the aftermath prompted Kurds into leaving Kirkuk (Anderson and Stansfield, 2012: 33-34).



All of the jockeying for position within the PMF has had far less to do with Da'ish and more to do with all the post- Da'ish conflicts. It was a game of chess where everyone was trying to think multiple moves ahead of their opponents. So even while the various militias were ejecting Da'ish from Iraqi territory, they were doing so with a mind for the inevitable conflict over territory with the KRG.

For all intents and purposes, the PMF is a more effective army than that of the ICG, and a significant portion of its units are little more than apparatuses for Iranian policy enforcement.<sup>355</sup> The Iranian presence, whether it be through special forces operators, advisors, or its leaders, is something of an open secret. During an interview I watched on a Kurdish channel, the interviewer asked an Iraqi politician if Qassem Soleimani was at that time in Iraq. The politician stood up, took off his mic, and walked away.<sup>356</sup>

This politician is not alone in his discomfort at discussing Major General Qassem Soleimani, the leader of the Quds Forces in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Soleimani has been at the nexus of Iranian extraterritorial military operations throughout the Middle East and is one of the most powerful men in Iran and the region at large (Corbin, 2019). He reportedly had Jalal Talabani and many other Kurdish leaders under his thumb and if he wasn't a king-maker, he was definitely a king-breaker (Soufan, 2018). One interaction that illustrates his role in the regional dynamic took place in 2008. Then-US CIA director David Petraeus was given a message from Soleimani reading, "General Petraeus, you should know that I, Qassem Suleimani, control the policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan. And indeed, the

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<sup>355</sup> The Sadrists and militias that look to al-Sistani make up the other majority group in the PMF and are quite anti-Iranian and advocate integrating the PMF into the official ICG armed forces (Malik, 2017).

<sup>356</sup> I do not have any citation for this, unfortunately. It was a live feed and I was too busy laughing to note the time and date of the interaction. My roommates and I often speculated that Qassem Soleimani had his own 'summer home' in every Iraqi province.

ambassador in Baghdad is a Quds Force member. The individual who's going to replace him is a Quds Force member,” (Chulov, 2011).<sup>357</sup> The message was a text sent to Talabani’s personal cell phone.

Exact numbers for the PMF are difficult to determine – in early 2018, their numbers were somewhere between 100,000 and 150,000 (Soufan, 2018). Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi referred to the PMF as “the hope of the country and the region,”<sup>358</sup> and they ran candidates under the banner of the Fatah Alliance in the 2018 parliamentary elections. These candidates won forty-seven of 329 seats (the KDP won twenty-five and the PUK eighteen; “Iraq’s 2018 Elections,” CRS Insight, 2018).

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I blinked, unsure if I misheard the newscaster or the translator’s English echo in my earpiece.

“Iraq?” I asked.

“No, Iran.”<sup>359</sup>

My interview at the Rudaw station had been straightforward to that point. ‘What are you doing here? What do you think about the Referendum? What does the US think about the Referendum?’ All questions that make total sense to ask a visiting American graduate student.

“Do you think Iran would change its mind on the Kurdish Referendum?” he asked again.

This did *not* compute. Why would Iran change its mind regarding the KRG’s independence? I had no idea how that kind of policy change could come about short of massive, character-changing blunt-force trauma to the regime’s head. In the heat of the moment, I simply answered,

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<sup>357</sup> Petraeus’ response to this was “go pound sand down a rat hole,” (Chulov, 2011).

<sup>358</sup> Another way of putting this would be that attempting to fight them is hopeless, as it would simply blossom back into sectarian conflict.

<sup>359</sup> I hadn’t pronounced ‘Iran’ (Īrān) like the American English “eye-ran” since I started Arabic ten years prior. There was little mistaking the name.

“Iran has its own Kurdish subset of the population and its own complicated history and has no interest in seeing an independent Kurdistan on its borders.”

The host thanked me, and I was shuffled off, de-microphoned, and kindly escorted back to the front entrance.



*Figure 25 - What bothered me most about this picture, which I took several days before the siege of Kirkuk, was the fact that they weren't going south – where we expected them to go; rather, they were going northeast, as were a large number of other air and ground military transports*

Based on the unspoken feeling I got from that interview and subsequent statements by locals and officials, there was a genuine belief that things would turn out in favor for the Kurds, for the referendum, and for the Barzanis. Despite the messy past with American-Kurdish relations, the even more tangled intra-Kurdish relations, and the intransigence of the governments in Baghdad and Tehran, they had this belief. All that remained was to wait and see what happened next, whether that hope would become reality, or if an oncoming storm dashed

that hope to pieces. The next move was not made in Erbil, Baghdad, Tehran, or Washington D.C., but in Sulaymaniyah.

*The Passing of Mam Jalal Talabani*

On October 3, 2017, Jalal Talabani died in Berlin, Germany due to complications from a stroke he suffered in 2012. His body was transported back to Iraq, and his funeral was held on October 6. As luck would have it, that weekend I was in Sulaymaniyah.

The closer we got on our drive to Sulaymaniyah, the more people we saw trekking on the side of the road. One such individual had his backpack decorated with the Kurdish flag and a banner of Mam Jalal. It was a kind of pilgrimage for these people, and as I would discover the next day, all we saw were the ones that walked.

The morning of the funeral, I watched my small television in my small hotel as the plane carrying Mam Jalal's coffin accompanied by his family greeted by dignitaries and given military



*Figure 26 - pictures from Jalal Talabani's funeral procession*

honors. A large number of the Barzani family members were among them (Masoud Barzani being foremost),<sup>360</sup> as were several Iraqi officials, including President Fuad Masum. Given the political backdrop of this funeral, it's worth noting that President Masum is not only Kurdish (a constitutional requirement), but one of the founders of the PUK.<sup>361</sup>

An hour or two before the procession was to come by, I went out to the main thoroughfare to save myself a spot. As time passed, the streets started to fill first with PUK Peshmerga and then with onlookers, well-wishers, and mourners. Some of these had poured sand and dirt upon their heads. The city was festooned with posters of Mam Jalal as were black banners declaring that he would never be forgotten. As we all waited and the crowd grew thicker, I started conversations with those around me. Many of these people were not even from Sulaymaniyah – many were from villages and smaller cities on the outskirts of the city, while several had come from Erbil to pay their respects.

As the funeral party came closer, we saw the hordes of young men who had run in front of the hearse from the airport. The Peshmerga and security forces were inundated with bodies such that they simply couldn't hold back the tide when the car came by. Those that were not close enough to drop flowers on the roof or touch (or kiss) the car lifted their phones to record the proceedings. Eventually, I decided to go with my roommate to his family's home, where we watched the remainder of the funeral on television.

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<sup>360</sup> I had a hard time getting a feel for what the relationship between Masoud and Jalal really was like. Despite the passage of some twenty years since the Kurdish civil war, those memories never entirely left the old guard and colored in many of the interviews I conducted with elderly Peshmerga. While a small number would approach the subject briefly or euphemistically, the vast majority tried *not* to talk about it. These absences were glaring.

<sup>361</sup> Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi was conspicuously absent. I haven't made up my mind whether that was a protest, a safety measure, or a bit of both.

As Jalal Talabani had effectively gone out of play between the end of 2012 to mid-2014, the PUK had been fighting over succession and his passing so soon after the Referendum created even more stress in this regard. Both the ICG and the KRG declared a week-long period of mourning for the former-president. Taking advantage of this requisite political lull, Qassem Soleimani had a secret meeting with Talabani's son Bafel and one of his cousins (Georgy and Rasheed, 2017). The results of this meeting would be clear on October 16.

Despite the build-up of pressure from the ICG and Iran, the Barzanis were still defiant in their presentation. While these miscalculations can't necessarily be 'blamed' on mixed messages from the US, it certainly made things worse. On October 14, President Trump gave a speech addressing his administration's overview of its Iranian policies. In its most distilled form, it clearly condemned Iran's role in perpetuating violence and instability in the Middle East and pushed for strong action to protect against this threat.

For as much as American actors claimed they would not support the Referendum, this speech – in both timing and content – clearly indicated the Trump administration's desire to take a harder stance against Iran than its predecessor. While none of the "allies" were named, it was equally clear that they held Iran responsible for much of the insecurity in Iraq, and there was no clearer face for the 'increasing menace posed by Iran' than the PMF gathering just below the KRG.

All of Iraqi Kurdistan's political elite were more or less betting the house on their interpretation of the details of this speech. As events actually transpired, it was quickly apparent that 'taking strong action against Iran' had the same depth of commitment as President Obama's 'Red Line in the sand' against Assad's use of chemical weapons (Maza, 2018).

### *The loss(es) of Kirkuk*

In the week that followed the senior Talabani's passing, all eyes were on Kirkuk. In conversation, Kurds and Turkmen both told me Kirkuk was the 'heart' of their territory.<sup>362</sup> I've heard and read historians argue different ways on this one, but I don't think it matters one whit with respect to times like this. It was certainly the heart of the issue.

After the horse-trading between the French and British post-WWI, oil was discovered in the Mosul vilayet in 1927, and the French were none too pleased at having traded it away (Demirmen, 2003). This discovery attracted a large number of Arab and Kurdish economic migrants to the area.<sup>363</sup> These in turn settled, creating ethnically homogenous neighborhoods and setting the stage for the events of July 14-17, 1959, the Arabization of the Saddam era, the post-2003 pushbacks, and Da'ish militant actions within that city.

For the leaders of the KRG, sole ownership of Kirkuk's oil output would eclipse the 17% ICG budget earmark for Kurdistan, and Kurdistan as a *de jure* state couldn't function without it (or at least not how they would wish it to). Prior to the vote, Barzani told the BBC,

I hope that we are not going to be forced to wage war because of Kirkuk. We do not want that to happen... But if some people want to take Kirkuk away from Kurdistan through the use of weapons, then you will see how all the Kurds are going to be prepared for a fight for this city...

("President Barzani promises 'special status' in meeting with Kirkuk components," Rudaw, 2017).

The KDP and PUK Peshmerga had been in the city since 2003 (Mistefa, 2014), and Barzani put his foot down, publicly and privately. Any change in that status quo would be violent.

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<sup>362</sup> Talabani called Kirkuk "the Kurdish Jerusalem," and Barzani said it was "the symbol of the suffering of the Kurdish people," (Hanauer and Miller, 2012: 8). Both of these are perfect examples of the extemporization and primordilization of twentieth-century political and economic issues.

<sup>363</sup> It was at this juncture that the number of indigenous Turkmen began to decline (Hanauer and Miller, 2012).

On October 14, Kurdish forces ignored an Iraqi warning that they would be moving troops to remove them from the city (al-Arabiya.net, 2017). The following morning, the PMF and Iraqi military forces engaged the Peshmerga south of Kirkuk. Word soon spread of PUK Peshmerga having abandoned their positions and opening up the eastern flank for the PMF. This turned out to be a previously orchestrated move by Bafel Talabani, Lahur Talabani, and Aras Sheikh Jangi (Abdulla, 2018; “Kurdish VP Accuses Certain PUK Leaders of Fall of Kirkuk, Calls Them ‘Apostates,’” Rudaw, 2017).<sup>364</sup> There were some PUK Peshmerga who didn’t leave, and these were under Kosrat Rasul Ali, who later berated his fellows for their retreat.<sup>365</sup>

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While there are many other details I could list, they don’t capture what it was like at the time. The bottom had fallen out and everyone was in absolute shock. The only thing anyone did all day was check their phones or watch the television to keep up on what was happening. For most of the day, Baho and I were huddled around our computer screens in the front room, jumping between news sites, Twitter, Facebook, and anything else that would give us an idea of where the PMF was at and what was happening. I waited for something, anything, from US forces trying to stop the potential bloodshed.

Baho and I found a video of some of the troops on the road passed Kirkuk, riding a tank. I looked closer.

*It’s an Abrams. That’s an American tank.*

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<sup>364</sup> Bafel’s mother, Hero, still acts as a strong matriarch within the family – as such, she stepped up and denied allegations of an order to retreat.

<sup>365</sup> Kosrat Rasul has been a long-term player in the KRG and was its prime minister in 1993 when violence erupted between the KDP and PUK (Gunter, 1996: 232). As of 2018, he has been the acting leader of the PUK. I suspect this is in large part because he’s one of the few in within the top echelons that has any remaining credibility with their KDP counterparts. It’s worth noting that Rasul wasn’t the only objector to the PUK dealings with Soleimani. One notable example is Rebwar Talabani, who was the acting head of the Kirkuk Provincial Council and fled not to Sulaymaniyah, but Erbil after the invasion (Majidyar, 2017).



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The entire day was a blur of footage of PMF going throughout the city, routing out Kurds and taking down their flags. One memorable moment came around ten at night when the Kurdish newscaster approached one of the many cars in northbound traffic. This was easy to do, since the line was entirely at a standstill. The man's car was filled to capacity with family members and housing items, including a bare mattress haphazardly tied to the roof. The newscaster asked the man where he was going.

In a tone of someone who had picked a line and was sticking to it no matter how ridiculous it was, the man replied, "I'm off to visit my sister." "Do you think you'll be able to return?" the newscaster asked, clearly implying the potential permanence of this trip.

"No, no, no, we're just visiting family," he insisted, looking in any direction other than that of the camera.

In other circumstances, this interaction would have been hilarious – a sweaty clown-car with a guy trying to sell a worthless pretext. If it weren't heartbreaking in the sad, powerless realities it portrayed. As with many such moments, I've tried to put myself in his shoes to imagine exactly what he was feeling. The only way I can describe the ensuing sensation is something inside my chest withering up, leaving a great cold hollow where hope and confidence used to live. I can't protect my own home, and the only thing I can do for my family is to cram us into our aging vehicle and crawl our way to somewhere we're less likely to get shot at. I know that anything left in our house may not be there when we get back. What's more, I know that if we came back our house may not be *our* house anymore.

I wonder if he did have a sister. But even if he did, following the inevitable line of events leads nowhere promising. It either boomerangs as he is turned away from entering Erbil by a line of heavily armed Asayish, or – best case scenario – he ends up being one of the many helpless fathers standing in a different line in the Asayish office.<sup>366</sup>

We collectively watched in horror and disbelief as tens of thousands were displaced.<sup>367</sup> Long gone were the nights with fireworks and flags. Sometime in all of the chaos, Rudaw took down the voting map.

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“We should pack up right now and go to Suli,” Baho said. “There we can stay with my family and my wife. It’ll be safer there.”

This was the third time we’d had this conversation since the initial invasion a day or two before. I shook my head. For as much as I loved his family and as much as his mother had essentially become my ‘Kurdish mom,’ I wasn’t going to budge. When I lived in Istanbul, I was living some six city miles from the American consulate. That never crossed my mind until the night of July 16, 2016. When I came to Erbil, I made sure I knew *exactly* how far away I was and how to get there if I needed it. Not only was I relatively close to the consulate in Ankawa, I was close to the coalition base.

“I’ve got all of my money on them not entering Erbil. It would cost them too much to take it, and moreover there is the coalition airbase just to the north of us. For as screwed up as this all is, I can’t imagine them doing it,” I replied.

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<sup>366</sup> See “Residency Card” section for more.

<sup>367</sup> According to the UN’s Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq, 183,000 people were displaced between October 16 and November 3, 79,000 being from Kirkuk itself and the rest from surrounding regions (Mylroie, 2017).

I could tell this didn't sit as well with him, but he didn't leave, and at the time I didn't really think of why. On the one hand, I suppose having company when making that kind of trip is simply smart. However, he had his whole family in Sulaymaniyah, and he'd made that trip countless times. He had been on the phone with his wife for long periods every night. The real reason I think he stayed says a lot about him as a person. He didn't want to leave me by myself in Erbil. I'm not privy to what he was saying on those calls, but I suspect the sticking point was not leaving his foreign friend left on his own without a car when a hostile force was breathing down our necks. I don't think I ever properly expressed my gratitude to him on this point, and I regret that.

This made up the second point where I had decided to stay. The first was when every NGO and Occidental<sup>368</sup> that hadn't left before September 25 had bugged out, having anticipated the closure of the Erbil airport ("News and Notices," EIA, 2017) or something like it. I'd had conversations with my own wife as well as my parents explaining that I still hadn't gotten what I was there for, backing it up with the same reasoning I presented Baho. I knew I could have left, citing security concerns and no one state-side would have looked at me askance. I could have still written about the Referendum itself and had plenty to work with online. I could have, but didn't.

The truth is, for as much as Baho didn't want to leave me alone in Erbil, I didn't want to leave Baho or our friends or his family in Iraq. I felt *guilty*.<sup>369</sup> Guilty that I had a passport that would let me slide out of a difficult situation and leave my friends, whose only option was to dig

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<sup>368</sup> I say "almost" everyone – there were some others that remained behind. Most of these were government employees of one sort or another (military contractors like a friend or two from the MMA gym (i.e. the former-British commando who cut his teeth in Ireland hunting down IRA bombs) and UN personnel (i.e. my former-roommate Jenny), but a small number included people like my landlord who also managed an NGO. "I'm not going to leave until I see tanks driving up 100m street."

<sup>369</sup> As it was, I still felt guilty for a long time after leaving for all of the same reasons. I just felt *less* guilty.

in and wait it out. I'm stubborn, and I wouldn't have been able to look at myself in the mirror without feeling that I had run away at the first sign of trouble. Looking deeper, I think there was an unconscious part of myself that didn't want to feel that same shame I felt when I saw that Abrams tank. Aside from a few senators that made cases to keep American allies abroad from being trampled, the parts of my government most relevant to this situation did nothing publicly to de-escalate the situation and save lives.<sup>370</sup> I would have felt complicit. You don't run away from friends in times of need, and I believe Baho and I were both demonstrating the value we placed on that sentiment in our own way.

### **RAKATAKTAKTAK!**

I woke with a start. Somewhere down the street someone – in fact, multiple 'someones' – were shooting. I sat up and listened, trying to hear if there was anything else along with it. No shouts, no explosions, no vehicles. Just sporadic gunfire. I crept to the window and peered in each direction. With the setup of the buildings it was almost impossible to tell which direction it was coming from.

As suddenly as it had started, it ceased. I stayed a minute or two more, hearing nothing but the movement of my roommates in their respective rooms doing the same thing I was. I turned around and made sure my grab-bag was where I left it. I think Baho and I had hit a point where we were too emotionally spent on being tense and started to find a lot of things funny that weren't funny at all. I shook my head and figuring there was nothing else to be done at that moment, I went back to bed.

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<sup>370</sup> Again, the same end-goal could have been met *without* losing the confidence of an important ally in the region and forcing them to turn toward regimes hostile to US interests. This was a massive failure in strategic thinking.

I woke up some three hours later and went out to the balcony. Nothing. I got my computer out and checked all the usual places. Again, nothing. I got dressed and headed down to the supermarket to catch the scuttlebutt.

“Hey, Hewan, how’s it going?”

“We’re ok,” he replied, looking as tired as I was.

“So, do you know what happened last night? The shooting?”

“I heard it was just some Peshmerga. They heard that a unit had retaken part of Kirkuk.”

“I already checked the news and saw nothing..”

“Yeah, it was a false report.”

I settled my elbows near the cash register and rubbed my eyes.

“Good to know.”

I bought some jam and returned to the apartment to see my roommates up and about in the kitchen.

“So, you didn’t sleep so well either?” Baho asked, a wry smile on his bleary face.

I laughed, following it up with, “Now they’re messing with our beauty sleep. Not ok.”

*The loss of Pirde*

“I can’t find my keys,” Baho said. He had previously signed up to give a lesson on programming to one of the camps in Pirde. He only had a few minutes before he was going to be late.

We looked for his keys for some time, and he eventually felt embarrassed having me help him and I went back to work. I pulled up my computer and went to the news. Every channel was telling the same story.

“Baho... They’ve taken Pirde.”

He abandoned his search and we gathered once again around our computers. Twitter, Rudaw, Facebook, Kurdistan24, YouTube, NRT...

It was October 20, and the PMF had moved up into Pirde and were working their way to Qushtapa, some fifteen minutes south of Erbil.

We had our ‘stay here – go to Suli’ discussion for the fourth time. Of course, that was contingent upon whether or not we could find the keys.<sup>371</sup>

As we continued our internet updates, we found a series of videos that claimed to be footage of a ‘PMF tank’ destroyed by Kurdish forces, and the people in our neighborhood exulted over this. Several days later, we discovered it was all footage from 2003, and as the first video was retracted, it was replaced by one narrated in Arabic featuring an undamaged Abrams tank rolling passed Kurdish vehicles on fire. Someone earlier had taken some of this footage and put a CGI-PMF flag over the Kurdish one. This too, was revealed as a fake and a new video posted.

Fortunately for us, Qushtapa was as far as the PMF was sent. While I felt vindicated in my predictions, none of us rested easily as we stayed abreast of the developments. Much of my data collection at that point was centrifuging information – misinformation that simply obscured things, misinformation that informed on the intentions and interests of the primary actors, and what was ‘actually’ happening. PMF commanders posted videos mocking Kurdish Peshmerga, Peshmerga posted ‘victories’ against the PMF, and KDP officials posted a mix of similar ‘victories’ and cries of ‘foul!’ against the PMF, the ICG... The most relevant American leaders

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<sup>371</sup> I was by far the most religious of the three of us, and the only one that regularly attends Friday sermons (which is all the more funny because I’m not Muslim), but we all later agreed that his losing his keys was an act of divine intervention. The keys had somehow ended up in his shoes.

and military commanders said little to nothing and lied about the rest.<sup>372</sup> Friends who worked in nearby shops claimed that the Barzanis had released one hundred Da'ish prisoners just to interfere with the incoming PMF. While they didn't last long, many Facebook accounts linked to the likes of AAH or the Badr Brigades posted 'thank you' notes to the PUK that left without a struggle (i.e. Cafarella, 2017).

A week or two later, I spoke with a Christian friend at the gym. He told me that he was hosting several family members who had fled from majority Christian villages further west. He grabbed out a map and started pointing at various roads west of Erbil.

"The Iranians are here.. here.. and here," he said as he pointed out several tiny dots.

If you connected them, it quickly became apparent that all of the major roads were being cut off, and Erbil was being boxed in.



*Figure 27 - PMF troops defaced Kurdish flags on their way up north; this picture was taken in Tuz Khurmatu on October 13, 2017; source: Ibrahim, 2017.*

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<sup>372</sup> This is not a partisan statement, simply an acknowledgement of the facts. CENTCOM's denial of any mobilization of PMF prior to October 15, or statements regarding the Battle of Kirkuk such as, "a misunderstanding... not deliberate as two elements tried to link up under limited visibility conditions [at night]," (Zucchini, 2017) were all easily falsifiable. Later, Pentagon spokesmen Eric Pahon said that the US military equipment operated by Ḥaṣḍī Ša'bī forces "[which were used in the fight against Da'ish]" would be returned to the Iraqi forces (Ali 2018). I understand and appreciate the role of war-time propaganda, but when it's as puerile as anything said by the former-Iraqi Information Minister Muhammad Saeed al-Shahhaf (i.e. 'Baghdad Bob'; Andrew, 2017), it has the opposite effect.

*Official Responses to Losing Face*

Over the ensuing weeks, checking out Colonel Ryan Dillon's<sup>373</sup> Twitter feed became one of the more depressingly humorous moments of my daily routine. With little variation, the formula was as follows:

RD writes something positive about the situation in the fight against Da'ish →

10-20 English-speaking Kurds reply to the post with derision and citations of abandonment.

Unsurprisingly, the colonel started looking particularly haggard from October onward.

Equally unsurprising was the fact that Kirkuk and Pirde changed things between the US and Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>374</sup> Furthermore, it changed the relations between the KDP and the rest of the KRG, including many of its own supporters. The narrative shifted drastically between the immediate aftermath and the weeks and months that followed. At first, the narrative relied almost exclusively on four things – justification for the Referendum, condemnation for the hypocrisy of democratic nations and allies, repudiating Iran and the ICG, and praising the efforts of the Peshmerga.

The biggest weakness in personality cults is when that personality is humiliated. When your symbol of strength is shown to be weak, what do you do with the symbol? Certainly, Kurdish nationalist discourse extends beyond the Barzanis, but the Referendum embodied much of those sentiments (albeit problematically), and it was anchored quite squarely to the Barzanis.

One evening I was catching a taxi on the way back home from the gym. Tonight's chauffer was an older Kurd, dressed in traditional clothing. We rode and chatted cordially until we passed a billboard with Masoud's face on it. He stuck his head out the window and yelled,

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<sup>373</sup> Col. Ryan Dillon was the spokesperson for the Combined Joint Task Force Operation: Inherent Resolve.

<sup>374</sup> Within the official circles, Brett McGurk, the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, was equated with Henry Kissinger.



“How’d that work out for you, brother?”

Masoud’s face simply continued to smile.

*Conspiracy – “It’s their fault!”*

On October 21, a source close to Masoud Barzani said,

The Talabani clan were behind the offensive on Kirkuk. They asked Qassem (Soleimani) for help and his troops were there on the ground... It is becoming clear that Iran is directing the operations to destroy the KDP. (Georgy and Rasheed, 2017)

Masoud himself echoed this sentiment, adding that "certain people in a certain party" were responsible for the fall of Kirkuk. The KDP Peshmerga command accused the PUK of "a great and historic treason," ("Iranian General Reportedly Played Key Role In Swift Takeover Of Iraq's Kirkuk," RFE/FL, 2017). It was less about the fall and more about who was holding the sword they landed on.

*Softening the Blow – “We didn’t lose – just postponed.”*

With no reprieve in sight, the KDP started to do damage control inside and out. On October 25, the “Kurdistan Regional Government” issued a release calling for a ceasefire and offered to “freeze” the Referendum results.<sup>375</sup> Outright cancellation would be ruinous to an already over-wrought national morale. This half-measure did not sit well with the ICG. Four days later, Masoud offered to step down, which he followed through with on November 1.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> My first reaction to hearing this was imagining some iced-over woolly mammoth from a sci-fi film, ready for revival at the pull of a switch; the governor of the Iraqi Central Bank likened it to a “timebomb... [that the KRG could] throw at the central government anytime it wishes,” (“Iraqi Kurdistan Profile – Timeline,” BBC, 2017). Obviously, the language used by the KRG here was anything but subtle.

<sup>376</sup> According to Rudaw, “The parliament of the Iraqi Kurdish region has *approved a request by Masoud Barzani*, the president of Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), not to renew his term when it expires on November 1,” (“Masoud Barzani to Step Down as KRG President,” al-Jazeera, 2017; emphasis added). At some point during the proceedings, armed men broke into the parliament to protest the resignation (Jalabi and Chmaytelli, 2017). Whether it was a genuine show of loyalty or a brilliant bit of play-acting, it painted the portrait of Masoud Barzani as a willing martyr for the Kurdish cause. Even at the time I took this ‘step-down’ to mean ‘step-away from the camera for a while.’ Time has validated that initial assessment. Not to be too indelicate, but leaders like Masoud

When he left, he took the position of president with him (“Masoud Barzani to Step Down as KRG President,” al-Jazeera, 2017).

The obvious choice of succession was his nephew, Nechirvan, who became the face of the party. Beyond being one of the canniest of the middle-generation Barzanis, Nechirvan has long been groomed for upper-echelon leadership, starting with being leader of the KDP’s intelligence apparatus, Parastin, during the 1990’s. His affect is substantively different from his uncle, the Peshmerga commander. I’ve never seen a picture of Masoud Barzani wearing anything other than traditional Kurdish garb, and I’ve only seen Nechirvan outside of a European-cut business suit on one or two occasions. To a rising generation of Kurds that feels more comfortable wearing slim jeans than baggy shelwar, Nechirvan is more reflective of modern leaders, even if the only thing that changed was the packaging.

On October 27 I attended the Friday sermon in a large mosque. As with the pre-Referendum rhetoric, it was prudent in avoiding names. What they did instead was sanctify the cause of Kurdish independence, justify it with holy writ, and extol the martyrs, praying that they would be found acceptable before God.

In spite of the many issues between the KDP and Komala, the Referendum aftermath highlighted some of their synergetic elements. After the Battle of Kirkuk, Ali Bapir set to consolidating and preparing for the next stage of the KRG, starting with a meeting with Kosrat Rasoul after his PUK Peshmerga refused to leave Kirkuk. On October 29, Ali Bapir characterized the events following the Referendum as a short-term political defeat. One of the first meetings Nechirvan attended after Masoud stepped down was with Ali Bapir, broadcasting a

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Barzani don’t retire; they leave the role of leadership via the sick-bed or the noose. I never spoke with anyone from the older generation within Erbil that didn’t still consider Masoud to be the president.

message prioritizing national unity and strengthening relationships with the KRG's neighbors (Hasan, 2017).

*Anger – “Shame on you, America/Iraq/Iran...!”*

After writing up notes on a series of particularly gloomy interviews, I looked up the physiological effects of loss. One of these studies was conducted on sports fans, and when their team won, their testosterone was higher and they reported more energy (see Booth, Shelley, Mazur, Tharp, and Kittok, 1989; also Herbert, 2015). The opposite was true of the those whose team had lost.

The day after Kirkuk fell felt like an invisible fog of depression had settled over the entire city. “Team Kurdistan” lost and was losing more by the day, and everyone was emotionally flattened. I thought about this fog and contrasted it with the ‘4am gun show.’ Between the oppressive fog and the number of falsely hopeful reports coming through, I could see a few Peshmerga hearing the only bit of good news and wanting a bit of celebration. Firing guns into the air is a bit of a cliché for the Middle East, but it fits well within the framework of testosterone spikers (McAndrew, 2015). For as transitive and relatively unimportant as this incident was, it is what got me thinking so much about how the men around me were going to handle these massive losses.

As I’ve mentioned previously, it was rare that any overt anti-American attitudes were directed towards me personally. This isn’t to say that many, many Kurds did not have quite a bit to say on the matter of Kurdish-American relations, but nothing that made me feel antagonized or threatened in any way.<sup>377</sup> On November 19, I got in a taxi to drive to the bazaar for a few

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<sup>377</sup> I’ll get to the exceptions later.

errands. My driver was a Kurd, but on his own volition our conversation switched between Kurdish and Iraqi Arabic at random, sometimes having both in the same sentence.<sup>378</sup>

Irrespective of the oddities in code-switching, what he really wanted was to express how upset he was about the situation in Kirkuk.

“What is America doing?” he asked, voice raised, a cigarette hanging for dear life from his window-side hand as his movements became more animated. “Since *two thousand and three*, the Americans and the Kurds were *brothers*, but now, \*pfff!\*... Kirkuk. Kirkuk is the heart of Kurdistan (*dilî Kûrdistāna*). The heart (*dil*), you know this word?”

“Yes, I know it,” I said. It would be rather embarrassing not to; Persian and Kurdish rely heavily on corporeal metaphors in nouns and verbs, so the words for ‘head’ (*sar*), ‘eyes’ (*çāw*), ‘hand’ (*dast*), and ‘heart’ (*dil*) are imperative to learn.

“Kirkuk is the heart of Kurdistan. In America, Washington D.C... if someone took Washington D.C. from you, it would be taking the heart of America.” Images from my high school textbook chapters on the War of 1812 flashed into mind, then the sarcastic response of ‘well, if anyone really wanted D.C., they could have it. Good luck if they can do any better.’ I held back from talking about either, as my mostly-joking sarcasm doesn’t translate well.

“That is what taking Kirkuk was for us.”

After this conversation, I thought a lot about this assertion. I mentally projected the various maps of Kurdistan and tried to figure if a Kurd from Diyarbakir/Amed, Turkey/Bakūr or Sanadaj/Sina, Iran/Rojhalāt would agree with them. I doubt they would.

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<sup>378</sup> While most dialects of Kurdish here have a lot of Iraqi Arabic sown in throughout it (i.e. *shahiya*, pg.384), what I’m referring to here is lexical and grammatical mixing that would be thoroughly disorienting for anyone not familiar with both languages. Perhaps because I’ve had many years of struggling (and all too frequently failing) to stay within a single language or dialect throughout a given task, he was surprisingly easy to understand. [Arabic expression] + [Kurdish verb] + [Arabic preposition] + [shared noun] + [Arabic verb] + [synonymous Kurdish verb]

At the bazaar itself, I was walking between shops when a large, older man got my attention. Rather loudly.

*“Amrīkā piyaw niyya! Piyaw niyya!!”* (“America is not a man! Not a man!”)<sup>379</sup>

I had nothing for him in response beyond an apology that things didn’t turn out better and there was no US support. He didn’t want a debate or a discussion – just an angry man – and it was the wiser course to let him get it off his chest without going much further. I kept walking.

Twenty minutes later, another man approached me.<sup>380</sup> He was looking for work, which isn’t unusual, but instead of asking whether or not I could get them a visa he asked if I thought the American troops would ever return to Kirkuk. Apparently he worked as some kind of local support and lost his job when the US army pulled out.

I shook my head.

Even after his describing to me a long line of major setbacks, both personal and regional, he hung his head. I was amazed that he was still able to be disappointed.

*Political & Economic Re-Alignment – “We’re done with you.”*

Up until the very end of October, Kurdish media coverage on Kirkuk was anything but conciliatory. Kirkuk and Pirde were “battles” in a larger “war” – all very confrontationally-oriented language. As the roads into Erbil were increasingly squeezed off, Peshmerga checkpoints replaced by PMF, the airport closed, and its borders clamped, this tapered off. Instead of “conflict” and “military engagement,” everything became “difficulties” and “complexities.”<sup>381</sup> I think I laughed the first time I heard it. The same game of euphemisms that

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<sup>379</sup> This man was hardly alone in his sentiment – see Rudaw English’s Twitter Post, 2017.

<sup>380</sup> As the vast majority of the Occidentals that weren’t pre-committed, military, or permanently in their apartments like some of the oil employees had left, I was the go-to representative for the US and Europe.

<sup>381</sup> Kurds outside of the KRG that voted became “citizens of the Kurdistan areas outside of the administration of the Kurdish region,” (Ali, 2017).

dominated the KRG civil war rhetoric came into play with anything connected to September 25, October 16 and 20.

On October 25, a friend of mine called me. While I have a great dislike for phone conversations, it was pretty apparent that he needed some kind of emotional lifeline. Even if he had fully convinced himself I wasn't a spy (not sure he could), I was still an American and might have additional information on what was going on.<sup>382</sup> So for the next hour and a half he plied with me questions, and I gave him the best answers I could. Much of it revolved around American-Kurdish relations and how this would negatively affect them.

“Well,” I said, “as we talked about with 1973 and 1989, this ain't exactly the first time for this.”

“So, what does Kurdistan do from here? If America isn't going to stand by it?” he asked.

“Short answer: go to Russia. I like to say that ‘Russia has more rubles than scruples,’ and while it's consistently working with countries like Syria, Turkey, and Iran – countries that are antagonistic to Kurds – it hasn't openly antagonized Kurds themselves, and I think that's going to push things in their favor here. I mean, not like the Barzanis have to huff it up to Moscow like they did in '49, but yeah... Russia.”<sup>383</sup>

Apparently, the Russians came to the same conclusion. On December 7, 2017, Russian General Sergei Rudskoi said,

...we have called upon the aid of Kurdish forces... [and] groups of regional tribal militias and Kurdish forces shoulder to shoulder with Russian special forces under the protection of Russian air support, breaking the Da'ish terrorists in eastern sections of the Euphrates...” (Zaġmī, 2017)

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<sup>382</sup> In his defense, he did lead off with asking if I felt safe in the KRG after everything that was going on. I answered in an honest affirmative.

<sup>383</sup> Mid-November was the first time I heard a taxi driver praise Putin and Russia. After mulling my conversation over with my friend, I figured it was a matter of time. As for the Kurdish leadership that fled to Russia after the collapse of the Republic of Mahabad, it did not take long for them to grow home-sick for the mountains and disillusioned with the promises of the USSR in terms of life in Russia.

Later, President Putin had an interview with Rudaw. One of the questions was whether or not Russian ties would remain in the Kurdish region, to which he responded,

The view on what took place, a referendum for the independence of Kurdistan was undertaken, after the leadership of Kurdistan put the process of the referendum to rest, that decision was not ours, but it was the decision of the Kurds themselves. They have remained on this decision as well, everything being within the framework of the constitution and everything being far from violence, with respect to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq, the leadership of Kurdistan has also respected the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq, because there has not been another path before [presented by] this, our companies, *especially Rozneft*, are working in Kurdistan. We are in agreement that this is in the interests of Iraq and Kurdistan Iraq and especially the economy of Russia. In general, our connection with Kurdistan and with Kurds are historical and far-reaching and are good and have good faith. We feel that those obstacles which Kurdistan has are in many fields, there are no roadblocks for us carrying on our connections with the Kurdish people, we also still see to carrying on carrying on our relations with Kurds. (Hussein, 2017)

The KRG-Russian connection grew from that time onward, with Nechirvan going to Moscow to meet with Putin at least once in 2018 regarding economic ventures.

#### *Ameliorating Symbols – Giving the Iraqi Government the Finger*

The meaning of humiliation and betrayal in [Iraqi Kurdistan] cannot be separated from a relational world and a past. The central question is how experiences are given emotional meaning and how this meaning legitimizes certain forms of action, and thereby shapes future interactions... Emotions such as humiliation or betrayal are universal; they are, however, *given meaning in culturally specific forms and in response to historically and contextually specific events.*

(Fattah and Fierke, 2009: 70; the original text said “Middle East,” but I believe “Iraqi Kurdistan,” or even “the Barzani clan” or “Kurdish culture” work just as well; emphasis added)

As much as anything I’ve written about how the overarching themes of politics, history, and languages influence the way people act, one of the most central, guiding conclusions I came

to in Iraq is that this approach can only bring our understanding so far. The crucial missing pieces lie in developing an understanding of the reflexive roles that pride, manhood, perception of self, and desired projection of self play in shaping those larger themes.<sup>384</sup> For as much as the Trump administration's failures were strategic and *realpolitik*, they were as much discounting the affect of communal humiliation.

Kurdish men are extremely sensitive to the way in which they are seen. Part of this comes directly back to the issue of turmoil and control. These men are taught a history that is suffused with being acted upon by other, larger nations, ethnicities, and powers. In this sense, their nationalist pathology has many similarities with Turkey's Sèvres Syndrome. Instead of the fear of being split apart, it's the degradation of being prevented from uniting. Barring tectonic shifts in the political geography, the best that can be hoped for with regard to the Barzanis and the Talabanis is peaceful equilibrium.

Regardless of all the failures, re-branding, and re-configuring that surrounded the Referendum, there arguably a single symbol that never lost its power – the ink-dyed voting finger. This is not unique to this situation or the region, but the personal and cultural weight of that ink is one that is heavily employed in defining the struggles during and after the Referendum. Many people forbore from washing that finger when cleaning their hands, the color fading away as an accumulated result of friction and exposure. In fact, it's arguable that the importance of 'the ink finger' expanded beyond the Referendum itself, the evidence for this being all those people who voted "No," yet kept the ink as long as they could. The blame went in

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<sup>384</sup> An equally crucial piece here is the role that womanhood plays. As I've lamented elsewhere, this is simply outside of my purview. I recognize that its absence precludes my ever having a *full* grasp of the situation. This genuinely bothers me, but I work with what I've got.



different directions depending on the voter's beliefs, but the fact that they could and did vote was universally lauded in the KRG.



Figure 28 - (Top) In his 'no regrets' speech, Rudaw pictured Masoud Barzani displayed holding his freshly inked finger up in triumph (Kurde, 2017).  
(Bottom) During an interview on November 11, Rudaw included the visual of Kirkuk's (former-mayor's voting finger – cracked, worn, but still persistent (Husayn, 2017). Being on the slower end of epidermal transit, the ink-nail was always the last to go.



### *Anti-Arab Sentiment*

On my flight to Iraq, I had the opportunity of watching the cult-classic “Cool Hand Luke” (1967). In brief, it is about an anti-conformist that is sentenced to prison and refuses to be broken by the afflictions heaped upon him. Usually this film is analyzed based on the effect of Paul Newman's free spirited character on the people around him (mostly Christological metaphors – a ‘Budweiser Jesus’). What I was instinctively drawn to was the power dynamics between the

inmates. The guards set them to work on menial tasks in brutally hot and humid conditions and had looked for excuses to exercise their power over the prisoners. Before Paul Newman's arrival, the inmates were living within hierarchies of their own making wherein the top-tier inmates tricked and abused their underlings in the same way the guards did to them collectively. I'd seen it before in other Middle Eastern countries, and was about to see it again.

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When it came to allocating blame for all on the turmoil, it frequently fell on the Arabs of



*Figure 29 - "[Fighting terrorism requires the participation and cooperation of everyone]"*

the KRG. Officially, what I just said is unequivocally false; in practice, it is common-place within certain contexts. The Ba'athist reign in Iraq has left an indelible mark on the KRG's collective subconscious as has Da'ish. These, added to the fresh insult of having Iraqis working with Iranians to prevent the creation of a Kurdish state, contribute to some definitive prejudices. Figure 31 depicts an anti-terrorism sign in downtown Erbil. In some respects, this isn't surprising in the least, as I've seen many such commercials on Iraqi television over the years. However, most signs in the city were at least bi-lingual, if not tri- or quadra-lingual (Kurdish, English,

Arabic, Turkmen). This anti-terrorism sign was written only in Arabic, and the implication is rather obvious.<sup>385</sup>

With some regularity, there were rumors that either the PMF were going to make a move into Erbil or Arab terrorists had infiltrated the city. In effect, this meant unexpected traffic as the Asayish set up checkpoints<sup>386</sup> and if you were Arab or looked like you might be, you were going to get stopped and searched. A mutual friend told Baho and me about a time he got stopped at a checkpoint,

I was asleep in the car, and when I woke up we were at a checkpoint. My face looks Arab, and they didn't believe me even though I speak perfect Kurdish. I had to show them my license and they took a long time checking it. Finally, they saw that I was Kurdish and let us through.

It's impossible to say where the line between 'an abundance of caution' and 'harrassment' is, but I am certain I saw both ends of the spectrum.

Baho and his co-workers in the application programming class had rented a bus to take to Shaqlawa, an idealic agricultural/vacation area north of Erbil. The trip was made up of mostly Kurdish young men, but a few Kurdish women, a Christian woman, and an Arab man. While the way up was uneventful, we got stopped on our way back into Erbil. The officer came into the bus and asked for our ID's, which we summarily gathered and handed off. He started to look through them, one by one, and when he was done, he looked up and asked in a clear voice,

“Are there any Arabs here?”

“No!” we shouted in unison. The officer returned our cards and let us on our way. After we were moving again, we started to laugh. Our Arab wasn't even permanently located in Erbil – he was visiting from Baghdad. His ethnicity would have been easily discernable had the guard either

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<sup>385</sup> While such 'microaggressions' lack the capacity to move the figurative Richter scale in a place like Iraq, they are good indicators of official and public attitudes.

<sup>386</sup> *Piṣkanīn*, the Sorani word for checkpoint, became synonymous with traffic in my mind.

taken the time to look. The truth is even more simple – I don't believe he was literate. This is not meant as a potshot at the KRG's education system or personnel, but rather an indicator of the kinds of struggles they're faced with. A populace that has a complicated history with neighboring ethnicities and an education system that has been profoundly effected by the many sanctions and deprivations they have been subject to by many of those same neighbors.<sup>387</sup>

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There was one phenomenon within Iraqi Kurdistan that I found particularly intriguing. It didn't take me long to notice that there was an unusual number of men with bandaged noses and bruising under their eyes. Invariably, when I got close enough it was obvious that the bandages were of the post-surgical variety. On occasion, I politely inquired as to how their recovery was going. Many said they would only have the bandage for a week or two, and that they had broken their nose as a child and never had it set properly. There were a few that were more honest. "I went to Turkey to get my nose operated on. I wanted to look less Arab. These other guys," he said, gesturing vaguely toward the street, "they'll tell you they broke their nose in a fight as a teenager or something. But really.. they just don't want to not look Arab."

"Why Turkey?" I asked.

"It's easier to get there and the operation is cheap."

Turkish-trained Turks and Turkish Kurds helping Iraqi Kurds look less like Iraqi Arabs.

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In the gym, there were a handful of people I was genuinely intimidated to spar with.<sup>388</sup> One of them was Farhad, an Iranian. While I didn't like going glove to glove with him, I did like

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<sup>387</sup> While I'll address this more later, one of the long-term victims of mass, long-term displacement is education. It's the malignant gift that keeps on giving, as we probably saw on our way back into Erbil from Shaqlawa.

<sup>388</sup> My pride urges me to clarify that sparring at Black Mamba usually means Muay Thai or MMA rather than grappling (see Footnote 419 and 429 for differences). I'll grapple anyone so long as we agree on the rules, but when

training alongside him as he was full of helpful insights. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get him to engage with me in Persian. For a while, I thought he believed I was a spy or something equally untrustworthy. One day I figured it out. It had nothing to do with where I was from and everything to do with where we were. Farhad didn't want to be seen speaking Persian in Erbil.

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One group I was particularly keen on speaking with were the Failis – Shi'ite Kurds. I thought I might be able to find some in Erbil, or at least a single Husayniyya,<sup>389</sup> but had no such luck. If they weren't Sunni Muslims, they didn't talk about it. The first chance I had to get to a Shi'ite mosque in Kurdistan was on December 1 when I was staying with Baho's family in Sulaymaniyah. While most mosques have gates, this one also had a checkpoint and a metal detector. Unfortunately, they have legitimate reasons for such precautions.<sup>390</sup> I made my way in and sat myself at the periphery, not knowing how many people to expect and not wanting to take up real estate for someone who was there for worship.

By the time the prayers started, there were maybe two-dozen men in attendance. All of them kept their distance from me, and there was a palpable tension in the air. I tried to make myself as invisible as possible as I observed the proceedings.

The sermon itself was, well, boring. The subject was so unremarkable I didn't even bother taking notes. Before the sermon had finished, I came to the conclusion that there was little I was going to be able to get here in terms of direct information. My presence was one more

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it comes to striking, I've paid too much money on languages and classes to leave my brain matter scrambled on the mat, and Farhad was both tougher and more experienced than myself.

<sup>389</sup> Shi'ite religious institution.

<sup>390</sup> In May 2014 a Halabjan that had joined Da'ish had entered this very mosque with a backpack filled with explosives (Hauslohner, 2014). Needless to say, the only thing I brought with me was my pen (a normal Bic pen, not my kubaton) and my notebook. No recording device, and I left my phone with security.

discomfort in an already uncomfortable situation. I wanted to know if any of these men had been expatriated by the Ba'athists in the 80's and sent back by Iran in the 90's. (see Leezenberg, 2005). I wouldn't say that the answers I got with respect to attitudes toward Failis were dishonest, but I think they were saturated with the official message of KRG harmony.

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The main pathway between Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran is at Haji Omran. It's at least as busy as Ibrahim Khalil on the Turkish side, and closing it takes a toll rather quickly. Of the \$3 billion worth of commodities passing from Iran to the KRG, roughly \$1 billion of that stays in the KRG ("Iraqi Kurdistan: No Decision to Reopen Haj Omran Checkpoint," Financial Tribune, 2017). While slowing commerce hurts Iranian interests, it is not to the same degree that is felt within the much smaller and more vulnerable Iraqi Kurdistan.

One of the most notable of such closures was in September 2007 after US troops rounded up and arrested a number of Iranian diplomats from the Iranian consulate in Erbil and a trade delegation in Sulaymaniyah (Entessar, 2009). From October 2017 onward, information on border closures was difficult to pin down. Haji Omran was certainly the largest, and it closed on October 3 ("Iraq Says Iran has Shut Border with Kurdistan," Radio Farda, 2017) and re-opened on October 26 ("Iran Reopens Border Crossing with Iraq's Kurdish Region," RFE/RL, 2017). The Bashmagh and Parvizkhan borders were less publicized, and all I had to work with was rumor which changed from week to week. This economic squeeze was extended to the *kolbar*<sup>391</sup> on the Iranian-Iraqi Kurdistan border.

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<sup>391</sup> The *kolbar* are the smugglers on the Iranian side that form massive caravans that carry large packs across mountainous terrain between the two countries. It is quite organized and occasionally targeted by border guards and the IRGC in times of higher tension between the KRG and Iran ("Death of a Young 'Porter' Highlights Plight of Iran's 'Human Mules,'" RFE/RL, 2017). On October 3, 2017 a seventeen-year old *kolbar* was shot dead by Iranian patrols for smuggling cigarettes into Iran. While *kolbars* deserve far more than a footnote, it wasn't my area of focus

This leads me to two of the trips that I wasn't able to make due to security concerns and visa problems – the first was visiting some of the city staging areas for *kolbar*, and the other was Khanaqin. Seeing the Iranian-bound smuggling would have put a nice compliment to having seen the Turkish-bound operations on more than one occasion. Despite being in the Diyala province (i.e. ICG control), Khanaqin has a large Kurdish community, and many of them are the remnants of the Faili community in Iraq. I was quite keen to meet any Faili willing to talk to me.

I talked with as many people as I could about the 'how' of getting there. Taxi drivers in Erbil I was closer to, a few people in-the-know living in Sulaymaniyah, and a few friends that I knew traversed between the KRG and ICG regions. All of them told me a similar story. There *are* "Kurdish roads" into Khanaqin, but just like the border crossings into Iran, information on which checkpoints are controlled by whom is tenuous. There may not have been any more Peshmerga checkpoints by then – depending on which Shi'ite militia was controlling the checkpoint – things could either be bad or *really* bad. For an American that had a KRG-visa but no Iraqi visa, this was a terrible idea. Certainly not worth dropping several hundred dollars just to bribe my way there and back, and that was the best-case scenario. The worst case-scenario that kept being repeated was 'disappear.'<sup>392</sup> I didn't make it to Khanaqin, and I never got an interview with a Faili who participated in the smuggling there.

#### *Meeting with the "Office" of Ali Bapir*

On December 17, 2018, I decided to try my luck at getting a meeting with a representative of Komala in Erbil. Between wanting adequate time for any waiting that might be needed and having conflicting reports of the office's location, I had not as of that point attempted

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and I never made it out far enough east to observe the process myself. For a short example, see "On the Border of Desperation" (Nima Film, 2010).

<sup>392</sup> 'Disappear' was one of the more recurrent euphemisms when it came to militia checkpoints.

a visit. One of my regular drivers brought me downtown, where he stopped in front of a building surrounded by a formidable gate.

“Here’s the Iranian Consulate,”<sup>393</sup> he said.

“Oh. Ok... it’s big. So where is the Komala office?” I asked, unsure of exactly what he was thinking.

“In there,” he responded, looking up at the gate.

“In the consulate itself?” I asked, not bothering to conceal my surprise.

He nodded.

I knew that Komala had some relationship with Iran, and that their headquarters had been attacked some years before. However, I didn’t know that the relationship was so deep with Iran that they not only wanted, but warranted the protection afforded by a consulate. I paid my driver, and after a short introduction, was guided inside to a small reception area staffed by an elderly Iranian gentleman fiddling with prayer beads.

“You here for a visa?” he asked me in Persian.

“No, no I’m not, actually. I’m a student from Indiana University studying Islam in Kurdistan, and I want to meet with someone from the Kurdistan Islamic Group office,” I managed in faltering Persian. You’d think with the two languages so close together that it would be easier rather than harder to make the mental transition.

The receptionist was confused and referred me to an equally confused official via phone call.<sup>394</sup> Failing to make headway, the receptionist summoned me further in where I spoke with another Iranian. Fortunately, he was able to shed some light on the confusion.

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<sup>393</sup> Technically it’s a consulate, but the word we used was *bālioẓxāne* (‘embassy’).

<sup>394</sup> I dislike phone calls in English, and despise them in other languages. My phone conversation was so poor that we ended up hanging up, and the elderly man redialed and the first thing he asked was, “*Če šod?*” (“What happened?”)



“The Komala office isn’t here,” he told me, in mildly accented English.

“Oh. My taxi driver said it was,” feeling as lame as I no doubt sounded.

“It’s down by Majdi Mall. Ask for the home of Ali Bapir, and they’ll take you to it.”

I thanked them all in as many languages as were relevant and got another taxi. Once again, I was fortunate enough to have found someone who actually knew what was where, and he brought me to a small, secluded neighborhood not far from the mall and the edge of town. We knew we had reached our destination, as there was a makeshift roadblock and two men in military fatigues sporting the ubiquitous Saddam-era assault rifles. Not knowing how this would go, I asked my driver to wait and got out.

I first spoke to the guard, then to an elderly gentleman to whom I explained my business there. I gave him my number and he told me that he’d give me a call if there was a time that week I could come by. On my way in, I’d noticed that the location was significantly less of an office complex and more of an actual neighborhood. Beside us was a small, shaded garden, complete with a slide and swing for kids and a wooden bench in the center of it all. An older, balding man sat on that bench reading a book. As I thanked both the elderly gentleman and the guard for their time, I got a better look at the garden on my way out. The man reading was none other than Ali Bapir. Every picture and video of him I’d seen of him, he’d been wearing a turban and was in officious company with serious expressions. Capturing this unscripted and vulnerable moment was a fascinating reminder that he, like everyone else, was very human.

At that moment, I had a flash that encapsulated every important bit of information I had on this man. His suspected ties to AI, his capture, imprisonment, and year-long interrogation. His support of the Referendum. The many books he’s written. I’m still very much in the process of determining what I think of him in sum, but at that moment all I felt his humanity.

“So, uh, last week.. yes, last week, there is recent news about the American embassy in Israel. Does your party, *yaʿnī*, have a position on this? An official opinion?” I asked Bedir in the offices of the Iraqi Turkmen Front.

“Yes. It complicates [*aloztri*] things greatly...”

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On Wednesday, December 6, President Trump announced that the US would be moving its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. While he claimed that recognizing Jerusalem as the capital was “a long overdue step to advance the peace process” (Landler, 2017), there was very little concordance internationally. It gave momentum to movements that need very little convincing to be adversarial to the ‘peace process.’<sup>395</sup> The United States Embassy in Baghdad, which only released a handful of specific travel warnings between September and December 2017, released two on the same day regarding the potential for violence around the Embassy due to the move to Jerusalem.

The taxi drivers with whom I had spoken about this topic gave more definitive responses, though they too did not antagonize Israel.

“According to you, was this good or bad?” my driver asked.

“I think it was bad. I think it was, how do you say? A distraction?”

“What do you mean?” he said.

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<sup>395</sup> In the interest of transparency, I admit to having a particularly jaundiced eye toward all things Israeli-Palestinian peace-process. Civilian casualties on both sides are little more than pawns in larger games that are less interested in ‘peace’ than ‘their piece.’ For American presidents, it’s an unattainable ‘feather in the cap,’ for Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, etc., it’s putting stock in religious credibility. For the extremists in Israel and Palestine, the most benefit comes from perpetuation of the conflict.

“There are things going on in the US that Trump doesn’t want to focus on. So, he changes the embassy in Jerusalem, and everyone starts talking about that instead. But in general, I think it was a bad idea. How about you?” I asked.

“Yes, it was a bad idea.”

Without exception, they all told me how this was a shared city and needed to be that way. One made what I thought was a very insightful observation in comparing Jerusalem to Kirkuk.

“Kirkuk isn’t just the city for Arabs, or for Kurds. It’s the city for Arabs and Turkmen and Kurds and Christians... everybody.”

Reduced to numbers, both cities represent massive amounts of income – Jerusalem for its religious tourism and Kirkuk for its oil.

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Rudaw featured an article discussing the differences between the Palestinians and the Kurds, specifically with regard to rights to nationhood.

A Turkish man by the name of Khalil Ibrahim spoke in Arabic to Rudaw on supporting Palestine and said, “It is the will of God that a Palestinian state come about, a state only for Muslims.”

“This ambition [fades] and an absurd position arises when I ask him whether the Kurdish community, as Muslims, have the same rights as Palestinians for their own state?”

Khalil Ibrahim said, “This is a different thing, an independent Kurdish state only benefits the interests of Israel.”

A woman was present in our discussion, and she said something strange, saying that the majority of her fellow Turks were not ready to speak on this. Aisha Noor said, “We don’t have any problems with the Kurdish desires for independence.”

But in the same way, a previous person [said that] the Kurdish state was a foreign project against Muslims and that, “the world powers are playing a game in this region, we won’t accept this.”

Amidst the protest were not only Turks, there was a man by the name of Abdullah Islam, who was a native of Southern Sudan, that country [having] declared independence in 2011. He said, “In every part of the world, we are ready to give our lives for Jerusalem.”<sup>396</sup>

Even this as well, that the Kurds as a community or the Palestinians shed their life blood for independence, was not good to him. Abdullah Islam said, “Muslims, Kurds, Turks, and everywhere are together and united.”

Palestinians and Kurds are two Muslim communities and are persecuted, but the first of these always receives more support in the Islamic world, God says every Muslim [must] see each other as equals, as has been interpreted by those few learned ones. (Abdulla, 2017)

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At the December 8 sermon, I had put myself in a corner or near a wall so I'm less obviously not participating in the prayer, and only take pictures if I see others doing it. I wouldn't take pictures at all, except the dissertation. The prayers hadn't started, and the light was just right on a 60 year-old Kurdish man dressed in traditional clothing praying right next to a 20-something Kurd with a backwards "Monster Energy Drink" baseball cap, and next to them was another Kurd very obviously taking a movie; I took the opportunity for a picture.

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<sup>396</sup> Erdoğan capitalized on these kinds of attitudes, saying, “it is necessary for Mr. Trump to know that Quds is a red line for Muslims,” (Usman, 2017).



Figure 30 - two very different generations of Muslim Kurds engaged in prayer

This won me the ire and special attention of my neighbor, who made it his task to keep miming for me to do this or that thing, do not do this, do not do that. Being a little on the physically hung-over side of things (ten hours of intense training and sparring with my friends in a five-day span meant a lot of bruising and muscle soreness), I was tempted to tell him to bugger off, but even if I weren't in a mosque, that isn't something I can very well do. With one or two exceptions, Kurdish cursing is really all or nothing - don't say anything or leave no survivors. Honorless man (*be šaref*), pimp (*gawād*),<sup>397</sup> heartless [impotent] man (*ājāq piyāw*) – they sound silly in English but are quite inflammatory in their native context. When it came to the group

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<sup>397</sup> *Gawād* came from the Arabic word, *qā'id*, which means 'leader,' but in the original context referred to Ottoman-appointed district leaders. I've been told that *gawād* is either 'a pimp,' or more eviscerating, 'a man who pimps out his own wife.' Given its original context, it is an interesting reflection on how Kurds viewed these appointees that adds a layer of nuance to its use in the present.

prayer, I stood parallel with the wall so as to allow the worshippers maximum spacing; my neighbor was displeased with this.

"Come! Pray!"

"I'm not Muslim," I whispered.

"What?" he said, confused.

"I'm not Muslim," I repeated loud enough that I knew he would hear.

I could not quite read his expression, but it was impossible to construe it as anything in the ballpark of understanding or acceptance. He told me to sit down, which I did to avoid further distraction from the service.

Especially considering the political context of the U.S. embassy move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, it was a tame sermon. The Imam said, "Quds is the capital of the Jews. It is also the capital of the Muslims. All of this is as it was with Salahadin."

All in all, nothing that made me feel that my blue eyes and blonde hair made me a target. After Friday prayer ended, I made for my shoes and kept track of my 'nosy neighbor,' who was furtively keeping tabs on me. I made a circuitous way out, and he kept following. I was going between cars and people and his shadow stayed more or less in the same position relative to me. Finally, he got my attention.

"Why didn't you pray?"

I gave the same answer as in the mosque, "I'm not a Muslim."

It should be fairly evident that someone that isn't a Muslim would refrain from reciting the *shahāda* simply to fit in.

"Why didn't you pray?"

Pretty clear this guy had a one-track mind filled with congealed pea soup. I switched directions to accommodate and hasten this encounter to its conclusion.

"I'm a researcher from America and I was here to listen to the sermon for my research in Islamic Studies."

I mentally kicked myself for my honesty. Any time I'm abroad and in a situation that being an American could cause problems, I lie and say I'm from a small town outside of Auckland, New Zealand. No one has problems with Kiwis and they have a hard time understanding the accent.<sup>398</sup>

The sermon wasn't the kind that would whip anyone up into an anti-American frenzy over the situation in Israel, and my overall experience in Iraqi Kurdistan was such that I had simply gotten out of the habit.

Not taking his eyes off me, he asked,

"Where do you live?"

I was only two blocks away from home, but I had no interest in sharing this.

"In Erbil," I replied.

In an effort to diffuse some of the tension, I attempted to humanize myself a little more. I reached out my hand, and clearly announced,

"My name is Ben. What is your name?"

Up until then he'd been injecting a lot of Arabic into our conversation, but his name was Dilojan – extremely Kurdish. After being as diplomatic as I could I excused myself, keeping an eye on him as he met up with a group of similarly aged Kurdish men. After a brief conversation, Dilojan left, but his posse took up pursuing me in his stead. So, I took a much longer time getting

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<sup>398</sup> I wrote this before the Christchurch massacre on March 15, 2019 wherein fifty Muslims were killed by armed gunmen at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. While the perpetrators were Australian, it's close enough that my NZ-get-away-free idea lost its viability.

back home. Fifteen minutes in a store, going aisle to aisle, picking up items and reading the ingredients. Where I went, they followed, quite obviously. Negative marks in the spy craft department for these fellows. Finally, I won the war of attrition, and I spent another twenty minutes winding through an unfinished apartment building and auto dealership to make sure I was alone before finally going home. Good riddance.

I didn't feel particularly threatened by these men, but being followed is being followed, and this simply isn't a country or the right weekend for that. While I can very easily rule out any sexual interest, this gave me more empathy for women like my friend Jenny, who experienced things like this far more often than I do as a male, even being as obviously American as I am.<sup>399</sup>

#### *The Humiliation of home searches and exile*

State violence effectively extinguishes the person as an individual subject through a process of iconic essentializing that transforms him or her into a mere instance of a more general case: a species, a specimen, a pathology, a class. Second, the category so defined is then subject to categorical obliteration through programmes of incarceration, torture, exile, and extermination. Refugees suffer, exemplify, and symbolize the worst excesses of this twofold dehumanising process. (Jackson, 2002: 78)

Following the PMF occupation of Kirkuk and the explosions that took place in November 2017, Kurdish homes started to be searched and many Kurdish young men rounded up (Husayn, 2017). A very popular opinion, which I'd heard voiced by government officials as well as many acquaintances, is that this had nothing to do with apprehending suspects and more systematic intimidation and collective punishment, i.e. the same 'aggressive gerrymandering' that the

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<sup>399</sup> I once asked Baho, "Judging by my face, how obvious is it that I'm not Kurdish?" "You? 200%," he replied, laughing.

On one occasion, my presence on the sidewalk literally slowed down traffic on a particularly busy street in Sulaymaniyah.



populations of Mosul and Kirkuk have undergone for decades. On top of the economic pressures, this ensured a continued influx of refugees.

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On the north of the city in the late fall, there really isn't much to see beyond the rows and rows of unfinished buildings. Many of them were draped with tarps and blankets and surrounded by water barrels. It didn't take me long to realize that all of them were all makeshift homes. Those refugees who can, stay with family while others end up in camps. For whatever reason, there's a third category that sets up in miniature communes in the unfinished buildings. Most of them are poor Syrians. They're intensely private, and the only reason I know where they're from at all is my interactions with them as they begged or accompanied their children to sell tissue paper packets or chewing gum. They don't speak any Kurdish and their Levantine accents are as good as a passport.

One day I was out walking and one such building caught my interest. A traditionally dressed woman walking up passed the tarped first and second floors. At first, I was confused what she was going up for – the remaining floors were entirely empty. Then I saw the empty bucket in her hand and realized that the only privacy she could find was to go up. My eyes returned to the street and I walked on.

*"Ben the Priest"*

In the 1830's, American and British Protestant missionaries entered Kurdistan to convert the Nestorians and Chaldeans. Under the Tanzimat, these foreigners had concessions to build churches where they wanted, and the structures they built were more like fortresses than conventional chapels (Eppel, 2016: 58). Most of these local Christians were vassals of Kurdish tribes, and upending the status quo was not a welcome development to the emirs, begs, and

aghas. In 1843, the forces of Kurdish Emir Bedir Khan massacred the Assyrian Christians of Hakkari. He was supported in his efforts to hurt the Christian community by the Ottoman government, which then used the excuse of incensed Westerners to turn around and take down the Emir.

Now jump to early October 2017, with me dressed in a coat and tie waiting to meet with the head of the Barzani Charitable Foundation to see if they had any need of an English tutor in the refugee camp in Qushtapa. They courteously welcomed me in and asked me to wait in the common room. Alone, I took in the tasteful, traditional furnishings in the local idiom. The only item I wouldn't see in any other sitting room was a whiteboard being used as a schedule. As I looked closer, the 10am meeting read, "Ben the Priest."

Ben Priest – Ben the Priest.<sup>400</sup> My mind froze somewhere between a laugh and a groan at the potential difficulties this misunderstanding could cause for me. The idea which I had come with – volunteering as an English tutor in exchange for time speaking in Kurdish with those same students – suddenly took on cynical contours. I think the only thing I was missing on the trifecta of suspicion was any hint of my being a Freemason.

It turned out to be an easy fix at the main office, but the stink of it followed me out to the camp itself when I met with the site managers. They were extremely polite, but were obviously concerned about my reasons for being there. After a good deal of conversation and convincing, they agreed to having me teach a group and speak with the students in Kurdish outside of class so long as I kept the topics as unpolitical as possible. This made plenty of sense to me and I

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<sup>400</sup> One of the ironies here is that I had in fact been a missionary. I served for two years as a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Fort Worth, Texas. In many regards, it's what started my interest in people (i.e. ethnography) and languages (Spanish, which I had to learn on my own after being assigned to work in a Spanish-speaking area). Just as I wasn't in Iraq as a spy, I also wasn't there as a missionary. Pinky-swear, cross my heart and hope to die.

readily acquiesced. These kids had problems enough without a (maybe Christian-Freemason) American (spy) asking questions of a sensitive nature.

Interestingly enough, I wouldn't be the only Occidental in the camp. For nearly a year, a French graduate student had been living in one of the homes. I consciously kept an eyebrow from crooking – she certainly hadn't come all this way to take cold showers and be exposed to aggressive microflora. Having done long-term work with refugees before, I knew that everything is sensitive or completely numb. I scoured my mind for a research project that was so politically inert that it would pass what I'd just agreed to. No matter what direction I worked the question, everything felt political. Even Kurdish children's songs have a political laquer more often than not. Maybe she'd made a sizeable donation that made it worth their while.

All I had to do was not make problems and hope they came to see me as 'Ben the English tutor who likes to work on his Kurdish outside of class' rather than 'Ben the Priest.' When the BCF drove me back to town, I bought myself an English textbook, put together a curriculum, and emailed it to the BCF. All I had to do was wait.

While it didn't take long, the 'it' turned out to be much different than what I was hoping for. Only days after my visit, the Iraqi government took over administration of *all* the refugee camps in the KRG, stripping BCF of all its charges and kicking them out. Between their apparent *raison d'etre* taken from them and the mounting economic siege, it didn't take long for the pressures to make a serious toll. After a few weeks of this, I was one recipient of a mass email pleading for sponsors to stick with the BCF during this difficult time. I've read stories regarding BCF efforts in the news, but that's about all of the contact I had after the camp seizures. I have no idea if the French student was allowed to stay and continue studying Rojavayi ceramic designs or whatever 'non-sensitive subject' she busied herself with.

### *Residency Card*

For as unpleasant as the whole process of getting my residency card was, it granted me a front-row seat to the subtle human drama of people trying to make their way through the system. It was a tableau of the quiet desperation of displaced families, the hazy-eyes of supplicants bounced from one office to another only to face another indefinite wait, all punctuated by occasional outbursts of frustration. There are two vignettes that stand out in my mind in particular.

In the first, I was waiting in a main lobby for one of the offices<sup>401</sup> to become reoccupied. I was hoping the official was just on tea break, smoke break, or simply hadn't shown up yet. The other potential was that it was closed for the day, which was a real risk given the post-2014 salary cuts. Despite the large number of people in the lobby, the conversations between officials and petitioners were quiet and no one else was talking. The single exception to this came from the youngest of a family of five situated two rows in front of me. It was a girl, probably less than a year old, crying her eyes out in her mother's arms. They'd been there longer than I had, and the mother had long since stopped trying to shush the child. As a father, I recognized this as the universal symbol of parental defeat. It was almost as if the unvoiced complaints and emotional grievances of everyone in the lobby was being channeled into that sustained wail. I stifled a laugh as I thought, 'this little girl is the most honest person in all of Kurdistan.'

The second vignette took place in the Asayish headquarters. In line once again, I was present for an exchange between an officer and a man from Mosul. From what I could gather, he'd only recently fled from the city with his family. Without the right paperwork, there's very little you can do in Erbil in terms of getting work and housing; this was very obviously the core

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<sup>401</sup> Offices in lobbies like these are little more than partitions of the room separated by plastic and plexiglass.

problem in conversation. Most of it was too quiet for me to pick up on, but the answer to every question from the man from Mosul was met with some version of a headshake and spoken iteration of ‘no.’ Finally, his frustration got the better of the man and in what was not quite a shout, stated, “But I am a Kurd!”

The officer simply shook his head.

## The Economic Siege

### *The Victims*

I stopped by Muhammad R<sub>x</sub> to see how things were fairing with him. Beyond simply being a good guy, I greatly appreciated his honest approach to whatever situation he was in. After spending so much time combing through the various filters of media and government, it was refreshing.

Everyone was in, and they immediately made room for me to sit and fetched me a drink. We made small talk and more or less shot the breeze while they conducted business. It had been a week or two since I’d last visited, and to my surprise, things were different. Of the handful of people who came in, only a small portion of them left with what they came for. For everyone else, it went like this,

“Do you have [item-x]?” they’d ask in Arabic or Kurdish.

“No, sorry, sir.”

“But I need this,” they would-be customer would ask.

“You can try so-and-so’s shop down the street. Go down the block and it’s at the end.”

“Thank you,” they’d say as their facial broadcast a more complex array of emotions.

Muhammad R<sub>x</sub> would shake his head and look down at the floor. After one such interaction, he extended his hand to open a covered shelf.

“These here,” he said, nodding toward a small package of medicine, “are liver medication. You know how much they’re worth right now?”

I shrugged.

“\$500 American. And that’s for *a week*.”

“Wow. That’s amazing. So, nothing is coming through right now?”

“Well, a little, but not much. Medicine comes from Baghdad or Turkey normally. Now we get medicine from other places like India, but they aren’t as good. There are babies dying after a week without medication here.”

I sipped at my water, feeling guilty for my good health and the ease of life I would enjoy as soon as I used my passport to leave all of this behind.

Less than a week later I was in a pharmacy south of Ankawa. As I waited my turn with the pharmacist, I eavesdropped on the man in front of me. His face was covered with a surgical mask and looked to be in some degree of discomfort. I couldn’t swear to it, but I think he bought the exact medication Muhammad R<sub>x</sub> had shown me. The pharmacist took the small box out and wrung up the register.

“That will be \$500.”

The man pulled out his wallet and unearthed five \$100 bills. The pharmacist took the money and the man took the medicine.

What I was seeing wasn’t new as the vulnerabilities in Iraqi Kurdistan’s supply chain have been exploited for years. While I easily bought into the narrative that the federal government was affecting all of the shortages, it isn’t the only narrative with regard to accountability and blame.

[In 2015], the notion of a stand-off with Baghdad contradict[ed] the reality that most Kurdish politicians have come to accept: that the two governments will have to work together, both to fight

ISIS and to negotiate the sale of Iraq's oil. But the nationalist rhetoric, perpetuated for years by the Kurdish media and officials, lives on in citizens like the hospital administrator. When I recounted his claim that Baghdad was withholding medication bound for Kurdistan to a high-level Kurdish official (who spoke on condition of anonymity), the official seemed exasperated. "He has to say that," he said. (Krajeski, 2015).

Two years later, Rudaw reported,

Regarding medicine delivery, Dr. Rekawt Hama Rasheed, KRG Minister of Health, announced in Akre that Baghdad promised to send medicine to Kurdistan in 2018. The Health Minister said that for that month Baghdad would only send life-saving medicine and vaccines, also that in the budget of the coming year, 180 billion dinars has been allotted for Kurdistan in the Iraqi Ministry of Health," (Rebwar, 2017).

In sum, it's difficult to say what is actually causing the shortages. Whether it's Baghdad showing dominance or KRG officials laundering the money, the costs are directly passed on to the consumer.

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Normally, the beggars don't move too far from their make-shift domiciles in the unfinished outskirts of the city,<sup>402</sup> but I came across a beggar one day near 'Doctor Street.' The skin of his head was like a melted candle that had fused his chin unevenly to his neck and made one eye a lidless, pearly-white orb floating aimlessly in the swirl of his face. I gave him some money and crouched next to him.

"What's your name, sir?" I asked in Kurdish.

"Dasdan," he said, his tongue no longer able to properly form the 't' in Dastan.

"Where are you from, Dastan?"

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<sup>402</sup> The biggest reason for this is either not wanting to be far from their children or not wanting to drag them across the city. Ankawa with its many shops was usually their easiest go-to for begging.

“Duhok.”

“If I could ask, what happened?”

“Da<sup>c</sup>ish.”

“Were you in the Peshmerga?”

“Yes.”

I gave him some more money, thanked him for his service, and walked on. I have no idea if it really was fighting against Da<sup>c</sup>ish or if he'd gotten in a housefire in Duhok and decided to beg in Erbil with a better story. I find myself hoping it's the latter.

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During the 1990's, Baho had an older sister who had a kidney condition. Due to the sanctions on the Iraqi government and the Iraqi government's sanctions on the KRG, the only way they could get her treatment was to bring her to Baghdad. Under normal circumstances, this was arduous. In this case, there was a mile-long stretch that had no road and was too difficult to drive a car over. They had to bring a wheelchair across the rocky terrain. She died during one of these excursions.

Responsibility for her death is a tricky thing. The easiest thing is to say is that Saddam's regime was responsible. The sanctions were meant to hit hard, and instead of defraying the costs from security budgets, the regime passed the bill onto the population, particularly those that were causing it problems. On the other hand, those who placed the sanctions knew that this is how things would work out (Mahajan, 2001). It may not have been the stated intention, but Saddam was a known factor and it didn't deter the American administration from squeezing.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> A UNICEF report from 1996 placed the number of children dead at over 500,000 (Mahajan, 2001). That number has been cited for years afterward, despite the fact that later UNICEF estimates showed no spikes in child mortality during the sanctions, thereby abrogating that high number (Spagat, 2013). As inaccurate as 500,000 children dead was, Madeleine Albright still said it was an acceptable cost.



*Time & Memory – Life Under Saddam*

Particularly after October ended, one refrain I heard more often than not was the statement that ‘things were better under Saddam.’<sup>404</sup> One such conversation in particular was with Baho’s mother one morning after breakfast. The weather had cooled considerably, and they kept a gas-powered space-heater in the kitchen until the sun thoroughly warmed everything back up. I was puzzled by her sentiment, and for as much as I wanted to bring up her daughter, I kept my mouth shut.

“Things were difficult, but we had electricity and services,” she said. “Now,” she said looking around the house, “we have maybe a few hours every day.”

I became even more puzzled when Baho’s father joined in and they started to tell me more of their family history. Baho’s father was a school teacher and his mother a seamstress. From the mid-70’s to the mid 90’s, they had *three* houses destroyed by the Ba’athists. Baho’s father had the walls of these homes filled with his Kurdish teaching materials, and along with everything else in the home, these were lost with each destroyed home.

They had to leave their second house due to chemical attacks, and they had to walk for miles to the next town. Baho’s mother was six months pregnant with him at the time. Upon their third forced relocation, Baho’s father was the only teacher available for six grades, and he took it upon himself to keep teaching even though there was no salary. While he taught, Baho’s mother made dresses and sold them in the market, and her brother supplemented them with his own meager income. When things became particularly difficult, Baho’s father started smuggling goods across the Iranian border. Fortunately for him, his partner had access to a truck with

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<sup>404</sup> I also heard this from some Kurds in Erbil and Iraqi Arabs refugees in the US. It surprised me to hear this from both Arabs and Kurds.

hidden compartments, so they were not stuck making the treacherous journey across the mountains on foot.

I shook my head in wonder.

“Why didn’t you leave?.. I mean, three houses, and the personal cost to your family..”

“Kurdistan is better for us,” Baho’s father replied. “It is our country, we wanted to stay. We grew up with Kurdayetî. We may leave for a month or so, but then we come back.”

Later, Baho and his father brought me to the bookshelf that occupied the stairs landing. I had seen it before, and even stopped to appreciate the many titles in his collection. Politics, education, and sociology in Sorani Kurdish, Arabic, and English. Now, knowing what it really meant for them to have these books, I marveled at their significance.

A few hours, Baho’s extended family came to visit, and they asked that I join them all together in the parlor. At one point, I mentioned how I had learned about the family’s history and all of the troubles they had.

“Everyone has a story like that,” Baho’s aunt said, rather dismissively.

### *The Earthquake*

On the evening of November 12, Baho and I were Skyping with my family when our apartment started to shake. We hung up, and we both started to laugh. By the time we were out of our apartment and hearing people screaming and trundling children down the stairs, we were outright cackling. The whole situation was just so ridiculous. When we got outside, I turned to Baho,

“I know things here aren’t exactly stable here in Kurdistan, but *seriously*?! Even the ground is in on it.”<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> An interesting side note about buildings in Erbil – because many of them are privately funded, the decision for how much reinforcing rebar to install is more or less up to the funder. Sometimes, they’ll go cheap and use a sub-

As we started to learn about the casualties further east, it stopped being funny. A 7.3 magnitude earthquake originated in Halabja and travelled all the way to Erbil and beyond. While damage was felt at the epicenter, the real havoc was wrought across the border. At first, the Iranian government only announced a small number of casualties. According to people I spoke to that had relatives or people they knew in Iranian Kurdistan, the toll was actually much higher. Apparently, the Iranian government built sub-par structures in that region, and the earthquake knocked many of them down.

Turkey responded with aid, and al-Azhar released a fatwa declaring that the earthquake was judgment for the Referendum.<sup>406</sup> On November 17, I went back to the Jaleel Khayal mosque near the center of the city. For whatever reason, the attendance there wasn't as much as it was before the Referendum, and I had no problems finding a place to quietly sit and observe the proceedings. I was interested to return and get a feel for the atmosphere and direction going on two months out. The first topic to come up was the earthquake and denouncing al-Azhar's statements that it was a judgment from God, asking instead why they don't instead reach out to their Muslim brothers in times of distress.

### Sex & the City (and Village)

In some ways, Kurdistan's connection to the world seems to be shoring up the system of patriliney and patrogenesis rather than diminishing it as some might have predicted. (King, 2014: 39).

Romantic love and sexuality, to stay with an example that is deemed crucially important by the young men I have followed in my fieldwork, form an ethical discourse with specific virtues and

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optimal amount. Others though, will opt for putting in 125% the amount required as a kind of bragging point. Our building was probably closer to the latter than the former.

<sup>406</sup> I was foolish and did not cite this immediately, now I am not able to find anything on the matter at all, even in the Google databases. All I can say is that it *did* happen, and locals *did* respond to it.

teleologies of the subject, that is, ways to become and be a good human being (see Foucault 1990: chapter 3). Romance is strongly present not only in everyday experience, but also in the public media in form of love songs, films, soap operas, and so on. While the plots and the kinds of problems that the heroes of love songs and stories face certainly move within a moral universe that makes them meaningful and understandable to their audiences, they definitely cannot be reduced to the religious discourse of legitimate and illegitimate relationships, the vernacular ethics of patriarchal family, or the forms of double morality that measure different actions on different scales depending on gender, social status, and the context of the action. Love represents an ethics of desire and commitment (which can reach the degree of obsession) that stand in stark contrast to the religious discourse on chastity and the social practice of parental control over marriages... (Schielke, 2009: 531)

### *Wastā*

On November 4<sup>th</sup>, I messaged my first roommate, Yaran, to see if he had time for lunch the week before he took off for school in the Czech Republic.<sup>407</sup> Fortunately for me, he was quite unoccupied and glad for the company. The next day he came and picked me up in a taxi, driven by a man in his late fifties whom I soon learned was under the employ of my friend's father. We talked a lot about his relationship with his father. We talked about his engagement to his long-time friend, or more accurately, how their respective fathers (a KDP minister and an oil company executive) forestalled that engagement due to political developments in the region. We talked about how despite his having sold his cars and prepped everything else, he couldn't leave for school before getting his father's approval. We talked about how he had been raised with all the money he could ask for but was unprepared to complete simple tasks by himself. When we

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<sup>407</sup> He didn't end up going to the Czech Republic for school, much like he didn't end up marrying his good friend (and more importantly, was also the daughter of an important business contact of his father's). As of 2018, he was studying oil and gas development in Moscow, Russia. I never bothered to ask if he wanted to do any of that.

weren't talking about the boxing match on the television (my fault), what we were talking about had to do in one way or another with his father.

“If he has you watched while you're here, why not live in Sulaymaniyah, where he does, and just make it easier on everyone?”

“No, if I lived in Sulaymaniyah it would not be easier,” he said, pausing for a drink of Coke. “If I lived in Sulaymaniyah with my father and brothers, I would have to be followed around by a black car, always. That is how it is with my brother, he always has protection. I couldn't go anywhere without being recognized... here, I can go anywhere I want and no one will recognize me. Well, very few.”

His point was pretty obvious after having seen pictures of his father and mother (who lives in Canada with my roommate's sister). If you knew his father's face, there'd be no missing it.

“Plus, I hate arguing with him. He gets very mad at my brother and swears at him.”

“Isn't swearing at your son hard to do in Kurdish without insulting yourself? I've noticed in Persian and Kurdish that most swear words revolve around insulting parentage. So if, say, you used the Persian *vāled-e čemūshā*,<sup>408</sup> to your own son..”

“I actually don't know Persian. All my family does, but me.”

“Sorry, that's 'the son of mules,' and that makes kind of an ass of you if you're the person's father.”

“Oh, we do it anyway. ‘*Sag bāb*,’ which, roughly translated, is ‘your father is a dog’ – “gets used all the time,” he said, chopping his hand through the air for emphasis. “Doesn't matter if it's his own father saying it.”

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<sup>408</sup> ‘Son of mules.’ Another fun variant of this same idea of shameful, unnatural origin is *tokhm-e jinnhā* – ‘offspring of jinn.’ They're funny in English but will make an Iranian blush.

“Huh. Pretty much everything you’ve brought up comes back to him. That’s a ton going on, emotionally I mean.”

“Yeah, yeah it is, isn’t it? Can you tell that I’ve lost weight?” Yaran asked, gesturing down his body.

“Actually, I had.”

“It’s because I’ve been running 2.5 kilometers every day,” a fact I found impressive, as he has on frequent occasion remarked how much he loathes exercise. “And on top of that, I haven’t been eating.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just don’t want to eat. I went to a psychiatrist here, not in his office, but to his home. If you go to a psychiatrist here, that means you’re retarded.”

“Really? No way to go without thinking that there’s something wrong with you?”

“No way. So I went to his home and we went into his bedroom. I told him everything that has been going on, and he told me I need to be more religious. I told him I don’t believe in God. I do – but I didn’t want to tell him that,” an interesting admission, given how loudly he had been in proclaiming his atheism for the time I’ve known him.

“Then what happened?”

“Then he said he couldn’t help me, and I left.”

“Whoa.. a psychiatrist telling you to pick up religion and that’s it?”

“Yeah I know, it’s kind of crazy.”

While I wanted to ask if his father had been in touch with this doctor beforehand, I thought better of it. It would probably be depressingly redundant to find one more reminder of how much of his life was controlled and manipulated by his father. So, I tried to change the subject.

“Like I said earlier, sounds like you’ve got a lot going on right now emotionally. I’m glad we could meet for lunch. How’s your pizza, by the way? Looks good.”

“Oh, it’s good,” he said, looking down at the pizza made by a Muslim Kurd, served to him by a Yazidi Kurd in a restaurant owned by an English-speaking Filipino man. All of them thought it was funny that I was learning Kurdish, and simply broke down laughing when I would switch into Arabic. The barking cat is just as funny in Erbil as it is in Istanbul.

“The pizza is really good, but I’m actually forcing myself to eat. It’s not that it’s bad, I’ve just lost, you know, the wanting to eat.”

“You mean you lost your appetite?” I proffered.

“Yes, that’s the word I was looking for!” he said, smiling.

“Huh. How do you say that, in Kurdish?”

My friend paused, his face a blank. “You know, I don’t know. It’s *šahiyya* in Arabic, but Kurdish..” looking up, he called to one of his friends at the restaurant, and says, in a mix of Kurdish, “Hey, do you know how to say *šahiyya* in Kurdish?”

The staffer also paused. Then in perfect inner-city American English, replied, “You know, I don’t think we really have that word anymore. Nobody uses it. We just use the Arabic. Words like that just disappear, and soon enough no one will know what *asalam alekum* means!... You know, to find out what it used to be, ask your grandpa.”

While my friend generously paid for our lunches, I went out to the car where his driver was waiting for us. Having the opportunity to chat in Kurdish, I learned that he had six children, and was very proud that one of them was living and working in Sweden and another was a Peshmerga. Just before they dropped me off, I remembered to ask, “Oh, how do you say *šahiyya* in Kurdish?”

“You know, the desire to eat,” my friend added.

“*Šahiyya?*.. well, it’s just *šahiyya*. We have many words for many different things in Kurdish,” he explained, bringing up several Kurdish words with a plethora of synonyms of Kurdish derivation as well as those borrowed from Arabic, Persian, Turkish. “But *šahiyya?*... by God, I do not know the Kurdish word.”<sup>409</sup>

My friend gave me his driver’s phone number, saying that he could give me a ride 24/7 if I called him. I thanked them both kindly and took my leave.

I know that if I called, he would show up. For a mixture of emotional reasons I’m still trying to sort out, I knew I wouldn’t.

#### *No Girlfriend, Except in the Mountains*

“I have so much in my heart to say, but I cannot say it in English.”

Lagan, Baho’s younger brother, shook his head in frustration. After I finished talking with my family that evening, he asked if I’d like to ride along with him to his work to print some things

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<sup>409</sup> On November 26, Baho and two of his friends were over at the apartment for an all-day programming session. I had plans to be out that day but seeing as I’d have company and had some writing to do, I might as well do that instead and soak up what I could from the guaranteed company of three Kurdish friends. During lunch, Baho insisted that for the sake of my studies we all speak Kurdish. This felt unnatural for our guests, as the presence of an American, or any other Occidental, is synonymous with speaking English. After a debate as to whether that should include Badini or just Sorani, we settled into a groove of story-telling and trading linguistic expressions. My main contribution to this was explaining how one uses “up the wazoo” in American vernacular. Of the stories they told me, the most relevant came from Baho and a trip he made to the hospital in Sulaymaniyah.

While he was there, a traditionally dressed older gentleman came in that was obviously in significant physical distress. First to check him in were the Filipinas who were very serious and very practical, both in how they acted and how they dressed. Then came the new nurse, a recent graduate who was still dressing as she would in college, which Baho described as “looking fancy and having lots of makeup. Nothing at all practical.”

This nurse started going through the normal routine for checking someone out, probing, and asked him if he was hurting.

“Do you have *pain?*” she asked in Kurdish.

The Kurdish words for ‘pain’ is *eshā*, *āzār*, or *zhān*. She probably could have used the Arabic *alam* and still remained within the realm of mutual intelligibility. However, she used the English “pain.”

“*Pain-ī heya?*” [is there *pain?*]

He replied in a voice that reflected his deleterious condition, “Yes.. we have a lot of *payn* in my village. I can send you some if you’d like.”

*Payn* means ‘fertilizer.’



off. Afterward, he brought me up to Gowjar Mountain to see the city at night. The night before I had been out with Baho's older brother, Alan, for a cookout and dominos with his old college friends on a mountainside in Šarbajer, which is the region between where Iraq ends and Iran begins. I felt like the shiny new toy and could imagine what these men were like when they were younger. My batteries felt fine, so I was game.

I suggested that Lajan express himself in Kurdish, but as he frequently mentioned, what he wanted was to say what he thought about his people and his country in English. He resorted to Arabic a few times, but only gave the Kurdish when I specifically asked for it. A full three minutes of companionable silence later, Lajan picked his train of thought back up.

“With my people, I am *mutašā'im*,” he said.

I went through my head and tried to remember this word in Arabic. Lajan wasn't the only one frustrated with their difficulties with word recall and expression. I had to look it up.

“Ah, ‘pessimist.’ You're a pessimist about your country?”

“Yes, I am *mutašā'im*,” he affirmed.

“What is that in Kurdish?”

“*Rašbīn*.”

“Ha, ‘black-seer.’” The physical idioms of Kurdish never cease to please me.

“I am a pessimist about my country and my people. They only see the small things, not more than that,” he said.

“Not seeing the bigger picture?”

“No. They only see what is in front of them. When you're hungry and poor, all you want is food.

Doesn't matter the quality.”

We continued to drive and snaked our way up the mountain.

“Sometimes boys and girls come up here to make the sex... They say that it is *cayba*<sup>410</sup> to [be in love with] a woman. Why is it *cayba*? It is a natural right. If people were not so concerned in what other people were doing – drinking beers, going out with women – they would be able to see themselves and their own problems. No one would come up here for that. You don’t need to do that in America or Europe.”

This last part is something that kept on coming up that neither of us could agree on. He would tell me that opportunity-x, like learning French, would be impossible in Iraq but everyone could do it in America and Europe. I tried to explain that while I agreed that the barriers for entry into most every opportunity were magnitudes higher here, either through availability, bureaucracy, or most commonly, money, it wasn’t like every city and town west of the Danube came with a French language center and a populace that had no qualms with individual choices in sexual partners.

Yeah, you’d cut down on traffic, but there’s always a reason for ‘the mountain.’ In any case, I was less interested in scoring points in a debate and more in how he saw things, especially as he found it so important to verbalize them.

“I think that Islam is one of the biggest problems for our people,” Lajan said.

“Do you consider yourself a Muslim?”

“No. But it says so on my card,” he said, laughing.

“Your great, great grandfather was Mollana Khalid al-Naqshbandi, right?”<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> *cayb* is the Arabic term for moral shame. It has a very religious connotation, especially when incorporated into non-Arabic contexts like the English conversation we were having.

<sup>411</sup> When I was first considering how to preserve my Baho’s family’s anonymity, I was concerned about their being descendants of such a large figure. This lasted for about a second, because I then remembered that this history was entirely oral, and he had *a lot* of descendants. Anyone that can track down Baho based on his genealogy gets a gold star.

“Yes. The grandfather of my father was a very famous man. He was a spiritual man, but also a political man. But I have never been to prayer in my life. I do not know how to perform the prayers.”

Having spoken with Baho about his spiritual beliefs on many occasions, that his brother felt the same was no real surprise.

“One thing I do not like is people who say one thing and do another.”

“Hypocrites?” I offered.

“*Munāfiqīn*,” he affirmed in Arabic.

“What is that in Kurdish?” I’m glad Haidar wasn’t with me right then, as he’d tell me that I already know this word, and I’d know he was right.

“*Dūrrū*,” he supplied.

‘Two-faced.’ Ah, those physical idioms.

“Believe me when I say,” he continued, “that everyone in the mosque says one thing and does another. They say don’t do this, but they go, and they try to take your money. They are not honest.” This conversation felt like we had picked up where Baho and I had left off with the pillagers in Baghdad in 2003. Go into the city, steal what you can, and stop to perform every prayer on your way back home.

As we made our way home, he continued to talk about his issues with religious hypocrisy, and how he felt that the answer to his country’s problems was education, travel, books, and even foreign movies.

“When I went to Azerbaijan [and Turkey], my eyes were opened. I saw that there was not trash in the streets, and they had electricity. If more people saw that, they would want it.”

The foreign movies came up as I noticed that the Braveheart soundtrack was playing. I thought this was an interesting opportunity to probe.

“Do you like Braveheart?”

“Yes, very much. It is a movie that has a great effect on me.”

“Do you think that’s because there’s any connection between the kinds of things the Scots experienced and those things that the Kurds have experienced?”

Yes, that was a leading question. Sue me.

“Not really, no. We do not have that anymore.”

That answer surprised me.

“But you used to, not that long ago.” I replied.

“Yes, in Kurdish history it was like this. They even had the same thing where on the wedding night they had to sleep with the leader.”

Shocked, I replied, “You mean they had to let their wives sleep with the sheikh on the first night?”

“Not the sheikh. The agha. But you could pay the agha and not have her sleep with him. That money is called the *sūrāna*. *Sūr* means red, for the blood that came from her.”

“Yeah, the breached hymen... how long did the *sūrāna* last for?”

“Seventy or eighty years ago it stopped. You should ask my father, he knows more than I do about this.”

Later, when we were back at home and I was sitting in the kitchen with his parents typing up my notes, I remembered to ask about the *sūrāna*. Apparently, it went beyond the end of the Ottoman Empire and only stopped in 1930 or 1940.

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“Because sexual relations are forbidden, it’s all they think about. It’s part of the problem here,”

– Professor Mustafa

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*Trip up Azmar mountain with Baho*

“On that peak,” he said, indicating behind us, “is where people go to drink and look at the city at night. And this peak, where we’re going, is where people like to come at night to make-out.”

After my laughter subsided, I managed to ask, “why aren’t they one and the same? Making-out and alcohol are complementary goods for some people.”

“They like to drink together and have barbeques.”

So, nominally acceptable social drinking as opposed to combining or maximizing social taboos broken. Sensible enough.

“I can’t blame them. Did the same thing when I was young.”

Looking shocked and amused, Baho asked, “You did?”

“Oh yeah. Well, just making-out, I never went any further than that and I don’t drink or do drugs. But even in Utah, if you had something private to do you went up to the mountain.” If it’s good enough for Moses, it’s good enough for Tom and Suzy, who may or may not bring Jack Daniels, some weed, or a condom along for the ride.

“If we’re lucky, we’ll catch some people up here while we’re driving.”

Catch some we did, laughing raucously as we watched them go by. It was difficult not to when the driver – always the guy – is putting such an extreme effort trying look nonchalant at the steering wheel, going nowhere at all while a bulb of dark hair remains visible from just above the dashboard of the passenger seat. Cars in Kurdistan are almost always small, so ‘duck behind the dash’ is not exactly a foolproof strategy.

The last of the couples we encountered were driving back in a hurry, looking quite flustered. It didn't take us long to learn why; we had stopped to take pictures of the view when along came a truck full of Asayish. Getting caught getting intimate in Kurdistan, even in Sulaymaniyah, is awkward enough, but getting caught by a truck loaded with security police?

*The Polygamist*

On the night of November 6, I stood out in the rain waiting to catch a taxi to get back home from the gym. Right before I tried calling up one of the myriad of drivers that had given me their number, a cabbie pulled up. The driver was a genial man clad in the traditional dark brown Kurdish clothing. As we talked, I learned that he was born in Erbil, but spent many years in Mosul, and he worked in both as a taxi driver for over thirty years. As is more or less custom, I proceeded to ask him about his family.

“Do you have kids?” Families are always a safe place to start, and in my case, quite useful in terms of answering some of my questions about manhood and ‘Kurdishness.’

“Yes! Thank God, I have seven children.”

“Seven! That is a lot. Fewer families here are having that many.”

“And I have two wives!”

I paused, thinking how to disambiguate this in Kurdish. “As in, *right now* you have two wives? Or did you have one wife, then a different wife?” I didn't want to simply ask, “did one die” or “did you divorce.”

“No! Right now, I have two wives living in the same home.”

“Whoa!” I exclaimed as my eyebrows reached their zenith. “You're the very first person in Erbil I've met that has more than one wife. Very interesting.” He took this as praise and looked quite

happy with himself. Wanting to follow this thread as far as I could, I continued, “So do you live in Erbil or a village nearby?”

“A village. Close to Erbil.”

“Ah.” I genuinely would have been surprised if it were otherwise.

“It’s halal,” he said, swiping the air in front of him in an up and down motion, “not haram,” this time swiping horizontally. “It is halal for me to marry up to four wives.”

I nodded in agreement, allowing a short silence to crop up as I pondered how in the world I would manage two spouses at once as a Kurd in Kurdistan. How would you mediate between issues? How would you not play favorites? There are basic supply and demand issues that come up. Why did the second one marry you when there is a larger market of men to choose from nearby? Even in village life, with the overabundant supply of taxi drivers in Erbil, how do you afford that? For someone I had only just met, I wanted to get as much as I could without offending him.

“So how does that work? Having two families?”

“One of them lives upstairs and the other downstairs, and the children just go in between.”

“Are there problems between the two?” Then, clarifying, “The wives, I mean.”

“No!” he said, shaking his head emphatically. “No problems at all. They all get along.”

Doing my best to not show any Western-bred incredulity at that last statement, I redirected my inquiry, “So how do you do it? Three days here, three days there?..”

“No, I do every other day. One upstairs, one downstairs.”

“Ah, ok,” I said, trying hard not to chuckle as my brain inadvertently connected this idea to the upstairs-downstairs dynamic of the BBC serialized period drama, *Downton Abbey*.

Still looking very proud of himself, he continued, “And I want to get a third one!”

“A third wife?” My eyebrows resumed their apex.

“Yes! A third!” he said, laughing hard and slapping the steering wheel with his palm. Nearing my apartment, I didn’t have time to ask whether or not the other two wives were consulted on this, and if they were, if he’d just build up or dig a basement. If I’d been thinking, I would have gotten his phone number and called him up for a ride later to continue our conversation.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t, being caught up instead trying to wrap my head around his situation.

Just like the rain that night, polygamy was something I knew existed in the area, but still caught off guard actually seeing. If I could go back in time right now, I would have simply given him 20,000 dinars – four times as much as I paid for my original fare – and asked him to just keep driving so we could keep talking.

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“I have a wife and two kids in America,” I’d say.

“Looking to have the same here?” my driver would ask as he laughed at his own joke.

I had this interaction more times than I can remember.<sup>412</sup>

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“I am a Muslim, but I don’t pray, I don’t fast, and I drink alcohol.”

“I’ve met quite a few people here like that,” I said.

“How old are you?”

Pretty regular question for me. My words say ‘doctoral student’ but my face says ‘sophomore, maybe junior’ still taking general education courses.

“I’m 30, well, 31, but my face looks 20,” I said.

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<sup>412</sup> I’ve not been able to figure out if this is a joke about polygamy in the Middle East, the promiscuity of Westerners, or the opportunities for illicit liaisons so far from home. As most people in the Middle East didn’t know the difference between a Southern Baptist and the Pope, I can safely rule out its being a joke about my own religion’s history.



“I am 25 years old, but my face looks older...” I did not bother to contradict him, as male pattern baldness has apparently taken a scorched earth policy with much of his scalp. He seemed no less a cheerful person for it, though.

“Are you married?” he asked, following it up with the Arabic version, “You know, *mutazawij*?”

“Yes, I have a wife and two kids in America. Are you married?”

“No. No I’m not,” he said with a voice void of emotion.

“I’ve heard that marriage is extremely expensive here.”

“Oh yeah, just for the marriage proposal, it’s 12,000,000... for poor people, it’s 10, 11, 12,000,000. For richer people, it’s 20,000,000. That’s why there are so many single people here.”

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When I told Samir about the bride price here in Erbil, he scoffed slightly and said, “in Duhok, it’s closer to 200,000.” While this system seemingly favors looking outside of Erbil for a bride, the asking price is only one of several sums that enters into the equation. Many of the marriages here still take place within larger family trees or are established through family connections, and Duhok is significantly smaller than Erbil (fewer women) in addition to being several hours distant.

Later, I ask Baho about the bride price and where it comes from in the culture.

“It is a type of insurance. If the man leaves the women later, then she will at least have the money from the bride price to live off of,” Baho said.

“Ah, I hadn’t thought of that,” I conceded. “It’s basically a pre-paid alimony.”

“Alimony, what is this?”

“When a couple gets divorced and say they had a bunch of kids that the wife stayed home raising. Those are years lost in terms of developing her own monetary potential in a career. She can pursue receiving alimony, which entitles her to part of her ex-husband’s paycheck.”

“Oh, that is really interesting! She gets that and child support?” he asked.

“Yup, both, if the judge rules in favor of it... front-loaded alimony. Huh.”

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That Samir had a girlfriend in the Western sense of the term was something of an outlier in the community. That she was a Christian fifteen years his junior from Duhok added to that. Ever since resuming his relationship with Arya, Samir had been something of an absentee roommate. Even if it hadn’t been for his work, it made sense that she held far more allure than either Baho or me, and we could respect that. For as fun as it was to have them around when they came into town, it frequently made for awkward moments. They’d come in, say their hello’s, and then retire to his small room situated in the middle of the apartment. Baho and I, separated from our wives by our work, would look at each other for a silent moment, then head off to find something outside of the apartment.

When I did get time to speak with Samir or Arya, both together and alone, they were always a goldmine of interesting information. Samir had lived in the US long enough that he “felt more Western than he did Middle Eastern.” While his live-in girlfriend wasn’t the most controversial thing going on the nineteenth floor,<sup>413</sup> it was like many aspects of Samir’s life: unusual. On the changes he experienced from his time in America, he told me,

I came back [to the Middle East], and all of a sudden, I see these divergences between myself and my family. Things they care about that didn’t interest me in the slightest. Things that bothered

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<sup>413</sup> Our next-door neighbors had some kind of love triangle going which ended poorly. I have the weirdest luck when it comes to neighbors on my research trips.

them that I would do, and things they would do that would bother me. Being in America for so long changed things. I just don't see things the same way anymore. Arya's parents don't like us dating.. not just that I'm technically a Muslim and older than her, but for economic reasons.

They're quite poor, and the class difference is a big deal for them.

### *The Trouble with Hymens & a License to Stare*

When Jenny moved in, I had to think about how to write home on the matter. My wife trusts me, but I needed to make sure she was comfortable with this. I'd avoided getting into a situation of having a female roommate, less because of my own qualms (which I had none on the matter) and more due to the potential stigma that it might produce in most Kurdish neighborhoods. No matter how intriguingly foreign I might be to them, that they would assume I was living with a mistress would put a dampener on aspects of my socializing. That I ended up in a very large apartment building with Lebanese neighbors who came straight out of a soap opera diminished these potential social costs substantially.<sup>414</sup>

Jenny was a Canadian, and in one of her many stints abroad lived in Kabul, Afghanistan while working with the UN. This also brought her to live in Gaziantep, Turkey, giving us a lot of common background to speak of. Another portion of what made us work so well together as flatmates was the fact that our experiences living abroad had so tinkered with our 'propriety meters' that I don't think either of us really cared. Rather, I think our sense of personal respect and distance were distilled to what we cared about most, and while we could conform to whatever was around us, when we were at home neither of us had any problems. We were extremely open

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<sup>414</sup> But not entirely. I still had friends that wouldn't come over for a movie as they knew a single, Western woman lived on the premises. From what I could piece together about my neighbors, there was an honest to goodness love triangle that featured barely-masked shouting matches, visitors that were quite embarrassed to be seen, locking people out of the apartment, and eventually a swift change in renters. The new tenants were boring.

to each other about our situations and had our own sets of unspoken rules that gelled without issue.

Despite all her travels, Jenny didn't speak much Arabic or Kurdish, as the vast majority of her work was done in English and the fieldwork conducted with the help of an interpreter. That being said, she was not unfamiliar with the way in which many men in the Middle East view Western women. She is tall compared to many women here and has the thin muscularity of long-distance runners and yoga enthusiasts. Her daily attire would be considered 'standard workplace professional' without being overly formal in most Western environments. Her sleeves ended above the elbows, her shoulders not overly revealing, and her legs were always covered. For as odd as it is to appraise my female roommate in this manner, it's relevant to understanding the context.

One day, Jenny was taking a taxi to the market place. Like many of the taxi drivers here, hers had enough English for rudimentary conversation. This means basic directions and simple questions regarding origins. "Where you go?", "Where you are from?", and "What is your name?" The driver asked her these questions, and she answered them politely from her place in the back seat.

"Are you a virgin?" he asked, looking at her through the rear-view mirror.

"Excuse me?"

"Are you a virgin?" he repeated.

In the scope of his limited English, knowing how to ask whether a woman had been sexually penetrated by a man was apparently important enough to remember. It may have been a clumsy way of asking if she had been married or not, but there are other ways to do that. The remainder of the drive was silent, and Jenny paid quickly and left even more so.

One of the more stupid things I ever did was suggest she go and check out the central market. I, as an adult male, had no problems navigating this and it simply didn't occur to me at the time that I'd rarely seen a woman do the same. Certainly not an Occidental woman. She thanked me for my suggestion, and when she came back a few hours later I could tell that something was bothering her.

"How'd it go?" I asked with cringe-worthy ignorance.

"It went well at first, but I had a creepy guy stalk me. He just *stared* at me, with an expression that was absolutely not okay. And he wouldn't leave me alone. Eventually we came face to face and he simply loomed over me, never breaking eye contact. Every alarm bell I had was going off, so I got in the closest taxi and got out of there."

I apologized profusely, angry at myself for giving such a novice-level recommendation without a single thought to the social disparities in our situations. Current Western terminology would call this a product of 'white/male privilege.' I simply call it 'stupid,' and I wrote it down in my head as a situation I'd never replicate again.

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After a discussion on the scarcity of petty theft in Erbil, Baho asked me about crime in Bloomington, Indiana.

"Well, Bloomington for the most part is pretty quiet. That being said, it is a college town with Greek life, which translates into people drinking too much and using drugs. This is also closely tied to the amount of rape that takes place in those settings."

"Rape? Really?" Baho was genuinely shocked by this, surprising me. Slightly confused, I continued,

“Yeah, there’s been a large number of rapes reported at IU. Gotten some folks in a lot of trouble and is a big public image problem. You mean to say that doesn’t happen here?”

“No, very, very little rape here. It is just not done.”

“What’s the word for that, in Kurdish?”

“Rape?”

“Yes.”

“*Zor gan* – to ‘force fuck,’ the *zor* means to do something a lot, or do it in an extreme way. We do not say this word. It is bad enough to say ‘fuck.’”

I’m still not sure what to make of Baho’s statement. Not that I disbelieve him, and in no way think he’d tell me something he didn’t believe to be true. But in a culture that leans heavily on patriarchal dominance, is lenient on drinking, yet relies heavily on the sexual purity of their daughters and sets high thresholds for entry into the marriage market in its largest cities where those young men come to find work? Not to mention the massive amount of Iraqi IDP’s and Syrian refugees that exist in a highly disadvantaged market.<sup>415</sup>

Not long after this conversation took place, there was an article in Rudaw about a foreign worker of Philippine origin being sexually harassed by a taxi driver. Articles like this describe the concept with characteristic euphemism – ‘*dastdrezhî kirdin sar*’ (‘reaching a hand out to (s.o.)’). Like many situations like Kurdistan, rape is simply not talked about by perpetrators or the perpetrated. Being something no one speaks of, it is effectively invisible.

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<sup>415</sup> Rania is a perfect example of the kind of endemic issues involving sexual violence. It is the honor-crime capital of Kurdistan, and one of the biggest issues is the difficulty in creating a physical and cultural space for the individuals effected to report and escape these crimes. See Satkunanandan, 2012 and the links it provides.

*The Male Gaze upon Women and Other Men, and the female Gaze upon Men within Islam*

Islam has some unique aspects to it in terms of the recognition of male beauty. In the Old Testament, the story of Joseph *implies* that he was desirable because Potiphar's wife (whose name we are not provided with) tried to seduce him. In Islam, the narrative (which comes to us via *isrā'iliyāt*<sup>416</sup>) tells of how Joseph walked into a room full of women stitching and they all looked up, some stitching their own fingers and not feeling it because they were so enchanted by this beautiful youth. He later marries Zulaikha (Potiphar's wife).

Sufism in particular has a lot to say about male beauty, and there was an ongoing debate in middle age Sufism regarding *nazr-e mard*, or gazing upon a beautiful male youth to induce theosophic trance-state. Many Middle Eastern Muslim men are enthusiasts of scents and colognes. Part of that is definitely wrapped up into ritual cleansing, part of it is the result of hundreds of years of cultures living in desert regions without showers.

I believe there's a case to be made about the combination of Western influence on the idealized male physical form as well as indigenous Islamic concepts that feeds a lot into the way men present themselves here, which in turn is tied up into the presentation of the national self and nationalism. These cultural understandings of masculinity directly inform the decision-making processes these men make in terms of politics and conflict.

*Martial Arts, Masculine Performance, and the Persianate and Turkic Worlds*

The Persian wrestling (*koštī pahlavānī*) tradition date back to the fourteenth century with the establishment of the *zūrkhāneh* (house of strength). The *zūrkhāneh* is a hexagonal gymnasium with a smaller, lowered pit wherein the athletes perform their guided routines and a podium, not unlike a mosque's minbar, where the morshed (guide) beats his drum and goes

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<sup>416</sup> *Isrā'iliyāt* are stories the Muslim world inherited from Jewish oral tradition regarding the prophets.

through his recitations. It is a fascinating blend of Sufism, *foṭuwweh* (Persian concept of chivalry and the masculine ideal), Shi'ism, and martial discipline. Enmeshed with the post-Islamic aspects of the tradition are many others which go back at least an additional millennium to Mithraism (Fisher, 2012), which trained its warriors with their proto-version of the Persian *māl* (a thick mace), *sang* (large boards mimicking the shape and weight of battle shields), and the chain and bow (training the muscles for drawing heavy bowstrings).<sup>417</sup> These practices also included ritual, melodic chanting accompanied by drums and bells. The *zūrkhāneh* tradition is still located throughout the Persianate world (including Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Iran), though the primacy of wrestling and weightlifting practice and competition as embodiments of the ideal masculine extend into the former Ottoman Empire as well.<sup>418</sup>

After the resurgence of the *zūrkhāneh* in 1934 in Iran, Persian-speakers have taken to referring to the wrestling tradition, which included *zūrkhāneh*s, as *varzeš-e bāstānī* ('the ancient sport'). As dexterity with a battle mace has minimal utility in modern combat, *varzeš-e bāstānī* has branched into the realm of international sport. *Zūrkhāneh* and *Pahlevānī* as their own sports have competitions throughout central Asia, including countries like Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, and India ("Afghanistan wins Zurkhaneh and Koshti Pahlavani competition," Salamwatandar, 2017). For the first, the events are judged by the number of complete repetitions

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<sup>417</sup> It's worthwhile to note that the religious, spiritual, and ecstatic aspects of *varzeš-e bāstānī* have led some modern writers to regard these practices as being parallel to yoga. This is not accurate. While recognizing that these traditions are not static across time and space, even in its current form, *varzeš-e bāstānī* retains its martial elements. Comparing it to yoga glosses over the fact that India has its own martial traditions that have far more parallels. Some implements had distinctive differences, such as the *gada* (a long, thin club ending in a circular stone), but almost everything else was exactly the same (minus the *zūrkhāneh* and its rituals). However, the end goal was the same – the movements and tools used ingrained the muscle memory for conventional armed combat in a pre-gunpowder combat. This, and the fact that there are no definitive sources connecting the origins of Persian martial arts to those of yoga, leads me to emphatically state that treating *varzeš-e bāstānī* and yoga as being related practices misses the point and consequently does disservice to both traditions.

<sup>418</sup> Similar to their Shi'ite brethren, the Ottoman wrestling traditions coalesced around *tekkes* (Sufi lodges; Chehabi, 2006).



completed in a specific time, with divisions based on the implement (*mīl*, *sang*, etc.), contender weight, and implement weight. *Košṭī Pahlevānī* or simply *Pahlevānī* referring to the Persian people but frequently translated as ‘heroic,’ has several iterations that include belt wrestling and non-submission and submission freestyle<sup>419</sup> while wearing a traditional pair of belted trousers that extend to the knees. Outside of Central Asia, Iranian wrestlers have been prominent features of international tournaments, particularly the Olympics.

On the other end of Kurdistan is the Turkic sphere of influence. Similar to *varzeš-e bāstānī*, the roots of Turkish wrestling culture are in their martial history. Concurrent with the institutionalization of the Janissary corps in the fourteenth century was the practice of *yağlı güreş* (oil wrestling). As part of their training regime, the Janissaries would strip down to their leather trousers and cover themselves in a mixture of olive oil and herbs to keep themselves from getting sunburnt and repel mosquitos (Slack, 2016). Six hundred years later, Yağlı Güreş has the honor of being Turkey’s national sport. Current rules dictate that a contender wins by “show[ing] his navel to the heavens.” Despite this simplicity, wearing nothing but the leather *kispet* (with no undergarment) and being heavily oiled from head to foot reduces the surface area with which to grip.<sup>420</sup> Matches can go up to forty-minutes long and most wrestling strategies include inserting one’s hands or arms into their opponent’s *kispet*.<sup>421</sup> Yağlı Güreş still enjoys a strong following in

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<sup>419</sup> While many modern submission grappling disciplines include score-keeping based on technique and body placement, they can be won outright when an opponent indicates surrender, or submission. Submission is a result of the contender being unable to escape a position wherein some portion of their body is in a state of tension wherein continued pressure would result in bodily damage. This usually means hyperflexion of a joint or pressure on a bone. Moves like eye-gouging, fish-hooking (grabbing the inside of the mouth), or genital manipulation are illegal in almost every discipline. Non-submission grappling is won entirely based on body placement and can be won by some kind of ‘pin’ wherein a contender is unable to escape a particular position, i.e. shoulders and hips touching the ground as in traditional Western folk-wrestling.

<sup>420</sup> While this may seem an oddity within the martial arts world, the only real difference is quantity and acceptability. Traditional boxing uses Vaseline on the angular portions of contenders’ faces where the skin is thinnest to prevent match-ending cuts. Judges in other martial arts have to watch for contenders illegally trying to replicate these slippery conditions with the use of moisturizers on their bodies and their clothing.

<sup>421</sup> This does not allow direct contact with genitals to gain purchase or cause injury.

Turkey, and top-tier Turkish wrestlers also feature strongly in international freestyle wrestling competitions.

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Back in Nashville, Tennessee, My second visit was on a Friday afternoon for the weekly sermon. Like the language classes taught in the weekend and summer school sessions, the sermon would be in Kurmanji Kurdish. Accompanied by my close friend and Kurdish mentor, Haidar Khezri, I sat in more or less the same place as I had on my last visit. Unsurprisingly, the meager line of attendees on a Thursday afternoon bore no resemblance to the packed hall in which we sat. With a few minutes to spare, I took the opportunity to introduce myself to a group of youths next to me. Of the four of them, three were Kurds and the last a Palestinian whose primary language was English. The only Arabic he could speak was colloquial Palestinian, and he spoke no Kurdish despite having Kurdish friends since his childhood. Being from the same generation has a power of its own, and I found speaking to these four to be the easiest start thus far. Serendipitously, the first of them I spoke to was a boxer.

Having both known my fair share of Afghans that wrestled and having worked on research projects on the confluences of Iranian martial culture and religion (including fashioning a set of home-made *mīls* to use alongside my collection of kettlebells),<sup>422</sup> I was excited to finally meet a Kurdish martial artist. While we only got to speak briefly and do little more than exchange Facebook information, I was able to find an article on this same young man and the relationship between his fighting and being a Kurd.

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<sup>422</sup> Kettlebells, while mostly known for their connection to twentieth century Russian athletics, have their roots in ancient Greece, which is to say that they originate somewhere in the Mediterranean. Sultan Murat the Fourth was reputed to have developed massive strength with regular use of a massive 224.4lb kettlebell and a 132lb macebell (similar to the Indian *gada*). Furthermore, he used that macebell and a 102lb sword in combat during his military conquests (Bardakci, 2016).

[Darvon Barwari] mentioned being a Kurd was a factor in his decision to become a fighter, pointing to the continued heroics of the Peshmerga. “I think our history [played] a big part,” he said. “We are always fighting for our land, and we fight the evils of the world. My grandpa—who passed away—was a Peshmerga, and that inspired me,” Barwari revealed. Although he was born in the United States to refugee parents from the Dohuk Province in the Kurdistan Region, the Kurdish boxer said he is proud of his roots. “Kurdistan to me means strong, hard-working, and relentless,” he said. Barwari began boxing at the age of 17, looking up to professionals like Mike Tyson, Marvin Hagler, and Rocky Marciano. He told Kurdistan24 the sport runs in his family as his dad grew up boxing as well. (Sulaivani, 2017)

This chance encounter with a seventeen year-old Kurdish boxer was my first real glimpse at the sheer breadth of much human geography that is influenced by *varzeş-e bāstānī*, *yağlı güreş*, and martial values developed over hundreds of years and conflict. Of more direct relevance to this writing, it opened me up to exploring the relationship between Eurasian, Eastern Asiatic, and Western martial arts with the ongoing cultural conflicts in the Kurdish world.

#### *Manliness, Masculine Performance, and Martial Arts*

In the second half of second-year Kurdish, I brought up the topic of Zurkhanehs in Iran. This got Haidar and me talking about wrestling in Kurdistan.

“So many of the men in Kermanshan walk around like this,” Haidar said as he flexed his shoulders and puffed out his chest. “They all wrestle and there is a lot of competition between cities as to who is the best.”

I came across articles in the MMA world and in the Kurdish orbit talking about Kurdish fighters. For instance,

[Jiar] Ali [whose parents hailed from Zakho] recalled being inspired at a very young age by movies featuring Bruce Lee or Jean Claude Van Damme. He started kick boxing at 10, and changed to Thai boxing two years later...

Adel Juanmiry, 19, a Kurd from Kermanshah in Iran, became the Danish Thai boxing champion this year. After this summer, he will be representing his country at the European Championship in Poland.

"I watched a lot of martial arts movies in our refugee camp in Iraq and it inspired me," said Adel, who will be attending high school in Copenhagen after the summer holidays,"...

Heva Sharif, 21, began boxing when he was 12, despite opposition from his worried mother, who fears he might get hurt. He has won many Danish championships and last year was voted "best fighter" at an event...

Barzani Osman, an 18-year-old who this month won the Danish Championship in amateur boxing... came to Denmark from Afrin in northern Syria at age three...

Delwar Mizori, who won the Scandinavian Championship in kickboxing five times... was born in the city of Mosul in Iraq, where his father was a Karate teacher.

Mizori believes there are so many Kurds succeeding at martial arts because fighting has been a part of the Kurdish past.

"Throughout our history we as Kurds became used to war, so we are good at fighting," he said.

(Serinci, 2014)

Before leaving Indiana for Iraq, I had tailored all of my fieldwork questions expecting to find that martial arts culture was connected directly to this concept of masculine protection and power and to the history and connection to the Peshmerga. Something analogous to Israeli efforts at inculcating martial attitudes and national unity in youth (Cohen, 2009), and once more an interesting connection between those two cultures. If it was not connected to Kurdish martial attitudes, then I suspected it was at least tied to a greater Persian *Pahlevānī* culture. I was excited. I brought my Jiu-Jitsu gi and every single article I had, keen for the opportunity to learn from Kurdish athletes.



*Figure 31 - Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media outlets provide Kurdish MMA fighters and Peshmerga devotees space to express their national pride*

Four months in, I had substantially revised my hypothesis. If I had to say what the national sport was in Iraqi Kurdistan, it would be the ‘squat and smoke.’ The men smoke small cigarettes and sheesha, they drink beers imported from Turkey, and they don’t exercise; ironically, all three of these aspects are present when they get together to watch football (soccer) matches. I never met anyone that cited Peshmerga or other symbols of ethnic struggle as initiating them into martial arts.

Despite the fact that my initial beliefs were misguided, my line of inquiry yielded some substantial insights. First, I had things backwards with respect to martial arts and masculine performance. Indigenous martial attitudes had no part or place in projecting masculinity, rather, sport and martial arts were vectors for projecting pre-existing masculine desires. The second is that Hollywood masculinity has seeped into every corner of the world, even in the corners that openly despise it. I can’t watch a single Da’ish propaganda video without seeing it as an Islamofacist copycat of military propaganda anywhere in the world.

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“There’s a good specimen of steroid abuse right there,” my American friend said, pointing to the television. The camera was focused on a body-builder, his arms very nearly as thick as his head, and the veins protruded like snakes trapped beneath a thin veneer of human flesh. The newscaster continued to narrate the biography of the lifter as the latter conducted a series of carefully executed cable tricep extensions.

It was early September and my friend had been asking me about what I was looking for in Iraq. At that point, I was still getting my bearings in Erbil and had not found any good locations for martial arts. I’d seen lots of gyms, and while they ranged from dungeon gyms with antiquated machines with cracked leather seats to expensive Western-style facilities (charging Dubai-level prices), I didn’t see any of what I was looking for. But, like my friend, I had seen body-builders. Initially, I had very little interest in this. Bodybuilding, while there are very real competitive elements to it, is almost singularly an inward and aesthetic-focused sport.<sup>423</sup> Competitors have no need to make any contact whatsoever. I was disappointed at the prospect of being stuck surrounded by meatheads and mirrors.

Being the intrepid ethnographer that I was, I told myself that everything told me something interesting if I just looked for it. Unlike my ‘Peshmerga-martial arts’ hypothesis, I was entirely correct in this.

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Some weeks later, I was once again in a taxi. The driver decided that since I was an American, I would appreciate watching a video of John Cena (see footnote 424). He was put in a ring surrounded by at least ten or fifteen other wrestlers, each having a turn at putting Cena

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<sup>423</sup> The term in Kurdish for body-building is *lašjuwānî* (which roughly translates to ‘beautiful body’).

through a series of body-punishing moves that left him panting on the ground. His opponents seemed almost voraciously hungry for their turn to give him a beating, and for a while, each of them would. Despite the overwhelming odds and seemingly bone-crushing impacts, Cena invariably found a way to fight past his own pain and fatigue to subvert one of his opponent's moves to turn the tables and remove the fighter from the arena. He would then repeat the process with another kabuki-esque characature.

I had zero interest in watching this. From a personal perspective, 'pro-wrestling' in the US has always baffled me with its overcompensating egos and soap opera dynamics. The fighter in me is baffled by the fakeness of the combat and the defensive and offensives smarts they demonstrably lack. The academic couldn't shut off watching this. I started to ask myself, why body-building? Muscles are a shorthand version of demonstrating strength, and the psychological appeal of this in such tumultuous socio-political living situations is easy to see. Putting it in this light helped me get a better grasp of what I was seeing, which in turn helped me understand the Iraqi Kurdish martial arts world once I found my way in. What I was told again and again is that their inspiration came not from Peshmerga or from the world around them, but from movies. The past fifty years or so of combat cinematography have increasingly oriented on the spectacular, creating and reinforcing the image of what masculine strength and hand-to-hand combat mastery should look like. From Egypt to Turkey to Iraq, almost without exception, the 'combat masculine' role models were one or more of the following: Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Lee, John Cena, Jean-Claude Van Damme, and Jackie Chan.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> For the uninitiated (which term I employ with a smile), I'll give a brief rundown of each of these cinematic warriors as they'll make more than one appearance in my writing – Arnold Schwarzenegger – Austrian-American actor/bodybuilder/politician; while he is not known for any particular martial art, he has won multiple Mr. Olympia and Mr. Universe titles for his physique and many of his films feature hand-to-hand or sword combat. He is best known for his roles in action-sci-fi "The Terminator" (1984) and

*Ahmed Rambo's gym*



*Figure 32 - Ahmed Rambo's Body-Building Center*

Figure 34 is an absolute microcosm of the kind of strength projection and identity-mingling I had been ruminating on. First, there is the cultural component and then the economics involved. While Ahmed is an extremely common name throughout the Islamic world, Rambo is not. Further, this same world has no shortage of heroes to draw upon, as we've seen with the many references to Salahuddin among others. Salahuddin's Center for Body Building would have a good 'warrior' tone to it. Apparently not as much as Rambo though (see pp.434-435).

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"Predator" (1987). He is also an American politician and overall fitness inspiration to millions around the world. Despite my dislike of body-building and performance-enhancing drugs, I admit that I am a devoted fan.

Bruce Lee – Chinese-American actor/martial-artist, known for his mastery of multiple Eastern martial-arts disciplines, as well as formulating his own, Jeet Kune Do (The Way of the Intercepting Fist). He is best known for his role in action-comedy television series "The Green Hornet" (1966-1967) and action-drama "Enter the Dragon" (1973).

John Cena – American actor/pro-wrestler, best known for his imposing physique, various wrestling personas, and his time as the "United States [Pro-Wrestling] Champion" from 2015 to 2016.

Jean-Claude Van Damme – Belgian actor/martial-artist, who, having trained and competed in karate and kickboxing, brought those skills and his muscular physique to the silver screen in such films as the action-drama "Bloodsport" (1988) and action-sci-fi "Timecop" (1994).

Sylvester Stallone – American actor, best known for action films such as "Rocky" (1976), "First Blood" (i.e. "Rambo"; 1982), and "Cliffhanger" (1993). He continues to act and is a minority-owner of the MMA league Ultimate Fighting Championship in the US.

Jackie Chan – Chinese actor/martial-artist; best known for his acrobatically-charged, martial-artist roles in over 150 films wherein he performed all of his own stunts. He is best known for his roles in the action-drama "Police Story" (1985) and action-comedy "Rush Hour" (1998).



To understand the economics, you've got to appreciate the biology. The musculature and body-mass ratio of "Ahmed Rambo" can only be attained through performance-enhancing drugs, meaning some regime of anabolic steroids. Even when cycled,<sup>425</sup> this would require periodic access to keep it in stock. Iraq does not produce its own pharmaceuticals, and the closest producers are Turkey on the west and India to the east, and that's assuming that the quality they produce is sufficiently effective (and safe) to have a sustained market-base among men in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>426</sup>

By itself, this is perhaps an interesting glance at a particular market and consumer-base; that it is in Iraqi Kurdistan, where disruptions to conventional supply routes are frequent makes it far more interesting. Sustaining that level of musculature requires access to steroids. By virtue of Iraqi Kurdistan's political and geographic issues, sustained access to steroids must require smuggling. Multiply this by the number of steroid users in the region, and this amounts to a substantive demand. Add to that all of the legal supplements, of which there are an even greater variety and a larger number of consumers. And all of this are simply for what amounts to lifestyle maintenance and psychological image, albeit one that is solely accessible from the top social tiers.<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> Sustained, uncycled use of these kinds of drugs has an even greater deleterious effect on certain internal organs and naturally produced levels of testosterone (Kanayama, Gen et. al., 2008).

<sup>426</sup> In the world of powerlifting, Olympic lifting, body-building, combat sports, etc., there are a large number of women who also consume various steroids for their role in mass-building and recovery between workout sessions. Within Iraqi Kurdistan (and Turkish Kurdistan but *not* Iranian Kurdistan) I can safely say that this is entirely a male phenomenon. This brings up yet another observation to be made from this poster – every single advertisement I ever saw for women's gyms were stock photos of scantily clad Western women (or women that wanted to appear Western – lighter hair, fairer pigmentation, facial structures more commonly associated with Western European heritage, etc.) working out rather than anything or anyone from their actual gyms. It spawns from a real or projected desire of both male and female-gazes – the first to be with such women, the second to be such women. It also safely objectifies Western women while reserving their own (tribe) from such visual scrutiny, feeding into the unconscious post-colonial power-struggle that academia has been so taken with since the advent of Edward Said's Orientalism (1978).

<sup>427</sup> I don't mean this as an oblique judgment of their choices or values, rather to put lifestyle maintenance consumption preferences in the context of the life-sustaining necessities that become scarce under economic

While high-quality calories, supplements, time, and gym access are bourgeois commodities, this doesn't mean the less affluent don't aspire to it.<sup>428</sup> The same friend that worked at a grocery store and told me about the extremists out in Tawela and Hawraman was in the gym when the earthquake hit. When I asked him which gym, he pointed down the street to a smaller complex a few hundred meters from my own apartment building. I didn't say anything, but I was a bit shocked. Not that he enjoyed the gym, but that he went to a gym that I had avoided due to what I considered to be prohibitive monthly fees.

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Natural enough, the central issue of martial arts is violence; they are all concerned with the attempt to mold and divert its violence from its natural course, which would end in injury and disorder, and seek to reduce (or sometimes increase) it, to overcome its haphazard and unintelligible character by formalizing it. In addition, martial arts often attempt to elevate violence to higher cosmological levels and thus enhance its nobility, morality or spirituality, and in general to imbue violence with meaning and sense (on violence, see Bishop and Phillips, 2006; Kapferer, 1997; Wilson, 2003). Each school of martial arts has a somewhat different world-of-meaning, constructed of its practical attitude toward violence.” (Cohen, 2009: 156)

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With some work and some helpful directions, I finally found an MMA gym – Black Mamba. It was a massive warehouse that was half conditioning and half combat. I was immediately in love with the place.

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pressures. Maintaining a sense of normalcy, control, and routine in situations that are anything but normal is a natural coping mechanism.

<sup>428</sup> Body-building, sports, and martial-arts were frequent topics with Muhammad R<sub>x</sub> and his crew. Muhammad, who was a wiry 130lbs, aspired to develop his musculature but lacked good facilities. There are some outdoor, public ‘exercise parks’ in the KRG, but they were designed by people who had a rough idea of what exercise equipment looked like but not how they actually worked.

On the matter of why Iraqi Kurdistan so little resembled the presence of martial arts in Iran, I asked my Iranian friend Farhad.

“It is a matter of population,” he stated. “There are 75 million Iranians, and if ten percent of them like martial arts, that’s 7,500,000 practitioners,” he said with a shrug, a few errant beads of sweat falling from his face. Rest period over, we went back to the heavy bags.

He made a simple but compelling point. While the ‘ten percent’ was an unempirical placeholder, the principle is sound. Here in Iraqi Kurdistan, there are some five million residents. While both the Iranian and the Iraqi portions of Kurdistan are particularly poor and affected by decades-worth of various sanctions and deprivations, a lot comes down to the numbers. Money and opportunity.

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On September 14, Black Mamba hosted Iraqi Kurdistan’s very first MMA fight event (Lucente, 2017). It was held at the Erbil International Hotel, and if it weren’t for the occasional traditional Middle Eastern walk-out music, it would be just like a private-club MMA expo. While I saw a few acquaintances from the gym, I ended up tagging along with a team of American contractors. The shortest and oldest of these men was also a Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) player, which immediately made a kind of bond. As someone who was always one of the shortest kids in class for as long as I can remember, one of the things I appreciate about BJJ was way it did not necessarily favor height.

The most important aspect of these fights was their fighting style. Most of the fights turned into a ground game at some point, and it was extremely obvious that what these men were trained almost exclusively with standing-based striking sports, primarily kickboxing. Watching it with American contractors made the experience all the more obvious, as we were all calling out

various moves that amounted to the same thing – they weren't used to using their elbows and knees, as is allowed in Muay Thai but not in Kickboxing, and didn't go for some match-ending moves that someone trained in grappling would be looking for.

An experience I had with another friend illustrates the pattern I was starting to see. One evening, Sarbast asked me if I'd like to work on some technique in the ring with him.<sup>429</sup> He had been training for quite a few years longer than I have and usually liked to show me new moves and trade off running through them a few times. At face-value this is good practice, but in reality it's like learning several dozen new vocabulary words, saying them a few times by themselves, then simply hoping they stick. Unless you are blessed with a preternaturally good muscle memory, it takes contextualized practice spaced out over time to make them useful and retrievable.

Beyond the overabundance of new information paired with the brevity of their repetitions, I noticed, not for the first time, that a lot of the moves felt more 'showy' than practical. Near the end of our session, I was getting a little tired of this. To make a point (without hurting him), instead of simply letting him do his flashy-move and continue, as soon as he got to the finish, I put him in an armbar. For as aesthetically pleasing as his move was, it made him

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<sup>429</sup> A 'takedown' is exactly what it sounds like – getting your opponent off their feet and onto the ground. 'Groundwork' is wrestling once you and/or your opponent is on the ground. Worldwide, wrestling sports can be broken down into two categories – 'position-oriented' and submission wrestling. Both can involve point systems, but the fundamental difference lies in the method of winning. Examples of 'position-oriented' wrestling are Freestyle wrestling where, by Olympic rules, you can win by pinning your opponent on their back, or Turkish Yağlı Güreş (oil wrestling), which you can only win by getting your opponent with their stomach towards the sky. A win submission wrestling involves positioning your opponent's limbs or appendages in such a way that they 'submit,' which is to say that they cannot escape the position without damaging their body or the position puts them into too much physical pain to continue (usually amounting to the same thing). Examples of this are Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, Russian Sambo, Japanese Akido, Turkish Oil Wrestling, and English Catch-Wrestling, all of which you can win through an assortment of locks and holds, with each sport having certain holds that are or are not allowed that force your opponent into submission.

immediately vulnerable to one of the most basic tools in BJJ, and it caught him off-guard. He laughed, I released him, and we then went to class together.

The next time we worked together in the ring it was with pads, and he tried to teach me a form of the tornado kick from (Korean) Taekwondo and a ground kick from (Brazilian) Capoeira. Used by an expert, these are devastating combinations of controlled movement and momentum; used by a non-expert in a partner-practice scenario, they're simply unsafe. Half of the time he missed my mitt, and the other half of the time he didn't even make contact with me at all. He wanted to teach me how to do this, and to practice it on him. I humored him for one or two very slow reps, but declined after that. He was asking me to try something that takes weeks, if not months, of training to get right before you try it on someone else, even with mitts and pads. What's worse, is that viewed through the lens of self-defense or an actual match, these moves, as executed by a non-expert, would be easily parried or used against them.

The last sparring story worth mentioning was my fourth time in the ring. Ibrahim, a very large Arab man who outweighed me by nearly one hundred pounds and stood over me four or five inches, asked me to work on some technique with him. I agreed, stipulating that we go 30% power, which I repeated in English and Arabic just to be safe. We touched gloves, and three seconds later he kicked me with nearly full power.

Ouch.

“Thirty percent, *thalāthīn bil-mī'a!*” I said, muffling the ‘*th*’s with my mouthguard.

He brought his punches down to about 50%, but the kicks stayed right up near full. I blocked a kick to the ribs with my arm, but took it in the elbow. Due to my own poor form, both in general but in particular fighting someone so much taller than myself, I left myself open for a few

straight punches to the face as well. Those I accepted as my own fault, but I was pretty irate about the elbow.

We finished our three rounds of three minutes, and sat down to talk through the match. While there were a few logistical things to review on both our sides, I was mostly interested in his reasons for joining.

“So, what brought you here? How long have you been boxing?” I asked.

“I was at the Erbil Sports Center before, doing weights, but switched to here a few months ago. I have lost a lot of weight. I only just started kickboxing, and Coach ‘Ubay has taught me a lot,” he replied.

“Yeah, he’s a great teacher,” I agreed, as I looked over to see that ‘Ubay was only just getting to the gym and had missed our sparring. That was too bad, as his critique would be great for both of us with the added bonus of teaching me some new Arabic along the way. Turns out al-Arabiyya, al-Kitaab, and virtually every other resource I’ve used to teach and learn Arabic don’t have much vocab in the way of combat sports.<sup>430</sup>

“What about you? I notice that you like the ground training and MMA,” he asked.

“Yes, back in the States I started doing BJJ. Last year, I had a month of training MMA with a fighter in Istanbul and the year before that I had a month of training Krav Maga in my hometown in Indiana. Everything else has been on my own,” I explained.

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<sup>430</sup> As it turns out, many of the phrases that are used in combative instruction here retain their English, Japanese, Portuguese, or Thai origins.

In Arabic, I asked, “[Coach, what is the Arabic word for *takedown*?]”

Muhammad paused for a few moments, then laughed, “[We just use *takedown*.]”

Specific moves, like *gouch* (Thai for a liver punch with an angled left hook), *armbar* (English for forcing the elbow into a position of hyperflexion), *kimura* (Japanese for a position that forces the rotator cuffs into a stress point) take no translation. Body parts and general movements are all referred to in Arabic.

“MMA is more dangerous. And I also do not like to be on the ground.. I like to be on my feet. I am not comfortable being on the ground.”

After we concluded, I assessed my physical condition and figure that my elbow was going to take at least a week to go back to normal, so I called it a day. When I got home, I told Baho about how Ibrahim didn't pull his kicks.

“Oh, he is probably just being a show-off. Wanted to show you how strong he was. ‘This is my 30%!’”

While each of these anecdotes may seem to be tangential complaints or ‘humble brags,’ they actually link up and inform us of some aspects of masculine culture. One of the questions I've had here is why Taekwondo? Of all the exported combat sports, why are Taekwondo, and to a lesser extent, Karate, so prevalent? What, if anything, does this tell us about attitudes here?

Taekwondo originated in South Korea and is probably best defined by its complex series of kicks and, due to the incentives of competition scoring rules, lack of hand strikes to the head and face. Karate likewise has rules against hand strikes to the face. In many respects, they are the body-building of the martial-arts world – aesthetically pleasing, but not as effective as some of its relatives.<sup>431</sup> With one or two exceptions (namely the hometown fighter who had trained us two nights before the fight and showed a good aptitude for groundwork), all of the fighters in the September 14 Fight Night showed this same trend.<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> For contrast, sports like Strongman, Powerlifting, and Olympic lifting focus on lifting the maximum amount of weight with various moves, durations, and implements. While practitioners develop muscular physiques, they are fundamentally different than body-building. Likewise, twenty years of MMA tournaments have narrowed the field of most-valuable combat skills to proficiency in at least one grappling discipline and one striking discipline – the most effective of these probably being Muay Thai and wrestling. For more on the development of mixed martial arts (MMA), which refers to the combination of elements from multiple martial art disciplines, see Downey, 2011.

<sup>432</sup> In Sulaymaniyah, Baho had once joined a dojo led by a martial-artist who trained with Shaolin monks in China. In a very East Asian mentoring moment, the instructor asked an aspiring pupil a single question, “What are you hoping to learn here?” “I want to learn how to defeat ten guys at once,” he said, a serious look on his face. “When you find out how to do that, please come back and tell me as I'd like to know as well.”

Combined with everything I've noted thus far – the immense popularity of maximum bodybuilding, the thoroughly integrated role of Western and Eastern-inspired media, and the aesthetic merits of disciplines like Taekwondo – they all indicate the importance of visually impressive performative masculine expression. Put into one sentence, the confluence of masculine expression and pride was summed up in their preferences for flashy martial arts and body-building. It reminded me of their fixation with keeping their car interiors covered in plastic. It was the appearance that mattered most.

### *ISIS 'Martial-Artists'*

[American] primitiveness can be seen in the spectacle of the fans as they follow a game of football... or watch boxing matches or bloody, monstrous wrestling matches... This spectacle leaves no room for doubt as to the primitiveness of the feelings of those who are enamored with muscular strength and desire it." Sayyid Qutb (Abdel-Malek, 2000: 14)<sup>433</sup>



*Figure 33 - (left) Da'ish 'octagon' where not one, but two pairs of fighters spar (Fightland Staff, 2015); (right) image from the UFC 210 Octagon in 2017 in Buffalo, New York (Graham, 2017)*

Among the many recruitment videos issued by Da'ish since its formation in Syria are several featuring martial-arts. Most of these are montage reels, the highlights of which include

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<sup>433</sup> Readers should note that the central advertisement in the Buffalo Center's octagon is Monster Energy Drink, the same brand featured on the ballcap of the young Kurd praying in Fig. 32. While this is simply incidental in some respects, it is also a subtle underscore to my assertion that international commercial interests have become integrated with the expression of masculinity.



Da'ish fighters breaking tiles with their foreheads, performing katas,<sup>434</sup> and rolling over or under obstacles to intercept their firearms. The final shots are of one fighter or another demonstrating their lower body flexibility in slow-motion (Linning, 2015). A video released in mid-2015 features pairs of fatigue-wearing fighters sparring in a cage reminiscent of the UFC octagon, ending with a clip of a fighter breaking through another stack of tiles with his forehead (Fightland Staff, 2015). No doubt, this will all prove useful when the Syrian opposition resorts to attacking them with stationary piles of ceramic. Perhaps the French student knew more than meets the eye (see pg.372).

The videos have the Da'ish theme song, uniforms, brand new trucks, and Taekwondo and Karate. They employ dramatic lens filters, auto-tune, and stylish scene transitions. It is a genre of Jihadist propaganda that departs from recorded speeches, edicts, and official pronouncements and goes straight for the sales-value in pre-existing masculine archetypes based not on the Qur'an, but Hollywood, video games, and professional combat sports. Were it not for the lyrics referring over and over to the righteousness of the Islamic State and the takbirs preceding the ceramic breaking, you could easily mistake this for a recruitment video for any given militia that had limited access to facial razors.

For as ridiculous as it is, the recruiters for Da'ish recognize their intended audiences and their desires. The same way that the female recruiters maintain a mixture of Islamic and popular Western idioms ("ilhamdulillah"s and "LOL"s), the male recruiters appeal to the desire to appear powerful and feel meaningful. I believe this is very much a reflection of the cultural change between generations of Jihadists. These new, aspiring Jihadists were raised in a world with the internet and greater populations of second and third generation immigrants in Western

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<sup>434</sup> A Japanese word for the series of stances and punches utilized by various martial-arts to imbed specific thrusts and parries into muscle memory.

countries. Rather than immediately antagonize all of the Western-rooted masculine imaginaries, they embrace it and give it their own spin.

For Kurdish men and Da'ish fighters alike, the projection of strength is as important as the causes and ideologies themselves. Whether or not they wanted it, their choices with respect to *how* that strength is projected are influenced by one of the great founding stones of modern Western culture – cinema. For as much as the students of modern militant Islamism need to study the range of Ibn Taymiyya, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, and Hassan Nusrullah, they ought to make time to watch “Rambo: First Blood Part II” and “300” as well.

Borders, Smuggling, & Magic Talismans

*Ibrahim Khalil, Part I*

From here on out my passport ceases to simply be a passport – a product of paper and laminate representing my identity on the level of functionary governance.

It is a magic talisman.

All such talismans have a magic to them, but an American passport is powerful, and its power is recognized by all who hold it.

In this land, there are many gates and many guards. My talisman's magic allows me, its holder, to move from one waypoint to another, bypassing the guardians of the gate and avoid the potential violence of detention and hopelessness of stagnation. It grants me personhood in a way that others with weaker magics cannot unless used in concert with other talismans, like money, or proof of connections to those with greater power.

My talisman is precious, and I must protect it for it to protect me. Otherwise, I'm lost to the throbbing tide of the displaced seeking a secure shore.

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It was almost October and I still had no traction whatsoever on getting my residency status. My parents, staunchly supportive but practical as always, asked me if I was going to leave if I couldn't get this taken care of. My answer was always some iteration of, "if it's the only option other than finding out what it's like to be on the wrong side of the KRG's immigration laws, then yes. But I don't think it'll come to that..." and fortunately for me, it didn't. For as irritating as the process was, my being a non-refugee and an American meant that I had more options.<sup>435</sup>

Three days before my entry stamp expired, I made the trip. This was first and foremost a means of buying myself 30 more days to get residency taken care of. I had also wanted for quite some time to make it to Diyarbakir and Mardin, both of which having been denied me first, by poor timing and then by a coup attempt.

I took the taxi to the Duhok garage located at the center of town where we waited forty minutes for enough passengers to make the trip. Once in Duhok, I went to the Zakho garage, and from there to a parking lot in the middle of Zakho. This being my first trip, there were a lot of things from here on out that made no sense at all to me, starting with why I had to wait in a parking lot several kilometers from the border rather than going straight to the border itself where I could make the crossing. Instead, we waited for another thirty minutes while the two Kurdish men to whom I had been remanded by my taxi driver made phone calls. I ate my lunch and probed as much as I could about Zakho and whether they thought it would be probable that they'd shut down the border to Turkey. Despite my unfamiliarity with their dialect and the local economy, I learned a bit about the attitudes of Kurds there.

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<sup>435</sup> At least at that time. See the chapter "A Fistful of Dinars."

For instance, they did not believe that the border would get closed. There were too many goods coming and going, and they just didn't see how the politics could overcome that. They were of course correct on this point. Regardless of all that was to come, that border never closed to freight trucks even if it got a lot more difficult for everyone else. For as much as money dictates the politics, there was never enough to be an effective counterweight to the money made by keeping border traffic flowing.

Finally, a fourth Kurdish man arrived in a boxy van that was to be my transportation through the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing. Unlike my other companions to that point, he was less interested in talking to me and more in making arrangements and checking in with friends/business partners on his phone. Several of these check-in's apparently required him to pull over entirely so he could focus on what turned out to be lengthy conversations. So I waited, looking out the window at the long lines of 18-wheelers waiting to get to the border. Most of these had Turkish company logos and their drivers idling, if not entirely shut off as they too waited. Miles and miles of light car traffic cruising past the parallel freighter road that remained almost entirely motionless from what I could tell.

At last, my driver concluded that we could continue, and drove until we came up on structures sheltered by immense cement barricades that could only be Ibrahim Khalil. My expectation at this point was that I would get my things and proceed to wait in line and make the crossing where I'd find a taxi; these expectations were quite unfounded. Instead of letting me go, my driver asked me for my passport as he pulled out a clipboard loaded with paperwork. So, for the first of many times between Iraq, Turkey, and back, I relinquished my passport to someone whose purpose was not entirely clear to me. As he copied information onto the clipboard, I realized that the extreme attention I had been giving to my own personal space now had to

include a small, five by four inch area that was unexpectedly taken from me. This made me anxious.

Within the next hour, we accumulated four more passengers – two older women and two young men, though it became increasingly clear to me that young men were more assistants than people trying to make a trip. We pulled into the first parking lot, which was filled with vans of the same make as the one I had been allocated to. We left our things and went en masse to the large, crowded immigration office, where we got in line and eventually the drivers all got their papers stamped. Instead of driving on, our driver met with some other men outside of another office. I tagged along, catching bits and pieces of conversation but on the whole too discombobulated by trying to figure out what was going on to get anything substantive.

As I had no idea what else to do, I more or less tethered myself to my driver, who was still in possession of my talisman. The more time passed, the more I realized that Diyarbakir might be further than I'd want to travel. So when I was asked where I was going, I decided Cizre had a lot of research potential.

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As part of the post-coup push against FETÖ and the PKK, the Turkish army had increased its counter-insurgent activities in the restive eastern regions. Kurdish militant activity was particularly defined in Cizre, redefining the local geography via road blocks and trenches to facilitate their own activities and stymie those of Turkish security (Bowen, 2016).

On December 14, 2015, the Turkish army put Cizre under a curfew and curtailed transportation in and out for more than four months. In the Turkish military's efforts to combat PKK members, approximately 160 civilians were killed and many homes destroyed, adding to the running list of atrocities committed by both sides during the decades-long conflict. When the

Turkish army puts a Kurdish area under seige, it's rarely a short-term affair. For instance, after the Dersim rebellion in 1938, the area was technically under seige until 1950 (Abdulla, 2012: 23).

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“You are going to Cizre?” my driver asked, his face morphing into a somewhat stern expression.

“Yes.. yes, I'd like to go to Cizre. I'm going to Diyarbakir, but tonight I'll stop in Cizre. Is that alright? Can I do that?” I asked.

“Yes, but we need to get special permission. Come with me,” the driver said.

In my mind, I put Cizre down as being in many ways just like so many Kurdish towns with a history of violent conflict between Kurdish militants and Turkish security forces. Throughout the summer of 2016, I used to scan the local newspapers and more often than not find something along the lines of ‘PKK weapons tunnel destroyed by Turkish police in Mardin,’ or ‘PKK militants opened fire on a military outpost outside of Diyarbakir’ right along with stories about soccer or Turkish celebrity news. Certainly, Cizre was a stark example in recent history, but by no means an outlier.

Special permission.. just what I needed to make my day go a little less smoothly.

As I followed my driver, I tried my best to explain why I chose Cizre and that I didn't *need* to go there.<sup>436</sup> Still, he was insistent that he'd get me there, and there was something about that insistence that smacked of ulterior motivation. The combination of the trouble of needing even more paperwork to go somewhere that might not be safe and being with a driver whom I was trusting less and less by the minute redoubled my adamancy to change my plans. Our

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<sup>436</sup> Interestingly enough, there wasn't much special about Cizre that required permission to travel. I discovered on my second trip to Ibrahim Khalil that my being a foreigner with no connections in the region basically required me to have permission to go much of *anywhere* in eastern Turkey.

discussion, which bordered on an argument, continued as we passed the long line of vans to a cluster of men trying to cut through the throng to talk to someone in their midst. The nucleus of this throbbing mass was a KRG military officer, everyone attempting to ply him for some form of permission or another, waving paperwork at his face and trying to direct him to their respective caravan. Most of them weren't drivers, but men I'd seen speaking with the drivers in the initial parking lot.

It took us several tries to finally get enough of the officer's attention to have him tell my driver that I couldn't go. Before we lost him entirely, I interjected,

"I don't need to go to Cizre. I just need a new stamp to be in Kurdistan legally."

"You don't need to go to Cizre?... he doesn't need to go to Cizre," he told my driver, who replied with a rapid stream of Kurmanji that I couldn't catch and once again providing his paperwork.

The more he wanted me to go, the less I wanted to go there at all, much less with him knowing where I was staying.

Finally, he assented.

My driver was not pleased, and the entire walk back he tried to convince me to go back. I refused.

"Oh, you did not pay yet," he told me.

"Really? I thought I did when you picked me up," I replied, incredulous. Better safe than sorry.

He wanted 15,000 dinars for the trip from the first parking lot to cross the border. I paid him with 20,000, and when I asked for my change he put me off until we got to the van. Once there, we told the others of what had transpired, and the two women, who were from Cizre and were at the very least in their mid-sixties, offered to help.

"What if we told them he was our guest? He could be our guest and stay with us."

Everything up to that point had been frustrating and befuddling - every service cost me something and everyone I'd dealt with wanted something that lay just beyond my ability to pin down. Suddenly, these two wonderful women provided the first glimpse of something with which I had any familiarity, namely the hospitality I'd come to expect almost anywhere outside of big cities. If there was any appropriate way for me to have done it, I would have given them both a huge, heartfelt hug. As both an ethnographer and someone that didn't want to turn down such kindness, there's nothing I would have liked better at that point.

However, I didn't think the border officer would be swayed by a pair of sweet ladies and a hug. I made up my mind that what I needed to do I had to do on my own.

"No, I just need to get across the border and back. I'm going to grab my things and walk."

They protested, and I told them that if I was able to make it to Cizre I would call them - their idea, not mine. The part of myself that still found humor in all of this decided that the next time I spoke with my wife I'd tell her that I gave my number to 'two gals' at the Turkish border.

Thanking them profusely, I grabbed my bags and headed back for the officer. My driver wasn't finished with me. Between the emotions of the day and his accent, I was having increasing difficulty understanding him, and his presence reminded me that he owed me change.

"Hey, you owe me 5,000 dinars from the 20,000 I gave you."

He looked at me with an inscrutable expression.

"..5,000. I gave you money when we were walking back to the car."

He still didn't reply. I stopped walking and thought back. I had paid him 15,000 already during one of our long waits on the side of the road.

"I *did* pay you. You owe me money!"



He made a reply I didn't understand, and as I got angrier, my linguistic capacities started to regress. He not only kept ignoring my money issue but kept trying to get me back to the car. Unfortunately for me, it was a long walk between the van and the officer. Finally, I turned on him, too agitated to say anything coherent in Kurdish or Turkish, so my brain resorted to Arabic. "You are a thief and a liar. Enough!" and for good measure, I added in English, "Fuck off."<sup>437</sup> Not my proudest or most professional moment in hindsight, and it wouldn't be my last that day. Making my way through the crowd of plaintiffs, I planted myself right in front of the officer. When he repeated his statement about not being able to go to Cizre, I said in a tone far different from the one I'd been using with my driver, who had been cut off by the other drivers, "No, no I just need to get my things and walk across. Can I do that? Can I walk to the border? Not Cizre, not Diyarbakir, not Mardin. I have one bag. Just walk to the end, then walk back." This satisfied him, and I left my driver behind, taking some small satisfaction at the look of upset on his face as the officer directed him to return to his vehicle. While I didn't get any malicious intent vibes from him, I knew he wanted something from me and it was more than just the extra 20,000 dinars.<sup>438</sup>

Before I could make it past the second checkpoint, I was stopped by a man in plain clothes who had the affect of someone in charge. He told me that I couldn't proceed on foot, but needed to be in a van. In short order, he attached me as the sole passenger for a black van identical to the one I was just in. The driver seemed relieved to have a passenger.

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<sup>437</sup> My wife objected to my including this, though I think it was more an objection to my having said it at all. I maintain that it's more important to show how this whole frustrating system eroded my patience, self-control, and sense of control to the point that I acted in opposition to the kind of person I aspire to be. I'll just have to tell my sons to "be better than I was on page [x] of my dissertation." That being said, I've found that the 'f-word' has a remarkable versatility between languages.

<sup>438</sup> On my second trip in "Fistful of Dinars," I pieced together what he, along with every other driver there, was really doing and needed passengers so badly for – smuggling.

The first checkpoint went without issue, though I made the mistake of referring to where I had come from as ‘Kurdistan.’

“It is Iraq,” the official told me in Arabic. “You are leaving Iraq.”

*D’oh.*

I had grown too comfortable with the lingua franca and ignored my change in context. “Ah, sorry. I am leaving Iraq,” I replied in Iraqi Arabic. My trip would go more smoothly if I recognized and internalized the necessary *sprachregeln*. As such, I kept an eye out for uniform patches and which of the three flags was flying closest to each of the checkpoints.

Shortly before the second checkpoint, my driver got out and started to reshuffle items in the trunk space. Having been told I had to go through the x-ray machine, I had gotten out and was in the process of getting my bag when my driver, moments before being ushered into the inspection, directed me to put several black plastic bags into my backpack. In the deluge of instructions I’d found the best thing to do to that point was just do what they say and make it to the next stage. Only upon picking up the bag did I realize how supremely bad an idea this was. A bag filled with something that smelled like tea that my driver was trying to get me to haul for him. Before I could protest, I was ushered away by a security guard into the x-ray room, backpack in tow.

At this point, all I had at my disposal was the ‘barking cat’ card. I put my backpack onto the scanner and immediately started up a conversation with the officers, who thought me much more novel than the image on their screen. My bag made it through, and shortly thereafter I thanked them for their time and the language practice, and headed out the door. Once we were safely between checkpoints, I took out the bags and gave them to the driver, making it as abundantly clear as I could that I didn’t want to be carrying them anymore.

“What is in it anyway?” I asked.

“Tea.”

As I would discover during my second crossing two and a half months later, he was telling me the truth. But on that first trip, I was too stressed about everything that had happened and the possibilities of what I had just helped out with to consider that it might have just been tea. Had I known this at the time, my question should have been why he would need to hide it, and how on earth giving it to me right before being sent through an x-ray machine constituted ‘hiding.’

In any case, my driver took the bags back and proceeded to rearrange things in the back of the van before we went through the third checkpoint while I closed my eyes and collected myself in the front seat. Fortunately, the inspection went seamlessly, and we proceeded to the Turkish side. It took us some time, but we found a single officer remaining in a locked building who was able to help me process a border visa. We chatted in a mix of Turkish and English, and in less than two minutes he had my talisman stamped and sent me on my way back from whence I came.

Stepping out of the office, I looked down at my talisman, then at the sunset over the uneven horizon. After having spent the entire day being hustled between officials and ‘officials’ (i.e. men in street clothes that the drivers treated as authority), I now found myself entirely alone in a massive parking lot. I turned toward Turkey and took in the miles of shipping trucks that stretched beyond my line of sight, then turned back to Iraq, taking in the aisles designated for passenger cars, buses, and other non-commercial traffic. All of them were empty and the booths unoccupied. The only sounds around me were the idling of distant diesel engines, the slow

flapping of Turkish, Iraqi, and Kurdish flags in the light evening breeze, and the metallic tinkle of their moorings tapping their respective poles.

It was at that moment that I stopped and really looked around myself.

*I was the only person at that moment coming back into Iraq that wasn't getting paid to do so.*

I stood there as the full absurdity of the day condensed into that single thought, and the slow smile that crept on my face turned into a loud, unrestrained fit of laughter. I probably looked like a madman out in the middle of a deserted portion of customs control, face red and body shaking with the growing strength of my guffaws.

I continued to laugh as I made my way to the truck aisles, as they were the only place I could get a return stamp. It didn't take me long before one of the truckers lowered their window. "Would you like a ride?" he asked, in Kurdish.

Having regained some sense of security, I figured a bit more Kurmanji practice wouldn't hurt, and it would save me a few hundred boring meters of walking. So I gladly accepted and hopped into the cabin.

We chatted affably while we alternated in the stop and go of checkpoint traffic, which I noted went far more quickly than anything on the Turkish entrance. The driver was a Kurd from a village in the middle of Turkish Kurdistan and had been working his particular route for years.

"So you want to come with?" he asked.

"Well, where are you going?"

"Kirkuk!" he said with a broad smile that anticipated my answer.

"Yeah, I think I'll hop off before then!" I replied, laughing at the unspoken joke.

When we reached passport control, I exited the truck after thanking him for his time, and we parted ways. Getting my stamp took all of two minutes, and I was once again on Iraqi soil, where I was greeted with two different flags telling two different stories.

Upon seeing the khaki-colored taxis and tell-tale gaggle of unoccupied drivers, I walked back to the same shop fronts I had been dropped off at that morning. I was emotionally exhausted and ready to be back in Erbil. As my luck would have it, I was asked to wait as another passenger loaded up their things. One of the men asked to see my talisman, and after hours of being conditioned to handing it to quasi-officials I immediately complied. He started going through it, page by page, and his buddies gathered around, admiring the pictures and the aura of possessing such a magical item. It only took a moment for all of the irritation of the day to reconstruct itself like some lumbering, undead beast as I realized this man had zero reason to have my talisman. I asked for it back, and he refused. Hackles rising, I asked him for it again. He kept going through the pages.

Blame it on the combination of stress, the collective distrust sown into me by so much of what had happened in the past few hours, and simple low-blood sugar, but this was the last straw. My mental countdown began, and this man had ten seconds to give me my talisman back. Two men on his left, two on his right. Your usual chain-smoking couch sitters. Straight right to the nose, left teep to the sternum to send his body back while his limbs trailed in front. Recover the talisman from (or near) his right hand with a quick, penetrating wrestler's shoot while his shocked friends figure out what just happened. Count on swift, unexpected, overwhelming violence to give me the time I need to turn and run to the taxi.

Fortunately for both of us (in equal measure), he gave me the talisman back with four seconds to go. I let the tension out of my shoulders and legs and hurried to throw my things in

the taxi and get out of there. The long drive, which was even longer due to the taxi breaking down in the middle of Duhok, gave me a substantial stretch of quiet to reflect on everything that had happened. More accurately, time to reflect on what I had done with the mystery bag and what I had very nearly (and *very* foolishly) done at the Ibrahim Khalil ‘garage’ to someone who was simply inconsiderate, bored, and not at all interested in stealing my talisman or otherwise causing an incident.

I’ve thought a lot about how close I came to losing control. Everyone in Erbil was stressed after the Referendum, and I was under a lot of pressure to decide whether or not to pull the rip-cord and get out of Iraq before anything happened. My passport was a burning coal in my pocket and positively luminescent whenever it was in someone else’s hands.

I’ve thought about all of the controlled violence I regularly engage in vis-à-vis martial arts training and compared it to this moment. I’ve often been hurt by sparring partners, and some of those times irate in the aftermath. Irate, perhaps, at my partner for not being more mindful, perhaps at the injury, or at myself for getting into a position wherein I allowed it to happen. None of that ever came close to the way I was ‘irate’ at the border crossings at Ibrahim Khalil. Dealing with the Khafka-esque bureaucracies is even less personal. It may involve pushing and shoving in ‘lines,’ but it isn’t supposed to involve physical violence. Yet I felt far angrier and more tempted to take it out physically at Ibrahim Khalil more than I ever did in any gym or dojo.

The difference was entirely in the power dynamic and the stakes. You’d think that getting injured by a partner would turn into a problem, but most of the time everyone acknowledges it as an accident; you ‘respect the tap,’ i.e. stop before you hurt them. I never felt the need for *retribution* at getting hurt by an over-zealous sparring partner, just *reticence* to get back in the ring with them. Bureaucracies don’t care how badly they hurt you or the people you love, you

have no means of defense, and you have little to no power. Hot, sweaty, and crowded, you claw to the front of the line and make your case. Then you wait in an office or courtyard with ten other people while random petitioners interrupt their way through to wheedle their own case. The process is inscrutable, even when I did get good enough to understand the language with less trouble.

Being forced to mule an unknown product through three different government border police checkpoints as a foreigner (after a major political event) and topping it off with a tactless taxi driver taking the only bit of power I had from me had me counting down the seconds before I literally forced the conflict into a format I had some kind of ability to act in. I'm not proud of any of that. However, it's just like sparring partner with the gym-pariah – I just needed to learn from it and avoid going back into the ring with this particular opponent until I had to.

Suli

When in Sulaymaniyah, I was usually with Baho, who lived most of his life in the same home on the north side of the city. This essentially meant a personalized, guided tour with micro-histories to compliment my knowledge of the overall context. This turned out to be fascinating and depressing.

Before we even made the weekend trip, we decided to finish the first season of "Stranger Things." I'd started Baho on it, and we restarted it when Baho decided he liked it enough to invite a number of friends to join us. While we all loved the show itself, there was one portion that we felt entirely different on.

"Let's skip the intro, it is weird and boring," Baho said.

"Wait, really? It's so retro, it reminds me of all the old-school horror movies title credits and covers of Stephen King books.." I trailed off, realizing my mistake.

Of course, this would have zero resonance with Kurds my age. They were born in the 1980's and grew up in the 1990's. They didn't have VCR's or used book stores offering pulpy horror novels with yellowing, dog-eared pages. When we went to his childhood home, I found out exactly what he did and didn't have.

On the drive out, we were slowed by a flock of passing sheep. I looked out over the decent-sized flock and the shepherd that kept them from getting too far into the road. His eyes weren't focused on the cars, though. He was eyeballing a large mountain dog that was perched on an opposing hill and was looking with equal intensity at the sheep. I realized that other than farm animals and the large wild dogs, I never saw any wildlife. I brought this up to Baho. "There are too many landmines. There are places that still have Iranian and Iraqi landmines and animals end up dying. There's all sorts of bad stuff in the ground."

We talked for a while after that about the use of depleted uranium slugs by Coalition forces, and then about the wide-spread belief within Kurdistan that Saddam did in fact have weapons of mass destruction. As someone who came to Iraqi Kurdistan with the firm belief that the WMD's in Iraq were a convenient fiction sold by untrustworthy sources to an administration that was ideologically primed for such stories, his conviction and stories had me questioning my own certainty somewhat.

We drove on in silence for some time after that, my own quiet one of reflection.

About an hour out of Sulaymaniyah, we stopped to get some ice cream. The city was situated in a valley, and a large river ran through it. We went out to the bridge and watched the water.

"Oh, wow! Look, Ben," Baho said, pointing down to the water.



Below us, feeding on the aquatic greenery were two turtles. Especially after our conversation about all the byproducts of war and mismanagement of waste, we were amazed. Despite our goal to make it to his parents' place before the sun set, we remained there a good ten minutes just watching these two wild creatures that survived so many adversities.

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“This is where my friend Bedir died on,” Baho said, pointing at a space between two houses. “We all used to use old ammunition to make our toys. I had an “RC Car” I made out of bottle caps and spent shells. We’d find [live-rounds], use some tools to pull off the [slug], and then hit the shell with a hammer. It was like a firecracker. A very dangerous firecracker. Bedir was doing something like that and the bullet went off and he died.”



*Figure 34 - Baho showing me the site where Bedir died*

### *Chinese Tech Products*

While in Sulaymaniyah, Baho brought me by the shop where he used to work. He'd been out of the retail industry for a while, quite purposefully.

"You just can't make any money. If you are lucky, you break out even."

He shook his head and looked out the window.

"I have tried to tell my friends this, that there are too many of us and the shop not profitable enough for all of us to be in it. They keep asking me back. I bet you anything, when we go in, they will try to convince me to come back. But no. No, I'm a programmer now. That is what I am doing and that's how I'm going to succeed. I can't just give up and go back to something that will never make money."

"Kind of a compliment though, don't you think? That they keep asking you back? Not just because you're a good friend, but because you're good at business?" I asked.

"Maybe.. I just know I won't be going back and I feel bad telling them so often."

The shop stood parallel to the hotel entrance, which made sense of why Baho had interacted with the hotel staff so frequently. As was the case throughout the Middle East, it was part of a row of shops selling the same items. It's part of what I've termed 'Middle Eastern String Theory,' which is that you put all the same shops in a line so it's easier to haggle. However, Baho's shop had already been selling their products at a zero-profit margin, if not at cost.

We were greeted by his three friends, which with Baho's return constituted a reunion of the founders. They were extremely affable, and I could easily see why Baho had gone into business with them. Not long into our conversation, we were joined by another man who came with a delivery. He was older than the others by a good ten or fifteen years but was friendly and had obviously worked with the others for some time.

“Great! I’m so glad you came,” Baho told the newcomer. “This is the friend I was hoping to introduce you to,” this time addressing me in English, “this is Roshan, he was with the PKK for a long time and I thought you might want to talk to him.”

“Yes! Yes, I would!”

*“The Turkish Army is Lazy”*

Roshan took a seat and to my surprise was immensely open to talking with me. He was somewhere between forty-five and fifty-five had the kind of face and dress that felt right at home in Sulaymaniyah. His dialect though, was a different matter altogether. It mashed so many Kurdish regions together it was easy to get lost mid-sentence. Baho later told me that everyone has a hard time understanding him.

I had told Roshan that I had lived in Turkey and he asked if I knew much about their military.

“Not especially,” I admitted.

“The Turkish army is lazy,” he replied.

Roshan was born in Iran and joined the PKK in his teens. He lived for many years in eastern Turkey, planning, coordinating, and conducting attacks against Turkish tanks. He was apparently rather good at this, and he rose through the ranks. Somewhere in this process, he became increasingly disenchanted with the upper leadership.

“They are hypocrites. All of them. They say they are Marxist, that they are fighting for independence, but they’re not.”

This attitude brought him into conflict with an unnamed member of the upper leadership, forcing him out of the PKK and out of Turkey. As his membership was known to the Iranian government, he could not return to his extended family in Iranian Kurdistan. He also had some

issues with high-ranking KDP members, which left Sulaymaniyah as the only place he could live. With no papers of any kind and a prison or death sentence waiting for him anywhere else in Kurdistan, he lived out his days in PUK territory, subsisting on delivery jobs and the friendship networks he'd built with people like Baho and his compatriots.

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An academic friend of mine from the States had asked me to try to get a gauge on the amount of Iranian presence there was in Sulaymaniyah. While my search wasn't exactly 'extensive,' I didn't really see or hear anything that wasn't also in Erbil. What I did see that I didn't expect to, was the very visible Turkish presence. Baho said a number of larger businesses there were led by Turkish ex-pats, and that they had a bit of a superiority complex over their Kurdish colleagues and underlings. Interestingly enough, the common language for communication between these groups was English, not Turkish, Arabic, or Sorani Kurdish (the latter of which the Turkish nationalists would probably have ideological issues learning).

I stopped by a Turkish restaurant at the sparsely peopled mall for some *dönme* and got into a conversation with the man preparing and serving the food. He turned out to be the manager and was from eastern Turkey. It didn't take us long to switch from Turkish to Kurmanji Kurdish while he prepped the food. While I ate, I realized that with no one else in the food court, the manager was filling his time by watching the television. It was a Turkish soap opera with Sorani Kurdish subtitles.<sup>439</sup> While this is ubiquitous in the region, the whole situation really drove home

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<sup>439</sup> Middle Eastern television is an interesting subject. It used to be the case that the most popular shows were made in Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria and geared toward night-time viewers during Ramadan. One of the underappreciated changes of the Arab Spring is the vacuum it created in television which was filled in by Turkish programming. Turkish standards are close but can be more scandalous in the content – not like Mexican telenovelas or American soaps – but it pushes the envelope more than most Arab shows and requires some editing in its neighboring countries. My favorite example of this in Iraq was watching a program in the background of a restaurant and realizing that the character not only had an alcoholic beverage, but that it was blurred out by censors. I laughed as 'Mehmet' reached down to grasp some red and grey pixels, put them to his face, and then set this mysterious object down back with fewer red pixels.

the effectiveness of Turkey's *bütünlülük* – the comprehensive integration via expanded business and trade with Iraq (Olson, 2011: 89). Turkish doctors, Turkish staff at hospital, Turkish restaurants, and Kurds watching Turkish television.

This also extended to military. During one trip to Baho's family, I woke up to find out from Baho that the TAF had bombed some of the nearby mountains. Far enough away that none of us heard it, but everyone was talking about it. This wasn't the first or last time for such an excursion so far outside of Turkish borders. It's Turkey's "Hot Pursuit" policy, where they will follow the PKK where ever they may roam. For as much squawking as the ICG and KRG have made about Turkish incursions, it is mostly for show.<sup>440</sup>

#### *No Representation Without Taxation?*

On December 20, I was invited by my friend Zane to join him on the morning radio program he helped host on Babylon FM. Having been in several radio studios in the U.S., it was almost disconcerting to drive through Erbil and step into a room that could have been pulled right from any self-respecting radio station in the West. The programs and commercials were all

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<sup>440</sup> "There have also been reports about (plans for) ditches and fences along the Northern Iraq-Rojava order to stop PKK and/or PYD guerrillas from crossing; but to the extent that these plans were realized, they have hardly if at all reduced the cross-border flow of personnel. One can even question to what extent such plans or actions on the KRG's part reflect or assert a law-based territorial sovereignty at all. In January 2017, KDP spokesmen threatened the PKK with military action if they did not evacuate Sinjar; shortly after, the PKK announced its withdrawal. The KRG seems to have posed this demand, and made this threat, at the behest of Turkey; earlier, regional president Barzani was said to have ruled out any direct military confrontation with the PKK. Instead of direct military confrontation, the KRG appears to have repeatedly resorted to economic warfare as a means of exercising pressure on the PKK, and on the parties and individuals sympathetic to it. Thus, on numerous occasions, the regular border crossings with Rojava were closed, blocking the flow of people and foodstuffs into Syria. These drastic measures were not restricted to Rojava, however, but also extended to areas nominally under KRG control. In late 2016, the KRG (dominated by the KDP) imposed an embargo on Sinjar region as well. In December 2016, Human Rights Watch reported that the KRG was imposing "disproportionate" restriction on goods (and in particular foodstuffs) being brought into Sinjar, in an apparent attempt either to stop the flow of supplies to PKK and/or PYD guerrillas or to punish the local population for their PKK sympathies. Regardless of the question of whether such embargo policies are effective or justifiable, and regardless of whether they reflect the KRG's or Barzani's own intentions rather than Turkish demands, these seem less the measures of a sovereign power backed by laws than the strategies of one side in a highly contested, and violent, field." (Leezenberg, 2017)

in English with a smattering of popularly used Kurdish and Arabic expressions for comedic effect or short-handing certain concepts (i.e. *ma<sup>c</sup>lîš*, with all its many nuances). The combination of pop news featuring Eminem (who was forty-five years old at the time) and the brand-new Western pop made me feel the inevitable ‘out-of-touch’ sensation that comes with getting older.

The station was set up with a ten-second delay, so they could edit out anything they needed had the same mandate regarding the most inflammatory material people wrote them. Zane told me, “Basically, we don’t want to *not* talk about things going on, but we also don’t want to cause any unnecessary problems.”

Sensible.

Before my segment came on, the topic of conversation was the recent protests in Sulaymaniyah and the question of what could be done about the political situation. One of the hosts posed two scenarios and asked the listeners to give their feedback. The first was a “grass-roots, Che Guevara-style revolution”<sup>441</sup> and the other he led off with, “now, I know this isn’t popular, but maybe what we need is to have taxes. Just think about it and let us know what you think.”

It took very little time for responses to start coming in on Facebook and on the call lines. The first of these to be read immediately cut into the leadership. I can’t remember the specifics beyond calling them out as thieves and calling them *gawād*.<sup>442</sup> He skipped a lot in his reading of that entry.

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<sup>441</sup> I’m assuming that floating the possibility of a violent overthrow of the government by at the hands of militants didn’t cross into the verboten because a) it didn’t mention politicians’ names and b) it didn’t suggest specific anti-government actions. In terms of understanding the psychological profile of Barzani governance, moments like this are worth noting. You can talk about corruption as an abstract that exists and needs combatting, but when you act like Farhad Pirbal or Sardasht Osman and start using names and specifics, your speech puts you outside of de facto law. Farhad’s ‘secular in content, Sufi in style’ approach has made the difference between simple beatings and jail time as opposed to Osman’s fate.

<sup>442</sup> See footnote 397.

My portion on the show went easily, and I think I acquitted myself as diplomatically as possible concerning the Referendum and its aftermath. We laughed and joked about my educational and experiential profile fitting too much into the secret agent category. Nothing we talked about was as interesting as the topics they had broached with their listeners.

Revolt or taxes. These tap directly into the key sociological problems that plague the Kurds and the region in general – top-down leadership imbued by years of strongmen cum dictators, exploitative governing apparatuses, poor education affecting political awareness, and an overall lack of accountability.

A Fistful of Dinars

*The trial of Reza Zarrab*

At the time of this writing, Reza Zarrab is a 35 year-old Azeri Iranian millionaire with citizenship in Azerbaijan, Iran, Macedonia, and Turkey. He was arrested on March 19, 2016 in Miami, Florida on the accusation of laundering billions of dollars in a gold-for-oil deal between Turkey and Iran that contravened international sanctions (Filkins, 2016).<sup>443</sup> While he was incarcerated in a federal detention facility in Brooklyn, the men behind the curtain went to work on securing his release, or at the very least, mitigating the potential damage done by a thorough investigation into the matter. This has included the most powerful figures in Turkish politics, such as President Erdoğan, former foreign-minister Zafer Çağlayan, the Turkish and the executive leadership of Halkbank (a state-owned Turkish bank), in addition to influential American politicians, such as Rudolph Giuliani (who is on Zarrab's legal team), who have worked on negotiating his release (Weiser, 2017).

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<sup>443</sup> He was first arrested in Turkey in 2013 and was the kick-starter for the investigation into Erdoğan, his family, and his cadres. The case was dropped, but at its peak, Zarrab's operation was moving 2,000lbs. of gold daily to Tehran.

Early in December of 2017, Reza Zarrab pleaded guilty to the charges in exchange for turning state's witness. Unsurprisingly, Erdoğan responded by countering that the accusations were all fabricated by members of FETÖ that infiltrated not only Turkish institutions, but American ones as well (Weiser, 2017). He proceeded to use that platform as an opportunity to continue onto other U.S. efforts at undermining Turkey, including support of Kurdish militias in Syria as well as its policies regarding Israel. Erdoğan's legal team also started an investigation into the prosecutor in Zarrab's trial in addition to sixteen others (Weiser and Kingsley, 2017).

#### *Leaving on a Jet Plane*

My initial research plan in Iraqi Kurdistan was to make two four-month stints – the first from September to the end of December, 2017, and the second from mid-January to mid-May, 2018. October, 2017 changed all of that. On December 16, I tried for the second time to get a ticket from Erbil to Baghdad via Baghdad Airlines, and for the second time I was rebuffed. I chalked this up to a glitch with their website and had me crossing my fingers that none of my financial information had been stolen in the process. Sure, the green safety check mark on my Google Chrome web browser was there, but as Baho had reminded me, “that's no guarantee.”

With my apparent failure, I brought the subject up with Baho. Instead of the Erbil airport, he suggested I go out to be with his family for the last weekend and leave from the Sulaymaniyah airport. That sounded like a fantastic way to end my trip, and I readily agreed. The next day, I tried my luck with a travel business located in one of the adjoining MRF buildings.

As I was walking, I had the distinct feeling that my plan wasn't going to work. At first I dismissed this as some kind of control-based anxiety; Sulaymaniyah is far less familiar and my freedom of movement would be more limited than it would be at my own apartment. Still, the feeling stuck, and I told myself that in that case I'd just try to go through Erbil as was my



original plan, disappointing as this might be. Maybe I'd just jump out to Sulaymaniyah for a night and then drive back the next day.

Feeling somewhat mixed, I entered the travel agency/Western Union office and asked for a ticket to Baghdad on December 23. The employee at the ticket counter was a young, Arab woman and when she heard my request, she met my request with an awkward pause. I repeated it in Arabic, in case I'd made a mistake with the Kurdish, but her apparent embarrassment only deepened.

"Where are you from?" she sheepishly asked in heavily-accented English.

"I'm an American," I replied, having my own go at feeling embarrassed. I hate resorting to English, as it's usually due to my linguistic shortcomings.

"I'm so sorry, but I can't sell you a ticket," she said, all but squirming in her seat with the awkwardness of the situation she'd been placed in. "Baghdad Airlines isn't selling tickets to foreigners right now."

With that simple pronouncement, my stomach sank.

No tickets to foreigners? How was I going to get down to my flight from Baghdad to Doha? My mind started to scramble for plan b, plan c, and however many more letters were required to get me out of Iraq and back into the US. Everything else had to be scrapped.

My first line of thinking was driving, and for that I texted friends and went to the taxi drivers.

"So, if I were to go down to Baghdad by shared taxi, how safe would that be?"

Without exception, they all responded with some iteration of, "I'm a Kurd, and I can't go down there. For a foreigner?..." what they didn't say with their words was communicated by the look on their faces.

Driving to Baghdad was out.

I spent the rest of the day online trying to play out my own version of “I’ll be home for Christmas.” While plotting what can best be called ‘emergency routes of egress’ more than two months earlier, I’d ruled out driving to Jordan; this meant that the only way out was northwest. Driving into Turkey.

That was if everything going on outside of public hearing with President Erdoğan, President Trump, Reza Zarrab, Fethullah Gülen, and all the king’s horses and all the king’s men could put Humpty Dumpty together sufficiently long enough for me to get a visa, get to the airport, and get out.

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#### *Metin Topuz*

Early October 2017, a man named Metin Topuz was arrested by the Turkish government on charges of espionage and arranging arms trafficking (“Turkish Court Rules for Continuation of Arrest of US Consulate Worker Topuz in Spy Trial,” Daily Sabah, 2019). Metin is a Turkish national, and more importantly, had been a translator and an assistant to the American Drug Enforcement Agency in the U.S. consulate in Istanbul for thirty years (Fahim, 2019). He has been in solitary confinement for eighteen months awaiting trial. U.S. State Department officials claim that the arrest has no legal credibility and is simply Erdoğan’s administration accruing another bargaining chip to use in the battle to extradite Fethullah Gülen.

Following his arrest, the U.S. embassy in Ankara halted non-immigrant visa services in Turkey, saying, they needed to “reassess the commitment of the government of Turkey to the security of U.S. Mission facilities and personnel,” (“U.S. Suspends Visa Services in Turkey, and Turkey Responds in Kind,” The Associated Press, 2017). The Turkish Embassy in Washington retorted, saying they needed to “reassess the commitment of the government of the United States

to the security of Turkish mission facilities and personnel,” halting e-Visas, visas issued at borders and visas in passports.

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The next morning, I made my way to the Turkish consulate to see if I was even able to get a visa, and if so, if I could get it expedited. As per an unwritten yet fully implemented rule regarding official government processes, my taxi driver had initially dropped me off at the wrong location. Fortunately, the guards helped me figure out where I was supposed to be and a friendly gentleman finishing his business there and was off to the same place offered me a ride. Getting around Erbil truly is a group effort.

Once there, we had to first go through the process of getting our papers in order. Across the street from the consulate was an official business specializing in preparing the necessary documentation for travel to Turkey. Once that was initiated, you went outside to an array of make-shift stalls where you could get photos and photo copies. The weather had been rainy, but both the dusty printers and well-worn couches had been kept dry by the stalls’ tarp canopies.

The novelty of helping a Kurdish-speaking American through the process meant I had everything I needed very quickly, which a part of myself felt bad about as I noticed the same faces waiting with anxious expressions in the office every time I went in and out.<sup>444</sup> Before leaving, I noticed that the man who took my picture wasn’t speaking Kurdish. I started talking with him and asked where he was from. His name was Hassan, an Arab from Tikrit. Less than a minute after he got a feel for my ability to speak Arabic, he showed me his hands.

In a tone of voice pitched just loudly enough for only me to hear, he confided, “I used to work for the Ba’athists. After Saddam fell, [the anti-Ba’athists] broke all my fingers.”

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<sup>444</sup> I had unwittingly become that interrupting petitioner who mysteriously jumps the line.. I’m still not sure how I feel about this.

He held them out for me to see. Even years later, his fingers had an odd, sausage-like quality to them that lent the appearance of being fleshy gloves rather than products of evolution built for dexterous manipulation of their environment.<sup>445</sup> What I was seeing was what Michael Jackson would call a “substitution of values” (2002: 165) – breaking Saddam’s figurative hands for what they did. His name was Hasan, and he would bear those marks the rest of his life.

Encouraged by the ease of this last process, albeit disturbed by the realities presented by Hassan’s hands, I crossed the street to the consulate. Once again, in and through the Kurdish end with no problems. My talisman was still good. I waited for a short while in the large lobby, which with its ticketed waiting system, digital reminder board, and complimentary television featuring a Turkish comedy stood in sharp contrast to the other offices I’d seen to that point. It wasn’t too long before my number appeared on the board.

After making an attempt in my rusty Turkish, the man helping me switched to Kurdish and things went quickly.

“Can I get a visa as an American right now? I’m trying to get a flight through Istanbul.”

“Yes, when is your flight?” he asked.

“Two days from now,” I replied, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice.

“Then you should probably not get a visa here. Instead, get one when you cross at Ibrahim Khalil.”

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<sup>445</sup> Perhaps this is morbid, but it’s worth pointing out that whoever did the beating did so thoroughly; they didn’t resemble the hands of life-long wrestlers or injured climbers where you can see disproportional sizes in the joints where they’ve had trauma, but rather a uniformity in distortion *throughout* each digit. I didn’t need an x-ray to know that they must have meticulously broken every part of the finger. Some of those long-term wrestlers and judokas can no longer make fists. Hassan? He could barely flex his fingers. Whoever did this didn’t kill him, but between the symbolic and economic value of functioning hands, they wanted him to suffer.

My face blanked for a moment as I processed what he said. I could actually get into Turkey – make it out through Zakho and then from Diyarbakir to Istanbul. In the back of my mind “I’ll be Home for Christmas” started playing again.

I copiously thanked the consulate employee, then thanked everyone else on my way out that I dealt with for good measure and simply to give my relief a voice. While I still had a lot left to do, I went back to my apartment and followed the post-anxiety release down into a dreamless sleep. I figured I’d have time for everything else – which included a trip to the ATM – even with a nap. I’d pay for that overconfidence the next day.

*Andrew Brunson*

On October 7, 2016, Pastor Andrew Brunson was arrested by the Turkish government and charged with membership in FETÖ, working with the PKK, and conducting espionage for the CIA through his small parish in Izmir (Erkoyun and Pumuk, 2018).<sup>446</sup> They claimed that he strove to, “divide Turkey into several parts...[and] under the guise of an Evangelist pastor, Brunson acted more like an irregular warfare operative (*gayri nizami harp elemani gibi hariket etti*) with an intelligence and psychological warfare doctrine,” (“U.S. Pastor Charged with “Dividing Turkey” for Gülen, PKK,” Ahval, 2018). In 2017, Erdoğan stated they would be willing to trade a “pastor for a pastor,” (Idiz, 2018).

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Fearing the possibility of missing my window of opportunity, I decided to take a private taxis to the border rather than chance the group-taxi taking too long to reach minimum capacity. I’d priced it out with others as a ‘hypothetical’ trip, and it came to about 250,000 dinars. Maybe it was the stress, but at that moment it didn’t make much sense to me, as a group of three ends up

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<sup>446</sup> PKK and FETÖ membership are equitable substitutes for Masonry, more than qualifying Brunson for the very trifecta I was avoiding in Qushtapa.

paying a total of 130,000 dinars for the same trip. Reflecting on this in the comfort of being back with my family in the US, I realize I hadn't factored in that the group taxi's system more or less guaranteed that their return trip would also be with paying passengers. No matter what rapport or sense of camaraderie I'd built with the MRF drivers, competition was stiff and the drivers aren't in the charity business. As a result, my trip started with me being 100,000 dinars lighter than I expected, and I had the three hour drive up to the border and however long it took to cross to let that fact stew in my brain and chew at my stomach.

Other than the money issue, the trip itself was uneventful and stress-free. I got dropped off by the massive concrete barriers that demarcated the city from the border-crossing, where I was immediately met by three Kurdish men who were connected with one of the fleet of minivans. It should come as no surprise that yes, I did make the crossing successfully. It took me ten hours to navigate approximately 1,000 meters of immigration offices, three inspection points, no-man's land, and all of their tautological loops of 'because I said so' that pit citizen against official. While everything that came next more or less mirrored my first trip, knowing what to expect meant that I could have my eyes and ears open to what was really going on.

While I wish I could say otherwise, I had no euphoria-inducing insights that revealed the inner workings of the official border-crossing process itself. All I saw were more official processes that only made more questions as I looked on, lips pursed and forehead creased in concentration and bewilderment. However, similar to previous sections on adaptation and exploitation of these processes, I did learn a great deal from the civilian end. The short answer to everything that was going on at the border is smuggling. A massive game of cat and mouse played out by official employees, smugglers, and the people they shuttled.

First, the van fleet. My taxi driver, Serwan, dropped me off on the outskirts of Ibrahim Khalil, where three different men unloaded my bags and escorted me to one of a dozen black vans parked along a side street. My last van had been something of a mess, with the seats not quite right and the plastic portions of the vehicle hanging loosely to their mountings. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but I noticed that all the other vans were in similar states of loose connectivity. Every last one of them was the same model, varying only in being black or white, and in the course of the day, I saw at least a hundred of them.

As I continued to wait, I had time to buy a drink and extend my walkabout to do some harmless eavesdropping. Most of the time they were on their phones or talking with other drivers arranging passengers, and after fifteen minutes we filled up. Unlike last trip, I was the only real 'passenger,' as the others all seemed to be part of the van team. Each of them brought several large bags filled with cigarette boxes. Cartons and cartons of cigarettes.



*Figure 35 - the cargo: Turkish cigarettes*

The crew's 'captain' was a thin, bearded, dark-complected Kurd with a black turtle-neck and brown leather jacket. Honestly, he couldn't look any more 'smuggler' if he tried. The others were all under twenty and were also Kurds who made me think that somewhere in eastern Turkey there was a secondary school short a few students. As we prepared to start the crossing

process, one of the crew gave me two large bags of cigarettes and told me that when we got to the first inspection point, these were mine. I nodded and put them next to my backpack.

Everything from there more or less proceeded just as it did in October. The captain took all our passports, wrote down information on his papers, and led us through the indoor line to get our exit stamp. For some of this, they had me in a sitting room within visual distance of the first set of lines – which also meant I could keep an eye on my passport’s whereabouts. It’s not that I didn’t trust my group; quite the contrary, they were far more friendly than my first van driver and now that I’d already done this, it became easy to recognize what was normal procedure.

As I sat, a man spotted me and made a bee-line toward my seat. At first I was puzzled as to what he wanted from me, but through bits of broken Turkish and hand gestures, he more or less just wanted to say hi and say that we were ‘similar.’ We shook hands and he went back to his place in line. Having re-learned my lesson in early September that sunburn is easy to get here, my policy had been to stay covered or inside more often, and while my particular mixture of Western European genetics don’t give me the nearly iridescent white some people from portions of the British Isles can have, I definitely stand out in a crowd of Iraqi and Turkish Kurds. The man was an albino. Whether he thought I also had hypomelanism or found validation that his pigmentation was closer to the obviously Occidental foreigner, he was quite happy with himself.<sup>447</sup>

Chuckling to myself, I rejoined my group when the leader waved for me. We went through, and having learned my lesson from last time, told them that I was on my way to Istanbul and the USA via Diyarbakir airport, furnishing them with a digital copy of my flight information. God bless the people who invented smart phones. The Kurdish official gave me a stamp, and we

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<sup>447</sup> *Pīroz bet, brākam*, now there are two of us here that really need to avoid skin cancer.



headed back to the car and into the mass of vans awaiting the first inspection point. We parked, and once again the leader asked me to accompany him to speak with the security officer to get special permission. Phone in hand, I walked alongside him as we adhered to the moving jumble vying for the officer's attention. To this day, if there is some kind of social norm or unspoken hierarchy of how people's issues get addressed either here or in the immigration offices or any other official proceedings, I have not divined it. However, the captain knew how to navigate it, and soon enough I was showing the officer my flight information and we got the permission we needed.

As we sat in the van, I got my first opportunity to talk with the crew. I pulled out my bag of oranges and started offering them to each member. Most of them took me up on it, and soon enough we were eating and chatting. Turns out that this is what they did for a living – crossing through Ibrahim Khalil to resell cigarettes.

“They are made in Turkey, they get shipped to Iraq, then we bring them back across and sell them,” one of the members told me between bites of his orange.

“They come from Turkey? Why do you resell them in Turkey?”

“You can make more money selling them there.”

“But why?” I asked.

He shrugged.

“You just do.”

“Interesting. So what are these other vans bringing?”

“Depends on the van. Some of them are smuggling tahini. Others more cigarettes. Lots of household stuff.”

Not drugs, not weapons, not illegal immigrants. Just household items. I ate the rest of my orange in silence, listening to my driver talk with another man about the price of x-amount of cigarettes in Cizre versus another town further north.

The cigarette resale I thought I understood. It's not uncommon in the Middle East to have cigarette cartons covered in pictures and warnings regarding the side-effects of smoking and second-hand smoke. I'd gotten used to this in Cairo, as well as the fact that not even the threat of sexual impotency is enough to make men curb their cigarette habits.<sup>448</sup> In Turkey though, the government took this a step further in 2014 with government-sponsored anti-smoking campaigns accompanied by higher taxes on smoking products to rein-in tobacco use, including hookah/nargile/shisha use in enclosed public spaces ("No More 'Smoking Like a Turk' with Decline in Turkey's Tobacco Use," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 2014). The price for which these cigarette cartons are sold in Turkey, where they are produced, must be higher with these taxes than the price for buying the same product, sold to Iraq then smuggled back into Turkey, where it is repurchased from smugglers. I can only assume that this is true of every other product that being transported illegally by the other vans from the fleet. I asked if there were shortages of foodstuffs in areas subjected to higher Kurdish-Turkish-Syrian conflict, but the crew members didn't seem to know.

Not long after this conversation, we left the car and spent some time in the cafeteria, where the crew captain bought me a drink and we talked a little about what I was doing in Iraq. They were impressed that I could speak what I did, and soon thereafter we noticed that the vans

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<sup>448</sup> In any given grocery store you see at least one cigarette packet featuring a young, unhappy-looking couple in bed with a warning, in Turkish, that cigarettes cause sexual dysfunction in men. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I believe that even if you put a warning label that said that smoking cigarettes would make you a weak, impotent, gay Israeli-Jew, all they'd do is switch brands. My intent is not to be homophobic, anti-Israeli, or anti-Jewish, but the behavioral preferences within Egyptian and Turkish cultures are such that I believe this to be the penultimate slight to their masculinity.

were moving. We got back in and eventually pulled up at the first checkpoint. We took out all of our things and lined up on the concrete divide beside the van. The Kurdish-speaking official in plainclothes that wasn't searching the van thought that the cigarettes that were 'mine' belonged to the others, and he started to yell at the captain. I assured him that they were mine, and with angry stare, he told our captain we could move onto the next phase. During this process, the other official had been going through various parts of the van to check for anything we might be bringing that we didn't have on us at that moment. We didn't, and were allowed to move on. The van next to us was not quite so fortunate – apparently the searching official saw the need to take apart the plastic portion of the windshield for closer inspection while the respective crew captain was frantically making phone calls.

As soon as we were beyond the first checkpoint, the crew set to taking the car apart, starting with the seats.<sup>449</sup> I got out so they could stuff several dozen cigarette cartons under my seat, and when they had packed all of those in, they set to the ventilation system. For obvious reasons, I didn't ask for a picture of this process, but it was impressive how they simply took the whole front assembly out and stacked hundreds of cartons into the cavity. All that was left when they were done were a three or four cigarette boxes which the upcoming officials would allow through without issue.

The crew explained to me that each of the checkpoints was manned by different authorities. The first was KRG, the second was the federal Iraqi government, and the third was Turkish. While they didn't say this, I gathered that each checkpoint had different rules regarding the allowed quantities of various products everyone crossing could have on their person. This explains why the first official got so mad when he thought we were trying to bring more

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<sup>449</sup> Sitting for a prolonged period on that lumpy mass of cardboard corners re-defined 'cigarette butt.'

cigarettes than was allowed through. The Kurdish checkpoint was far laxer than the Iraqi or Turkish ones, letting any given person carry an emphysema-inducing amount of cigarettes across the border.

Each of these checkpoints also had its own search procedures. While vans were searched thoroughly in the checkpoints, the fifty meters of road between were filled with van crews openly reallocating the goods to various crevices and man-made openings. That the standards and even the places that they checked in the car were different from station to station was evidence that there must be no communication between these stations. For the second station, I got to stay for a while to watch the Iraqi authorities at their work. They went through every van with crowbars, opening up the plastic protectors around the frame and searching every compartment. They more or less put things all back together when they were done and ushered us on. Had they simply sat down on any of the seats, they would have noticed the odd way they bulged and the feeling of hard edges sticking into their hamstrings and glutes. The jig would be up. But they never sat down, and the seats went unmolested.

For the last stretch, the crew unloaded the seats and stuffed them into cloth-covered compartments under the front roof and the rest went into the bumper cavities. It took several hours, but once we reached the Turkish checkpoint, they did a thorough search of the seats, floors, and doors. They skipped the bumpers and didn't see the covered compartments. Finding nothing, they sent us on to passport control.

Start to finish, this whole process was a matter of Iraqi and Turkish Kurds transporting goods that they could sell in Turkey past three separate authorities whose politics and bureaucracies precluded the kind of collusion and coordination that could prevent the entire enterprise. I would have guessed that there was massive bribery involved, but the way in which

our captain was reprimanded and the thoroughness of the places that were searched said otherwise. With the smugglers, there were no constraints; just cell phones, word of mouth, and shared interests. Passengers are absolutely necessary for that first checkpoint, and four passengers must be the golden ratio for 'smuggling space' to 'product amount.' So if you're crossing that border and don't have a car of your own, you will end up being a participant in the process.

Ten hours and three different inspection points later, we pulled through to Turkish passport control. In my mind, this was the moment where I'd see just how much Gülen, Zarrab, incarcerated U.S. employees and everything in between were going to come into play. I was also intensely aware of how little cash I had left on my person, praying that the transit visa wouldn't cost me too dearly.

To my disbelief, the border guard took my passport, shown his light on me, then back to the paper, took a stamp, and pressed it to the page. Within less than thirty seconds and no money exchanged, I was into Turkey. I was elated.

From there we drove for a few miles up into the hills, stopping at a makeshift parking lot off the side of the road. They unloaded me and my things into a kind of van I'd never seen before, and I got in to negotiate with the driver.

"Hi! I'd like to get to Amad (Diyarbakir)," I said in my best Kurmanji.

"\$200."

Shit.

The tension that had left me upon entering Turkey redoubled as I realized that I only had \$111 worth of Iraqi dinars on me. I started clawing through my belongings for stray bills of any denomination that I could find.

“I’ve got... let me see, something like \$111..”

“That’s not enough,” he scoffed.

I stammered and fumbled some more. Then the thought occurred to me to check in the old wallet I had in Turkey. Against all odds, I still had fifty dollars worth of Turkish lira from the year before<sup>450</sup> and six printed copies of George Washington’s stoic face to boot.

“Ok, I’ve got, let’s see, \$173! I can get you the rest in Amad.”

“I don’t go to Amad for any less than \$200. I’m not bringing you. You need to get out.”

It was 11pm, we were in a deserted parking lot on a portion of road that was closer to Syria than I ever wanted to be on this trip. We continued to argue, and my panic grew.

Despite our being in a heated argument, he still had one arm idly draped through a space in the steering wheel. If he started to get out I was going to wrap both hands around the spot where his wrist and hand met and use the metal fulcrum to put him in an armbar. I’d tear through the majority of the soft tissue in his elbow before I let myself be dropped off on a deserted road this close to Syria in the middle of the night during a period of high, international political drama.

Suddenly, someone appeared next to the driver’s window and tapped on the window. It was the smuggling crew. Seeing that there was some trouble inside the cabin, they had turned around, gotten out, and walked up the driver’s window. The driver rolled down the window and started to discuss our debacle. The captain argued that \$173 was enough. The driver disagreed. A few minutes later, the captain had my things out of the car and was calling a more affable driver to rendezvous with us. Some time later, an identical van pulled away and I climbed in.

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<sup>450</sup> It didn’t take a currency-exchange guru to see that with everything going on in Turkey in July 2016 the lira had ‘devaluation’ written all over it. My original intent was to switch it as soon as possible back to dollars and lose as little as possible. I later decided that maybe it wouldn’t be a bad thing to have some on me ‘just in case.’

The other driver wasn't worth any more of my breath, and I focused instead on copiously thanking the crew for coming to my aid. I have no idea if it was my taking the time to get to know them, helping with the smuggling, sharing my food with them, or simply being good, consciencious people, but they were my advocates even though I had nothing additional to compensate them with. I felt like crying out of sheer gratitude. I made it out of Iraq with only 250 dinars to spare (something like fifteen cents), and that because it was crumpled up in the corner of my wallet.

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My driver was an amazing and talkative young man from Diyarbakir, and the drive was totally perpendicular to what it would have been with the first, had he deigned to drive me. I'd have no reason to talk about the trip other than the fact that it justified my paranoia. It didn't take us long before we had to take make-shift detours over 'compromised' sections of the road. "Whoa, this one wasn't here last week," he said in Kurmanji, slowing down to a stop a few meters from a car-sized crater. The hole was several feet deep and the pavement was blackened for a good ways beyond the hole itself. He backed up, then drove for a while off road until the road evened back out. We came across several such combat zones, some with concrete barriers and heavily-armed Turkish soldiers acting as checkpoints.

From that point onward, everything was absurdly easy. We got out to take pictures of old Mardin when we came passed it sometime in the early a.m. The next day I found an ATM and even got to see Dağkapı Square, which in many ways was the place where my dissertation ideas had started. As I toured a local mosque, I looked up as I heard a heavy *thwup-thwup-thwup* and saw the khaki-painted military transport helicopters like egg-laden, misanthropic dragonflies ferrying between waypoints in the city. It firmly encapsulated why doing research on Kurdish

nationalism here was a bad idea. A trip to the grocery store reminded me how mutually *unintelligible* Zazaki Kurdish is. My drive to the airport reminded me how effective Turkish efforts had been at transforming the Kurdish language.<sup>451</sup>

After a flight to Istanbul, my bus between Sabiha Gökçen International Airport and İstanbul Atatürk International Airport stopped not only at Taksim Square, but also directly across from Kurdela Street. Had I had time, I might have gotten out and walked up to that familiar teal gate that led to my old apartment. Time there was not, and it was quite early and raining profusely so even the prostitutes had called it a night.

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Twenty-two hours and two Homeland Security debriefings later,<sup>452</sup> I was back with my family. I was home for Christmas.<sup>453</sup> The trip out cost me significantly more than I'd counted on and we had to scrap the second half of my research trip, much to my wife's relief. On January 5, 2018, I sat down for the first time to earnestly write and try to make sense of all that had happened.

## Conclusion

I would like to write the history... with all the political investments of the body that it gathers together in its closed architecture. Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means that by writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present.

(Foucault, 1979: 31)

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<sup>451</sup> "How do you say [x] in Kurmanji?" I asked in Turkish. My driver thought for a second and replied, "Oh, that's [y]." I smiled a little.

"Actually, [y] is totally Turkish." Couldn't have been any more Turkish if it had a *yapmak* on it.

<sup>452</sup> Most of these meetings had to do with me re-explaining the situation with Jaylen Abdulla Miller and telling them that no, I had not gone to Syria. Frankly, I was glad to see the follow-up on Homeland Security's end.

<sup>453</sup> Well, my in-laws' home, but that was close enough.



In many respects, Kurdish history is something of a self-replicating loop. What happened in Kirkuk in 2017 mirrors what happened in eastern Turkey in 1847. They look eerily similar and include all of the following:

Great regional powers at war with each other.

Conflict converges in Kurdistan.

These powers exploit intra-Kurdish strife and clan leaders' aspirations.

Clan leaders, after years of jockeying for position, exploit the conflict as a means of furthering their family's dominion.

Intra-Kurdish loyalties reshuffle as deals are made and promises exchanged with the great regional powers.

Great regional power wins as strongest Kurdish clan leader is cut down a few pegs in relation to his rivals.

Small number of rival Kurdish clan members reap mild profit.

Kurdish autonomy is diminished.

You can see elements of the Republic of Mahabad. The Turks and the Persians squeezed Sheikh Ubaydullah's forces from west to east in 1880 just like they did the YPG in 2018 (“[Iran Bombs the Mountains of Haji Omaran and Native Districts],” Kurdistan24, 2018). The Persians sold out Kurdish fighters in 1975 for land just as they did in 1930. Nothing about it is ‘timeless’ or primordial, but these histories have a way of adding accumulated momentum to the current crises. This political *déjà vu* adds to the entrenchment of hostilities and partisanships.

*What Kurdish Nationalism is and isn't*

“Kurdish Nationalism” in the abstract summons a rough caricature of autonomy for a large swath of land cut out of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. It takes all of the Kurds and puts

them under a single, self-governing roof. Of course, this abstraction is riddled with paradoxes revolving around authority to speak for who and what a Kurd is, what they believe, and what their relations are with their neighbors and each other.

*Kurdish society is not settled on its religious identity.*

Kurdish Islamists in Turkey have had little success compared to the separatist pull of the PKK, inc. and the official parties of the AKP (which is pro-Islam, anti-Kurdish nationalism) and the HDP (which is secular, pro-Kurdish rights). Kurdish Islamist parties in Iraq are fragmented and consistently pull in less than fifteen percent of the Kurdish vote. Yet the Barzanis and Talabanis have to navigate their relations with these parties and their own Muslim constituents with care. Even the PKK's policy respecting Islam has been subject to revision. Any group that refuses to actively engage in the ummah dialectic does so at considerable risk to their future. Religious justifications and argumentations play a massive role in the national narratives in both Turkish Kurdistan and the KRG. Failure to convincingly engage directly through projection of piety or indirectly through linking to Islamist parties may further increase the risk of losing those Kurdish men hanging on the precipice between conservative belief and extremism. Despite the bizarre and troubled nature of Kurds within the ummah, Islam is and will continue to be a critical tool in reinforcing legitimacy.

*Kurdish Society is Diverse*

While decades of ethnic conflict and economic pressures have effectively rearranged the demographics of Kurdish regions, Kurdish regions have ethnic minorities that are wary of an independent Kurdistan. Within the KRG they try to stay as quiet and out of the way as possible,

wanting to avoid the kind of attention that opens them up to the “Cool Hand Luke” effect.<sup>454</sup> One of the paradoxes of Kurdish nationalism is the continuity of intra-Kurdish divisions. Whether this is based on religion (see footnote 208), language (footnote 33), or on family or clan or patronage, they are very real in their cleaving effects.<sup>455</sup>

*Kurdish Nationalism has no Static Alliances or Lines of Patronage*

The narrative dictating friend and foe, ummah and non-ummah is as flexible as it needs to be. Especially in the KRG, much of this is dictated from the top-down and is more reflective of the needs of the relevant leaders. Erdoğan can stand up and say a phrase in Kurdish on Turkey’s official Kurdish news site in 2013 and close the Kurdish Institute of Istanbul three years later. Masoud can call in Saddam’s cavalry when Mam Jalal pushes the KDP out of Erbil, then attend the latter’s funeral with a seat next to the deceased’s family. The “War in Kirkuk” becomes downgraded to “complexities” and “events” as Russia becomes “good” and America is “no longer a man.” These titles are equally impermanent as those that preceded them.

*The politics and the religion are all subject to male ego.*

For as much risk as there is in compromising one’s projections of piety, there is an equal amount of utility placed in preserving their masculine image. Failure to acknowledge this importance not only in the leadership, but on the individual level is a contributor to failed policy (i.e. weakening one’s position in the region). Almost every Arab, Kurdish, and Turkish man I

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<sup>454</sup> Top Inmate: “He ain't in the [solitary confinement] box because of the joke played on him. He back-sassed a free man. They got their rules. We ain't got nothin' to do with that. Would probably have happened to him sooner or later anyway - a complainer like him. He gotta learn the rules the same as anybody else.”

Luke: “Yeah, them poor old Bosses need all the help they can get.”

Top Inmate: “You tryin' to say somethin'? You got a flappin' mouth. One of these days, I'm gonna have to flap me up some dust with it.”

I'd use a more technical term to describe the formation of hierarchies within inmate populations, but I haven't found anything specifically dealing with the abusive-pyramid dynamic I'm speaking of.

<sup>455</sup> “The Netherlands sent a delegation to the KRG to discuss reforming the Peshmerga. There have been many previous international attempts to pressure the KRG to have a unified security apparatus that is not subjected to the political manipulation of the KDP and PUK. All failed,” (Alabbasi, 2018).

met didn't like to be seen being on the ground during a conflict. The specificity of the traumas built into their collective psyche places massive importance on understanding each of them as simultaneously separate and interconnected.

*The conflict is never really 'over' – just evolving.*

This fact is not lost on any of the primary actors involved, who are constantly jockeying for position. Pronouncements of 'Victory!' require epic suspensions of disbelief. Treating Da'ish or any other crisis in the Kurdish region as a singular, compartmentalizable illness is a result of politically convenient decontextualization. They are almost never 'one-and-done' viruses, rather they are symptoms of underlying immunodeficiencies.<sup>456</sup> More like evolving versions of Lyme disease, Hepatitis C, or Herpes – recurrent problems with the same root.

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For better or worse, the Coalition took out a load-bearing wall in 2003, and what we have left is dealing with the consequences. I've heard many people say they wish we could all just 're-write the map,' as if we could get everyone to agree that 1920 was yesterday and tomorrow is 2020. If it could have been done, it would have, and the passage of time and aggregate politics have formed institutions and cultures that preclude power sharing and didactic constitutional constraints. I remain unconvinced that any leader – be they self-termed Western-style democrat, Marxist, or Islamist – would be able to deviate from the current state of affairs.

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<sup>456</sup> They simply go partially underground and subsist on the lowest-hanging fruits. For instance, on January 17, 2018, a group of armed men approached a mosque seventeen-kilometers from Qara Tapa (a village a few miles west of Kirkuk) during evening prayer. They exited their vehicle and read a list of names of seven people who were then in the mosque. One of those they killed, six others they forced into their car, and four of those were able to be freed. According to the official on record, this follows the standard operating procedures for Da'ish fighters collecting people for ransom (Mihammad, 2018). It's the monster's version of Girl Scout cookie drives. Dormant and evolving, not defeated.

Rather than directly state my own opinion about the future of ‘Kurdistan’ in terms of political and geographical borders, I prefer to present a theoretical conversation. To do this I assume I am back in Nashville, Tennessee, where I set all of the quandaries, the personality conflicts, the paradoxes and the pains in front of Nawzad Hawramani.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said about the necessity of there being an independent Kurdish state. I’ve seen what you’re talking about and I think I understand it. But I have more rather than fewer questions. What could possibly convince the government in Baghdad and their backers in Iran to roll over and allow Kirkuk to be the heart that pumps Kurdish oil? Or Turkey to relinquish its eastern portions with the headwaters for the Tigris and Euphrates and a substantial number of dams? Despite advances in alternative energies and international climate agreements, demand for oil and gas demand remains inelastic and more clean water is being used up.

“For a Kurdish state, there would be a mandate for a united Peshmerga, but united under whom? The Barzanis? The lieutenants of Öcalan? The Talabanis? Kosrat Rasul? Is there anything in their respective track records that indicates they’d be willing to give equitable shares of national oil and gas profits to odd-man-out places like Tawela, Halabja, and Hawraman? What of men and women like Roshan who can only live in the small cracks between competing interests? What’s to keep Roshan from becoming yet one more passing news article written in passive terms *–piyāwek kūzhrāwa* (“a man was killed”) – to describe his politically motivated demise? How are new lines on the map better than just re-strategizing for long and short-term crisis management? Is it really worth it?”

In his diplomatic way, Nawzad would consider my words in respectful silence. He’d take a moment to digest my barrage of intractable queries, then respond with,

“Yes, yes, some of all this may be true.. But they would be *our* mistakes to make. *Our* problems. *Our* being responsible for *ourselves*. It would be difficult, but it would be *ours*.”

[end of theoretical conversation]

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For whatever this Kurdayetî really is, its brightest hopes are people like Baho, his family, and our programmer friends who did the best they could with what they had to be entrepreneurs in lives defined by turmoil. They are the living, breathing martyrs of Kurdistan that have buried their own but continue to fight the battle for decency, personal integrity, and love of their home and their people. This battle is just as real as any Peshmerga who fought against the Ba’athists, Da’ish, or the PMF.

My friend Ferman illustrated the commitment and heart this battle required. After a particularly tough evening of throwing each other across the mats, he kindly offered to drive me back to my apartment. As we wound our way into town, our conversation turned to what we wanted for our futures. I was deciding between academia and government. Ferman was going to go from being a pharmacist in the family shop to a full doctor. Like many in his position, that meant going West where he could get a good medical education in English.

“So, you’re going to Europe to study medicine?” I asked.

“Yes,” he answered in English. “I will go to Croatia to complete my medical degree.”

“You going to stay there, or maybe go further west?”

Conditioned by the innumerable, unsolicited diatribes against life in the KRG, I expected only one answer.

“No.. No, I’ll study there and then I’ll come back.”

“Really?” I asked, not bothering to conceal my surprise. “Why is that?”

“Kurdistan is my home,” he said, his eyes never leaving the road as we drove south through Ankawa traffic. “I can leave for a while, but I always come back. This is where my family is, and this is my people. I don’t want to leave them.”

We sat in silence for a moment as I absorbed this.

Ferman nodded to himself, “Yes, I’ll always come back. Kurdistan is my home.”

## Appendix

### **Item 1 – Conversation between Seyit Riza and Mustafa Atatürk**

#### **“Order for the executions to be carried out by the weekend**

“To the Head of National Intelligence:

“-Confidential-

“A meeting was held with İhsan Sabri. He told us the court would issue a judgment and that the executions needed to take place by the weekend. But the most important point is that Seyit Riza and our President must meet and that this take place in the highest secrecy and that all necessary measures must be taken to ensure this is the case.

#### **“Gallows set up prior to verdict**

“We made our preparations with the utmost rapidity... After several meetings the death sentences were signed and tractors and other vehicles were brought in to set up the gallows and to light up the Buğday Square where the executions were to take place. Preparations were made and reviewed several times in order for the meeting to take place and remain secret.

#### **“As the court hearing continued Seyit Riza was taken from the court**

“At 12.20 on the morning of 15 November Seyit Riza and his accomplices were brought to court. The bench began to read out the verdict. 14 people were acquitted and seven accused, including Seyit Riza, were sentenced to death. As the word ‘idam’ [capital punishment] was not used, there were voices heard in the court saying in Kurdish ‘no death penalties’. As the hearing ended Seyit Riza was taken to a jeep with the police chief and İhsan Sabri. There were 5 vehicles and when we reached the Elazığ Central Railway station, which had been closed in readiness and the staff had been sent home. There was no one at the station except for MAH (national intelligence) operatives.



**“Seyit Riza refused to sit down**

“The President’s white carriage was in a siding. After waiting for 8 to 10 minutes we boarded the train. Alongside the President were Alpdoğan Pasha, Kazım Orbay and the President’s aide-de-camp. A meal was in progress and alcohol was being consumed. The President looked at Seyit Riza and told him to take a seat. Seyit Riza refused to sit down. The President reminded him that the court had handed down a death sentence, which would be carried out that very night, and told him that if he expressed remorse and begged forgiveness he would pardon him. Seyit Riza said he had not done anything that warranted remorse, that all they had done was protect their own lives, property and land. He added that the President had only listened to state officials, and that he wanted to explain the realities.

**“There is no rebellion, only repression**

“The President nodded and Seyit Riza explained calmly how Dersim had suffered great repression in Ottoman times, but despite this they had protected Dersim, and despite not sending men to the Ottoman army, had sent many men to join the national struggle, that they trusted the Republic, and that their trust had increased in particular after the abolishing of the caliphate. He added that they had assisted in the collection of arms, that most of them had been handed in, that if they had intended to revolt they would not have surrendered their weapons, and that truly Dersim had not wanted to rebel against the Republic.

**“When he explained the persecution Alpdoğan tried to intervene**

“Seyit Riza said the gendarme had constantly incited the people to rise up, encouraged hostility between the tribes and invented pretexts to attack the people. He said many people had been killed by bombs dropped from aircraft, and that there had been massacres of women and children

who had taken refuge in caves. Alpdoğan Pasha tried to interrupt, but the President signalled him to remain silent and requested Seyit Riza to continue.

**“Seyit Riza said he had been tricked**

“(Seyit Riza explained how promises had been made before he surrendered) "An officer from the General Staff came to see me. He said you were waiting at the Erzincan Governate to discuss peace. He swore it was true and I believed him. I went with three companions to Erzincan and they arrested us and sent us to Elazığ prison. They tricked us again after the trial started. They altered my son's age and made him 2 years older [in order for a death sentence to be passed]. On your orders they handed down death sentences. Although I trusted promises made and surrendered you are going to execute me. How can I trust you again?”

**“You're Turks' said Mustafa Kemal**

“The President said he would have an investigation carried out as he had not heard about them before, adding: "Ask forgiveness from me, express remorse so that I may pardon you. If you do this you will be more useful to Dersim. You will cooperate with us. The Republic will do very worthwhile things for Dersim. The people of Dersim came from Khorasan, they are Oğuz Turks. When they become reacquainted with their Turkishness they will do very useful things for the Republic. I believe this, don't miss this opportunity.”

**“I do not want a pardon**

“Seyit Rıza replied: “I did a lot for peace, for the republic. I helped collect the weapons. Certain people were wanted, I turned them in. Every time they said: 'this is the last thing.' Then they began to ask for more things. At first I didn't understand, then when the Tunceli Law was enacted I realised that it didn't matter what we did, as your plan was to eradicate Dersim, to wipe

it off the map. I eventually understood this. I do not regret anything I did. I do not want a pardon. These are my final words. I will say no more.”

### **“Mustafa Kemal gave an order**

“The President was annoyed and stood up. He pointed to Seyit Rıza, saying: 'take him away and do what is required'. As Seyit Rıza was being taken outside he turned to the President and said: "I didn't understand your deceptions, I couldn't cope with them, that's why I wanted to speak to you. I'm going to die, but I did not submit and may this cause you trouble.” The President gestured for us to take him away and we left the compartment. We went to the Buğday Square.

### **“They exhibited the bodies**

“It was Seyit Rıza's turn to go to the gallows.<sup>457</sup> He pushed away the Gypsy boy and stood on the stool. Then he said in a strong, deep voice: "We are the descendants of Karbala. It is shameful, it is tyranny it is murder.” Then he put the noose around his neck and kicked away the stool. The courage of this elderly man amazed everyone. The bodies were left hanging for the whole of Monday 15 November and on 16 November were driven around Elazığ to show the people.

### **““The bodies were burnt”**

“İhsan Sabri summoned us to a meeting at the governor's office at 12.00. He said: "The hurried execution of Seyit Rıza will definitely lead to concern and anxiety. The order from Ankara is that we are to say that it was imperative that we execute Seyit Rıza before the President arrives in Elazığ as there was a possibility he might pardon him. Also, the bodies will be burnt and buried at a secret location. This task will be carried out by colleagues in MAH.” The corpses were then taken to a waste ground and burnt using kerosene. The remains were put in sacks and buried in a pit between the Elazığ Central station and the Yolçatı station. A map of the site, records of what

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<sup>457</sup> The executioners hanged Rıza's sixteen-year-old son first and made Rıza watch (“Seyit Rıza was Hanged after Refusing to Apologize for Rebellion: Report,” Yeni Şafak, 2015).

was said on the train and a recording were handed to İhsan Sabri. Two copies of this report were prepared, with one being submitted to the Prime Minister's office and one to İhsan Sabri Bey.” (“Controversial Dersim Documents Revealed About Seyit Riza and Ataturk Meeting,” KurdishQuestion.com, 2015)

**Item 2** – Mullah Krekar's 1997 interview with Nida'u Islam

“As for [the] catalysts [of Muslims' ignorance of the Kurdish issue], these are certainly the loss of the central authority of the Islamic presence in Islambul [*sic*], I mean by this the Islamic Khilafa, then the dispersion of loyalty and the division of the Islamic land all over the world. Further, the emergence of Nationalism in the early stages in Europe and the arrival of this movement in our Islamic world was a reason in dividing our community with each race demanding independence and self rule [*sic*]. At the outset, the Turks, then the Arabs, then the Persians then others, the Kurds lived amidst this squabble in the region of the Middle East. The Kurds also reacted with other people in a peaceful manner in their call for independence. When this nationalism emerged amongst these people, one can say that the main reason was the weakness or lack of a central Islamic authority. In our view, this is the first reason for the hardships of the Kurds and the others.

“Secondly, the inability of the imported ideologies to deal with the Kurdish issue in a correct manner, and their failure to present a correct solution which would harmonise [*sic*] with what the Kurds are demanding and which may also harmonise [*sic*] with what other peoples of the region are demanding. Whilst the Liberal and leftist groups may have contained the Kurdish issue for a short time they, [*sic*] have failed miserably in their attempts to suppress it. These groups are also responsible for the emergence of the barriers amongst the Kurds themselves.

“A great deal of the hardships was caused by the establishment of the different governments in the area, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, the former states of the Soviet Union, which are Armenia and Azerbaijan now, bearing in mind that Kurdistan is divided amongst all these countries.

“Despite their ongoing disputes and wars, these regimes share a united stance with regards to the Kurdish issue. This too has added to the hardships of the Kurdish people. The Arab Nationalist regimes in Syria and Iraq, and the Secular and nationalistic Turkish regime and the Communist direction of the Persians all played their roles in complicating the Kurdish issue. Add to this the politics, the geographical division and the internal divisions amongst the Kurds which all led to the present situation. As one of the Lebanese Journalists said: If various nations had been oppressed by history, the Kurds have been oppressed by both history and geography...” (“An Official from the Islamic Movement in Kurdistan Provides: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Kurdish Cause,” [islam.org/au](http://islam.org/au)).

**Item 3** – I Am in Love with the Daughter of Massoud Barzani, by Saro Zardasht

“I am in love with the daughter of [Iraqi Kurdistan president] Massoud Barzani, the man who appears here and there and claims he is my president. I would like him to be my father-in-law and also I would like to be a brother-in-law with [former Prime Minister] Nechirvan Barzani. If I become Massoud Barzani’s son-in-law, we would spend our honeymoon in Paris and also we would visit our uncle’s mansion in America. I would move my house from one of the poorest areas in Hewler to Sari Rash [Barzani’s palace complex] where it would be protected by American guard dogs and Israeli bodyguards.

“I would make my father become the Minister of Peshmerga [the Kurdish militia]. He had been

Peshmerga in September revolution, but he now has no pension because he is no longer a member of Kurdistan Democratic Party.

“I would make my unlucky baby brother, who recently finished university but is now unemployed and looking to leave Kurdistan, chief of my special forces.

“My sister who has been too embarrassed to go to the bazaar to shop, could drive all the expensive cars just as Barzani’s daughters do.

“For my mother, who is diabetic and has high blood pressure and heart problems but who is not able to afford treatment outside Kurdistan, I would hire a couple Italian doctors to treat her in the comfort of her own house.

“For my uncles, I would open few offices and departments and they, along with all my nieces and nephews would become high generals, officers, and commanders.

“All my friends said Saro, let it go and give it up for otherwise *you will get yourself killed. The family of Mullah Mustafa Barzani [Massoud Barzani's father] can kill anyone they want, and they surely will.*

“I told them I did not commit blasphemy and I swear to the dagger of [Massoud's late brother] Mustafa Idris Barzani that my father had spent 3 nights with him on the same mountain [during the fight against Saddam] and so why not say those things? Massoud Barzani claimed himself that he is a president, and I would ask him [how many times] has he visited Hewler and Sulaymaniyah in the last 18 years?

“My problem is this man, Massoud Barzani, is so tribal that so arrogant that he does not recognize anybody from even the other side of Sari Rash. With a few clicks, I can out more about any leaders’ wives in the world but I have no idea who my mother-in-law would be and what she looks like.

“I have no idea who I should take with me to ask Massoud Barzani to give me his blessing to marry his daughter. From the beginning, I thought I should take with me few religious figures, some respectful old men and some old Peshmerga, but one of my journalist friends told me that I should find some Saddam collaborators and those who participated in the Anfal operation [ethnic cleansing in the late 1980s] with Saddam because they are all around Massoud now and he likes them. Another friend suggested that I should go to one of news conference of Nechirvan Barzani and make friends with him and ask him to do me a favor. However, if he doesn’t help, then I can ask Dashne [a Kurdish singer] because she meets them frequently and might help out.”

(Osman, 2010; italics added)

**Item 4** – Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

“...many of your Muslim admirers amongst the common folk are wondering about your attacks on the Shia. The sharpness of this questioning increases when the attacks are on one of their mosques... My opinion is that this matter won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it... [they will ask] were there some operations that weren't called for? And is the opening of another front now in addition to the front against the Americans and the government a wise decision? Or, does this conflict with the Shia lift the burden from the Americans by diverting the mujahedeen to the Shia, while the Americans continue to control matters from afar? And if the attacks on Shia leaders were necessary to put a stop to their plans, then why were there attacks on ordinary Shia? Won't this lead to reinforcing false ideas in their minds, even as it is incumbent on us to preach the call of Islam to them and explain and communicate to guide them to the truth? And can the mujahedeen kill all of the Shia in Iraq? Has any Islamic state in history ever tried that? And why kill ordinary Shia considering that they are

forgiven because of their ignorance? And what loss will befall us if we did not attack the Shia? And do the brothers forget that we have more than one hundred prisoners - many of whom are from the leadership who are wanted in their countries - in the custody of the Iranians? And even if we attack the Shia out of necessity, then why do you announce this matter and make it public, which compels the Iranians to take counter measures? And do the brothers forget that both we and the Iranians need to refrain from harming each other at this time in which the Americans are targeting us?... Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable - also- are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages.”

(“Zawahiri’s Letter to Zarqawi”)

On Zarqāwī’s part, he wrote,

“[The Shi’a are] the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom... The unhurried observer and inquiring onlooker will realize that Shi`ism is the looming danger and the true challenge. “They are the enemy. Beware of them,”” (U.S. Department of State, 2004).

**Item 5 – Article 58 of the Iraqi Transitional Administration Law**

“(A) The Iraqi Transitional Government, and especially the Iraqi Property Claims Commission and other relevant bodies, shall act expeditiously to take measures to remedy the injustice caused by the previous regime’s practices in altering the demographic character of certain regions, including Kirkuk, by deporting and expelling individuals from their places of residence, forcing migration in and out of the region, settling individuals alien to the region, depriving the inhabitants of work, and correcting nationality. To remedy this injustice, the Iraqi Transitional Government shall take the following steps:



“(1) With regard to residents who were deported, expelled, or who emigrated; it shall, in accordance with the statute of the Iraqi Property Claims Commission and other measures within the law, within a reasonable period of time, restore the residents to their homes and property, or, where this is unfeasible, shall provide just compensation.

“(2) With regard to the individuals newly introduced to specific regions and territories, it shall act in accordance with Article 10 of the Iraqi Property Claims Commission statute to ensure that such individuals may be resettled, may receive compensation from the state, may receive new land from the state near their residence in the governorate from which they came, or may receive compensation for the cost of moving to such areas.

“(3) With regard to persons deprived of employment or other means of support in order to force migration out of their regions and territories, it shall promote new employment opportunities in the regions and territories.

“(4) With regard to nationality correction, it shall repeal all relevant decrees and shall permit affected persons the right to determine their own national identity and ethnic affiliation free from coercion and duress.

“(B) The previous regime also manipulated and changed administrative boundaries for political ends. The Presidency Council of the Iraqi Transitional Government shall make recommendations to the National Assembly on remedying these unjust changes in the permanent constitution. In the event the Presidency Council is unable to agree unanimously on a set of recommendations, it shall unanimously appoint a neutral arbitrator to examine the issue and make recommendations. In the event the Presidency Council is unable to agree on an arbitrator, it shall request the Secretary General of the United Nations to appoint a distinguished international person to be the arbitrator.

“(C) The permanent resolution of disputed territories, including Kirkuk, shall be deferred until after these measures are completed, a fair and transparent census has been conducted and the permanent constitution has been ratified. This resolution shall be consistent with the principle of justice, taking into account the will of the people of those territories.” (Coalition Provisional Authority, 2004)

**Item 6** – Item from Article 140 of 2005 Iraqi Constitution

“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 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2007.”

**Item 7** – Ministry of Faith and Religious Affairs release on October 4, 2017

“We have called for our own rights in a [secularly] legal, constitutional, and [Islamicly] legal framework. We are basing our freedom and state upon the blood of our martyrs...[The statement from al-Azhar] is full of oppression and untruth and incorrect clauses and faults against our society. We ... believed in al-Azhar, that hand of brotherhood and loving heart would gather together for Kurdistan, in view of the command of the Great God, <For the believers are brothers> and the many years of historical connection of Kurdistan and al-Azhar tying the two together, that familiarity of brotherhood and respect would be together. But it is clear that al-Azhar is in an illusion and the sorrows of the Muslims are in another matter.

“The historical role of reforming al-Azhar by Salahadin Ayubi on the behalf of the scholarship of al-Azhar is not subtle. That it was because of al-Azhar, the huge citadel of Islamic sciences that the Muslim nations and Kurdish scholarship have had active roles in the propelling of the Sharia sciences in the heritage of al-Azhar. It is not fitting for the scholarship of al-Azhar and the great imam to defend an oppressed condition which was foreign annexation, that was in Sykes-Picot, in an incessant series of one government over all the constituencies of Iraq wanting to take away the name of the Kurdish Muslim community for the period of 100 years. Furthermore, it is not fitting for them insofar as what is taking place in Iraq in that sectarian war, with Shi’ite mobilization threatening unpleasantness towards the Kurdish community, as they have hitherto come face to face with the scholarship and Sunni peoples of Iraq.

“After the geography of Iraq which was spoken of in the books of Islamic jurisprudence, from Hamreen mountain to south of Tikrit is not more bundled together, it would be better it opened al-Azhar to sending a delegation to Kurdistan for hearing the truths in the perspective of the command of God, “O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient one with information, investigate, lest you harm a people out of ignorance and become, over what you have done, regretful,” (49:6).

“With the following points we send back the answers of al-Azhar’s college of Sheikhs.

“1. You speak of the coming together of the Sunni masses because of our independence, yea, that scholarship of yours which visited Kurdistan ... [and] with their own eyes witnessed how the condition of Kurdistan has been, the bulwark and side of the Sunnis the exiles of Iraq’s losses and Syria. We, in the principles of brotherhood and remaining Sunni have safeguarded and protected the Sunnis in the region with courage and the resistance of the Peshmerga forces of Kurdistan and their blood as been the leaven for our country.

“2. Do not advise us on our lives. We are the foremost in this subject and in our ministry we have more general management, especially in beliefs and religious activities and religious creeds representatives. But yet the Muslims of Baghdad don’t accept each other, that there are two sectarian walls by the names of Sunni and Shi’a. This is a sectarian government that you congratulate in your manifesto and which is the cause of this separation between the Sunni and Shi’a.

“3. We ask what these crocodile tears of yours for the undivided land of Iraq are, that we Kurds for many years are crying out in suffering from the oppression, killing, wounding, and forced expellation at the hand of one Iraqi government after another. Your action in the face of all of that oppression which has been done to the Kurdish Muslim community [millet]?

“4. To you we announce that we have defended our own rights within a legal, constitutional, and Islamically legal framework. By the blood of our martyrs we have preserved our freedom and state. The tragedies of Anfal which ended the lives of tens of thousands of citizens. Those mass graves, which the Ba’athist government undertook, the scholars of al-Azhar saw with their own eyes. The bombardment of the people of Kurdistan with chemical weapons at the hands of Saddam’s regime. Right now as well, the cutting of salaries by the sectarian Baghdad government. For all of these like it the Kurdish community (millet) has taken this decision.

“5. You are very concerned regarding the welfare of your Sunni brothers in Iraq, whereas those animal acts of which Shi’ite militias against Sunni parties in erasing their identities, extinguishing their religious beliefs, annexing and blowing up their mosques, exiling Sunnis from their native homes and their grandfathers and erasure of the rest, we ask where [are] your statements regarding these repugnant acts, that it is with great difficulty that a Sunni can practice

religion in peace in their own place? But in Kurdistan it is different, every practice can be undertaken with ease and happiness.

“6. It is good that you put the blame at our feet, that some citizens have raised the Israeli flag... we have hoisted the Palestinian flag for many years and have defended their rights from the minbars of our mosques, is this our reward? We ask it is permitted (halal) for you Arabs to have more than twenty of your countries, and not permitted (haram) for us Kurds, whose number of citizens is more than 40 million, to have our own state?...

“7. We announce to you that that statement of yours very feeling of Kurdistan compatriotism is estranged before you... the people of Kurdistan have are establishing their own state with the blood of martyrs. A country ... that coexists in harmony and safety and see to accepting each other. May God give you guidance in the right way – the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.” (“[The Ministry of Awqaf Gives Answers in Seven Points to al-Azhar Regarding the Referendum],” Rudaw, October 4, 2017)

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## Résumé

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OPI score from July 2010: S (2-) L (2) (Awarded in October 2018)

➤ *Iraqi Arabic* DLI test on ILR scale: (2) (Awarded in October 2018)

➤ *Levantine Arabic* DLI test on ILR scale: (2) (Awarded in October 2018)

➤ *Kurmanji Kurdish* DLI test on ILR scale: L (0+), R (0+) (Awarded in November 2018)

## Publications & Presentations

- “Islamic Identity and the Ka’ba,” in the University of Chicago publication “Lights”
- “Saintly Paradigms,” presented at Religious Studies Graduate Conference, IU April 14, 2016
- “Between Iraq and a Hard Place: The Kurdish Referendum for Independence,” presented at the BYU Kennedy Center March 28, 2018

### **Awards**

- Foreign Language & Area Studies (FLAS) scholarship for 2016-2017 academic year to study Turkish from the Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center at IU
- “Outstanding Graduate Student Award” from the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, 6 April 2016

### **Academic Appointments & Professional Experience**

- Instructor for Sorani Kurdish, Indiana University, IN – August 2019-May 2020
- Instructor for Sorani Kurdish, Indiana University’s Intensive Summer Language Workshop – June 4-July 27, 2019
- Assistant Instructor for Sorani Kurdish, Indiana University, IN – October 2018-May 2019
- Assistant Instructor for Arabic, Indiana University, IN – August 2012-May 2015
- Instructor for Arabic, Ivy Tech Community College (part-time) October 2015-April 2016
- Research Assistant, *Brigham Young University*, UT – January 2011-June 2012

### **Volunteer Experience**

- Family Mentor for Iraqi family, *International Rescue Committee*, UT  
February 2010-July 2012
- Volunteer Representative, *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*  
November 2005-November 2007