



**THE
REGIONAL
KURDISH
QUESTION IN A
GLOBAL WORLD:
*MENTALITIES,
POLICIES AND
GEOPOLITICAL
DYNAMICS***

YASİN SUNCA

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KURDISH QUESTION IN A
GLOBAL WORLD:
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GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS***

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Introduction

Although the Kurdish question inarguably is a regional issue, regardless of whatever perspective we may take, it has always, without any exception, been considered as an internal matter of states. Even efforts to factor in regional dynamics have largely been limited to contemplating the “outside’s influence on the inside.” In its pursuit of political solutions, mainstream peace studies mostly focus on actors, attempting to include those parts of the population that are involved in a conflict while considering the social and historical conditions not as the determinants of conflict but only as its influencing factors. Increasingly there is a need for a perspective that goes beyond this paradigm. Critical peace studies and critical conflict analysis have developed an important body of literature to address the shortcomings of mainstream peace studies. Following these critical approaches, this study responds to the need to broaden and deepen our perspective and engages in an in-depth analysis in order to work out more permanent solutions. Although “peaceful coexistence” is one of the major topics of debate in international relations, this debate is anchored in the dominant perspective of solving problems from within the system. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon puts forward a striking definition of the globally dominant understanding of peace which presents us with a new framework: Fanon conceives of peace as legitimate violence imposed on colonial societies as an order. Here, his emphasis is not on peace, but on new forms of violence legitimized by the prevailing form of peaceful coexistence. Adopting such a critical approach to peace requires us to interrogate our prevailing understanding of peace more thoroughly. In this framework, the main claim of this study is that those approaches to understanding and solving the Kurdish question which abstract it from its constitutive historical and systemic dynamics and squeeze it into the borders of individual states are doomed to fall short and - irrespective of the intentions of individuals or social actors - perpetuate rather than solve the problem.

This study proposes to view the framework of peaceful coexistence through a perspective that discusses the three dimensions of the Kurdish question in depth. The first one is its historicity. Rooted as it is in nation-state building processes and struggles, we should not look at this problem as if we were simply going to correct a historical mistake. Otherwise, we will fall short of detecting the underlying relationships that reproduce racist attacks, supremacist discourses, and social and political hierarchies on a daily basis, as we are currently able to observe. In other words, instead of viewing the issue as a one-time event of the past, we need to emphasize its historicity which is constantly being reproduced. The second dimension is interrelatedness. Perceiving the issue as a problem of one particular

city, geographical region, or state or the wider Middle East and discussing possible solutions within such a framework seriously limits our ability to understand the geopolitical relationality involved. On the contrary, we should rather acknowledge the interrelatedness of the global, regional, and local levels when addressing the emergence and transformations of the Kurdish question and shift our focus to discussing its solution within this framework. The third dimension is social agency. Limiting our analysis to the level of political actors leads into geopolitical reductionism when it comes to understanding the transformation dynamics and solution perspectives at the regional level. In order to also comprehend and conceptualize the geosocial and geoeconomic depth that sparks geopolitical processes, it is necessary to highlight not only political actors but also social forms of agency. Such a tri-dimensional perspective is indispensable for framing all discussions to follow.

Moreover, the Kurdish question is not discussed around the political, historical, and social convergences and imaginations of Kurdish political actors and around what they want and what they are doing (or ready to do) to achieve these goals, but rather with an eye to what the relevant states or governments want or in how far they allow a democratic order based on equality to exist. Granted, this may be due to the fact that this debate has taken shape within real conditions, because while the former is about an imagined future that is the subject of struggle, what is at stake in the latter is the preservation of power and the political and social privileges power affords for by means of the political repressive apparatuses that it holds in its service. But in fact, both perspectives are defined within a power struggle and therefore determine each other. Understanding the sum of these power struggles in their historicity opens the door to many different solution perspectives, blazing new trails that can lead out of the dilemma of liberal peace from which peace studies around the world have not been able to escape. Therefore, this study takes into account not only the actors holding power but also political structures that represent the political will of another (bottom-up) social agency in the equation of power struggles. Within this equation, this study does not solely concern itself with the distribution of power but tries to produce results that are centered on transforming the existing power relations.

Analyzing the historical, sociological, and global dimensions of the issue in conjunction with the political actors involved in the power struggles in resistance or as power-holders requires us to discuss the notion of the “Kurdish political space.” Saving a more thorough discussion for the first chapter, the “Kurdish political space” can briefly be defined as a geopolitical, geosocial, and geoeconomic sub-system with the regional Kurdish question at its center, which produces internal dynamics on

the basis of its historical, social, and political conditions. This study was written with the aim of analyzing the internal dynamics of this political space and the global and regional background of the transformations observed in these dynamics over the past twenty years, and showing what impact these have had on potential solutions to the Kurdish question at the regional level.

The theoretical perspective of this study is mainly based on two social-theoretical approaches. Firstly, and most importantly, the approach of the Latin American Grupo modernidad/colonialidad, which tries to understand power relations based on race, class, and gender by examining the historical colonial relations which lie at the root of the hierarchical construction of these relations (e.g., Dussel, 1994; Grosfoguel, 2011; Quijano, 1992). Originally developed in Latin America, this perspective has found favor with scholars around the world, especially thanks to its capacity to grasp the global level. Secondly, this study relies on an approach grounded in global historical sociology. Global historical sociology tries to understand global political transformations in their historical and sociological meaning, enabling us to make sense of the relationship between local and global transformations (e.g., Lawson, 2006; Rosenberg, 2006).

The main method of this study is historicization, that is, recent developments are thoroughly linked to their origins and current contradictions are analyzed by way of historicizing them since this offers us a perspective on exactly where to intervene. In line with the above-mentioned theoretical approaches, a historicizing approach is geared to making sense of the transformations in the power relations that render today's relations possible. The main method of analysis of this study is analysis of the correlation and interactions between levels. A historical analysis of the interactions between global, regional (Middle East), and local (Kurdish political space) processes is to show the correlation between these three levels. The study relies on secondary sources to lay bare the basic social and political structures at the global and regional levels in which the Kurdish political space operates. The sources selected for this study are made up of scientific works that fit in with the theoretical framework outlined above. Analysis of the processes undergone by the Kurdish political space and their interaction with processes at the global and regional level is primarily based on interview data.

The data used in the study is based on a total of 36 semi-structured one-on-one in-depth interviews, 5 of which were conducted specifically for this study. In order not to risk the safety of the researcher, the institution publishing this study, and the interviewees, the names of all interviewed individuals are kept confidential. The

group of interviewees includes civil society workers/representatives, representatives/sympathizers of political parties, academics specializing on the topic at hand, TV broadcasters and journalists working for various media outlets, and individuals who were engaged in politics or the revolutionary struggle in critical periods but are no longer involved in politics. What all interviewees have in common is that they are close to or a member of one of the Kurdish political movements. The interviews were conducted in Kurdish (questions in Kurmanji, answers in Kurmanji and Sorani), Turkish, and English. The interviewees were chosen to represent both the four parts of Kurdistan and the different political tendencies/parties in each part. The interviews were conducted mainly in Europe (Brussels, Paris, Hamburg, Berlin, Bielefeld, London) and Southern Kurdistan (Hewler, Sulaymaniyah), the majority in the spring and summer of 2019, and a few in the autumn of 2021. Ongoing contact was maintained with active political actors in all four parts of Kurdistan via video conferences and phone calls to confirm information when needed.

The content analysis of the interviews was conducted using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo. The interviews were integrated with the analytical perspective of this study to answer the questions, “How did Kurdish political actors shape the social and political processes at the global and regional level?” and “How did they themselves transform in these processes?” The results obtained through this analysis were included especially in the discussion concerning the Kurdish political space. The major topics that came up during the interviews with respect to each subject under discussion were interpreted in such a way as to form a whole, while also discussing their interaction with the transformations at the regional and global levels. Direct references were made to the interviews where it was deemed necessary.

Based on a literature review, the first part of this study draws an historical and theoretical framework. Once again, based on a literature review, the second and third chapters each first focus on analyzing the social and political structures that emerged at the global and regional levels in the 2000s and 2010s respectively, before engaging in an analysis of the Kurdish political space in the two periods based on the interviews. Naturally, this study cannot discuss all relevant processes in detail. It does not claim to touch on every geopolitical problem area or to include every topic of debate in the analysis, nor would it be possible to discuss the historical details of all these processes in a chronological manner. In this respect, the main concern of this study is to show that global and regional processes are an essential component of any project of peaceful coexistence. In doing so, we have to be content with identifying and discussing the geopolitical ruptures and social upheavals that occur as a result of global and regional processes, the forms of coexistence that are negotiated and

redefined within political processes, and the organizational forms determined by political agencies that arise as a result of all these dynamics.

In parallel with the decolonial perspective of this study, the purpose of choosing this methodological and analytical approach is to move the social and political agency of the Kurds to the center of the debate. As I will discuss in more detail in the first part, challenging the dominant notion of the Kurds as the mere “victims of global and regional geopolitics” and instead demonstrating how Kurdish political and social structures/organizations actively participate and even transform these geopolitical processes, is imperative if we want to situate the Kurds not simply as individuals affected by but also as subjects influencing these processes by virtue of their own agency. In analyzing political and social agencies we are not obliged to affirm, confirm, or justify those who act. On the contrary, these types of analysis proceed from the assumption that for better or worse, societies and political structures acting on behalf of social groups are subjects in their own right and that they partake in processes on the basis of this social subjectivity. Therefore, interaction analysis presents a dynamic ground that not only works from top to bottom but where all levels actively determine each other, thus enabling us to hear, at least to some extent, what Spivak calls the “voice of the subaltern.”

The first part of this study mainly tries to understand the Kurdish question, the formation of the Kurdish political space, and the dominant geopolitical, geosocial, and geoeconomic dynamics in their historical-sociological depth. The analysis in this part tries to establish the historical and social links between the global, regional and local conditions that gave rise to the Kurdish question and prompted different dynamics in the Kurdish political space. Given that the Kurdish question is largely debated as a national issue in Turkey, approaching it through the broader perspective of a regional issue can hopefully make for a fruitful contribution to the research done in this area. The second and third chapters deal with how these historically constructed dynamics have transformed within concrete geopolitical processes.

In this context, the second and third chapters touch upon distinct political processes to show what decisive role the interaction between global, regional, and local processes, which is the main thesis of this study, has played in transforming the Kurdish political space. The second part contextualizes the political and social dynamics observed throughout the 2000s in the global geopolitical processes that began after the Cold War. While the Kurdish political space took shape within an equation determined by an increasingly radical tradition of Islamist resistance against the imperialist interventions in the region in the 1990s and 2000s, two main

ideological-political orientations started to crystallize during the 2000s: democratic confederalism and classical nationalism. The social and political dynamics of this organization in the Kurdish political space were also at the source of the divisions that would grow deeper in the 2010s.

The third chapter focuses on the 2010s to analyze the dynamics behind this deepening division. In the context of an interaction between the violent manifestation of a global crisis of the liberal international order and the Arab uprisings in the Middle East, the Kurdish political space underwent a transformation: On the one hand, the chance of liberation was within reach, but on the other hand, historically determined forms of division between political actors emerged. The dynamics that started to unfold in the 2010s, when the intra-, extra-, and counter-hegemonic crises of the liberal international order were all strongly felt in the Middle East and in the Kurdish political space, and still prevail today, creating a chaos that leaves the room for something new to emerge.

Based on these discussions, this study explores the dynamics of this chaos in its global, regional, and local dimensions. In fact, this chaos in itself signals a new situation. However, the “new” does not only harbor what is good, beautiful, and moral, but is also fraught with the bad, ugly, and immoral contained in its historical-social baggage. Against this backdrop, the concluding section discusses the possibilities for and limitations to peaceful coexistence in the near future.

CHAPTER ONE

THE REGIONAL

KURDISH

QUESTION

AND THE

EMERGENCE OF

THE KURDISH

POLITICAL

SPACE AND ITS

DYNAMICS

What is the Kurdish question?

The Kurdish question can be defined in different ways. From the perspective of the states who have experienced/experience conflicts stemming from the Kurdish question, it may be defined as a problem of terrorism, separatism, underdevelopment/backwardness, imperialist interference etc.¹ But probably, one of the main reasons why the Kurdish question is a problem is the denial of its very existence. This can be observed both at the global and regional levels and at the level of various political actors within each of the states that occupy the geographical area of Kurdistan. The historical and in certain respects still ongoing denial of the Kurdish question by four different states, albeit to different extents, can be identified as its primary geopolitical cause. Although the transformations, conflicts, and contradictions of the last forty years have practically caused the problem of recognition to vanish, looking at how long it took Turkey, for example, simply to recognize this problem, may give us an idea of its sheer depth.

How the Kurdish question is defined once we move beyond this denial on the part of states is, quite importantly, a matter of scale, that is, of how we conceive of the historical and spatial dimensions of the Kurdish question. A look at the different Kurdish political actors who have been involved in the struggle until today allows us to identify their varying perspectives from the narrowest to the widest definition possible. Accordingly, the Kurdish question can be described as a cultural problem, a problem of self-government, a problem of colonialism, and a problem created by capitalist modernity. Such a categorization greatly facilitates our thinking about the issue, as each way of defining the problem is ultimately inherent in the perspectives on how to solve it.²

On a very narrow scale, the Kurdish question can be reduced to a problem of living or keeping alive a culture, which puts education in mother tongue and the free development of language and culture at the heart of the matter. In this definition, the greatest emphasis is on the identity-related dimension of the matter. Next,

¹ This study prefers to speak of the “Kurdish question” and avoids the term “Kurdish conflict”, which especially research in the area of peace studies tends to use in a problematic manner without subjecting it to any critical scrutiny. The term “Kurdish conflict” does not describe the core of the problem, but a situation arising from it, meanwhile rendering the other side(s) of the conflict invisible and reconstructing Kurdishness in a problematic way.

² In addition, the Kurdish question can also be defined as a problem of democracy (or lack thereof), but this definition is not included here because it emphasizes the conditions for the solution (democratization) of the problem rather than the historical factors lying at its root.

the Kurdish question can also be defined as a problem of self-government. The main determining factor here is that there are four states, founded to represent other peoples, which rule over the Kurds by force and violence. The definition of the Kurdish question as a problem of colonialism is based on the observation that the four states, while their histories and methods may differ, have established the geographical area of Kurdistan as a territory for exploitation. The main determining factor here is not only the denial of (self-)government but the exploitation of natural resources and workforce as a whole, and the forced assimilation of Kurdishness into the central identities constructed by the states. Debates around self-government and colonialism are often intertwined, with both ultimately emphasizing the notion of self-government along the lines of the right to self-determination. We can read this framework in parallel with the global processes of decolonization that historically occurred in three waves. In addition to all these, it is necessary to underline the internationalist perspective that has always existed in the Kurdish political space and that defines the Kurdish question in the broadest sense within the hegemonic relations brought about by capitalist modernity. This perspective is based on the argument that in treating the Kurdish question as one nation's struggle for liberation, we miss the other political, social, economic, historical, and global power relations that cause or sustain the problem. Therefore, this perspective offers a solution within a framework that calls for a more detailed interpretation and understanding of the problem in all its depth and complexity.

Based on this discussion, we can identify three basic elements that cut through all these different definitions and therefore provide us with a solid foundation to comprehend the nature of the Kurdish question at the regional level: 1) The Kurdish question is an identity problem: the non-recognition of all cultural and historical elements, including visions of the future that make identity and identity construction possible together with the complete absence or strong limitedness of the means that could keep these elements alive; 2) The Kurdish question is a problem of self-government: although there are differences regarding the form, extent, and historical foundations of this problem, which can be discussed in greater detail, this ultimately describes the fact that the Kurds do not govern themselves; 3) The Kurdish question is a question of international recognition: the lack of international political and legal recognition of both Kurdish identity and self-government.

Ultimately, it would not be wrong to define this problem as a problem of self-determination. However, self-determination is both interpreted in very different (and sometimes conflicting) ways among Kurdish political actors and indicates a fundamental and constitutive contradiction for the states that have historically

denied this right to the Kurds. Taken as a common ground, the right to self-determination refers to both state and non-state alternatives. However, since the Kurdish question has been intertwined with various other economic, social, and historical power relations all the way until today, any solution of this problem must be wary of all these factors. This is directly related to the historical, social, and political construction of the Kurdish political space.

What does the term “Kurdish political space” describe?

The Kurdish political space can be defined as the compound product of the geography in which the Kurds live, the social and political structures they have historically built, the states that have established their political and cultural sovereignty in the geography of Kurdistan, and the regional and global geopolitical, geoeconomics, and geosocial relations of all of them as a whole.³ This conceptualization, which I will discuss in greater detail below, essentially derives from the historical fragmentation of the geography of Kurdistan and the impact this has had on the Kurds, the region, and global geopolitical processes. This concept is mainly used for an analytical reason. That is, its use does not imply any political, historical, or social meaning.

Understanding “political space” as a combination of Agnew’s and Ferguson and Mansbach’s conceptualizations can help to free it from a territorial context that is limited to the space of nation-states. Agnew (1994) proposes a notion of “space” that goes beyond territorial and structural conceptualizations when analyzing the impact spatial constructs have on political-economic processes. Ferguson and Mansbach (2004: 67), on the other hand, define (political) “space” as different ways of distributing identities and loyalties attached to different political groups, seeing territoriality as just one of many different forms. The first definition emphasizes the impact of space on processes, while the second highlights space’s connection to identity and belonging with an emphasis on group consciousness. In both cases, “political space” extends beyond the borders of the nation-state. In this respect, a political space can be seen as a space in which social, political, and economic processes take place and as the sum of

³ This is true not only for the Kurds, but also for the other ethnic groups living in the region and also for the differing religious and sectarian affiliations within these identities. The Kurdish political space needs to be apprehended within this broad context of ethnicity, religion/sect, and geography. For the two most advanced mappings in this field, see Annex-1 and Annex-2. Also, for the geographical distribution of Kurdish dialects, see the map in Annex-4.

identities and forms of belonging produced by these processes.

Excluding those relations that affect and are affected by what lies outside the given borders, the temporal (as in the primordial understanding of the nation) or spatial (as in the case of the nation-state) delimitation of political space prevents us from understanding the actual relations, structures, and processes involved. In the social sciences, the term methodological nationalism is used to refer to discussions of social interactions that are specifically confined to the borders of any one nation-state. In the international relations literature, one would speak of a domestic analogy.⁴ Both terms essentially criticize the tendency to assume a homogeneous social structure within nation-states and found social (and even natural) scientific practices on these assumed homogeneous entities. However, since nation-states are political and therefore artificial constructs, the analytical plane of methodological nationalism is quite insufficient when it comes to making sense of social realities. This naturally has a direct impact on both the understanding and functioning of political and geopolitical processes. We may therefore argue that the Kurdish question, mainly because of its *trans-frontalière* (cross-border) character, cannot be understood within the given territorial confines.

Within this framework, one can state several reasons to explain why one would rather use the term Kurdish political space instead of alternative definitions like Kurdistan or the geography of Kurdistan. The main reason is also the most immediate one: Kurdistan does not refer to a state with a certain form of government and the political, social, and cultural practices that come along with it. In other words, the Kurdish question does not have to do with the internal affairs of a state called Kurdistan but with the collective problems of the Kurds who live dispersed across a very large space. In this regard, a second aspect is that due to the resistance of different identity groups, especially the historical struggle of the Kurds, the states who are confronted with a Kurdish question could not, as envisaged in the theories of nationalism and the nation-state, achieve a homogenization of their respective populations. In other words, states with a Kurdish question have to deal with the difficulties and challenges that arise in their relations with each other and with regional and global powers simply because of this problem. A third dimension is that even though they are living in different states, there is still a sense, no matter how limited, of internal solidarity among the Kurds. Despite the differing ideological/political project(ion)s of different Kurdish political movements and the tensions between them, this internal solidarity

⁴ For a discussion of methodological nationalism, see Dumitru, 2014. For a discussion of domestic analogies, see Rosenberg, 2006: 308-9.

prevails as a cross-border relationship and in many ways shapes the Kurds' internal relations and their relations with regional and global powers. These dimensions create a space of political interaction that has its own sub-dynamics. In line with these considerations, throughout this study, the terms Bashur (South), Bakur (North), Rojava (West) and Rojhilat (East) are used to refer to the regions in Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran, respectively, which are predominantly inhabited by Kurds and politically affected by the Kurdish question in the first degree. This terminology enables us to make sense of the historical, social, economic, and political dynamics of the Kurdish political space, which differs according to the states, within their own context.

With reference to Bozarslan (2013: 23), one may choose to use the concept of the "Kurdish political space" because it grasps the Kurdish question in all its complexity and includes all its repercussions at the level of the Middle East. Conceiving of the Kurdish political space as a sub-system in the Middle East which has its own internal dynamics and, through these dynamics, interacts with the rest of the region and the world, will facilitate our understanding of the discussions that follow.

The emergence of the Kurdish political space

With reference to academic works in the field of political geography, we have already stated the two main characteristics of political space. First, space's impact on political, economic, and social processes and second, the identities, emotions, and forms of belongings that occur during these processes. In the Kurdish political space, the formation of these can be analyzed in three intertwined dimensions: political borders, mentalities, and struggles. We can start from the observation that in the geographical area where the Kurds have historically lived, political borders have not been able to vitiate the determining effect of space but have given rise to various conflicts between mentalities that resemble each other despite being linked to different and fragmented identities. As a result of the conflicts between these similar mentalities, the spatial necessity of peaceful coexistence is constantly under threat.

Borders

The Kurds are historically connected by ties of kinship and/or through a kind of internal solidarity that derives from the fact that they speak the same language and/or share the same culture. A summary history of their division by state borders can

help us to make sense of today's dynamics.⁵ Historically speaking, the construction of borders can be viewed in two stages: empire and nation-state borders. Borders are one of the most decisive factors in the consolidation of the Kurdish political space as it is today.

For a long time, the Kurds lived as the border people of two empires. The first border dividing the Kurdish people was the border between the Ottomans and the Safavids. This border came into being as a result of the Treaty of Qasr-e Shirin (1637) between the Ottomans and the Safavids and subsequently did not undergo any significant changes. While the Kurdish population and the geographical region that historically makes up Kurdistan were for the larger part located in the Ottoman lands, there also was a substantial share of the Kurdish population that was living under Safavid control. In this period, as the border peoples of both empires, the Kurds became involved in the political, military, and economic relations of the empires through autonomous emirates (*mîrtî*) that were modeled as tribal confederations (McDowall, 1996: 27; van Bruinessen, 1992: 157-161). For the empires, the region inhabited by the Kurds formed a space that was very difficult to control by force, but which should also not be lost because of the strategic protection it offered against the other empire. For these two main reasons, the Kurdish tribal confederations, which resembled a form of autonomy, were a quite convenient solution for the empires (van Bruinessen, 1992: 174). Given the empires' loose and open border policy, being part of an empire did not pose a major problem for the Kurds.⁶ This had a direct impact on generating two dynamics that still prevail in the Kurdish political space today. First, being settled in the northern regions of the Zagros mountain range has provided a strategic defense advantage to the Kurds and the political structures they established. Secondly, the autonomy acquired by Kurdish structures in return for their subordination to the empires would later turn out to be a historical and political disadvantage for the Kurds. Especially during the time when nation-states came into being elsewhere, this autonomy became an obstacle for Kurdish nationalist leaders who were waging a struggle for independence. This latter dimension will be part of a broader discussion in the context of mentalities below. At the risk of falling into anachronism, it is possible to contend that this historical construction, having gone through various transformations, is still valid in today's political conditions. We will see examples of this in the next two chapters of this study, which deal with the transformations that

⁵ Here, it is important to point out that we are dealing with a type of internal solidarity that, unlike the 'imagined community' that Anderson (1991) uses to describe processes of nation building or the 'form of social solidarity' that Durkheim (2007) conceived of in his definition of modern society, is created by ethnic affiliation and concrete blood ties and kinship relations and manifests itself in waves.

⁶ For a discussion of empires, loose borders, and the Middle East, see Ellis, 2015.

have occurred over the last twenty years.

The consolidation of borders and the evolution of their current meaning are directly related to the nation-state building processes. In the broadest sense, the interaction between states that achieved political independence in the second and third waves of decolonization⁷ and communities that were not ultimately recognized as a people in these processes constitute the overall framework of the Kurdish question in the Middle East. In other words, looking at the nation-state building processes that affected the whole world on a global scale and their interactions with the social, political, and economic structures that already existed in the Middle East will help us to understand the construction and transformations of the Kurdish political space during the 19th and 20th centuries. From this date on, we are no longer talking about loose borders, but about nation-state borders that are increasingly fortified and subjected to tight control.

At this point, it would be good to outline, in very general terms, how today's borders came into being.⁸ The border between Iran and the former Ottoman lands, including Iraq, which still prevails today, was consolidated as nation-state borders at the beginning of the 19th century. Turkey's borders, which divide the geography of Kurdistan in the south divide, largely took shape (except for the uncertainties regarding the provinces Iraq and Mosul – and Syria and Hatay) as a result of the Turkish struggle for independence, which was supported by the Kurds living within the borders of Turkey. The border between Syria and Iraq took shape under the direct influence of France and England, which designated the Ottoman lands in the Levant as their spheres of influence in the notorious Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916). Although the French and British did not exactly get what they wanted because of struggles between themselves and with the local powers, this agreement caused the division of the regions that are today known as Rojava and Bashur.

The centralization of administration practices within these boundaries is also a determining factor for practices of state violence and social and political resistance against it. Over the preceding two hundred years, the Qajars and the Ottomans had

⁷ Historically, we can talk about three waves of decolonization, the first one being the declarations of independence that started in the Americas at the end of the 18th century, the second one referring to the independent nation-states that broke free from the collapsing Russian, German, Habsburg and Ottoman empires during and after the First World War, and the third one finally being the independences gained in the “third world” especially after the Second World War (Kennedy, 2016).

⁸ As these processes are mostly known, it will suffice to briefly recall what role this issue played in the construction of the Kurdish political space.

already developed practices to centralize the administration (Matin, 2013). These tendencies eventually gave rise to two constitutional monarchies, when the Tanzimat Edict (1839) was adopted in the Ottoman Empire and the Constitutional revolution (1906) took place in Qajar Iran. Following the proclamation of the Republic in Anatolia in 1923 and the transfer of power to the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran in 1925, efforts to create a secular and homogeneous nation grew stronger. A similar process of centralization can also be observed in Iraq and Syria, which were under the mandate of England and France, respectively, as the two nations gradually progressed toward independence. The direct consequence of this centralization in terms of the Kurdish political space has been that these states have seen the existence of the Kurds as an internal and external political threat, and that the central powers ruling as the sovereigns within these borders, have been able to legitimately make use of violence.⁹

In conclusion, it is possible to state the following: Despite all its historical contradictions, coexistence was most significantly dismantled by the nation-state borders, which became more manifest due to states' centralization practices. This concerns not only the Kurds but all peoples in the region. Resistance to states' centralization practices is one of the main causes of the protracted conflicts in the region. The division of the region historically known as Kurdistan by nation-state borders should be placed in the context of wider regional and global transformations. Today's borders came into being in two stages: first, the division of the Kurds as the border people of two empires; second, the construction of nation-states in the wake of a collapse of empires following World War I, and the formation of a nationalist resistance against the efforts of imperialist Western powers to establish dominance. The major implication this had for the Kurdish political space was that the newly founded states, which held the monopoly of violence in their hands, reconstructed the Kurds as "rebels" or "collaborators" in their hegemonic discourses.

Mentalities

The second key factor in the construction of the Kurdish political space is the import of nationalism as a natural and necessary social, political, and ideological model from

⁹ Here, we need to underline that state violence against the Kurds (and other social groups) has been marshaled by the political elites. Despite different problems and conflicts that arise from time to time, there has always been a form of interaction and coexistence among the peoples. It should also be emphasized that there has always been common organization or periodic cooperation between Kurdish communists or Islamists and their Arab, Turkish, or Persian counterparts. In this respect, we need to make a distinction between the institutionalized practices of the state and other social and political relations. However, it should be underlined that the top-down definition of such policies under the leadership of elites fosters an anti-Kurdish racism because these policies provide privileges to different social groups. For a more detailed analysis of this last aspect, see Ünlü, 2018.

Europe to the Middle East, mostly through nationalist leaders. While the structure and borders of the nation-state defined the institutional framework of this import, nationalism as an ideological formation acted as the main dynamo in various transformation processes since the 17th century. The spread of nationalism brought about a new fragmentation in respect of practices of coexistence that had developed in the imperial periods and were based on the notion of the *ummah* (i.e., the Muslim community). The dominant mentality in the context of creating homogeneous nations shows itself in the state-led annihilation/deportation, externalization, or forcible assimilation of all identities and affiliations that are considered as outside of the homogeneous imagination (Conversi, 2007; Miley, 2018).

Whatever the “imagined nation” they act in the name of, we need to talk about an Orientalist revolutionary leadership and the kind of subjectivity it constructed. These actors were aware that their own perceptions are Eurocentric, but in their pursuit of elevating their societies to the “level of contemporary civilizations” by means of a revolution, they did not see any harm in imposing their imaginations by force. Understanding this revolutionary subjectivity is key to understanding the nationalisms that evolved in the region. Under the influence of the dominant paradigm of modernization, an Orientalized Orientalist revolutionary leadership engaged in practices of destroying all traces of “the local” and using political force to assimilate geosocial reality into the form coded as advanced (Maldonado-Torres, 2016: 14).¹⁰ In other words, for this revolutionary vanguard that acts on an internalized Orientalism, “the local” represents a form of subjectivity that needs to be civilized, corrected, or disciplined (Soguk, 1993).

That such policies became possible is directly related to the ideological sources of the nationalisms in the region. The multinational form of social coexistence left over from the empires was faced with a process of Westernization that was imposed from the top down with the aim of achieving progress and modernization. In all four countries, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey, these processes unfolded after a revolution or a rupture that drew a clear line between the old and the new (Azeez, 2016). After this shift, a

¹⁰ This postcolonial argument, which is historically justified at its core, is employed on a very problematic political plane in the discourse of the AKP government in Turkey and partly in Iran and the Arab world. These three (and all other postcolonial discourses that are constructed without a critique of the state) have in common that they construe their struggles against the dominant powers as driven by the dream of creating their own hegemony, while ignoring the victimization and hierarchical relations of domination they have created in their own political and social domains. That is, the historical justification is constructed and employed as a functional instrument of power and domination. Erdoğan’s frequent reminder vis-à-vis the UN Security Council that “the world is bigger than five”, or the Iranian regime’s rhetoric about the great Aryan race can serve as examples of these discourses.

state-led and exclusionary brand of nationalism became dominant. In connection with the second wave of global decolonization, (full) independence, seen as a “civilizational standard,” eventually became a guiding principle. That is, in order to deal with the problems that in certain aspects had their cause in European imperialism, leaders resorted to nationalism and the nation-state – a Eurocentric solution after all.

In the Kurdish political space, this mentality directly translated into a politics of assimilation. Although the exact practices differed from one state to another, the Kurds were defined as a group that had to be civilized and included in the homogeneous nation. At the core, these assimilationist policies rested on the assumption that Kurdishness did not constitute an identity in its own right. Through the policies implemented in Turkey and Iran, the assumption that the Kurds were Turks or Aryans, respectively, was imposed as an apparent reality by force. In Turkey, this policy was based on the denial of the existence of the Kurds until the 2000s, but after years of struggle and sacrifice, it became politically impossible to sustain it any longer. In Iran, on the other hand, instead of a policy of denial, the aim was to assimilate the Kurds to Iran by viewing them as part of the Aryan race.¹¹ While the Kurdish language was not banned, education in Kurdish or political activities carried out in order to promote the rights of the Kurdish people were punished with severe penalties, including execution. The same policy was carried out in Iraq, where all groups whose fate depended on an Arab state, including Kurds, Armenians, or black people, were considered as Arab people (Bozarslan, 1997: 49). In Syria, the state's practice was based on the externalization of the Kurds. In terms of political practices, this meant that around 300,000 Kurds were stripped of their citizenship, while an Arab population was resettled to the areas that were historically inhabited by the Kurds, effectively constructing the so-called Arab belt (Tejel, 2009: 51).

One should also note that there were other political structures that emerged during the imperial era and that the same modernist mentality bequeathed to the political struggles which would take place in the 21st century. The first of these is political Islam, which, even though it mainly left its mark on the past twenty years, essentially developed as a form of resistance to a modernization process imposed from above. Instead of developing a secular polity, which can be considered as a prerequisite for a democratic republic, states forged a problematic brand of laicism. While this top-down form of laicism was most clearly pursued in Turkey and Iran, similar policies

¹¹ In this respect, it is also instructive that the word “Iran” means “land of the Aryans”.

can be observed throughout the Middle East until the 1970s.¹² For example, Atatürk's principles, which were written as a kind of modernization doctrine, could very easily have been written by Nasser in Egypt or by Reza Shah in Iran; they reflect the same spirit (Richards et al., 2008: 465). As a result, the state brought pressure to bear on the religious structures, which had penetrated into the capillaries of society through sects and communities. The fact that laicism was imposed by force is one of the most important factors contributing to the emergence of political Islam. During the Cold War, NATO supported political Islam in order to contain the Soviets, allowing it to flourish. Later, interventions and sanctions, especially on the part of the USA, led these forces to radicalize and become jihadist (Matin, 2018).

Politics with Islamic references, in the broadest sense of the word, had direct and indirect effects on the Kurdish political space. First, left-leaning Kurdish political structures, especially those on the axis of the KDP, which had acted in pursuit of national liberation until the 1970s, increased their traditionalist and Islamic rhetoric in the 1980s (Bozarslan, 2003). Secondly, there were social groups which translated their religious sensitivities into political discourse while at the same time emphasizing Kurdish identity. This not only generated support for parties that articulated their politics through Islamic references, as in Turkey, but also directly led to the founding of political parties, as in Iraq. Third is the direct impact that the sectarian dimension of religionism has had on the transformations in the Kurdish political space. The main determining dynamic here is that the Kurdish political movements, caught as they are within the cultural codes of the Kurdish Sunni majority, have created structures that politically excluded the Shiite, Alevi and Yazidi (religious) minorities.¹³ This has also affected the inclusiveness and expansion of the Kurdish movements.¹⁴ For example, in Iran, the Kurdish national liberation movements that are traditionally made up of Sunnis and Sorans have not been able to persuade the Shiite Kurds. Likewise, some of the Kurdish Alevis in Turkey adopt the political discourses of Kemalist laicism, which they see as an antithesis to the Islamist repressions, which they experienced in the past, mostly at the hands of Kurdish Sunnis. Finally, it needs to be underlined that the image of the Kurd fighting against jihadism had a direct impact on the transformation of the Kurdish political space. This will be discussed in more detail in the last two chapters of this study.

¹² Although the dynasties in the Gulf underwent a process of modernization based on traditionalism, secularism was never a basic principle here.

¹³ For a detailed mapping of the religious and sectarian distribution in the Kurdish political space, see. Annex-3.

¹⁴ The major exception to this, as will be discussed throughout this study, is the ideological openness of the democratic confederal approach.

When discussing mentalities, one should also mention tribalism as another social dynamic in the transformation of the Kurdish political space. Historically, tribes were one of the social structures that saved Kurdishness from extinction but in their interaction with modernization processes, a hybrid structure emerged that turned them into useful tool for hegemonic interests (van Bruinessen, 2019). On the one hand, as will be discussed below, Kurds' attempts to build a nation failed in the course of the nationalist power struggles. On the other hand, the relations of a limited number of tribes, which have established limited areas of sovereignty for themselves, with different power centers have become one of the principal micro-sources of political tensions among Kurds. The top-down modernist mentality and the political subjectivities it created played a central role in the construction of the Kurdish political space. However, it should be underscored that this mentality is part of a process that not only Turks, Persians, or Arabs, but also Kurds go through at the level of political elites and that determines today's conditions. It would not be wrong to identify the homogenizing modernist mentality as another major obstacle to peaceful coexistence. This mentality engenders the basic approach of centralizing states. Historically, however, Kurdish political actors, despite their periodical tolerance and inclusiveness and discursive openness, are not free from these homogenization practices either.

Local Struggles

Dominating the last two centuries of the Ottoman Empire, the modernization process, as partly discussed above, involved not only the Turks, Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, and other peoples but also the Kurds. In other words, at the time of the transition from empires to nation-states, Kurds were also mobilizing around a Kurdish nationalism (van Bruinessen, 1992: 229). Following Hroch (1985), we may identify stage A of this nationalist mobilization in Kurdish nationalist leaders' attempts to conceptualize a notion of Kurdishness. The main problem, however, occurred in stage B, which was about the dissemination of this idea among the public. Therefore, stage C, the creation of a nationalist movement through mass mobilization, could not be achieved at that time. In how far this has been achieved today is still a matter of debate.

This can be explained by two basic relationships/contradictions. First, the contradictions between the urban Kurdish leaders who favored modernization and the tribal landlords and sheikhs, whose traditional political and social structures dominated locally. The second is the dynamics of this political and social elite and its relationship with different power centers in the same period.

In this context, it would not be wrong to look for the historical roots of the Kurdish question in the centralization tendencies of the empires which we partially discussed above. Defensive modernization was the common reflex of the Ottomans and Qajars, who prospered internally as a result of colonization and imperial practices, but gradually declined vis-à-vis the surging European states which were about to become global hegemonic powers (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, 2015). In the face of this situation, the empires started to strengthen their centers, to renew their armies in order to increase their competitive capacities, and to develop relations with the European powers. Moreover, they took steps to centralize their administrative structures which they had inherited from previous centuries. One of the direct results of this process was the disruption of the political structure of the Kurds that was made up of principalities (*mirlik*), which constituted a form of autonomy. In the second half of the 19th century, the Botan and Baban principalities, which had already had a problematic relationship with each other, disintegrated as a direct result of the centralization policies of the empires (Bozarslan, 2013a; Matin, 2013). Despite their resistance, the principalities had to succumb to these transformation processes. This first struggle can be viewed as the central struggle that constituted the Kurdish political space.

Given the important role that the principalities played between the power centers on the one hand and the Kurdish people on the other hand, their dissolution created a power vacuum in Kurdistan, which the aghas and sheikhs started to fill. Various power centers (i.e., the Ottoman Empire and the imperialist powers who were trying to bring the region under their control) used the divisions between the Kurdish aghas and sheikhs to pursue a politics of divide and rule. Simultaneously, the Kurdish beys, who were appointed to various administrative, military, and bureaucratic positions in the center of the Ottoman Empire, started to pursue a nationalist agenda, like the leaders of other peoples living in the Ottoman Empire. However, these beys' actual relations with the society in Kurdistan were very limited. In this dual dynamic, the aghas and sheikhs in Kurdistan took an attitude more in favor of the Ottomans, that is, the ummah and the empire, while the beys in the cities tried to model their own nationalist project but were unable to popularize their efforts because their relations with the Kurds in the region were rather weak (Bajalan, 2016; Özoğlu, 2001). This division is a central but not the only factor preventing the construction of a Kurdish nationalism. Coupled with other modern divisions that emerged among the Kurds over time, the effects of this division have played an important role in the construction and continuity of the Kurdish political space, especially today.

After the division of the Kurdish political space by nation-state borders, we can observe a differentiated and increasingly idiosyncratic form of political struggle

throughout the 20th century. Here, the central dynamic in terms of Kurdish political actors appears in the form of two distinct, yet often intersecting struggles. The common traditions of struggle of Rojhilat and Bashur on the one hand, and Bakur and Rojava on the other hand, largely laid the foundation for today's political orientations. This is most clearly illustrated by the examples of the Republic of Mahabad and the formation of the party Xoybûn. After the Kurdish tribal revolts in the 1920s, especially the Simko revolt in Iran, had not led to any tangible results, the Soviet invasion of northern Iran in 1941 created a geopolitical opportunity. From that date onward, Mahabad and its environs were ruled by a Kurdish people's government under the leadership of Qazi Mihemed and declared its independence in 1945. But when the Soviets were pressured to withdraw from Iran, especially by Britain and the United States, Mahabad disintegrated in 1946, after having survived as a republic for less than a year. One of the main reasons for Mahabad's disintegration was that the tribes were aware of the changing circumstances and withdrew their support for Qazi, and that resistance against the Iranian military could therefore have resulted in a massacre (Eagleton, 1963). Mele Mistefa Barzani, who was the army commander of the Republic of Mahabad during this period, already announced the establishment of the Iraqi KDP before Mahabad dissolved. After the dissolution of Mahabad, Barzani and the forces under his command fought against the Iranian soldiers, managing to cross into Soviet territory. Rife with betrayal and partnership, the relationship between these two structures has lasted until today. Likewise, the reason why different factions of the KDP-Iran and Komala are settled in camps in Southern Kurdistan today can be traced back to this period.

Xoybûn, on the other hand, was a party founded by a group of Kurdish notables who moved to Rojava and then to Damascus in the aftermath of the Sheik Said rebellion that had taken place after the proclamation of the republic in Turkey. Xoybûn was the leading force in the Ararat rebellion, which was suppressed with great state violence, ultimately ending up in a massacre of civilians that would go down in history as the Zilan massacre. In the years 1937-38, a rebellion took place in Dersim against the central state's policy to interfere with the local Alevi Kurdish population in an attempt to "civilize" and "develop" the region, as official discourse purported. This rebellion, too, was put down in an episode of massive state violence, which would later be described as the Dersim massacre (or genocide). Until the 1950s, there was no further unrest within the borders of Turkey and all activity in the context of Kurdish political demands was suppressed with great state violence. Aided by an atmosphere of relative political openness in Turkey since the 1950s, it was mostly Kurdish intellectuals and notables who developed the Kurdish movement. In the 1960s, the movement was organized in and around the TIP. Under the leadership of young

cadres who favored the idea of armed struggle, the movement became increasingly radicalized in the 1970s. Immediately before and after the 1980 military coup in Turkey, several organizations, including Kurdish movements, went to the PLO camps in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. On this occasion, the PKK, which was one of the organizations to visit the PLO camps, established direct contact with the Kurdish regions in Rojava to set up mutual ties. Thus, political relations between Rojava and Bakur, which were already connected through their historical and cultural affinities, could develop more organically.

Meanwhile, there have always been relationships between the political actors of all four parts. That is to say, the relations between Rojava and Bakur on the one and Rojhilat and Bashur on the other hand did not preempt other ways of relating to each other. Until the 1980s, the Kurdish political struggle can best be described as a relatively left-leaning national liberation movement. This is particularly true for Rojhilat and Bakur. In Bashur, however, the Kurdish movement transformed after 1975, mainly for pragmatic reasons, developing an increasingly conservative profile (Bozarslan, 1997: 122–130). The ideological-political bifurcation of the Kurdish political space in the 1990s and 2000s, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, is rooted in the dynamics that arose in this period.¹⁵ In fact, both sides of this bifurcation in the struggle were based on a critique of the Soviets: While traditional Kurdish nationalists' critique mostly rested on pragmatic reasons, there also was an internationalist critique of real socialism that was geared to developing a new line of ideological and political organization.

In this section, we discussed three processes – borders, mentalities, and struggles – that played a decisive role in the emergence and historical construction of the Kurdish political space. We may conclude this section with the following observations: Taking into account different identity formations and affiliations that cannot be delimited by political borders in the context of regional mentalities and local struggles is indispensable for any discussion about peace that is taking place under today's conditions. The borders, mentalities, and forms of struggle that I have tried to summarize here constitute the foremost obstacles to peaceful coexistence. In order to make sense of the transformations that the Middle East as a whole and the Kurdish

¹⁵ In the following sections, I will frequently use the term “ideological-political transformation”. This term does not refer to an absolute ground such as the unconditional application of a certain ideology, but has to do with the periodic representations of the idea of final liberation that keep transforming within political processes. Since this definition embraces a variety of positions, from organizational pragmatism to the different usages of the maxim that states that “the end justifies the means”, it can prevent us from reducing the transformation of Kurdish political actors to only ideological or only political grounds.

political space in particular have gone through over the course of the past twenty years, we need to understand these historical-sociological dynamics which occasioned their formation in the first place. In other words, if we want to understand peaceful coexistence through an analytical perspective that goes beyond Eurocentric political actor analyses, we need to discuss the transformations at the geopolitical level with due regard to their historical, social, and global dimensions. In the next section, we will discuss how the historical-sociological background that we have established so far can be translated into geopolitical dynamics.

The main social and geopolitical dynamics of the Kurdish political space

The basic contradiction at the heart of the Kurdish political space, which is thrown into relief by the historical account above, is between Kurds' struggle to fulfill their right of self-determination and states' fight against this struggle for the sake of their own survival. However, trying to find a solution to the Kurdish question in individual countries, rather than at the regional level, and treating the issue as if it were but an internal problem of those countries, only serves to reinforce the current deadlock. What lies at the base of this question is a ground of legitimacy built on the principle of national sovereignty in a world of nation-states. This constitutive contradiction produces a variety of conflict dynamics for Kurdish political and social actors and the states established in the geographical area of Kurdistan, as well as in terms of regional and global geopolitical transformations. These dynamics are crucial factors in determining both the internal peace among the Kurds and the conditions of reconciliation between the political actors and the relevant states.

Kurdish political actors

In terms of Kurdish political and social actors the main dynamic takes shape within an equation of resistance and assimilation. As discussed above, one of the main aspects that the four states which once waged their own struggle for self-determination have in common is their rejection of the Kurds' right to self-determination. Kurdish political and social actors can respond to this in two ways. The first option is to do nothing. The obvious result of such an attitude is absorption into one of the state's grand national narratives and the identity constructed by this narrative. The second option is to engage in some form of political or social resistance and ultimately to secure the right to self-determination. This inevitably leads to a confrontation with the state that rules

as the sovereign over the respective part of the Kurdish political space. The dynamic created by this predicament can be observed in the entire Kurdish political space.

Another important geopolitical issue (or weakness) in terms of Kurdish political actors is the “inability to achieve national unity”, which can be traced back to a mental fragmentation. As discussed above, the Kurds were unable to create a national sentiment because they failed to fully develop a national consciousness before the borders that divided them were consolidated. This was further supported and perpetuated by the fact that they were socializing with the other peoples who made up the population of the sovereign state, and that their commercial activity, their education, their political resistance, and all their other exchanges took place within the borders of this state. For the Kurdish political space, this came with the direct consequence that each part of Kurdistan defines the Kurdish question as its own problem, taking itself as the starting point when developing any perspectives to solve the issue. The collective memory that formed under such conditions was further proliferated as every region basically narrated its own history, so that national sentiments remained confined to each region for a long time (Vali, 1998).

While theoretically targeting the whole of Kurdistan, in practice, the solutions developed by Kurdish national liberation movements mostly prioritized the problems of their own region. This gave rise to geopolitical dynamics that obscured the fact that the Kurdish question needed to be solved at the regional level, reproducing a state-centric perspective by construing the Kurdish question as an issue of individual nation-states and at times even pitting political actors against the Kurdish movements in the other parts because they were prioritizing the problem of one particular part.

In fact, there have always been political agreements and communal sentiments among Kurdish organizations. Politically, there is the agreement between Öcalan and Barzani that paved the way for the PKK to establish itself in the Qandil region. Another example would be the fact that the KDP-Iran and the Komala (also due to other dynamics) have set up camps in lands that are still under the control of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government. In addition to these, the Anfal genocide, that is, Saddam Hussein’s genocidal campaign against the Kurds, or the Kobanî resistance against the Islamic State, which affected all Kurds, indicate communal sentiments at the level of societies (Gunes, 2019: 10). But although there have been various efforts to organize a national movement that could draw from a certain history (see Bajalan, 2009), the fragmentation of the Kurdish space has provided a very fertile ground for political exploitation and instrumentalization. I will further elaborate on this point in the discussion on the global and regional geopolitics.

The states

In terms of the domestic policies of the states in the Kurdish political space that host a Kurdish population which they cannot assimilate, the major dynamic consists in an understanding of politics that problematizes internal differences in relation to the question of the states' own survival and their search for unconditional (national) sovereignty. When this is considered together with the resistance of the Kurds, it appears that these states are facing a conflict dynamic which they have had to deal with since their very foundation.

The positions taken by these states vis-à-vis each other in the Kurdish political space also harbor a dynamic that concerns the regional geopolitical balances. Whenever there is an improvement, transformation, or change regarding the rights of the Kurds or their status as an identity group in any of the states facing a Kurdish question, this causes the other states to be overly alert and launch direct or indirect interventions (Bozarslan, 1997: 45 ff.). The states are trying to prevent any positive developments regarding the Kurds from taking place in any of the four parts. We have witnessed several instances of this attitude in the 21st century. This dynamic is exemplified by the almost coordinated opposition of Iran and Turkey to the independence referendum of the Kurdistan regional government in Iraq or the repeated incursions of Turkish soldiers in Rojava.

Meanwhile, we can also identify a second dynamic where states may use the Kurdish question in another country against this state in the context of their geopolitical interests. This may actually be to the benefit of Kurdish political and military actors who pursue their own agenda because it allows them to take advantage of the contradictions inherent in the region. One of the most tangible examples is Hafez al-Assad's attempt to interfere with Turkey's regional interests and objectives by establishing a relationship with Öcalan through the Syrian intelligence service. The last dynamic worth mentioning is the efforts of regional and global powers, who are striving to establish a certain dominance in the Kurdish political space, to intervene in the internal affairs of weaker actors or to instrumentalize them. Kurdish political actors and the regional states both face similar dynamics in this regard. In this context, the four states often accuse the Kurdish political actors, whom they try to subdue, of being toys of imperialism or foreign powers.

Global geopolitical struggles

The geography of Kurdistan, both historically and at the present, is located as a buffer zone in the middle of many geopolitical and geosocial polarizations. It has already been discussed above that the fact that the Kurds were the border people of two empires and lived at the heart of the areas where the British and the French wanted to exert influence created a long-term condition that still affects the present. During the Cold War period, the geographical area of Kurdistan was divided, in a sense, the north, i.e., (pre-revolution) Iran and Turkey, taking sides with NATO, and the south, namely Syria and Iraq, being closer allied to the Soviet Union. Additionally, it should also be noted that the south of Kurdistan is mostly Arab, while its north is mostly Turkish and Persian (Unver, 2016). Currently, the Kurdish political space has become a focal point of the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West. Along with the geographical fragmentation and the fragmented mentalities, analyses of the Kurdish political space should also take into account its position as a geopolitical and geosocial buffer zone.

There are two distinct ways of analyzing how the basic dynamic in the global geopolitical configurations affects the Kurds and the states under whose rule they live. As far as the Kurds are concerned, their weak political movements had to put up with imperialist powers' instrumentalization efforts and practices throughout history (Matin, 2020). This could most recently be observed when the US first supported the YPG and YPJ forces (which were renamed as SDF following the inclusion of other troops) in their fight against ISIS but then left them to their own devices against the interventions of the Turkish army, after the territorial presence of ISIS had been diminished.¹⁶

Moreover, global powers have always sought ways to advance their own interests at the regional level by using the weaknesses of the states in the Kurdish political space resulting from the Kurdish question. For example, while Saddam Hussein could only become so powerful thanks to the support of the USA, which even kept silent about the Anfal campaign and the Halabja massacre (Chomsky, 2003), the atrocities against the Kurdish population were later cited as one of the reasons for the 2003 intervention in Iraq that was presented in a framework of cosmopolitan human rights (Çubukçu, 2011).

¹⁶ The emphasis here is on the United States' intention. Otherwise, the struggle taken up by the YPG and YPJ to defend their own regions requires another plane and level of analysis.

In conclusion, we can state the following: In the Kurdish political space, the peaceful coexistence of Kurds with other peoples hinges upon the dynamic of resistance against assimilation and denial. This dynamic directly determines the internal peace among Kurds, the regional geopolitical processes, and the interaction with the global hegemonic powers.

Kurdish political actors at the beginning of the 21st century

The main objective of the analyses made so far, as stated in the introduction, is to make sense of the historical transformations that have occurred in the 21st century in order to assess the geopolitical possibilities of efforts to find a peaceful and negotiation-based solution. In this context, Kurdish political actors should be viewed in their entirety to interpret their interactions with other actors in the Kurdish political space, their relations with the forces that intervene in the region from outside, and finally, their perspectives on how these relations and conflict dynamics can be channeled into a vision of peace. Looking at the political projects of Kurdish political actors, the social bases which these projects rely on, and the relations occasioned by these projects, will help us to understand the geopolitical processes in the first two decades of the 21st century.

In his article on the geopolitical spaces of the regional Kurdish question, Kamran Matin (2020) essentially mentions three political projects: classical nationalism, revolutionary socialism, and Islamist self-government. Matin considers the idea of democratic confederalism, which the PKK-led Kurdish movement has conceptualized and put to practice especially in the last two decades, as a product of the project of revolutionary socialism. While I do not want to argue this claim in theory, I do think that democratic confederalism deserves being considered as a distinct project, because it envisages a practice that is explicitly anti-nationalist and situated outside the classical forms of self-government. United only in the idea that the Kurds should somehow rule themselves, there are different approaches as to how this is to happen, their differences mainly stemming from ideological positions that have developed within a multiplicity of relations.

The classical nationalist position pursues independence at the ideological level, but in practice it exploits this goal for political purposes. The KDP and the KDP-Iran can be cited as representatives of classical nationalism. Although classical nationalism is the

longest-running political tradition in Kurdistan, it has a highly controversial history full of internal betrayals. Nonetheless, it somehow manages to influence the struggles in the other parts. Although it is difficult to define its social basis, especially due to the inclusion of different segments that want to get their share from the economic pie that has grown since the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government, one can describe it as a structure based on a traditional Sunni Kurdish brand of nationalism.

In some form, this political tradition is represented in each part. It has its buttress in the South in the KDP, which at the present is largely under the control of the Barzani family. The KDP-Iran also still has some if waning power in Rojhilat (the East). While this political view offers an alternative Kurdish nationalism to the one of the revolution in Rojava, its influence in the North is very limited. The KDP, in its current and historical practice of traditional nationalism, displays an extremely pragmatic behavior regarding regional geopolitical issues. For example, the KDP has maintained very good relations with Turkey's AKP government since 2007 and received ample support from Iran especially during the Iran-Iraq war. It has historical experience in partnering up with forces that can offer it global support, as well as with local actors. For example, the classical nationalists acted in concert with the communists in the Iraq of the '50s and '60s under the presidency of General Qasim, who received the tacit support of the Soviets, and later shifted to the right when the regional power relations underwent changes in the '70s.

There is another ideological tendency that adopts a socialist and in the case of some organizations revolutionary position, pursuing different goals within the wider context of the right to self-determination, ranging from a federation to independence. In this category we can include structures that criticize the political leadership, which mainly concerns the growing right-wing profile and the military failures of the classical nationalists. The most important example of such structures is the Komala, which was founded in Rojhilat. Like the KDP-Iran, the Komala mainly has its basis in the Sunni-Soran population. Witnessing an internal division between the socialists and Kurdish nationalist socialists in the early 2000s, the party, which has been able to survive in camps that are largely under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government, is considerably weaker today. In Bashur, at least in the period after its emergence, the PUK can be considered as a representative of the socialist position. But following the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government it shifted its policy, being in no way inferior to the KDP with respect to its ties with tribes and rentier state practices, thus moving away from a socialist stance pushing for transformation. There were many structures that pursued such a course in the north

before the 1980 coup. From the 1980s to the 2000s, the PKK followed this tradition but later on underwent a radical transformation, eventually growing critical of the idea of national liberation. Although this ideological camp has never been the main force in any field, it offers us a lot of analytical data as its internal transformations are intertwined with the political transformations of the world and the Kurds.

Finally, within the Islamist tradition, there is a range of factions that differ greatly from each other and find their common denominator in envisioning an Islamic government that is branded by Kurdishness. However, this camp too has never become the main determining force in any place. The main forces representing this tradition, perhaps, are Hüda-Par in the North and the Kurdistan Islamic Union in the South. There is a Kurdish and Islamic political tradition in Rojhilat that is not represented by any party but still has a certain strength. We can observe different levels of radicalism in this camp, which generally organizes around Islamic sensitivities. For example, while the KIB in the South is closer to the Muslim Brotherhood, Hüda-Par's position is much more radical. This political tradition has historically represented a significant share of society but has never achieved to become one of the main political actors in the Kurdish political space.

In addition to these, democratic confederalism emerged as an ideological project in the 2000s and a practical agenda in the 2010s – even though it needs to be said that the debates on democratic federalism, although the latter is not explicitly mentioned, date back to the 90s. Embodying an internationalist political agenda and a social imagination that prioritizes a common life together, this idea, which was put into practice in the Rojava revolution, was severely criticized for its anti-nationalism. Unlike other nationalist and Islamist lines, it started to organize a structure that touched other aspects of people's daily lives by placing not only the right of self-determination of Kurds, but many other issues like women, economic exploitation, ecology etc. on the agenda of the Kurdish political space. These agendas constituted a novelty in the Kurdish political space and came along with serious consequences. For example, because of the pluralistic discourses of democratic confederalism as opposed to the discourses of other political parties, the Shiite and Yezan Kurds of Rojhilat became more sympathetic to the Kurdish struggle. Likewise, feminist struggles became more visible in almost every part. This ideological transformation, which essentially emerged as a result of the processes undergone by the PKK, has a strong social base and transformative capacity in every part except the South. At the beginning of the 2000s, the PKK was facing a serious crisis due to the fact that Öcalan had been handed over to Turkey. It was partly on the back of this transformation that the PKK managed to ride out of this crisis and gradually establish dominance in

various areas. This comes after the belief had prevailed in the Kurdish political space at the beginning of the millennium that the PKK was about to disappear.

Conclusion

We can start to identify the current actors of the Kurdish political space and their respective repertoires of struggle by the 1990s. The principalities, which were dissolved as a result of the centralization tendencies of the states that dominated the Kurdish political space in the 19th century, were replaced by a form of organization based on tribes and sects. However, neither the principalities nor the tribal and sect-based political structures succeeding them were able to achieve an organization suitable for the conditions of the period, and the rebellions that took place in this period were met with intense violence by the state. Afterwards, the Kurds started to build new national liberation movements, partly with the support of the Soviets. But apart from partial achievements, such as the Republic of Mahabad, whose foundation was made possible by global geopolitical processes, or the two years of harmony between Mele Mistefa Barzani and then Iraqi prime minister Abdulkarim Qasim in 1958, or the autonomy agreements of 1970, they did not gain any victories. Together with the weakening of Soviet influence in the region and the regional reconstruction that played out to the disadvantage of Kurdish political actors, this created a bifurcation in the 1990s, which was mainly based on a critique of the Soviets. From the point of view of the states, the 1990s confronted them with the reality that the Kurds were still around despite all state oppression and violence. In other words, neither had the states succeeded in completely suppressing the Kurds, nor had the Kurdish political organizations been able to achieve any lasting progress in terms of the right to self-determination. The political consequence of this was that it had become virtually impossible for the states to peacefully coexist with their own Kurdish populations and the organized structures representing them, with the Kurds in the other parts, and with each other. However, the antagonism between the Kurds and the regional states offered great maneuvering space for manipulation by imperialist or aspiring hegemonic powers that pursued a regional policy centered on the Kurdish political space. Sometimes, new political balances established by means of liberal peace technologies produced social and political dynamics that eventually fueled new conflicts. The 2000s and 2010s were rife with struggles in which these dynamics played an important role. This is the background of the chaos in the region, one dimension of which is the Kurdish question.

CHAPTER TWO

THE KURDISH QUESTION IN THE 2000s

If we want to get a better picture of the Kurdish question and the Kurdish political space in the 2000s, we need to understand what kind of transformation the Kurdish question underwent within the scope of global geopolitical processes. The most drastic event to leave its mark on the 2000s was undoubtedly the attacks on the World Trade Center in the heart of the USA, the global hegemonic power, and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. While these processes seriously affected the world in its entirety, the Middle East and West Asia were at their center. The new concepts of an enemy and a war against terror which had been developed throughout the 1990s, would find a concrete expression in the political processes of the 2000s. The impact of these processes, which were largely unfolding in the Middle East, on the Kurdish political space has been the topic of great debate. Therefore, the main aim of this chapter is to discuss the interactions of global and regional developments with the dynamics in the Kurdish political space.

In this context, the geopolitical opening (or, in Cuma Çiçek's words, the first geopolitical shift), which would entirely redefine the Kurdish political space, can be seen as an immediate result of the contradictions between ongoing processes at the global level and regional geopolitical processes. The interventionist paradigm of the 2000s cannot be understood outside the globalization of the liberal order following the Cold War but should also not be interpreted in the overly narrow framework of how hegemonic imperialist powers redefined everything underneath them. In this respect, we need to include the different forms of resistance against imperialist processes in our discussion, whilst also taking into account the ideological colors or political positions of those who resisted. Among these dynamics of resistance against hegemonic processes, the decade-long struggle of the Kurds at the regional level, notwithstanding all its shortcomings and mistakes, stands out due to its nascent potential arising from these contradictions. This was true for the Iraqi Kurdistan Region in the South in the 2000s, and, as I will discuss in detail in the next chapter, for Rojava in the 2010s.

The main thesis that I will defend in this chapter can be explained in two stages. First, the Kurdish political space has been subject to almost constant transformation via interaction with global and regional processes. We can see this in the support lent to the Kurdish parties in the south in the context of an opinion that emerged in the 2000s as an antithesis to Middle Eastern exceptionalism which considered the Iraqi (South) Kurdistan as an "exception to the exception." Another example is the attempts in the north to portray the PKK as an obstacle and remove it from the equation. The dynamics that arose under these conditions led states to change their positions and brought about the recognition of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government.

This, in itself, fundamentally redefined the Kurdish political space. In parallel, the PKK resisted the attempts to remove the party from the equation by undergoing a radical ideological-political transformation, subsequently gaining a major influence that would leave its mark on the Kurdish political space. In the second stage, these two parallel processes would throw into relief the dividing lines between traditional nationalism and democratic confederalism within the Kurdish political space and shape other geopolitical positions in the region in line with this divide.

In this chapter, I will conduct a global political sociological analysis of the new interventions and Middle Eastern exceptionalism before moving on to discussing the impact of these two phenomena on the general reshaping of the Middle East. I will try to provide a more detailed analysis of the intervention in Iraq to explain the consequences of this intervention. Then, I will discuss how this new interventionism affected the Kurdish political space, states' changing perspectives on the Kurdish question, and the transformations undergone by Kurdish political actors and how they contributed to reshaping the Kurdish political space. Finally, I will try to summarize the consequences introduced by the dynamics of the 2000s at the global and regional levels and in terms of the Kurdish political space, thus painting a picture of the overall environment as we enter the 2010s.

Global transformations: post-Cold War liberal triumphalism

The fall of the Berlin wall and ultimately the collapse of the Soviet Union were the main factors triggering the processes that unfolded around the globe and in the Middle East in the 2000s. The direct impact this had on the existing global geopolitical balances can be discussed within the framework of a liberal triumphalism over the fact that the Cold War dynamics had ceased to be a hegemonic determinant and that hegemony was now taking shape in a unipolar world (Falk, 2010). Having organized themselves according to the conditions of a bipolar world, states and social and political movements had to reconsider their positions in the post-Cold War world. In the new world order, the sovereign powers of individual states, who had been trying to advance their own interests by taking advantage of the balances between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, started to adopt new positions, indexing the promotion of their interests to the hegemony of the USA. Social and political movements, on the other hand, were affected directly and indirectly. One direct impact was that national movements lost at least discursive and, in some cases, direct financial and military

support of the Soviets. One indirect impact was what Traverso (2016) conceptualizes as 'left-wing melancholia': The defeat of the socialist bloc to the capitalist bloc, together with the nostalgia for the past of groups engaged in social struggles, created a melancholic attitude on the left. Although this attitude would later spark new types of organizations on the left, the impact of this melancholia can still be observed today.¹⁷

It would not be wrong to see the dynamic created by attempts to forcibly implement the international order envisioned by liberalism and the reactions against these attempts as the main source of the contradictions in the 2000s. The liberal international order, which became globalized after the Cold War, had actually emerged as a liberal internationalism in the countries of the Western bloc after the Second World War (cf. Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, 2020). With the collapse of the Eastern bloc, all ideological and political obstacles had disappeared for this order to establish global hegemony. After all, this was a period when different theses were written on the 'end of history.' The essential components of this international order have been defined by its proponents as open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic community, progressive change, collective problem-solving, shared sovereignty, and the rule of law (Ikenberry, 2011: 2).¹⁸ Based on such premises, it was expected that liberal internationalism would solve the world's problems, and with this goal in mind, the integration of the entire world, especially the post-Soviet countries, into this system began.

The central pillars of this process are a neoliberal economic globalization based on the profit maximization of multinational corporations, (representative) democracy and human rights, and a mainly Western-financed expansion of civil society. This order was based on the effort to transfer economic, technological, technical, military, and political standards from the West, especially the US, to the east and south in order to achieve global integration (Richmond, 2008). But these principles were far from being without any contradiction. In particular, neoliberal globalization, following Harvey (2014), can be understood as the export of finance capital to the whole world with the aim of maximizing profits while minimizing costs. The global economic crisis in 2008 showed the internal limits of this a kind of globalization (Gills, 2010). Similarly, the belief that free and fair elections would solve all problems turned out wrong: Because

¹⁷ This is most clearly seen in the way a significant part of the people who were involved in political struggles prior to the 1980 coup in Turkey today relate to this period, its memories and its struggles. For example, those among this group who are still involved in politics tend to take the 70s as their point of reference (Interview, Germany 19.07.2019).

¹⁸ Here, I only explain the basic feature of the liberal international order. I will discuss it in more detail in the next chapter, together with its crisis.

democracy was reduced to elections and political elites' ability to manipulate had not been taken into account, elections did not solve but aggravate existing problems. This is most evident in the fact that Iraq, which I will discuss in greater detail below, continues to pose a persistent problem. The expansion of civil society, which was based on the premise that US- and EU-supported civil society organizations would end tyranny and that people had an innate desire for freedom, which could be realized based on a form of citizenship modeled after the US, eventually created self-serving structures that are relatively detached from the societies in which they operate (Falk, 2008). 2010: 258-260).

In the face of deepening crises, the absence of a global geopolitical power that could contain the new world order created a legitimacy problem and the need to define a new antagonist within the new paradigm. The actors that reinforced the legitimacy crisis at the global level were the resistance and protest movements, who gained a lot of ground from the second half of the 1990s to the first half of the 2000s. There were numerous reactions against the system, including a new internationalist movement that took its strength from the resistance of the Zapatistas, Seattle and Porto Alegre, the alter-globalization and occupy movements, the world social forums etc. (Wallerstein, 2014). These global protest dynamics united diverse platforms of resistance against neoliberal aggression, their agendas ranging from food security to new forms of colonialism and racism. These dynamics of protest cannot be considered independently of the forms of victimization and resistance created by the nation-state bureaucracies in cooperation with global capital (Robinson, 2018). This challenge from below has deepened the legitimacy crisis in the system's own inner domains. Parallel to this, there were a number of states that posed an obstacle to globalization. These states, which included Libya, Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, had to be integrated in the new order at all costs. The leaders of these states took the principle of sovereignty to mean that they could treat their citizens as they wanted, showing a complete disregard for human rights that manifested itself in genocidal campaigns and forced displacement. With their (very problematic) anti-imperialist rhetoric, these states posed an obstacle to the wave of globalization desired by the US-centered world order.

In order to establish their legitimacy, global capitalism and state bureaucracies redefined their antagonist on the basis of an anti-terror discourse (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Robinson, 2014). In other words, the new enemy essentially emerged out of a lack of enemies (even though different threats still prevailed). Linking the threat posed by non-state actors to the support they received from certain states, the US-led world order coined a new definition of rogue states that support terrorism, thus creating a post-Soviet image of an enemy based on the idea that weapons of mass destruction

could be used by these states (Falk, 2010: 251). This paved the way for new imperialist interventions, while also introducing the definition of an enemy that is hard to detect and identify. Due to this fluid image of an enemy who could be anywhere at any time, it was judged that the fight against this enemy also needed to be constant and ubiquitous (Hardt and Negri, 2000). One of the primary justifications for such a position was the attacks on the twin towers in the USA. The attacks carried out by groups such as al-Qaeda, especially September 11, showed that, contrary to widely held beliefs, non-state actors were capable of creating major damage. This signaled a paradigmatic shift to security and constant war and enabled the global campaigns against terrorism.

One of the direct results this created was that different centres of power around the world started defining terrorists according to their needs, declaring different groups as terrorists. The anti-terror paradigm was used to legitimize the further marginalization of certain segments of societies and their exposure to various forms of state violence. As political structures of complex social and historical character were pushed out of political processes by simply being labeled as 'terrorists', existing conflict dynamics intensified. Primarily intended to meet the needs of the state, these labels failed to meaningfully represent the anger in societies, therefore thwarting any chances and possibilities of reconciliation based on negotiations.

Right at this point, we should emphasize the peace-building processes that were introduced with the claim of resolving conflict in these states, but effectively failed to do anything but to integrate these societies into the global neoliberal system through interventions from above. We can view this in connection with the theory of new wars, which is based on the observation that there are no more wars between states (the 'democratic peace' theory), but that wars are now fought between states and groups that oppose them. However, what is neglected here is that existing sources of conflict were renewed in the post-Cold War era (Malešević, 2008). There was widespread belief in the 1990s and 2000s that these conflicts could actually be resolved through the democratization of state systems. But while the Eurocentric, liberal and technocratic methods of peace and state-building led to partial successes, they failed to resolve the grounds for conflict. This becomes evident when we look at the Tamil genocide in Sri Lanka, the complete collapse of political and social structures in Iraq, and the dramatic consequences of neoliberalism in South Africa.

Another factor that made the interventionist policies of the 2000s possible was the problematic foundation undergirding the understanding of human rights in the neoliberal era. Sure enough, the global and local importance of being a legal subject on

account of being human and of protecting certain inalienable and irrevocable rights is beyond dispute. But beyond their status as abstract norms, the question of how human rights are defined and who is included in the category of human beings and who is excluded, is answered within practical political processes (Mignolo, 2009). In other words, the contradiction between the normative theoretical ground of human rights and its practical political application directly relates to how and from what perspective the topic is approached (Rao, 2010). For instance, while an Iraqi citizen coming to Europe as an immigrant and an Iraqi who is oppressed under the Saddam regime possess similar subjectivities, there is a serious ethical-political contradiction between the British state rhetoric that legitimizes the systematic racist othering which the Iraqi refugee is exposed to in the UK on the one hand, and the “struggle for human rights” of the British state that intervenes in Iraq to protect the human rights of Iraqi citizens on the other hand. In any case, both the interventions to guarantee universal human rights and the different ways of violating the rights of one’s own citizens while relying on the principle of sovereignty have accumulated an extensive record of violations. The “cosmopolitan interventions”, as Çubukçu (2011) calls them, have led to a clear and two-sided outcome: on the one hand, those citizens who were oppressed by their regimes saw imperialist interventions as a solution, while on the other hand, the ruling elites gave themselves an anti-imperialist veneer to avoid losing their power. The limited number of human rights violations that were detected within these states and preferentially highlighted against a given normative backdrop would serve as a justification for imperialist interventions.

To sum up, we can talk about a number of mechanisms and processes that played a dominant role at the global level from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the 2010s and also had an impact on individual regions: Liberal triumphalism and a new international order in which the USA became the sole hegemonic power; a new economic order based on open markets which ultimately culminated in neoliberal aggression; a new and reductionist understanding of democracy and human rights that ultimately produced different forms of marginalization; new social and political movements against all these developments; a threat perception and anti-terror campaign targeting these movements; efforts to employ the conceptual toolbox of peacebuilding to integrate states who were dealing with historically rooted conflicts into the global neoliberal processes. In the 1990s and especially in the 2000s, the Middle East as a region was constantly caught up in these dynamics.

Regional transformations: the (historical) construction of (discursive) exceptionalism and interventions in the Middle East

One of the more profound dynamics that shaped the 1990s and 2000s in the Middle East is the liberal and Orientalist Western discursive construction of Middle Eastern exceptionalism and the imperialist interventionism based on this construct. The discourse on the exceptionalism of the Middle East is essentially based on the idea that, when compared to other parts of the world, the Middle East is displaying a stubborn refusal of integration into the liberal world, and on the claim that this must be due, in part, to a kind of structural resistance. In the liberal discursive universe of the West, this finds expression in different problematic assumptions, e.g., that “Islam as a religion is not suitable for democracy” or that “the ‘archaic’ relations in the region resist development.” Moreover, the conflicts in the region are attributed to the fact that the region could not maintain peace due to its own historical and political dynamics, obfuscating the role of imperialism in creating the ground for conflict. Meanwhile, the new regime of peace, which has been implemented by force after an intensification of conflict, produces new conflict dynamics. According to this understanding, the Middle East’s structural problems, from the standpoint of US hegemony, are linked to the fact that democracy, free markets, human rights etc. are not fairly established in the region. Considering the Middle East from a very generalized point of view, this perspective ignores the social multiplicity which would expose the inconsistency of its own perceptions. This naturally creates a huge gap between the Orientalist perception and the historically constructed conditions of today’s Middle East. At the same time, this understanding ignores the dynamics that have historically been created especially by Western interventions, acting reluctant to assume its share of responsibility in a problem-stricken Middle East (Agnew, 2005; Hazbun, 2011). After the Cold War, the US tried to implement the different pillars of liberal globalization – open markets, civil society, human rights, representative democracy, etc. – in the region in an even more aggressive manner (Dodge 2006: 460). The fact that it was not possible to include the Middle East in the prevailing peace regime of the liberal international order, mainly due to the resistance dynamics in the region (which are just as problematic), laid the groundwork for the conceptualization of the Middle Eastern exceptionalism that justified the interventions of the 1990s and 2000s.

Against this Orientalist conceptualization we should hold that the current state of the

Middle East, while its historical roots are much deeper, can be traced back at least to the regional struggles between Islamism, secular nationalism, and communism and the interventions in these struggles from outside. While political Islam was able to grow with the support of the West against the Soviets, communists were eliminated by the more or less secular regimes in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. These are the real historical, political, and social origins of the regional dynamics of resistance to liberal globalization, which are defined as Middle Eastern exceptionalism.

In fact, in the Middle East, the Cold War already ended at the beginning of the 1980s.¹⁹ Paralleling trends around the world, the main factor determining the dynamics of the Cold War in the Middle East was the geopolitical polarization between the states in the region, who were adapting their own interests to those of the Eastern and Western camps in order to receive military and economic support. On the one hand, aligned with NATO, there were the small but rich Arab emirates, Turkey, Iran, and Israel, and on the other hand, there were the large but poor Arab states that received Soviet support. But rather than a system forcibly imposed on the Middle East by the blocs according to their own interests, this should be considered as a geopolitical polarization caused by the states in the region who were advancing their own interests by adapting them to the hegemonic interests (Halliday, 2005). Most scholars agree that in the Middle East, the Cold War actually ended in the early 1980s (Bozarslan, 2011; Halliday, 2005). The siege of Mecca showed that Sunni Islam was not in the service of the global powers under all circumstances. The Iranian revolution destroyed the pro-Western shah regime and used the Shiite ulama to crush the social opposition. Following the 1980 coup in Turkey, the threat of communism was resolved by “steamrolling” it. In Iraq and Syria, it was the regimes themselves that eliminated the communists.

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan resulted in a strengthening of jihadist Islam in all Muslim societies. Amid all this turmoil, the most important development in the Middle East was the recognition of Israel by Egypt, which was the regional centerpiece of the axis of resistance during the Cold War and acted as the flag bearer of secular Arab nationalism. That said, the situation emerging after the Cold War would redefine the political, social, and economic dynamics in the region, including the Kurdish political space. In this context, we should address the formation of Islamist politics, the waning or complete disappearance of secular nationalism and communism, and

¹⁹ Considering the 1989 revolutions, which precipitated the eventual dissolution of the Soviets, as the historical roots of world politics is a Eurocentric understanding which in the final analysis excludes local dynamics (Saull, 2010: 181).

the reorganization of geopolitical balances according to a unipolar world order.

Islamism in the Middle East took shape along two lines: “revolutionary” and “moderate” Islam.²⁰ It can be argued that both forms of revolutionary Islam expanded according to the dynamics of the Cold War. These dynamics can be observed in the emergence of Sunni jihadism, that is, of al-Qaeda, which emerged from within the mujahideen who had been supported by the US against the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, and then of jihadist Islam, which would deeply affect the Middle East’s relations with the West. This form of jihadism grew stronger and became more and more diversified as a result of Western interventions and caused the USA to face great resistance in Iraq. Meanwhile, it also provided fertile ground for the formation of ISIS, which would be labeled as the “global evil”. The origins of Shiite revolutionary Islam, on the other hand, can be traced back to Iran, which pitted itself discursively against both the USA and the Soviets (Matin, 2013; Saull, 2010: 195).²¹ Although the origins of moderate Islam are much older, the Cold War dynamics provided it with an opportunity to spread. The Muslim Brotherhood, born in Egypt as a social reaction against Westernization and the pressures of top-down secularization, was to become the corner stone of a political tradition that would become influential throughout the entire Middle East and be referred to as moderate Islam in the 2000s. As moderate Islam was advancing its relations with the global hegemonic powers in many ways, the AKP government, which adopted certain ideological tenets to keep this tradition alive in Turkey, would garner great support in the rest of the region as a role model of conservative democracy. While revolutionary Islam developed as a form of resistance against American hegemony, moderate Islam, despite its discursive anti-imperialism, would mostly act in concert with the US hegemony, especially in the 2000s. This contradiction between the discourse and practice of “moderate Islam” derived from the fact that on the one hand, Islam turned into a political tool because large Muslim communities were defining it as the center of resistance to hegemony, while on the other hand, realpolitik necessities made cooperation with the hegemon inevitable.

Secular nationalism, on the other hand, has gradually lost the pivotal role that it played especially from the beginning to the third quarter of the past century, but it is

²⁰ While I use “revolutionary” Islam to denote programs that aim to change the existing order according to Islamic principles, “moderate” Islam shall refer to Islamic structures that aim to establish their own power within the existing order without being fundamentally opposed to it. Although I do not completely subscribe to the notions of “revolutionary” or “moderate” Islam, I chose to use these expressions because they help us to discuss the different positions in relation to the political and social system in the Middle East.

²¹ One needs to add a note here when speaking of revolutionary Islam. In fact, we are talking about a revolutionary Islam that opposes all social improvements, while defending but its own interests at the state-level. Its rejection of the liberal order is based on such policies.

still alive as a political tendency. Today, the secular segments of society, who consider religious people as backwards, are largely taken by nostalgia. Parallel to this, the stifling of communist tendencies in the region also greatly weakened the position of secular politics. Over time, the regimes had forced the communists into exile or left them to decay in prisons, eventually decimating them to such an extent that they no longer had any significant social basis by the 1980s (Gerger, 2006). Moreover, it should be underscored that this was done under the conditions of the Cold War, primarily by the Baathist regimes who were supported by the Soviets. According to Saul (2010: 189), the Middle East, especially in Iran and Baathist countries, was the place where the Cold War ended most violently, with secular leftist structures ending up largely razed. One of the main sources of the Islamization in the 1990s and 2000s is the dissolution of the existing organized mechanisms of social resistance within the scope of the war with the Soviets, with the support of the USA in places such as Afghanistan or Turkey, and by the ruling regimes in the Arab countries.

At this point, it can be helpful to take a closer look at both Islamist and secular politics' anti-imperialist discourses. Picking up momentum in the second half of the 1970s, Islamist politics could thrive in the areas opened up by the West, but at the same time had to develop an anti-imperialist discourse. Secular nationalism, on the other hand, was opposed to Western imperialism, especially in connection with Arab socialism and Baathism's relationship with the Soviets but eliminated communist structures (among others) within. To some degree, Iran constitutes the only exception here: While the Shah's regime, which can be called secular nationalist, was fully aligned with the West, Iran has maintained an anti-imperialist discourse under the rule of the Shiite ulama since 1982. However, as Bozarslan (2011: 104) notes, all these types of anti-imperialism are predicated on the state establishing absolute control over all its subjects. This manifests itself in state policies that resort to oppression and coercion against all kinds of ethnic and religious groups, oppositional political structures, or "LGBT perverts" who are accused of plotting against the state. This has to do with the fact that anti-imperialism is a very useful political tool: It constitutes an ideological mechanism based on an exclusionary form of nationalism, determining the state's approach towards those social groups that each group, whether they be Islamist or secular, labels as its respective other. This could be observed in the statist anti-imperialist discourses that prevailed during both the invasion of Iraq and the Rojava revolution.

In summary, by the 1990s, we can identify a regional setup with various macro-determinants: having taken advantage of the rivalry between the two superpowers to increase their autonomy in the bipolar world order, regional power centers would

try to secure the support of each global hegemonic power in the unipolar world (Hinnebush, 2013: 3). In connection with this, at the ideological level, Arab socialism, secular nationalism and more specifically Marxism-Leninism were replaced by Islamism and neoliberalism after the Cold War (Bozarslan, 2011: 107). In the post- Cold War era, minority issues that had already posed a problem during the Cold War became even more visible. Undermining the nationalist narratives constructed by the state, they reinforced the crisis of nationalism in the Middle East (Bozarslan, 2011: 105). The discursive construction of Middle Eastern exceptionalism, which would pave the way for different foreign interventions in the 1990s, was anchored in the perception that the conditions inherited from the Cold War prevented the region from integrating into the new world order.

This problematic perspective advises that the regional dynamics of resistance against the liberal world based on political, social, and historical particularities should be corrected through military interventions and/or by force, if necessary.²² There are two stages to this interventionism. First, the global implementation of the Pax-Americana in the 1990s, which also affected the Middle East, and secondly, the direct interventionism of the 2000s. In essence, Pax-Americana refers to the globalization of the new peace dynamics created by the new world order that arose under the hegemony of the USA (Wallerstein, 2003). In this context, to give an example, US aids to Kuwait during the second Gulf War were aimed at breaking the resistance against globalization (Hinnebush, 2013: 31). However, there were several structural geopolitical contradictions that prevented the realization of a Pax-Americana in the Middle East. These included the fact that Iran and Iraq were declared “rogue states”, the impact of US-Israeli relations on the region, and the Palestine problem. Another factor that we need to include in the equation is the anti-Americanism that was proliferated by the anti-imperialist discourses of Arab nationalism and Islamism. Thus, the Pax-Americana did not only fail but also created a new political climate in which the West, especially the USA, were portrayed as the main enemy, ultimately resulting in continuous jihadist attacks that were followed by direct military interventions in the region. The interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq turned out to be motivated by imperialist ambitions, namely the integration of the Middle East into neoliberal globalization. They left the region behind in a much more dire situation than before. These conditions enabled the first geopolitical shift in the Kurdish political space.

²² This is not a debate about good and bad, or the dilemma of being an American or a traditionalist. I simply want to underline how the problematic, racist and hegemony perspectives taken while approaching the region contribute to the deepening of regional problems.

The intervention in Iraq

The intervention in Iraq certainly had a direct transformative impact on the Kurdish political space, moreover it entailed major consequences for the reorganization of conflicts and relations at the regional level and, as I will discuss in the third chapter, the transformation of relations at the global level. In practical terms, the Iraq intervention, which can be situated in the broader context outlined above, took place in 2003 as a continuation of the sanctions that had been gradually intensified since the second Gulf War. During the intervention, the USA and the UK acted without the approval of the UN. It is possible to identify four reasons for the intervention in Iraq. First, after Al Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Center twin towers in New York in 2001, the false allegation that Iraq, labeled as a "rogue state", possessed weapons of mass destruction was turned into a justification for the intervention. The USA had not at all been bothered by the fact that Saddam was making use of the weapons of mass destruction in his possession (especially in the context of the Iran-Iraq war) at the time he was still acting as a partner, but now problematized the mere possibility of the existence of such weapons (Chomsky, 2003). As former Russian diplomat and foreign minister Primakov (2009: 319) recounts, Saddam Hussein actually had nothing to hide, but he was deliberately creating confusion as a kind of trump card and show of strength vis-à-vis the rest of the region. Meanwhile, he never held it possible that the United States, despite its rhetoric, would really launch a ground operation. Secondly, in the medium term, the fact that the USA had not been able to fully establish its ideological and institutional hegemony at the global level pushed it to establish this hegemony by force; Iraq turned into a testing ground for this campaign (Dodge, 2006: 457). The third reason concerns geopolitical hegemony: Saddam's dictatorial regime had signed various concession agreements with France and China, in which oil played an important role and which excluded the USA and the UK (Hinnebush 2013: 32). The fourth reason concerns the normative dimension. The United States based its intervention in Iraq on the grounds of defending the human rights of Iraqis who were violated under the Saddam regime (Çubukçu, 2018). Although the military intervention was short-lived, stability in Iraq, a popular topic of debate in the 2000s, almost completely eroded as a result of this intervention, at least in the sense in which it is understood in the international relations literature. Therefore, it is possible to identify three dimensions as regards the outcomes of the intervention: the political structure it created within Iraq, the reorganized and increasingly radicalizing jihadist front of resistance, and the general impact these two had on the region, especially the Kurdish political space.

During the 1980s, Saddam increasingly brought the Baath party under his control,

gradually removing the Shiite cadres because he feared the potential influence Iran might exert on Iraqi Shiites. Similarly, the Kurds in the north were excluded from politics due to the historical conjuncture and political insecurities. The weakening of the institutional structure of the state throughout the 1990s, which was due the sanctions which were imposed on Iraq under the leadership of the United States, made Saddam resort to tribalism to back the Baath party (Hinnebusch, 2016: 568). In other words, until the invasion in 2003, Iraq, already far from constituting any internal unity since its very establishment, was divided even more thoroughly due to Saddam's policies and the foreign sanctions. These problems were further aggravated by the 2005 constitution, which provided for the distribution of political power among Kurds, Shiite Arabs, and Sunni Arabs in the expectation that this would help to achieve "democratic integration" (as in Lebanon). While a significant portion of Sunni Arabs gravitated towards jihadist Islam, which grew more and more radical in the face of a loss of status and privilege, Shiite Arabs appeared to be increasingly under the control of Iran. Eventually, if we take into account the officially recognized Kurdistan region in the north and the fact that the Arabs were deeply divided along the lines of Shiism and Sunnism, it is possible to say that Iraq was practically divided into three. Given the relations developed by individual actors at the regional level and the overall interdependence at the global level, this dividedness led into a situation which was even more difficult to get out of. Luizard (2015: 48) argues that Americans deliberately confused the demographic majority with the democratic majority, thus further aggravating the existing sectarian and ethnic divisions: Kurds started voting for Kurdish parties, Shiites for Shiite representatives, and especially after the first boycott in 2005, Sunnis started voting for the Sunni candidates.

While the ethnic and sectarian divisions caused a constant governmental crisis, the deep rift running between the Shiites and the Sunni resistance front that was mobilizing against the American occupation forces resulted in blind violence. This violence was rooted in the fact that Shiites had lived under Sunni domination during the Saddam era (Luizard, 2015). In fact, the US invasion was met with resistance by both Sunnites and Shiites. The former Sunni middle class, which lost the social status and the privileges it had enjoyed under Saddam, mounted a resistance that was mostly inspired by a jihadist rhetoric. Among them were some of the army commanders of the Saddam era. The Shiite elites were brought to Iraq from their exile abroad and settled in the center. In return, Muqtada al-Sadr, undoubtedly the strongest Shiite political leader in Iraq, employed an anti-imperialist rhetoric, inciting the cities of Najaf, and Karbala to resist. But especially after the 2005 elections, which strengthened the Shiites while leaving the Sunnis out in the cold, the Islamist resistance against the occupation turned into a sectarian war. In addition, the Iraqi

market was opened to a fierce neoliberal economic attack, essentially pursuing the goal of stability in order to serve the foreign capital that was flowing into Iraq. In this context, the limited areas of agricultural production in the rural areas were largely destroyed, leaving a significant share of the young population with no choice but to migrate to the cities. The new social and demographic structure created by this was one of the major reasons why the calls for radicalized resistance increasingly struck a chord with both Sunni and Shiite youth. Given these circumstances, the intensification of civil war conditions resulted in a deepening of social cleavages (Hinnebush 2016, 569-570). By the 2010s, instability would become even more pronounced, leading to the de facto dissolution of Iraq's borders in 2013.

At the regional level, the situation in Iraq harbored both potential benefits and risks for all actors, especially the country's neighbors. Saving the discussion concerning the regional dimension of the Kurdish question for the next section, the following can be stated with respect to the regional geopolitical processes: The domestic consequences of the invasion would become apparent in the 2010s, because jihadism would rise on top of the collapsed state structures and this would immediately affect a number of relations. Meanwhile, Iran and Syria were happy to see Sunni influence decrease in Iraq during the 2000s but at the same time, the direct and indirect impact the ongoing war in Iraq had on themselves caused them unease. As I will elaborate further below, Turkey, notwithstanding its own security concerns, sought ways and means to turn things in its favor. Ultimately, it is possible to say that there was a pro-Western alliance in the region which was led by the United States and the Saudis and involved Egypt and the other Gulf countries, and a "axis of resistance" that was led by Iran and included Syria and the Hezbollah. During the 2000s, Turkey adopted a neo-Ottoman approach and tried to find a balance between these two camps (Hinnebush 2013; Hinnebush 2016: 574). What is most significant if we consider the intervention in Iraq from the point of view of peaceful coexistence, is that the US attempted to redistribute power without taking into account the historical and social rootedness of power relations. This was the reason why the Western liberal democratic order, which US interventionism was trying to impose by force, encountered the resistance of radical Islamist structures in the region. Due to the fact that Shiites had taken over government and autonomy had been given to the Kurds, a revanchist anger had amassed among Sunnis, which eventually burst out in the form of jihadism. All these developments posed serious obstacles to the possibility of peaceful coexistence. The efforts to establish stability after the intervention did not only create a new geopolitical balance in the region, but also shaped the ideological colors of the protest movements that would emerge in the 2010s.

Transformations in the Kurdish political space

Above, we have seen that the intervention in Iraq triggered the first of the geopolitical shifts in the Kurdish political space and partially discussed the global and regional dynamics that made this possible. In what follows, I want to discuss how these changing conditions shaped the Kurdish political space and, vice versa, how the Kurdish political space affected these conditions. After examining the transformations undergone by the individual states and the implications this had for these states' policies regarding the Kurds, I will discuss how Kurdish political actors responded to this process and what kind of transformations they went through.

States and their policies regarding the Kurds

The *de facto* establishment of a Kurdish state in Iraq had direct consequences for all actors in the Kurdish political space. Iraqi Kurdistan, which in fact already gained a certain autonomy as a result of the declaration of a no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel in 1991, was a region where political rivalries, which derived from the disagreements between Barzani and Talabani, between whom US President Clinton acted as mediator in 1998, and occasional conflicts could cause serious problems. In addition, the Kurds did not pursue the goal of breaking away from Iraq, nor was there any support for such an agenda at the global and regional level. According to the Russian diplomat Primakov (2009: 337-338), the US was faced with a dilemma before intervening in Iraq: it was either going to support Kurdish separatism and let Iraq disintegrate into its constituents or it was going to use Iraqi Kurdistan as a tool for its own interests. The efforts undertaken to seek reconciliation between Barzani and Talabani can be seen as a direct indication that the US chose the latter. Likewise, the millions of dollars of aids that were sent to the KDP and PUK one month after the Washington agreement had been signed under the auspices of Clinton in September 1998 had the purpose of changing the regime from within (Černý, 2014: 342-343). Especially after the Turkish parliament had rejected a memorandum that would have allowed the occupying forces to use Turkish territory, the Kurdistan region (next to other alternatives) gained major strategic importance for the USA. This may be considered as a practical reflection of the notion that Iraqi Kurdistan was "the exception to the exception." While other states and power centers around the region resisted the Western model of democracy and progress, the Kurds accepted democratic institutionalization, at least schematically, even though there were serious problems in terms of its practical implementation. Besides, "while other powers kept fighting the US, Kurds made it very clear that they were pro-Western" (Interview,

Sulaymaniyah, 22.09.2019). In adopting the 2005 constitution, the Iraqi state officially recognized the autonomy of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, which had so far existed in a *de facto* manner, granting it powers so ample that one could almost see it as a form of independence. This seriously affected the other states in the region, which were going through a period of transition at the domestic level.

For Iran, the main determinants until the second half of the 2010s were the regime's institutionalization in the face of demands for a transformation on the one hand, and the effort to respond to geopolitical risks outside Iran's borders on the other hand. This trend can be observed both in the context of the regional Kurdish political space and in Iran's relations with its own Kurdish citizens. When Khatami, who represented the reformist movement, was elected as president in the 1997 elections and the conservatives lost in the 2000 parliamentary elections, the non-Persian population, especially the Kurds, had high hopes that extensive political changes would follow (Entessar, 2014: 214). The reformist movement fueled great expectations, especially regarding freedom of expression (Gunes, 2019: 91). However, Khatami had a hard time standing up to the regime's conservatives, who, for example, did not allow the election of pro-Kurdish or pro-Khatami city councilors (Entessar, 2014: 215). On a deeper level, this was related to the fact that elections were not enough to dissolve the rule and the adherent administrative mechanisms of the Iranian regime, which was organized around the religious leader. This would become even clearer in the 2010s. Ahmadinejad, who won against the reformer Rafsanjani in 2005, had enforced the state's authority in the Kurdish regions in the 1980s and personally carried out the military operations at that time (Gunes, 2019: 92). Since the regime resolutely contained the reformist movement, which the Kurds were strongly supporting, and since Ahmadinejad, who had a particularly dirty record regarding the Kurdish question, was in power, there was no positive development regarding the Kurds' rights in the Kurdish political space. On the contrary, until 2011, we can observe the state engage in a low-intensity war with the PJAK and incessant state violence against the Kurds. Ahmadinejad's steps to advance Iran's nuclear program led the West to tighten its sanctions. In the beginning, this contributed to ensuring the internal unity of the regime, but it also strengthened the hardliners (Ehteshami et al., 2013: 237). In addition, there was constant mobilization of grassroots protest and rebellion movements, which also included the Kurds. The dragging of the dead body of Shivan Qaderi, who was killed during a protest in 2005, through the streets of the city of Merivan turned into a symbol of Iranian state violence against the Kurds. In general, these protests were sparked by the fact that the people had to bear the economic brunt of the sanctions against Iran and that it became almost impossible for the non-Shiite and non-Persians to express themselves politically, especially during the Ahmadinejad era.

For the Kurds, it was especially the hanging of Kurdish politicians and revolutionaries that stoked their anger, leading them to actively participate in the protests (Güneş, 2019: 91). Particularly after 2009, reformists started to spearhead the protests, which would evolve into the Iranian Green Movement. However, the religious leader's rhetoric and the violent intervention of the state at every critical stage, as well as the fact that they were unable to take sufficient steps to eliminate the reasons for the regime's authoritarian policy, led the Green Movement and the reformers in general to lose their appeal in the eyes of the public (Entessar, 2014: 219). In the Kurdish political space, this had the direct consequence of an increase in state violence.

The small channels of change that the reformist movement had tried to open were almost completely reversed under the geopolitical conditions of the 2000s, when the invasion of Iraq took place and the paradigm of security became more prominent (Sinkaya, 2018: 846). In fact, a Kurdistan region that would establish good relations with Iraqi Shiites would form a geopolitical structure that could serve the interests of the Iranian regime (Sinkaya, 2018: 853), which pursued a strategy of integrating the Shiite crescent in order to counter the US policy of containing Iran. Another equally important strategy was to ward off threats to Iran outside of Iranian territory. The Kurdistan Regional Government occupied an important position with respect to realizing this strategy with respect to Syria. Iran's relationship with Yekîti (PUK) can also be evaluated in this context, as will be examined in greater detail below. Another issue in the same context is that the KDP-I and the Komala, who were operating in Iranian Kurdistan, were able to set up camp on the territory of the Iraqi KRG. While a more detailed analysis of this will be provided below, let it suffice to briefly state the following here: Iran was pleased to see that the parties, which were the historical interlocutors of its own Kurdish question, established themselves in a region which it could partially control thanks to the relationships it developed with the PUK and partly with the KDP. Meanwhile, the activities of the PJAK during the same period caused a low-intensity war that lasted until 2011. Parallel to the security concerns created by the American invasion, Iran began to resort to extreme violence to suppress the new militant Kurdish force led by the PJAK. Pushing the limits of its relations with Turkey, Iran coordinated joint artillery strikes against the PJAK and the PKK, especially in the Qandil region, in 2007.

Meanwhile, domestic politics in Turkey were going through transformations that would affect the Kurdish question, regional engagements and the country's global position (Insel, 2015). The relationship between the Kemalist establishment and the AKP government, which came to power in 2002, was shaped by a conflict between political Islam and secular nationalism, one of the basic historical conflicts in the

Middle East. This contradiction can be viewed in direct correlation with the recent 1980 coup and the rise of Islamism at the regional level. In the 2000s and 2010s, the ruling AKP was able to gradually bring the army, the advocate and executor of the ideological, political, and practical mechanisms of the Kemalist establishment, and the state bureaucracy, especially the judiciary, under its control. This was made possible by a number of factors: a global capital in search of an outlet and a parliamentary majority that could make the necessary legal and political arrangements to offer such an outlet; the relatively conflict-free environment in the first years of the AKP government that was a result of the crisis the PKK had entered after Öcalan had been turned over to Turkey; the fact that the US-hegemonic global order wanted to advance neoliberal globalization in the Middle East through moderate Islamic actors etc. In a favorable domestic and global climate, the AKP government largely ousted the Kemalist establishment until 2010. Internally, it managed to consolidate its own political organization by using the political balances in line with its interests and in harmony with the open international climate. The AKP achieved this by setting up the cadres of the Gülen movement, its partner until 2013, within state institutions, by instrumentalizing EU and US expectations for a solution and democratization regarding the Kurdish question as a tool against the Kemalist establishment, and by forming its own middle and capitalist classes by availing itself of the periodic economic relief brought by foreign capital flowing to Turkey (Karatasli, 2015). Under these conditions, the Turkish state's discourse changed significantly (Yeğen, 2007). Erdoğan accomplished this transformation by combining the ideological and discursive reproduction of neo-Ottomanism with an ideology that projected how Turkish power would operate in the future (Bozarslan, 2013a).

The invasion of Iraq and the establishment of the KRG were initially met with great hesitation by the AKP government, especially due to the partial insistence of the army, which was the representative of the Kemalist order. Over time, however, the AKP government developed a better relationship with the KRG, especially benefiting from the latter's needs and interests. This foreign policy could develop thanks to the "zero problem with neighbors" doctrine, which was made possible by the AKP's ideological codes, as this doctrine was essentially based on neo-Ottomanism. In opening a consulate-general in Hewler (Erbil) in 2010, the Turkish state did something completely contrary to its founding codes and deviated from the century-old policy of denial. Moreover, Öcalan's forced departure from Syria in 1998 brought a certain relief for the Turkish state regarding its quarrels with Syria over the Kurdish question. Thus, the AKP government started to use Syria as a door to the Arab world so that Syria would become the country in which Turkey's neo-Ottomanism was most palpable and proactive (Hinnebush, 2013). However, beyond that, Syria's position was in any case too

important for Turkey to leave the country to the influence of Iran (Kabalan, 2013: 36). Apart from their economic relations, the issue that Turkey and Syria could most easily agree on was the Kurdish question. The fact that Turkey was not involved in the US and Israel's policy of encircling Syria facilitated both countries' cooperation in other areas.

In Syria, where power was transferred from Hafez al-Assad to his son Bashar al-Assad in 2000, the regime was cautious to protect and consolidate itself against internal and external threats. Just like it had been the case in Iraq before the American invasion, the regime in Syria tried to hold up sectarianism by putting it in disguise (Luizard, 2015: 52). Meanwhile, the Sunni upper class was advancing their own interests by using military and political powers, as the Baath dictatorship primarily relied on unconditional allegiance to Assad (Daher, 2019). In fact, when Bashar al-Assad first came to power, he had created expectations regarding a change and softening in domestic politics. This project was called a "modernizing authoritarianism" because it was thought that it could create the conditions for adapting the regime to globalization. However, it soon became clear that this would not be the case. The regime was in a difficult situation during the 2000s, especially due to the sanctions of the USA and France (partially because it did not support the invasion of Iraq). The Qamishlo rebellion, which will be discussed in detail below, showed that there was a strong Kurdish opposition in the country and that the invasion of Iraq could put the regime in trouble in many ways.

In addition to the country's own Kurdish question, the regional Kurdish question too had repercussions on Syria, giving rise to security concerns that were due to both the regime's own political preferences and external dynamics. For a long time, for example, the regime had tried to use the PKK's presence in Syria as an instrument against the militarily and economically superior Turkish neighbor. In response, Turkey threatened Syria with reducing the water flow of the Euphrates and military intervention, but the problems and tensions between both countries were suddenly resolved when Öcalan was expelled from Syria following the signing of the Adana Agreement in 1998 (Kabalan, 2013: 29). At least for the time being, water ceased to be an issue.²³ Both the regime and the general opposition in Syria opposed the invasion of Iraq due to the great uncertainties it contained and its possible repercussions on Syria (Ehteshami et al., 2013: 228). This mainly concerned the possibility of a pro-Israeli Iraqi government after the invasion, the repercussions on Syria's own internal Kurdish question, and

²³ This issue would resurface after the Rojava revolution in the 2010s. It can be viewed as a result of Turkey's policy of weaponizing its water resources.

the economic crisis that the occupation would produce. The US (and Israel) did not respond to the continuous calls for dialogue by the Syrian regime, thinking that the regime was basically trying to break free from its isolation. Under these conditions, the Syrian regime, after the invasion of Iraq, was looking to find the right balance with Europe and Turkey against the United States and Israel, while simultaneously trying to increase its options by developing its relations with Iran, the Hezbollah, the Hamas, Russia, and China.

One can identify two clearly emerging trends in terms of states' responses to the developments in Iraq regarding the Kurdish question. In the first place, they positioned themselves against the establishment and institutionalization of the KRG due to their own geographical and historical limits and their own Kurdish questions. This position is indicative of a policy that will later manifest itself mostly as a concern for states' ontological security. In other words, after the 2003 intervention, the possibility of an independent Kurdistan would unite the states, especially Iran and Turkey, around their opposition to Kurdish independence. However, this did not prevent mutual distrust between the two states, which arose from the fact that each of them was trying to exert its own influence on Iraq. Secondly, after the autonomous Kurdish regional government was established in Iraq, the states tried to arrange themselves with this situation without having to compromise their own interests. For Turkey, this has meant increasing the trade volume and, by this means, gaining partial control over the processes in the KRG. Iran, on the other hand, chose to limit the movement capacity of the Kurdish parties, which had historically been the protagonists of its own Kurdish question, by confining them to the borders of Iraq. The establishment of the KRG also posed a risk for Syria, which tried to counter this risk through its relations with Turkey and Iran.

Transformations in the Kurdish political space

The developments in the 2000s affected the entire region in various ways. They eventually contributed to the more clear-cut emergence of two main political currents, which still act as the two predominant ideologies in the entire Kurdish political space today. These are democratic confederalism and traditional nationalism. Their emergence was not occasioned solely by geopolitical processes in the region or by Kurdish political actors but was made possible by an interaction of both.

The regional government in Southern Kurdistan

The Kurdistan region, which had existed in a *de facto* manner since 1991, but was constitutionally recognized in 2005 when the 2003 intervention had created some

relief, occupies an important position in terms of both the historical sociological dynamics of the Kurdish political space and the dynamics of the Middle East. During the interviews conducted for this study, three main headings emerged under which these dynamics can be discussed: the consequences the establishment of the KRG created in the Kurdish political space, the formation of a dual power structure in the South and the geopolitical fact of the KRG being a landlocked region.

From the perspective of the Kurdish political space, the KRG is the first recognized Kurdish government since the Republic of Mahabad. The consequences of the Kurds' gaining recognition, even in a small region, were felt across the entire Kurdish political space. The parties that achieved this partial liberation turned into a role model. The ideological shift of the parties in Rojhilat from autonomy to a federal solution illustrates this very well (Interview-1, Germany 28.06.2021). Meanwhile, especially in formations ideologically led by the PKK, the example of Southern Kurdistan is considered as a bad model of government. In other words, Southern Kurdistan constitutes both a positive and a negative model. Secondly, given the linguistic and cultural proximity, a large number of people went to Southern Kurdistan to seek political asylum or do business, or in the hope of finding work there. While the capitalist class of the other three parts (even if limited) frequently went to Hewler and Sulaymaniyah for new business opportunities, Kurds from other parts of the world went to Southern Kurdistan to work in different jobs, especially construction. In military terms, the Rojhilat parties withdrew their military units from Iran to camps assigned to them in Southern Kurdistan, which offered them partial security. However, since the military forces of the PKK can look back at a much older history, the establishment of the KRG did not cause a serious transformation in terms of military affairs. In summary, the US intervention in the region was facilitated by a number of global, historical, and sociological factors. Its immediate impact on the Kurdish political space was that it opened up a path for the struggle for Kurdistan, which has been going on for decades.

However, the establishment of an administration in Southern Kurdistan was not free from historical, social, and (geo)political contradictions. The contradictions between the KDP and the PUK, including the tribal and sectarian structures from which they originated, would largely reflect on the administrative levels. Especially since the 1970s, Iraqi state policies fueled a process of urbanization. Traditional tribal leaders ended up in political parties, meanwhile taking precautions to turn this process to their advantage. In other words, we are not only dealing with residuals of an archaic tribalism, but a process in which hierarchical social structures were adapted to new conditions. In this respect, we can think of the administrative system in the South

as a hybrid system that brings together the traditional tribal structure and the modern party form. This can be seen as the historical sociological explanation for the great political and economic dependence of the population in the South on political parties (Leezenberg, 2006). And it also explains why the contradictions between the KDP and the PUK prevented both parties from establishing a joint administration. While the KDP was organized around Hewler and Duhok, around the Barzani family and the Naqshbandi order (although the latter is no longer as strong as it used to be in the past), the PUK was organized mainly in and around Sulaymaniyah, around many large families, primarily the Talabani family, and (in the past) in line with the Qadiri order.²⁴ Or, to put it in the words of a member of the Gorran movement led by Nawshirwan Mustafa, who would rise to greater prominence in the 2010s: If the KDP is a dynasty that tries to control revenues in order to govern through profits, the PUK is made up of a network of corrupt executives that try to control every aspect of the economic system in order to maintain their own positions (Aziz, 2017). In these conditions, representative democracy cannot develop. Although it exists on paper, “the parliament has no influence in the administration of the region, because the administration is almost entirely in the hands of the families ... for example, the leaders of these parties enjoy immunity even where charges of corruption or treason are concerned; so it is not possible to hold them responsible for any crime” (Interview, Sulaymaniyah, 24.09.2019).

Currently, there might not be two parallel structures in the regional administration in Southern Kurdistan, but it is nonetheless possible to identify a dual structure that is completely divided along party loyalties. For example, although there is a ministry that pays the salaries of the Peshmerga forces, the Peshmerga act within a dual chain of command divided according to party loyalties (Abbas Zadeh and Kirmanj, 2017). The most important reason why unity could not be achieved is that “the two parties, each of which rules in its own regions, do not want to lose their power” (Interview, Süleymaniye, 24.09.2019). Similarly, one can observe a certain revolutionary fatigue caused by this power structure divided between the KDP and the PUK. Today, the unshakable positions of the two parties, which pioneered a partial liberation in the South, stem from not only the social and political system they established but also a social acceptance and loyalty based on their position as a revolutionary *avant-garde*. This shows itself in the covering up of contradictions and problems that arise with

²⁴ However, the representative of a political party whom I interviewed very clearly expressed the opinion that the religious orders do not play any role in elections and politics (Interview, Sulaymaniyah, 22.09.2019). Besides, when asked, the people in the streets of Sulaymaniyah and Hewler did not associate themselves with any particular sect but confirmed that there were certain ties. In any case, it would not be wrong to state that sectarian identity plays a constitutive, if not the decisive role in the current transformations.

respect to many other issues and constitutes one of the main reasons why there is no change of government.

In geopolitical terms, the most important point that needs to be underlined is that the Kurdistan region is a landlocked area (Interview, Sulaymaniyah, 22.09.2019). This implies a dependence on its neighbors regarding any kind of commercial, economic, military, and political activity. With Turkey to the north, Iran to the east, the Iraqi central government to the south, and the very short border with Syria to the west, the Kurdistan region is caught between four different regional powers that have historically denied the Kurds their rights. Therefore, the Kurdistan regional government's attempts to cooperate with these powers, rather than generating constant tension, are very much inevitable. When considering this in connection with the existing hybrid power structure, we find that the ruling families' interests have led into a relationship of dependency with the neighboring states' governments. Here, we can refer to the relationship between the PUK and Iran, which share a longer border, and the relationship between the KDP and the AKP, which have been developing a (partially) mutual dependence in the north for a long time (Interview, Sulaymaniyah, 24.09.2019). Meanwhile, this has sometimes been in favor, but mostly to the detriment of the Kurdish movements in the other parts, because the states usually perceived the relations developed by the KRG with the Kurdish movements in the other parts as a security threat. Especially in the 2010s, the KRG would more clearly assume a mediating role regarding the Kurdish movements in the other parts and at times even turn against them. Thus, one of the main sources of the tensions between the PKK and the KDP under the current conditions is the land-locked geopolitical position of Southern Kurdistan.

In summary, we may conclude that following years of struggle and thanks to a geopolitical opportunity, an autonomous administration was established in Southern Kurdistan. This had a short- and medium-term impact on the other three parts of Kurdistan. Meanwhile, the structure of the KRG was rife with many internal contradictions that were rooted in the historical and social structure of the Kurdish political space. On the one hand, this strengthened traditional Kurdish nationalism, which pursued the goal of establishing a Kurdish state, but on the other hand, it also defined the internal limits of a Kurdish nationalism that confined itself to only one part of the region.

The PKK's return to armed struggle

One of the major developments that would affect the Kurdish political space as a whole was the PKK's return to armed struggle. The significance of this development

can be examined by looking at two processes. The first concerns the complexity of the regional and global (geo)political processes behind Öcalan's extradition to Turkey and its direct connection with the Kurdish question. Taking into account the views of both PKK members or sources close to the PKK (some of whom I interviewed one-on-one) and personages who have gained access to military and diplomatic circles through their work, such as Murat Yetkin for instance, I want to throw light on the depth of this matter. The role played by the US and some of the regional states in the handing over of Öcalan to Turkey gives us a clear idea of the geopolitical functioning of the unipolar hegemonic global order. It is critical to include Turkey, which historically played an important role in the US military intervention in the Middle East, among the actors who were anxious to integrate the region into the global(izing) order. The existence of the PKK was the biggest obstacle for Turkey to change its regional foreign policy. "Unlike other Kurdish organizations, the PKK was not dependent on the United States" (Interview, Germany, 18.07.2019). Its independence from the US is directly related to the fact that the PKK was founded as a Marxist-Leninist national liberation movement. By handing over Öcalan to Turkey, the USA managed to please Turkey and remove Öcalan from the equation (Bila, 2007: 205). Also, for Richard Clarke, then official of the US National Security Council, the US owed its ally Turkey because the capture of Öcalan was expected to weaken other terrorist activities in Europe (Yetkin, 2004: 147).

In the beginning, pressure on Syria began to increase from all angles. On September 16, 1998, Land Forces Commander Atilla Ateş led a saber-rattling display of force on the Syrian border, while NATO-linked warships were exercising off the Syrian coast at the same time. For Syria, a war with Turkey would mean going to war with the NATO. In other words, "actually, Turkey was not the power that drove Öcalan out of Syria... If it had only been between Syria and Turkey, Syria could perhaps have dealt with the pressure. Egypt and Mubarak were there, convincing Assad that if he did not get Öcalan out of Syria, Turkey and the NATO would take military action and that they, as the Arab World, would not stand behind him. Egypt was part of the Western alliance at that time" (Interview, Brussels, 19.05.2019) (see also Yetkin, 2004). Subsequently, Öcalan was turned over to Turkey in Nairobi, after he had departed from Syria and toured several countries, including Greece, Italy, Russia, and Kenya. The geopolitical implications involved in Öcalan's capture alone show that the Kurdish question has always played an important role in terms of different actors' regional and global positions.

The second area of examination is the PKK's return to armed struggle and the resultant ramifications. In this respect, we should try to understand how this

development affected the political dynamics of the Kurdish region in Turkey and what the re-emergence of a the movement meant for the wider region. Based on the interviews I conducted, I would suggest that the consequences of Öcalan's extradition to Turkey can be observed across three temporal stages. The first and most immediate consequence is that the PKK entered a serious ideological, political, and organizational crisis (Interview, Brussels, 17.05.2019). Following a serious internal political debate, around 1,500 guerrillas and senior cadres left the organization. Politically, this was related to diverging views concerning the limits of armed struggle and the possibilities of a democratic struggle within the system. But in fact, what was really behind this division was the limits of the national liberation movement. This issue warrants further analysis. The extensive ideological debate within the PKK regarding the classical line of national liberation would have serious implications for both the PKK and the Kurdish political space. Actually, the ideological transformation of the PKK can be traced back all the way to the early 1990s. Different topics such as women's liberation and an approach to guerrilla warfare that is in harmony with nature started to be discussed in that period, questioning various dimensions of the paradigm of national liberation. At that time, these discussions were sparked by the collapse of real socialism, which made it necessary to develop a new socialist practice that could respond to the new conditions brought about by a globalizing capitalism. The PKK was able to develop such a new political practice by modifying its organizational structure in the light of the ideas and suggestions that Öcalan worked out in prison. Eventually, the PKK emerged from the organizational, political, and ideological crisis that it had entered after Öcalan was turned over to Turkey by undergoing a comprehensive ideological transformation and organizational restructuring (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2010; Saeed, 2014). In the 2000s, this ideological transformation signaled a shift towards a localization and partial autonomization of political practices, but this trend would come into conflict with the rising tide of nationalism across the Kurdish political space in the 2010s. Different parties were born out of these autonomous political practices, the PJAK in Rojhilat, the PYD in Rojava and the PÇDK in Başur. Especially in Rojava and Rojhilat these new practices triggered a major expansion. Thirdly, the PKK's return to armed struggle led into a new process that was marked by resurgent clashes and, after 2005, partial negotiations. Thanks to the partial relief created by the PKK's crisis, the AKP could gradually establish itself in the center of Turkish politics. This was also hinging upon the party's willingness to sustain its efforts towards democratization in discursive harmony with the USA and the EU. As a result, negotiations with the PKK were taken up in 2005. These negotiations were one of the connecting pieces in a long series of talks that had their origins in the early 90s and would start once more in 2013.

In short, the transformation undergone by the PKK after Öcalan was expelled from Syria and turned over to Turkey played a key role in accentuating the contradictions between traditional Kurdish nationalism that was determining politics in the Kurdish political space and democratic confederalism with its internationalist orientation. That said, one should try to see this ideological-political shift not as a determining factor, but as a necessity that emerged in complex political processes. In other words, we should not suppose that ideology simply shapes its environment but take account of the interaction between ideologies and political processes. To substantiate this argument, I will discuss some examples concerning the transformations that the policy of the third way brought about in both Syria and Turkey in the next part.

The Qamishlo rebellion and the PYD

While parties linked to the KDP and PUK had been traditionally strong in the northeastern city of Qamishlo, they were also able to establish themselves in and around Afrin and Kobanê when Öcalan and the PKK went to Syria and then to Lebanon in search of a place where they could set up guerrilla camps before the 1980 coup. During the time the PKK was active in Lebanon and Syria, its cadres continued to organize the party in the Kurdish cities. Until 1998, the PKK was trying to achieve popular mobilization among the Rojava Kurds, who were historically pitted against Turkey, not Syria, while other parties mostly positioned themselves according to political processes and were less active to organize the masses (Tejel, 2009). The direct result of Öcalan's expulsion from Syria was that the PKK lost its ties with Syria, one of the main factors enabling the expansion of the Kurdish political front in Syria (Tejel, 2017). The most obvious manifestation of this is the 2003 revolt in Qamishlo, which resulted in 50 deaths, many injuries, and the arrest of more than two thousand people. The revolt broke out after a football match in Qamishlo and from there it spread to Afrin and Kobanê. This is directly related to the organizational power of the PYD, which was trying to establish itself at the time. Moreover, many parties canceled the 2004 Newroz celebrations in Qamishlo after the protests had been violently crushed by the regime, but not the PYD, which showed that the PYD's power had remained intact despite the regime's repressions (Gauthier, 2005).

Parallel to these developments on the inside, two main answers were given during the interviews to the question why the regime suppressed this rebellion with such great violence. First, the rise of the PYD was disturbing the Baathist dictatorship because al-Assad was maintaining very good relations with Turkey in order to circumvent the isolation policies introduced by the US and Israel against Syria. The regime did not want this rapprochement, which was made possible by Turkey's "zero-problem" paradigm, to deteriorate because of the PKK. A YPG official evaluates those days as

follows: “Since we adopted Öcalan’s ideology and relations between the Syrian regime and Turkey were good, the regime especially arrested and tortured our members” (Interview-2, Sulaymaniyah 22.09.2019). It can be argued that the regime had a special security concern regarding the PYD, which was due largely to the PYD’s ability to mobilize large masses (Kajo and Sinclair, 2011). Besides, as a second reason, it should be underlined that the autonomous region in Southern Kurdistan, which was securing its future at that time, created a lot of momentum at the regional level and in the Kurdish political space. The regime considered the Qamishlo rebellion to be a result exactly of this momentum (Sunca, 2021: 113). In fact, the regime’s response reflects the main fear of all states that have their own Kurdish question, namely that developments outside could stir up a rebellion among their own Kurdish populations.

Rojhilat and the transforming Kurdish political space

Based on the interviews, we can identify three major dynamics of this period in terms of Rojhilat. The first is constantly recurring revolts, protests, and demonstrations. This dynamic particularly concerns the popular level (this topic has already been discussed above in the section on the general situation in Iran).

Second, the Rojhilat parties had camps in Iraq while Saddam was still in power. After its establishment, the Kurdistan administration in the South continued to provide safe space for the KDP-I and the Komala here. Apart from sporadic and limited attempts to restart the armed struggle, the organized cadres of these parties and the Peshmerga forces mostly live in Southern Kurdistan (Interview-1, Germany 28.06.2021). While this provides security against the attacks of the repressive Iranian regime, it at the same time severely restricts relations with the large masses of the Rojhilat Kurds (Interview-2, Germany 28.06.2021). In other words, especially after Iraqi Kurdistan gained its official political status, the balance between security and political activity has been shifting to the disadvantage of the latter. Political activity is limited to attempts to reach the masses through television, social media, and a number of printed publications. In addition, despite their pro-autonomy discourses in earlier years, the KDP-I and the Komala have recently championed the idea of a federal Kurdistan in a democratic and federal Iran (Gunes, 2019: 86), based on the model of Iraqi Kurdistan. The KDP-I and Komala both went through internal divisions (once again) in 2006 and 2007, respectively, mainly due to the disagreement between groups wanting to increase political and/or military activities and those wanting to maintain the status quo. This can be seen as a direct consequence of the increasing political inertia. The fact that these parties were trapped in Southern Kurdistan caused them to become significantly weaker, meanwhile creating an opportunity for the PJAK to become even stronger.

This rise of the PJAK is the third issue. Due to the very limited scope of activities displayed by the other parties, the PJAK's political capacity and its visibility among Rojhilat Kurds increased during the 2000s. Especially after the ideological transformation of the PKK, the PJAK managed to seriously open up its discourse so as to include different social segments outside the traditional Sunni-Soran Kurdish population which the other parties traditionally tended to address, establishing relations with Lor, Kurmanc, Shiite, and Yaresan Kurds (Interview -2, Germany 28.06.2021).²⁵ The great progress made by the PJAK can be seen as one of the immediate impacts of the ideological openness that came with the transformation of the PKK and was built on the idea of being open to and incorporating differences. The PJAK was able to maintain its influence in Rojhilat until it declared a ceasefire vis-à-vis Iran in 2011. Afterwards, the party would face various obstacles, inhibiting its further rise in the 2010s, as Iran continued its cross-border operations to bomb the camps of the PJAK and its security-based policy of punishing against the Kurdish population in the country.

Conclusion

This part of the study had the aim of understanding the transformations that took place in the Kurdish political space in the 2000s. I have tried to engage in a historically informed discussion to situate the Kurdish space of the 2000s within the broader context of the developments that occurred at the global and regional level at that time. The 2000s created a lot of momentum in the Kurdish political space, with the Kurds finally able to gain certain victories and to change their position in the region. Thus, the 2000s had a direct impact on the years to come. In other words, the social, political, and geopolitical structures that emerged in this decade can very well be considered as the basis for the transformations, contradictions, and conflicts that would surface in the 2010s. The historical background and dynamics would be the central determinants of the processes that came after. In this respect, the social and political developments of the 2000s are at the center of global and regional developments taking place today.

We can address these transformations in the Kurdish political space in the context of a new interventionism and integration into the liberal world order at the global level, and in the context of resistance to this integration, which is conceptualized along the lines of the Eurocentric notion of "Middle Eastern exceptionalism," at the

²⁵ For a geographical distribution of Kurdish dialects see the map in Annex-4

regional level. The effort to absorb the rest of the world into the liberal world order was a direct consequence of post-Cold War liberal triumphalism. Combined with the workings of financial capital, they did not only wreak great havoc but also aroused a multi-faceted resistance. This, in turn, led the global powers to intervene in the Middle East. However, this intervention ultimately created a geopolitical and social equation that was almost impossible to resolve. On the one hand, the invasion of Iraq caused great destruction in Iraq itself. On the other hand, it also prepared the ground for the global crisis of liberal internationalism that we would observe in the 2010s. In addition, this also created various new political and social positions at the regional level. We have analyzed the implications these developments had for the Kurdish political space in detail above. They can be summarized in a few paragraphs.

If we look at the global hegemonic processes, the need to create new enemies and the anti-terror campaigns that were subsequently launched also led Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey to view the Kurdish movements in the context of terrorism. This had the direct result that the PKK was included on the list of terrorist organizations by the USA in 1997 and by the EU in 2002. The fact that the KDP and the PUK were removed from the list of third-degree terrorist groups in 2014 shows us more clearly what the label of terrorism means in the context of the Kurdish political space and global hegemonic processes.

Efforts to integrate the region into the global system went hand in hand with liberal peacebuilding practices. In the 2000s, it was envisaged that the PKK would be disarmed and the Kurdish problem in Turkey would be resolved by means of liberal peace technologies. We will discuss the effects of this further below in the context of the solution process in the 2010s, but suffice it say that without this understanding of peacebuilding that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, neither the Oslo process nor the solution process would have been possible. The same approach was also at work in the state-building process in Iraq, which may be considered as one of the worst examples.

One of the most direct consequences of the fact that the normative ground and defense of human rights are bent and twisted according to political and geopolitical processes is that the imperialist powers changed their policies according to their priorities and preferences. For example, the various forms of state violence unleashed against the Kurds by the Turkish state, a NATO member, led to limited legal sanctions by the European Court of Human Rights, meanwhile eliciting almost no political sanctions but rhetorical condemnation. However, the genocidal campaigns carried out by Iraq during the 80s and 90s (even though these were mostly carried out with the direct or indirect support or connivance of the West) were cited as one of the main

reasons for the intervention at every turn. Here, we are not discussing which state is using how much and what kind of violence, but the historical fact that the Kurdish question is dealt with according to the preferences and priorities of the political order and not within the framework of the normative principle of the alleged universality of human rights.

From the point of view of the states in the region, the contradictions are a little more complex because the common denominator that has historically united the four states and the power structures in these countries has been their opposition against any possibility of Kurdish independence. Since the states were concerned that a Kurdish independence could lead themselves and the historically grown social hierarchies to disintegrate, they have framed the issue as a problem of ontological security. Throughout the 2000s, however, another concern for states was how they could utilize the Kurdish movements against each other. Along the same lines we can understand the attempts of global imperialist actors to bring the states into line by either eliminating or supporting the Kurdish movements within their territories. In this respect, the handing over of Öcalan to Turkey to create a grave crisis for the PKK is directly related to the United States' desire and effort to make Turkey a part of the Middle East flank of the global neoliberal integration. Likewise, the support the KDP and the PUK received from the USA was part of the preparations for the subsequent operations against the Saddam regime.

Furthermore, repercussions of Middle Eastern exceptionalism also had its effect on the Kurdish political space in so far as the Kurds were considered as the "exception to the exception." Especially in Iraq, Kurdish politics was presented as an imperialist game in the dominant discourses because it was relatively more secular when compared to other social and political groups and adopted democratic principles at least at the discursive level, and therefore appeared to be aligned and compatible with the West. In other words, when taken together, the efforts to establish a liberal peace regime and the political practices of the Kurds, who constituted an "exception to the exception" in the hegemonic perception, caused the states in the Kurdish political space to be concerned about their ontological security. While the West viewed the Kurds as "the exception to the exception," the four states in the Kurdish space viewed them as "a toy of the West" or "the pawn of imperialism." This contributed to making coexistence even more problematic, not only for the regimes, but also for their opponents. However, it should be underscored that whether it be the "exception" for the West or the "pawn" for the states in the regions, these are cognitive representations that are produced from hierarchical positions and position Kurdish politics according to their own political ends. Both were motivated by the aim

of instrumentalizing and not of understanding the Kurdish political space. Similar discussions would take place after the Rojava revolution and the defense of Kobanê against ISIS in 2014.

After the invasion of Iraq, this perception caused Arab nationalists to see the Kurds as the people who “betrayed” them or “stabbed them in the back,” thus intensifying nationalist tendencies. As a reaction against this, Kurdish nationalism grew stronger. Kurds had to collaborate with imperialist powers in order to obtain their own rights. However, this problematic dichotomy between imperialism and anti-imperialism, as discussed in detail above, only served to deepen already existing contradictions. After all, Kurdish politics, the states, and other oppositional actors all have to deal with the imperial powers in the region in one way or another. We are likely to see much greater repercussions of this in the future.

Finally, we saw two major transformations in the Kurdish political space: In the 1990s and 2000s, the Kurdish national liberation movements came to a crossroads between a radical democratic confederal and a traditional Kurdish nationalist wing. The national liberationist movement, which gave priority to internationalism and socialism, had been strong in Turkey since the 1970s. In the 1990s and 2000s, it gradually shifted to democratic confederalism and began to increase its activity. This was the product of an intersection between the mechanisms of oppression introduced by global and regional geopolitical processes and the conceptual and political openness resulting from ideological transformations that had the aim of developing more profound solutions to resist this oppression. The nationalist wing, which had always been more dominant in Iraqi Kurdistan, flourished under the conditions of the 1990s and 2000s that provided it with the opportunity to establish its dominance and expand its sphere of political influence. Reproducing various problematic elements of the Kurdish social structure by blending them with ideological-political arguments, both wings would continue to be key actors in the Kurdish political space of the 2010s. The political structures and formations in Rojava and Rojhilat were generally influenced by these two models. But already the 2000s mark the onset of transformation that occurred under the impact of an organization of the masses that was ideologically, practically and politically led by the PKK and would work to strengthen democratic confederal tendencies, which would emerge much more clearly in the 2010s.

In summary, all these aspects led to a new situation in terms of peaceful coexistence: The most significant event is undoubtedly the constitutional recognition of the Iraqi Kurdistan region as a federated region of Iraq. This development caused both regional actors and the Kurdish political space to undergo major transformations. In this

respect, the Turkish government's decision to open a consulate-general in Hewler is of great symbolic importance, considering how Turkey had historically approached the Kurdish issue. It indicated that federal solutions would find acceptance around the region, leading the Kurds to adopt this approach as a main tool to develop peaceful relationships with the relevant states through their political elites. In parallel, the handing over of Öcalan to Turkey led the PKK to complete its transformation, thus introducing new balances in the regional relations. The transformation of the PKK and the models of social organization and political structures that would emerge as a result of this transformation in the 2010s enabled a bottom-up practice of coexistence based on alliances between different segments of society and their political representatives. In other words, while the federative solution in the South would set an example for a peaceful order at the diplomatic level and the level of political elites, the circumstances created by the PKK's transformation in the North would set an example for coexistence at the bottom, i.e., at the level of social groups and their representations. This was the general outlook of the Kurdish political space when entering the 2010s, which would see the crisis of the liberal international order, the Arab uprisings, and the Rojava revolution.

CHAPTER THREE

THE KURDISH QUESTION IN THE 2010s

In order to understand the transformations that occurred in the Kurdish political space in the 2010s, we need to look at the interactions between the crisis of the liberal international order, the Arab uprisings that erupted in the region, and the Kurdish political space. Crisis, as defined by Gramsci, refers to an interregnum in which the old is dying but the new cannot not yet be born (Gramsci, 1971). This interregnum is rife with various possibilities (Stahl, 2019). The crisis of the liberal international order is not limited to the liberal-democratic nations. On the contrary, since it is exactly these states that have been dominant and hegemonic until now, this crisis more or less affects the entire world. It can also be interpreted as societies' rejection of the dominant colonial understanding of peace and the conflicts that arise as a result of this rejection. Since this crisis unsettles political and social balances around the world and grows deeper as it interacts with the social and political dynamics in different parts of the world, it needs to be approached from a broader perspective. The purpose of this third chapter is to discuss this crisis within the context of political and social conflict in the Middle East, particularly in the Kurdish political space.

The primary proposition of this chapter is that, similar to the discussion on the 2000s in the previous chapter, the transformative dynamics of the Kurdish political space in the 2010s are intertwined with regional and global processes and that both cannot be considered separately. I will defend this thesis at three analytical levels: First, the emergence of the crisis of the liberal international order as an intra-hegemonic, extra-hegemonic and counter-hegemonic crisis and its different repercussions on the world. Second, the Arab uprisings that broke out as a result of the interaction of this global crisis with the socio-historical fatigue in the region and the renegotiation of power relations this entailed at the regional level. And third, the developments that occurred as a result of the interaction of these global and regional processes with the dynamics of the Kurdish political space. In the previous chapter, we have seen that the states in the region were visibly weakened but nonetheless managed to achieve their authoritarian re-consolidation, while the Kurdish political space failed to unite, as it was organized, but also divided along two ideological-political lines. In this chapter, the main topic of discussion is how these dynamics inherited from the previous decade shaped the 2010s.

Global transformations: The crisis of the liberal international order

One of the main determinants of the global transformation in the 2010s is the crisis of

the liberal international order. The key components of this order have been described by its proponents as open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic society, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty, and the rule of law (Ikenberry 2011: 2). In the previous chapter, we discussed how the liberal triumphalism that held sway in the 1990s and 2000s, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was imposing its agenda on the rest of the world. Consisting of neoliberal economic tyranny, a problematic understanding of human rights and democracy, and a civil society that hardly had a bearing on real social processes, this program began to face a serious crisis in the 2010s.

The crisis of the liberal international order can be situated in the context of growing challenges from inside and outside the system to the reductionist application of the principles of global governance, which in the final analysis led to a deepening of social and political contradictions. Among others, the principle of open markets turned into an outright neoliberal attack, leaving societies defenseless vis-à-vis the workings of global capital (Harvey, 2014). Meanwhile, international institutions were basically transformed into servants of the hegemonic powers that imposed economic and political norms (for example, the World Bank and its lending system) (Robinson, 2014). While collaborative security was reduced to the security of the Global North, those areas outside the Global North were confronted with great social, ecological, and economic insecurities (think of the debates on food security and the numerous local organizations working on this topic). Likewise, the notion of democratic society was manipulated and undermined by reducing it to elections of questionable legitimacy (for example, the fact that “minority” rights appeared as an issue particularly prone to violation around the world in terms of race, gender, class, etc.). Collective problem solving remained limited to the level of the political and economic elites, while it was mostly the populace that had to bear the brunt of wars and economic crises. In the face of countless imperialist interventions, the principle of sovereignty lost its meaning. On the other hand, authoritarian states used the principle as a pretext for excluding, negating, or killing some of its own citizens (Çubukçu, 2018). And finally, the notion of the rule of law was rendered void in the course of endless debates around whose rule of law the principle should refer to.

Against this backdrop, the main dimensions and consequences of this crisis, which would have a direct impact on many developments around the world, can be analyzed under three headings: the intra-hegemonic crisis, the extra-hegemonic crisis and counter-hegemony.

The intra-hegemonic crisis

The intra-hegemonic crisis refers to the dilemma faced by the states located at the center of global hegemony. These states, where the institutionalization of the liberal democratic order is most developed, have faced a serious internal crisis due to the rise of neofascist tendencies that surged on the back of the crises produced by the neoliberal system (Robinson, 2019).²⁶ This had a negative impact on the global hegemonic positions of these states and disturbed the intra-system balances. The clearest indication of this is that racist and white supremacist politicians gained great popularity with their agitative-racist rhetoric in many Western countries, especially in the USA and England. In the USA, Donald Trump won the election against Hillary Clinton in 2016. In the same year, the UK decided to leave the European Union, Marine Le Pen passed the traditional political parties on the right and left and came second in the presidential elections in France, and in Eastern Europe, leaders like Orban remained in power thanks to their victories at the ballot boxes. These are only some of the most apparent visible indicators of the major transformation that has unfolded on the inside.²⁷

There are several dimensions to the social and political origins of this internal crisis. First, we should mention the impact of the global neoliberal order on the social structures of these states. This is most clearly observed in the drastic pauperization of the populace due to an increasing tax burden, a loss of income and the unequal distribution of resources that can all be read as a result of the collaboration between companies and state bureaucracies. This has come with the immediate consequences of declining education and increasing homelessness and unemployment. A second

²⁶ Here, the prefix “neo” in the term “neofascist” is added to refer to an updated form of “fascist” ideology under new conditions, although there are various qualitative differences. Also, I would like to briefly explain why I preferred the term neofascist to “populist”. “Populism” or “populist” is used in the sense of being on the side of the people, or in the pejorative sense it gets in leftist jargon, “sitting on the people’s tail”. What is problematic here, however, is that the liberal political order is constructed as a positive counter-model vis-à-vis against all forms of “populism”, regardless of their content. This removes the distinction between people’s struggle against hunger, unemployment, racism, and sexism, and for the right to access to the most basic education and healthcare and the individuals and groups representing these struggles at the level of parliament or social leadership on the one hand, and the sexist, racist and anti-labor mentalities who seek to exploit the crises generated by the neoliberal white supremacist system to establish their own dominance on the other hand. In other words, the critical position against systemic exploitation and oppression is equated with the racist position, which has no inherent problem with systemic exploitation. In order to avoid this confusion, I prefer to use the term neofascist instead of populist in this study.

²⁷ It should be underlined that we are seeing a global wave of nationalism with racist structures gaining power almost everywhere. We cannot deal with Erdogan in Turkey or Modi in India independently of this. That said, these forms of nationalism outside the West are characterized by some different aspects that will be explored below.

dimension concerns the loss of privilege and supremacy. While it is primarily non-whites, women, and LGBT+s who suffer a loss of income and poverty in these states, it can be argued that regardless of identity, a similar relative deprivation occurs across all lower and middle classes (Yuval-Davis, 2015). Meanwhile, for the white majority, this deprivation has meant the perceived loss of a supremacy/privilege that is based on racism. This perception attributes the spread of unemployment to the arrival of immigrants and growing poverty to the increasing visibility of non-whites, who used to be considered inferior, and the emergence of political movements/structures acting on their behalf. Having enjoyed privileges within state systems and their established orders in the past, Whiteness begins to oppose the system in the face of this loss of supremacy/privilege. Third, the traditional distinction between left and right in representative politics has become increasingly meaningless, as the basic parameters of the system agreed upon by the right and left parties in the center are also the parameters that cause the current crisis (Cardoso Rosas and Rita Ferreira, 2013).

Declaring themselves representatives of the “real people”, neofascist political structures have become important vessels that organize and represent the anxieties and anger of white people. During election campaigns, these actors promoted racism and supremacy, promising that the people would once again reign supreme and that those who sank into poverty under the rule of the corrupt liberal elites would soon see the “old days of prosperity” return. This rhetoric led to positive identification among the people. Eventually, these parties either succeeded in coming to power or they became central oppositional actors (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, 2020). Meanwhile, the rapid expansion of this neofascist politics was due its ability to submit overly superficial and manipulative proposals for the solution of massive problems of wide-ranging historical and social origin, which in the end only served to deepen the crisis of the liberal order both within these countries and at the global level. On the one hand, this turned society’s most vulnerable groups into the target of social anger and fueled protests and revolts, while on the other hand undermining the liberal order that had been established in these countries.

The fact that Trump lost the elections in 2020 and that the UK, though struggling with many problems like the issue of Northern Ireland and poverty, is slowly getting back into shallow waters, shows that the liberal order is trying to heal itself. On the other hand, the fact that Trumpism is not dead, on the contrary, that there is a (high) chance of Trump being re-elected in 2024, goes to show that the intra-hegemonic crisis is going to become even more dramatic. Especially when we also take into account those crises of the liberal international order that occur in other regions, the limited improvements – as far as the liberal order is concerned – that we witness in these

countries seem meager in the face of such a profound overall crisis. After all, the intra-hegemonic crisis clearly exhibits how the inability of societies to live together in peace is intertwined with economic exploitation, racism, and sexism. Thus, the importance of the intra-hegemonic crisis for this study is that due to its own internal economic, political, and social problems, that is, racism, sexism, deep poverty, and income injustice, the liberal order gradually ceases to be a model for the world.

The extra-hegemonic crisis

The extra-hegemonic crisis basically describes a situation where the liberal order, already struggling with various problems on the inside, is also faced with geoeconomic and geopolitical challenges abroad. Triumphant emerging from the post-Cold War, the liberal international order pursued the aim of changing the entire world and ambitiously began to remove all barriers in front of the global economy in order to provide full freedom to multinational corporations. Due to its hegemonic rule, the neoliberal economic program did not meet any obstacles. However, the phenomenon of East Asian countries, especially China, that achieved growth by combining increasing production capacities with an authoritarian regime, would end the global aspirations of neoliberalism (Frank, 1998; Weiss and Wallace, 2021). The extra-hegemonic crisis of the liberal world order can be examined in a geoeconomic and geopolitical context.

Despite its various territorial contradictions (Karatasli and Kumral, 2017), the rise of China is no longer a myth, but a geoeconomic reality that has a direct impact around the world. China's integration into the system was facilitated by factors such as the country's transfer of technology in the post-Mao era, the existence of a huge cheap labor market, and the post-Mao CCP's openness to the liberal world. In this period, the neoliberal deregulation of the economy made it possible for China to enter markets in many places and to attract capital from the 1990s onwards, turning the country into a competitive global actor (Rosenberg and Boyle, 2019). China secured its growth through aggressive imperialist practices such as the large-scale destruction of nature in Africa and geopolitical moves to establish its own dominance in Asia, as well as by maintaining relations with the leftist regimes of South American countries that were in conflict with the US administration. In the meantime, many production centers traditionally concentrated elsewhere have shifted to Asian countries, primarily China, because of the cheap labor market and growing transport capacities available there. These transformations come along with two direct consequences for the liberal international order. First, under the given circumstances, China is challenging the hegemony of the USA to redefine global hegemonic relations. Second, there is an

undertow to this transformation in the states located at the center of capitalism which manifests itself in the form of post-industrial unemployment (Levett, 1994). The supporters of Trump in the USA or the Brexiteers in the UK were mostly made up of white people concentrated in these post-industrial areas.

At the same time, there was a loss of geopolitical hegemony, playing out more or less intensely, in all of South America, Asia and Africa, which was both cause and result of the weakening of the global hegemony of the USA (Schoen and Kaylan, 2014). In this report, we are going to focus on analyzing the extra-hegemonic transformation with respect to Russia and the Middle East, as this will provide us with a foundation for the discussions to follow. Faced with a serious economic, social, and political crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian state began to regain its power under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. This was basically achieved with a military regime around which the economy was built. Through its military-economic complexes and the technology investments it carried out in this area, the Russian state, whose economy equals that of a mid-level European country in size, in fact wanted to establish hegemony in its direct environs and in other regions, especially the Middle East. For example, Russia played a significant role as a balancing actor against the entire NATO system in Ukraine and Crimea, and against the USA in the Middle East, especially in Syria.

At this point, it is useful to make a distinction in terms of authoritarianism between the authoritarian facets of the intra-hegemonic crisis of the liberal order and states like China and Russia that challenge this order from the outside. China and Russia are extremely oppressive on the inside, silencing all kinds of opposition and restricting various freedoms, especially the freedom of expression. Both states see their people as cheap labor and prevent people's problems from being represented at the level of the state. These regimes fend off all criticism leveled at them by asserting their sovereignty rights, while growing on the back of their own people who have to pay the price of the aggressive and ruthless economic competition created by neoliberal globalization. The domestic political processes in states such as the USA, on the other hand, are based on a representative democracy that is prone to manipulation and have prompted the rise of neofascist tendencies. The authoritarian *raison d'état* in these countries does not grant a political or physical right to life to political structures that might oppose it, suppressing people's protest by means of military or security measures to mitigate the risk of an overthrow. Nevertheless, there is something that Western liberal capitalism and authoritarian capitalism have in common. Transformations occurring at the level of governments do not imply that the interests of the people are defended in one way or another, or that there would be direct

solutions to their problems. On the contrary, both models eventually come down to a striving for hegemony under the control of their political and economic elites. These two hegemonic structures, which differ from each other in certain aspects, also transformed the dynamics of coexistence between societies: While the new geopolitical balances have the potential to deepen existing conflicts, they also opened the way for establishing a new notion of peace.

Counter-hegemony

A third factor that prepared the stage for the crisis of the liberal international order was the social movements that sprang up almost everywhere around the globe in the 2010s and, to some extent, are still around today. This dimension of the crisis can be called counter-hegemonic because, at the core, these social movements are driven by the protest against practices of power that are based on economic exploitation and global forms of identity-based domination and exclusion. But contrary to what is presented in the mainstream media and mainstream academic debates, the defining feature of these social movements is not just opposition to economic crisis, but opposition to the system that regularly reproduces such crises. They do not simply claim identity rights but oppose the global identity regime that negates and marginalizes certain identities. They do not only fight for the equality of men and women but oppose the very patriarchal and sexist regime that produces this inequality and many other forms of exclusion and oppression. They do not only oppose individual dictators, but dictatorship itself (Álvarez & Chase-Dunn, 2019; Clement, 2016; Evans, 2012; Gago, 2020; Karataşlı, 2019; Ph m, 2018). In the wave of uprisings in the 2010s, which is presented below, one of these forms of exclusion and exploitation would usually be in the focus, but we should acknowledge that all these different instances of protest, when taken together, form an anti-hegemonic totality.

The last decade saw protests almost all around the globe (Clement, 2016; Danewid, 2018; Jung, 2020; Karatasli, 2014). In England, Portugal, Spain, Greece and many other places, protests and resistance against austerity policies continued throughout the 2010s and partly still take place today. We can see this in the fact that a leftist politician like Jeremy Corbyn was elected to the leadership of the Labor Party in England, or that Bernie Sanders' movement received a significant share of the votes in the USA, or that the political representation of the street movements, which organized against the effects of the economic crisis in Spain and Greece, came to power, as in the case of Syriza, or became the strongest oppositional force, as in the case of Podemos.

Along with these, one should certainly mention the #BlackLivesMatter movement, one of the most influential movements in North America and Western Europe, which has rallied around an anti-racist agenda. This movement had already been fighting the structural violence of state institutions against people of color for years on end, but gained even greater momentum in the 2010s, when state violence in neighborhoods and areas inhabited by Blacks, immigrants, Latinos, and Asians became more frequent and severe. The protests did not only question the daily violence against people of color, but also included the tearing down or damaging of the statues of former colonial rulers, thus exposing the historical origins of today's violence. In addition to these, the ongoing occupy movement, the so-called Chilean autumn, which started as a protest against the hike in metro prices but later evolved into a more general movement against the increasing cost of living and deteriorating living conditions, the large protest and resistance movement that broke out in India against a legal reform aimed at giving away farmers' lands to large companies, and many other relatively less visible protests can all be understood within the context of opposition to the global neoliberal economy.

Apart from these examples, which were mainly due to economic reasons, there were multiple waves of protests in Russia, Ukraine, Romania, and Brazil that were sparked by a rebellion against authoritarian state mechanisms. Besides, the protests caused by political uncertainty and government policies in Brazil and Venezuela, the student-led #YoSoy132 (I am 132) movement in Mexico, the Sunflower Student movement in Taiwan, the youth-led Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, which contested state surveillance technologies with very effective methods, or the democracy movement in South Korea can all be cited as examples of resistance to states' repressive authoritarian policies. Another part of the revolts against this global regime of oppression is the wide range of women's and LGBTIQ+ movements, which have been most prominent in Latin America but could also be observed in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. In particular, the international women's strike known as *Paro Internacional de Mujeres*, the demonstrations for the right to abortion in many places, especially in Eastern Europe, and the Pride Weeks around the globe that gave visibility to LGBTIQ+ individuals despite all repression and violence, show us the anti-sexist character of these global protest movements (Gago, 2020). In addition, the Arab Uprisings, the causes and consequences of which we will discuss in greater detail below, initially broke out as a wave of protest against economic pressures and violence, but then brought together different groups and individuals who had problems with the state and the system for different reasons.

At the heart of these mobilizations that we see occur at the global level is the system of oppression and exploitation established by the liberal international order. The aggressive neoliberal onslaught paired with states' security mechanisms together constructed a police state system that increases economic exploitation and reorganizes security at the micro level. Gradually disempowered vis-à-vis states and companies, different social groups resisted against the racist and sexist ideology that had become baked into the system and at times managed to force a change of government or policy. However, since the exclusionary and exploitative economic, cultural, and sexist regimes remain largely intact despite partial achievements and improvements, social discontent is likely higher than ever.

The consequences of the crisis

Having conceptualized the crisis of the liberal international order along these three dimensions, we next want to look at the direct consequences of this crisis and see how they led to a further deepening of the greater systemic crisis. The most obvious result is probably the unstoppable rise of nationalism in countries all over the world and, based on this, states' active use of their repressive apparatuses against their own populations. Especially the hegemonic states in the West reinforced their borders in order to protect themselves against the influx of refugees from outside. The rise of nationalism, in turn, entailed the direct consequence that the resistance of non-whites and immigrants against the racist-supremacist social order has gained momentum.

The liberal international order normalized a hierarchical peace regime based on race/ethnicity within the borders of the nation-state in the rest of the world. Liberal thinkers argue that the liberal international order would protect cultural differences through nation-states (e.g., Reus-Smit, 2021). However, the main problem here is that the cultural borders drawn by nationalism or the hierarchical structure that emerged as a result of homogenization and modernization projects within nation-states also gave rise to cultural genocides. Owing to the so-called Westphalian order, the hierarchies based on race or nationality that developed within states were protected by the principle of sovereignty (Búzás, 2021). However, the signs of disintegration and anti-supremacy movements at the center of the liberal order also created concerns regarding ontological security among peripheral and semi-peripheral countries. As a result, the right-wing *raison d'état*, which is traditionally opposed to the West, became even more pronounced in countries such as Turkey, Russia, and Iran.

Another result is that the often cited "international community" has ceased to be a reference. When mention is made of the international community, this usually refers

to the hegemonic world order centered around the USA and NATO and the historically constructed conditions of peace and the prevention of wars and conflicts within this order as these were the powers that had the capacity to impose norms on others. However due to the great problems concerning racism and constant poverty within the countries at the center of the international community and the fact that these countries tolerated and even collaborated with dictatorships in the rest of the world, the “international community” has lost its significance as a point of reference of the liberal order for many different social groups. Another accompanying factor is that due to the shifting balance of power in the wake of geoeconomic and geopolitical challenges, the number of beneficiaries of the limited set of principles of the liberal international order has decreased significantly at the global political level. This is most clearly seen in the relationship of the European Union with the Turkish government.

The most direct result of the liberal international order and another phenomenon profoundly affecting its crisis is migration. Various social or political groups that were subject to oppression, exploitation, and exclusion in their own countries – not least because the US-centered global hegemonic order supported or ignored authoritarian regimes – continued to flee to the West despite the structural racism prevailing there. Urbanization, forced industrialization, and the subsequent cheapening of labor were other major reasons for migration. In this context, we should also take into account migration due to the climate crisis (Faist, 2019), a topic that is discussed rather less frequently in Turkey.

Finally, the crisis of the liberal international order made it very evident that we need to change the ways of looking at world politics (Anievas and Nisancioğlu, 2017; Zarakol, 2010). International relations’ approach to the analysis of the world system is mostly Western-centric and based on European exceptionalism. According to this approach, Europe’s rise since the 15th century had to do with Europe’s own human capacities, industriousness, appropriate religious and moral conditions, and the political, social, and economic conditions that made all these possible. Even Marxist studies, while analyzing the infrastructure to explain phenomena, refrained from addressing the political, cultural, social, and economic relations in their global totality and contented themselves to analyzing Western-centered hegemonic processes (Hobson, 2012). However, especially the rise of China has shown us very clearly how vital it is to analyze the ways societies are affected by each other, and perhaps more importantly, the inevitable inclusion of all societies in global networks of relations that take shape in one common world (Frank, 1998: 26-28). Just as the hegemonic orders of a world centered around the Chinese, Mongol, and Ottoman empires was replaced by Western-

centered hegemony in the past, we may interpret the current transformations as a similar hegemonic shift. This process is not likely to take place overnight or to reveal clear winners and losers. It is more realistic to assume that it will unfold according to the interactions and power struggles between different political and social actors in the short, medium, and long term. If we want to understand the dynamics of this process, we cannot focus solely on individual parts, but we will have to analyze the whole that these parts compose.

Based on the analysis of the liberal international order conducted in this section, we can conclude that the most defining feature of the 2010s is the global hegemonic transformation that needs to be seen as an expression of a crisis. The global hegemonic transformation is neither completed, nor has it produced any clear winner(s). On the contrary, it continues with great intensity. But even if it has not yet come to an end, the crisis itself has already had serious consequences for the rest of the world, which in turn greatly reverberate with the crisis. The current crisis does not only affect conflict and peace within and between societies but also concerns the normative level of peacemaking. Any attempt to understand the Arab uprisings and the subsequent transformations in the Middle East and the repercussions these had on the Kurdish political space would be lacking if it is not situated in this broader global context.

Regional transformations: The Arab uprisings and beyond

A key role in the regional transformations of the 2010s was played by the Arab uprisings, which began in 2011 but historically speaking, have repeatedly flared up since the end of the 19th century.²⁸ In December 2010, a street vendor set himself on fire to protest corruption and police mistreatment in Tunisia. This sparked a wave of protest which spilled over to the entire region, especially to Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, culminating in the collapse of dictatorships that had been dominating in these countries for decades or, as in the case of Syria, in the palpable weakening of regimes. Bearing in mind that Ikhwan member Morsi was overthrown after the initial overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, that the civil war in Libya,

²⁸ Instead of conducting an in-depth historical analysis here, we can be content with simply referring to the problematic nature of the construction of the Middle East as discussed in the first part of this study. Also, since a chronological account of events would exceed the scope of this study, we will limit ourselves to discussing the conditions that made the Arab uprisings possible and the consequences they produced.

which broke out after the overthrow of Gaddafi, is still ongoing, and that in ISIS, a tremendously brutal actor appeared on the scene in Syria and Iraq where the civil war still continues in certain aspects, it becomes clear that the Arab uprisings have played a central role in reshaping the entire region. In the face of great state violence and social and political destruction and given the fact that subsequent power formations did not change the regimes in these countries to the better, today, in its tenth year, this wave of protest has almost completely subsided. However, the conditions that led to these revolts remain largely unchanged.

We can name three political-economic factors that contributed to the emergence of the Arab uprisings. The first of these factors is the profound disintegration of the state-led developmental economies of the 20th century as a result of neoliberal economic practices and the deep poverty this has created. Second, local populations came under increasing pressure because the existing state mechanisms were politically weakened by the anti-terror campaigns (discussed in the second part of this study) in the region and the rent-distribution capacity of dictatorships, whose economy was already weakened, were further reduced due to embargoes. Third, on top of all these, living conditions grew increasingly difficult as a result of the direct impact that the 2008 economic crisis had on all Middle Eastern countries (Matin, 2018).

Meanwhile, the Western states supported this regional system of nation-states until the 2010s. However, all these states had been founded upon a very weak social cohesion in the first place (Bozarslan, 2014: 16). Since small interest groups were in complete control of the mechanisms of political rule, the tight control over organizations that represented large social groups prevented these organizations from participating in decision-making processes (Hinnebusch, 2013: 34). The dynamics created by this dictatorial regime are one of the most important reasons for the uprisings that broke out in the 2010s.

Another important factor catalyzing the uprisings in the Middle East is what Hamit Bozarslan calls the "social fatigue" that was created by the historical transformation of these regimes. At this point, it might be good to highlight two main processes in the transformation of the Middle East, which we have examined in detail in the first chapter: (1) The top-down modernization process led to the formation of dictatorships and caused allergic reactions among society. This is expressed in an Islamist and anti-Western reaction against a secular nationalism that was being imposed from the top down. (2) The process of re-Islamization, which gained momentum in the 1970s in the context of anti-Soviet policies, reconstructed the dictatorships around the region on the basis of an ideological discourse of Islamic modernization. However, the fact

that the legitimacy of dictatorships derived from religious, sectarian, and nationalist identities gave rise to the polarization of different social groups. These polarizations made the main problem, namely the dictatorships, invisible. Adding to this, the fact that the status of being a “minority” was renegotiated at every critical stage further aggravated the problems and made them almost inextricable (Bozarslan, 2011: 10–11; Halliday, 2005: 86–90). Thus, the earlier mentioned social fatigue has its roots in a social diversity whose different facets are constantly pitted against each other and enter complex relationships with power. We need to understand this social fatigue as one of the historical sociological phenomena that catalyzed the Arab uprisings that erupted in the 2010s.

The impact of the Arab uprisings on the region

The first major consequence of this wave of protests and uprisings is that the counter-revolutionary power formations were able to survive despite the great longing and desire for social change. Today, ten years after the uprisings, we can ask the following: If we look at Egypt, for instance, those who overthrew Mubarak, those who elected Morsi, and those who supported Sisi all called themselves revolutionaries. But which one of these is a “real” revolution and what would be the point of reference to answer this question? Although there may be no clear answer to this question, we can nonetheless see that these successive processes did not bring about any fundamental changes in terms of the state’s basic government mechanisms and elite rule. Following Gramsci, we can call this a ‘revolution without a revolution’ (Brownlee & Ghiabi, 2016). But here, another question arises: Did the revolutionary potential which had accumulated in societies simply disappear? To the extent that it forms a liaison with power, every revolution limited to seizing power and establishing its own dominance/superiority is doomed to turn into a counter-revolution. In other words, every revolution that does not aim at achieving a social transformation turns into a counter-revolution and generates a new insurgent potential against itself. But instead of a social and political imagination for the time after the overthrow of regimes and a practical preparation for this time, what we saw during the Arab Spring was political structures such as the Ikhwan, who aimed to seize power and institutionalize their own regime. Situating the consequences of the Arab Spring in such a context is also of great significance for future analyses of the Kurdish political space. For example, despite all its shortcomings, the Rojava revolution mainly distinguishes itself from these processes in that it tried to project a vision of social transformation and to achieve a form of political organization that could realize this vision.

The second major outcome of the Arab uprisings undoubtedly is the emergence of

ISIS as a militant group that terrified the entire world with its acts of violence at pornographic level, which earned it the label of a “global evil.” The emergence of ISIS was conditioned by three historical periods: the dissolution of the Iraqi state and economic system through US-led sanctions, the sectarian-based reconstruction of politics and society after the 2003 invasion, and the opening of the region to the assault of the neoliberal economy (see Chapter 2 for a detailed analysis).

After the existing autocratic political structures, including “moderate Islam,” had become weakened or completely disappeared as a result of a permanent back and forth dynamic between revolutions and counter-revolutions, ISIS appeared as a new focus that addressed and organized the anger and interest of social groups that become increasingly radicalized (Matin, 2018). Partially owing its growth to the direct support or connivance of the regional states on the Sunni Islamic axis, ISIS managed to combine, at least to some extent, its own understanding of jihad with these states’ political-geopolitical goals. After ISIS carried out numerous highly violent attacks against social groups that it perceived as outside of its understanding of Islam, including especially the Kurds, and against all forces that did not bow down before it, a coalition led by the USA supported the SDF forces to liberate the city of Raqqa, the capital of ISIS, in 2017. In 2020, the group was expelled from the last territories under its control. Although ISIS no longer effectively holds sway over any territory in the region today, the conditions that led to its emergence still largely prevail. Therefore, the boundless violent potential of radical jihadist Islam will always remain a social and geopolitical factor in the region. The rise of ISIS is important not only because of its way of using violence, but also because it temporarily abolished the Sykes-Picot order, carried out attacks on the West, revealed the helplessness of states in the region in fighting against the group, and exposed that some states in the region supported or at least tolerated such grave violence. In one way or another, one may argue, ISIS will continue to pose a threat to the region and, to a certain extent, global politics. The direct relevance this has for the Kurds and the position occupied by Kurdish politics in the global system will be examined in greater detail below.

Third, the Arab uprisings probed the borders of the nation-states, showing once more that these borders do not correspond to anything in reality. However, the borders ultimately remained in place. In many academic circles, it was discussed whether the Arab uprisings would bring or had brought about the end of the Sykes-Picot order (Fawcett, 2017: 794). However, in the tenth year of the uprisings it has become clear that the autocratic states have maintained their borders and reconsolidated their power. This is most dramatically illustrated by the case of the Assad regime since 2017. The fact that the states in the Middle East have been so open to foreign

interventions and that they seemed incapable of representing their own societies has created the impression that they could collapse at any moment. In some way, this has been a source of motivation for protest movements, instilling greater hopes than ever in many peoples, particularly the Kurds, who had been struggling for years. Under the current circumstances, however, the hegemonic confrontation in the region supports the continuity of the state system: Although the USA and its allies hope for the softening of state policies, they are ultimately in favor of the continuation of the state system as it exists today. This has to do with the fact that under the conditions created by global hegemonic encounters, any major changes would harbor great risks and the possibility of serious instability. On the other hand, the state system does not pose a big problem for the powers that struggle for hegemony in the region, especially Russia and China, since they benefit greatly from this system and prioritize their own geopolitical and geoeconomic interests over social and individual rights (Katz, 2020: 149-150). China's energy investments in Iran or Russia's support for the Assad regime can be cited as the most concrete evidence of their approach. In summary, the Arab uprisings seriously destabilized, but did not overthrow the authoritarian power structures. Therefore, the state-society relationship is currently being renegotiated. So far, what is certain is that the borders have remained unchanged and that a new autocratic consolidation has been achieved. Meanwhile, the structural causes of the social contestation of the regimes still prevail. The course taken by the dynamics of social resistance and the consequences of the crisis of global hegemony in the years to come will directly affect the future of the regimes and their borders.

The fourth consequence of the Arab uprisings is that they gave rise to a new discourse of Middle Eastern exceptionalism. When the protests first broke out, many articles and analyses expressed the view that what we were witnessing were protests for (liberal) democracy and human rights. In some respects, however, these analyses were very problematic. For example, the role of social media was exaggerated so much that, in Tariq Barkawi's words, "to listen to the hype about social networking websites and the Egyptian revolution, one would think it was Silicon Valley and not the Egyptian people who overthrew Mubarak."²⁹ Such a political discourse is exemplary for the "thingification" of revolutionary dynamics by a counter-revolutionary discourse within the Eurocentric world system: According to Azeez, this reification derives from the presupposition that a revolution outside the West, independent of the West, and not aiming to be like the West, can simply not take place. This position is very problematic because it absorbs all revolutionary potential and agency and ascribes it

²⁹ See: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/442-don-t-believe-the-hype-al-jazeera-s-tarak-barkawi-denounces-the-role-of-technology-and-the-westernization-of-revolution> (last accessed on 30.10.2021).

to an external source. Or, it holds that every revolutionary transformation that is to take place outside the West can only be as strong as its capacity to imitate the West (Azeez, 2016). These are the ideological moorings of the discourse of exceptionalism. Those who promote this discourse point to the fact that the Arab uprisings resulted in an autocratic consolidation and that ISIS emerged as a new “global evil” to substantiate their claim: ultimately, the argument goes, the Middle East resists change and is not fit for democracy. Thus, this discourse of exceptionalism, a product of a Eurocentric strategic perspective, is based on the notion that change is impossible in the Middle East, especially in the Arab world. This discourse found its expression in new concepts like “Arab winter” or “Islamist winter” that followed the “Arab spring.” This had two implications for the Kurdish political space: First, Rojava was treated as a new “exception to the exception”; and second, the power structures in the region began to view Kurdish political subjectivity as their ontological other.

A fifth result that emerged at the regional level is that a possibility of freedom arose for regions that differed from the central state in terms of their social and political characteristics but had always been subject to the sovereignty and in several aspects also violence of these states. This was made possible by the fact that the internal conflicts and contradictions created by the Arab uprisings temporarily weakened the regimes. This particularly concerned the Kurdish political space in Iraq and Syria, the Cyrenaica region of Libya and South Yemen (Ahram, 2018). In the meantime, the conflict dynamics have picked up an even greater momentum. A brutal war has broken out in Yemen, in the course of which many people have already died of starvation, and in Libya, the civil war has become even more intense. We will deal with the situation of the Kurds further below.

The geopolitical formation after the Arab uprisings

The Arab uprisings also introduced some novelties in terms of the geopolitical formation of the region. Here, I only want to briefly touch on the geopolitical structure at the regional scale and spare an in-depth analysis of the four states that comprise the Kurdish political space for the next section. First of all, we should pay attention to the changing scene in terms of hegemony: In the 2010s, one could no longer talk about one dominant foreign power controlling the entire region. This was mainly due the USA's withdrawal from the Middle East during the second term of the Obama administration, a decision that was directly related to the crises of the liberal international order discussed above. Combined with the social and political upheavals in the region and the increasing competitiveness of China and Russia, this dwindling of US hegemony has led to the emergence of a new security dynamic and geopolitical

arrangement (Fawcett, 2017: 807).

The great geopolitical volatility brought about by the Arab uprisings is primarily due to the fact that Egypt, Syria and Iraq, states that traditionally had the capacity to define relations in the region, have been seriously weakened as a result of the uprisings and internal armed conflicts. This is paralleled by attempts of Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Saudi Arabia to propose alternative normative grounds that suit their own interests. Their goal is to take advantage of the existing vacuum and to expand their spheres of influence in order to deal with their security issues outside their own borders. But far from establishing any new normative grounds, these efforts have only served to produce new and more pronounced crises in the region and led to new civil wars or intensified ongoing conflicts, thus ultimately increasing the overall instability in the region (Hazbun, 2019). In fact, the cooperation between Qatar and Turkey, which became a medium for the export of norms and values throughout the region towards the end of the 2000s, was used to support the new Islamist governments after the Arab uprisings. However, these efforts ground to a halt after the coup in Egypt in 2013. After that date, but especially since 2015, Turkey's main priority in the region was to prevent the Kurds in Syria from making any gains. Even though Turkey had to make various concessions to the USA and Russia and undermined its own position in NATO, it has not backed down from this position.

In the Yemeni Civil War, we also saw how the opposition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, whose interests were in conflict throughout the 2010s, made itself felt at the regional level. Having already left its mark on the 2000s, the conflict between the Sunni axis led by the USA and the Saudis and the Iranian-led Shiite axis of resistance continued in the 2010s. With the help of affiliated militias Iran was able to assert its influence in the region, especially in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. This could not be prevented by the other powers in the region, especially the dynasties in the gulf, who considered this Iranian influence as a threat (Postel, 2021). As much as Iran positioned itself against the Saudi-led Gulf, on a geopolitical plane, its role in the region was also opposed to the West, which was pressuring Iran to stop its nuclear program. However, Iran's growing influence, especially in Syria, was becoming one of the primary security concerns of other powers around the region, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia. When Donald Trump took over the presidency from Barack Obama in the USA, this altered the geopolitical configuration in the Middle East: now Saudi Arabia and UAE tried to increase their regional influence vis-à-vis Iran with the support of the USA (Hazbun, 2019). However, Iran's hand was once again strengthened after Joe Biden's election, as it was announced that negotiations about Iran's nuclear program would be resumed.

To sum up, we can conclude that the disintegration of the normative order under the US hegemony and the efforts of regional states and non-state actors to exploit this situation for their own interests played a pivotal role in redefining the geopolitical positions in the 2010s. In particular, Russia's stronger presence on the scene since the beginning of the war in Syria and its international patronage of Syria cannot be viewed separately from the crisis of the liberal international order (Hinnebusch, 2016: 574). The Arab uprisings, which originally made these conditions possible, faded over time as the new power structures that took over power did not allow for a fundamental transformation.

The Kurdish political space: Weakening regimes, historical possibilities

States and their policies regarding the Kurds

Iran

Despite elections and changes in the leadership, Iran did not undergo any serious changes due to the dominance of the Islamic regime. However, after Trump was elected president, the nuclear deal signed during the Obama administration between Iran and the US-led group of countries made up the P5+1 and the EU was shelved. Subsequently, tightened embargo and sanctions made life even more difficult for the Iranian population, which had already been under great economic distress. This directly translated into a social mobilization that grew increasingly radical over the course of the 2010s. With interruptions, the protests continued in almost all parts of the country, including extremely conservative cities like Kum that traditionally supported the regime. The Kurds in Iran were also actively involved in these protests, because the Kurdish cities were among the places where immiseration and the direct impact of the embargo were most severe. In addition, there was a very strong pro-Kurdistan streak in Iran that catered for strong participation in protests and activities carried out for such purposes, for example, defending Southern Kurdistan and Rojava against ISIS.

The various ramifications of the progress made by Kurds at the regional level have led the regime to take even more drastic measures regarding its own Kurdish question. In the first half of the 2010s, the Kurds in Iraq had acquired a form of autonomy that came close to independence. After the Rojava revolution in Syria, a model of self-

government had been installed and dialogues were continuing in Turkey to solve the Kurdish question. In other words, while Kurds were making progress everywhere around the region, it seemed that Iran would remain the only state that could not find a solution to its Kurdish question. In addition, the ongoing solution process in Turkey and the good relations the AKP government maintained with the Southern Kurdistan administration, especially the KDP, reminded the Iranian regime of the Ottoman-Kurdish alliance that had formed against the Safavids in the 16th century. In this sense, the Iranian regime's security concerns were further aggravated by the existence of the considerable guerrilla forces of the PJAK, with whom it agreed on a ceasefire in 2011 that both parties only partially abide by (Sinkaya, 2018: 855). However, the end of the solution process in Turkey, the hostile approach by the ruling AKP-MHP coalition towards Rojava, and the almost coordinated opposition of Iran and Turkey to the independence referendum in Southern Kurdistan caused Iran somewhat of a relief in terms of its own policies regarding the Kurds. In its foreign policy, the Iranian regime generally tends to resolve issues that may have internal repercussions where they arise. Thus, Iran chose to support the regime in Iraq against the street riots that erupted towards the end of the 2010s and the regime in Syria against the entire opposition and the Kurds in general (Postel, 2021).

Turkey

The 2010s can be divided into two separate periods that would result in Turkey's dramatic transformation: the first five-year period, in which the AKP consolidated its control over the state and the system and achieved full consolidation of its own electoral base, and the second period, in which it was forced to cooperate with a paramilitary organization that formed the historical roots of the state, pursued an increasingly nationalistic policy in its coalition with the MHP and began to display despotic state practices. Largely establishing its control after the 2010 constitutional referendum, the AKP fully consolidated its power by 2013. In 2013, the AKP had a fallout with its partner, the Gülen movement, over private teaching institutions, and as a result, the tremendous scale of the ruling party's corruption was revealed in public. In the same year, the government faced serious social and political opposition when the Gezi Park protests broke out in reaction to different political practices that also constitute the short-term origins of the current authoritarian regime (Yeğinoğlu, 2013). From this moment on, the AKP shifted its policy towards polarizing the society, pursuing this approach all the way until the 2015 elections, in which it would lose the majority in the parliament. Meanwhile, this polarization policy did not include the ongoing peace negotiations with the PKK, as this would ultimately raise the bar for democratization. Following numerous terrorist attacks by ISIS after the elections in June 2015, which were only possible with the connivance and/or support of the state,

society once again hit the ballot box in November 2015 in an atmosphere of national delirium. This marked the beginning of a period in which all sorts of opposition were intimidated through repression and threats. In the second half of the 2010s, Tayyip Erdoğan's "new Turkey" completely succumbed to the reign of the "old state." In an environment of great oppression, Turkey has since then seen a deepening of the already existing forms of social polarization, the gradual decline of its economy, and the thwarting of any possibility of peoples' coexistence by nationalism (Jongerden, 2018b, 2018a; Tansel, 2018).

The AKP government's policy regarding the Kurds, together with the ongoing negotiations in the early 2010s, gave rise to the perception that the country was undergoing a process of democratization and transformation. And indeed, the environment in Turkey was more democratic than ever before. However, the state coalition formed in the second half of the 2010s made the country go through one of the darkest periods in its history (and still does, despite signs of weakening). Those politicians who acted as interlocutors in the peace talks in the first half of the 2010s, were punished in the second half of the same decade. Institutions were closed or reached a point where they could not continue their operations. In Kurdish cities, electoral democracy was completely overridden, as trustees were appointed instead of the elected mayors. Several deputies were arrested after their immunity had been lifted. Political murders, which some thought to be a thing of the past, recurred as a result of shady schemes that are yet to be resolved. Entire cities and villages were ruled with the iron hand of the military. And ultimately, society at large was stifled through vast anti-terror operations almost everywhere in the country.³⁰

The most important aspects of the AKP-MHP coalition's policy in the wider region were the continuous bombardment of and two military interventions in the Rojava region, even though the latter did not pose any threat to Turkey, and the operations against the PKK forces within the borders of the Iraqi state that were carried out with the knowledge and covert support of the Southern Kurdistan administration, to which Turkey maintains solid economic and strategic ties. Except for the HDP, the opposition stood behind this policy, thus contributing to the continuity of the AKP government. The security concept that was implemented in the second half of the 2010s and was essentially directed against the Kurds and, to some extent, the AKP's former partner, the Gülen community, had the aim of bringing the entire society to its

³⁰ These examples are only a selection that is supposed to give the reader an overview of the atmosphere of political repression. For more detailed information please see Human Rights Watch (HRW), Turkey: Crackdown on Kurdish Opposition. 20.03.2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/20/turkey-crackdown-kurdish-opposition> (last accessed on 25.05.2017).

knees. Today, one can say that it largely succeeded to accomplish this. Again except for the HDP and the radical left-wing parties, the political opposition in Turkey was on the same page with the government in its nationalist and anti-Kurdish stance and took an even more racist position than the government on issues such as immigration, thus sustaining the AKP-MHP coalition. In its foreign policy, as in other areas, the coalition disposed of institutionalism altogether. In its policies regarding Syria and Iraq, where this collapse is most clearly observed, the coalition was led by a great irrationality, which cannot be explained with any reason other than a deep hostility towards the Kurds. Yet until 2021, the opposition supported this policy, basically issuing a blank check to the government. As this report was written, the opposition's attitude showed first signs of a change. But the fact that this shift is based on calculations regarding the approaching elections and implies an instrumentalization of the Kurdish question, prevents us from cherishing great hopes for the future.

Syria

The most dramatic transformations in the 2010s unquestionably took place in Syria. The Syrian offshoot of the Arab uprisings, which initially started under the leadership of local coordination committees, turned into an armed opposition as a result of the Baathist dictatorship's violent suppression policy (Phillips, 2013). The Assad regime's tactics of dealing with this rebellion at home was to transform the popular uprising into a sectarian conflict and to undermine the legitimacy of the broad opposition by taking strategic steps to foster blind jihadist violence. With the significant support of Iran and Russia, the regime achieved a military victory against the opposition and ultimately succeeded in consolidating its rule (Fawcett, 2017: 800). Among the opposition, on the other hand, jihadist tendencies grew more and more dominant. Jihadist structures began to emerge as the stronger alternatives as the relatively more moderate opposition, which was supported by Turkey, the Gulf, and initially the United States, lost its influence over time. In the second half of the 2010s, the secular and left-wing oppositional forces had completely vanished and the Muslim Brotherhood, which had a relatively milder approach, was only seen in meeting rooms in Geneva and Istanbul, while the field in Syria was mostly dominated by jihadists.

Seriously weakened as a result of the repercussions the Arab uprisings had on Syria, the Syrian regime's main concern in dealing with the Kurdish question was self-protection. Seeing dictatorships fall one by one in the region, it was deemed possible that a similar situation could occur in Syria. At this point, the Assad regime applied a century-old strategy: It chose to first protect the center and fortify its rule, before it started to deal with other problem areas. This was the military-strategic rationale behind the regime's decision to withdraw from Rojava. To put it in concrete

terms, the regime wanted (1) to protect areas of much greater strategic importance, such as Aleppo and Damascus, against the armed opposition, before it would turn to the Kurdish regions; (2) to punish the AKP by pitting “Kurds that were linked to the PKK” against the AKP government, which was supporting the opposition to the regime at the time; (3) to set up its two enemies, namely the jihadists and the Kurds, against each other through different strategic moves, including the release of jihadists from prisons (Gunes and Lowe, 2015; ICG, 2014; Spyer, 2013). However, the question of what status the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which was established under the leadership of the Kurds in the second half of the 2010s, will eventually gain is still one of the hottest topics on the agenda today. Next to the regime, the mainstream opposition too has pursued a policy based on Arab nationalism and taken a determined stance not to allow any progress regarding the status and rights of the Kurds. For the latter, this is one of the main reasons pushing them to pursue a policy of the third way.

Iraq

In the 2010s, Iraq was still in great disorder since all the support, protection, and instruction of the United States was ultimately not enough to establish a functioning political system. This became most visible when ISIS took Mosul: Attacking 30,000 soldiers stationed in Mosul and the same amount of police forces with around 1,500 fighters, ISIS brought the Mosul region completely under its control within six days, because most of the soldiers deserted. The fact that the Iraqi army, which had been trained by US soldiers for years and was far superior in terms of ammunition and weapons, handed over the region to ISIS without any serious resistance was also a clear indication that the US state-building practice had collapsed. With the support from Sunni Arabs who had lost their social position in the era after Saddam and the help of NATO weapons they seized in Mosul, ISIS would move on to obliterate the Iraqi-Syrian border in the years that followed. With the help of the USA, the Iranian regime and the Hashd al-Shaabi militias, the Iraqi central government would gradually end ISIS’ presence in Iraq as well. However, poverty, which had partially been hidden behind ethnic and sectarian conflicts, would spark one of the largest popular movements in the country’s history after 2019. This movement, which came to be known as the Tishreen (October) Uprising, was founded on the demand of the destitute and powerless majority, especially the youth, for a new system and spread very rapidly to the central and southern regions of the country (Postel, 2021: 8). Although it did not bring about any major changes, this popular movement that emerged in the southern regions, which are largely inhabited by a Shiite population, showed that sectarian divisions and conflicts can perhaps no longer serve as a smoke screen to legitimize concrete economic, political, and social problems.

The Iraqi central government's policy regarding the Kurds was also shaped by the presence of ISIS and the USA. Except for the budgetary tensions created by the sale of Iraqi oil to the international market through Turkey (Hoffmann and Cemgil, 2016: 17), the problems between the Kurdistan region and the central government were relatively more controllable until the independence referendum. The social and political conditions created by ISIS played a decisive role in this. However, as I will discuss below, the fact that the Kurdish forces established control in Kirkuk after liberating the city from ISIS was not welcomed by Iran, Turkey, or the central Iraqi government. But in practice, there was not much they could do. After the 2017 independence referendum for the Kurdistan Region, which did not receive a lot of international support, the central government had the upper hand and acted in concert with the Hashd al-Shaabi forces to take these areas under control without encountering any serious resistance on the part of the Kurdish forces.

The regional geopolitical alignments of the states in the Kurdish political space were partly linked to their own Kurdish questions. Iran's basic policy was to support the regimes in Iraq and Syria, which it considered closer to itself in the context of the Shiite corridor, which it has been trying to secure for a while. This was also made possible by the fact that the Kurdish political actors within its borders did not engage in military activities. Turkey from the very beginning offered full support to the Arab uprisings in states where political groups in the orbit of the Muslim Brotherhood could potentially come to power. Although this policy became very difficult to sustain especially after the overthrow of Morsi in Egypt, Turkey continued its efforts to influence the region in this way until the end of the decade. In Syria, on the other hand, the AKP initially pursued the same goal, but later shifted towards prioritizing opposition to the Kurds in its coalition with the MHP. Moreover, Turkey's use of foreign mercenaries, first in Syria, then in Armenia and Libya, has created another new dynamic. The main concern for Syria and Iraq was the survival of their regimes and the ability to continue to develop relations with regional and global powers under the difficult overall conditions (Gunes, 2019; Hoffmann and Cemgil, 2016; Kabalan, 2013; Postel, 2021).

Transformations in the Kurdish political space

We can identify six major processes that determined the transformations in the Kurdish political space in the 2010s: (1) the Rojava revolution, (2) the solution process in Turkey, (3) the independence referendum in Southern Kurdistan, (4) the Yazidi genocide in Sinjar, (5) the AKP-MHP coalition's interventions in the South and Rojava, and (6) the transformations in Rojhilat. Each of these processes, which were both a

direct result of the Arab uprisings and a component of the global hegemonic crisis, further accentuated the two ideological-political camps that had emerged in the Kurdish political space in the 2000s.

The Rojava revolution

Undoubtedly, the transformation that most clearly determined the 2010s in terms of the Kurdish political space was the Rojava revolution. The Syrian war and the Rojava revolution were one of the leading issues on the global and regional agenda. In my interviews, Kurdish political actors referred to Rojava in their assessment of all kinds of developments in the Kurdish political space. The Rojava revolution took place in 2012 when the Assad regime withdrew from the Kurdish region in the north of the country in order to secure a strategic position against its opponents. Those forces in the region, which were organized around Öcalan's ideology and had been active for decades, seized the opportunity to declare a model of self-government based on three cantons. Based on the interviews and the relevant academic literature, the conditions that made the Rojava revolution possible can be evaluated in three dimensions: the repercussions of the global hegemony crisis on Syria, the survival crisis of the regimes caused by the Arab uprisings, and the ideological and political preparations of the Kurdish political actors.

In the 2010s, when the USA had long started to withdraw from the Middle East, Bashar al-Assad began to develop relations with Russia in order to secure the survival of his regime. In other words, around the time the Arab uprisings broke out, the global hegemony crisis reflected on Syria in the form of a geopolitical rivalry between the US-led West and Russia, whose influence in the region was growing (Trenin, 2016). From the point of view of the USA, its withdrawal was due to both the economic costs of maintaining its presence in the region and the fact that the region was considered less strategically important, something that would become even more evident in the second half of the 2010s (Gerges, 2013). For Russia, on the other hand, the strategic importance of asserting its influence in Syria has to do with the country's effort to support its own state system and economy that centered around military technology. The encounter between these two hegemonic forces was an important factor that opened the door to the Rojava revolution. If only the US had been in a dominant position, it would probably have aligned itself with the Gulf states and Turkey to support the more traditional and conservative oppositional forces and tried to inhibit any progress that was spearheaded by the Kurdish political forces. On the other hand, if only Russia had been dominant, it would probably have tried to prevent any alternative political formation from developing in Syria's north in order to fully consolidate the Assad regime's rule. The confrontation of two powers in pursuit of

hegemony, along with the jihadist terrorist attacks in the West, created a geopolitical opportunity. The military forces in Rojava, who were actively combatting the jihadist forces, took advantage of the hegemonic confrontation to carry their revolution through. Thus, the crisis of global hegemony became an immediate factor in the Kurdish political space.

The second condition that made the Rojava revolution possible, as discussed above, was the withdrawal of the regime, severely weakened as it was due to the repercussions of the Arab uprisings on Syria, from the North with the purpose of protecting itself.

The third and probably most important factor that made it possible for the Rojava revolution to materialize is the Kurdish political structure that had developed in the Rojava region over the years under the political and, more recently, ideological leadership of the PKK. What was most urgently needed when the conditions for revolution had come about was the existence of a political and military power and revolutionary will that had the capacity and organizational strength to effectively transform these conditions into a revolution. As discussed in detail in the previous two chapters, the PKK, which had organized a base among Rojava Kurds since the 1980s, especially in Kobanê and Afrin, further expanded its popular base after Öcalan's expulsion from Syria and displayed its strength especially on the occasion of the Qamishlo rebellion in 2004. Although the other Kurdistani parties were much stronger, especially in Qamishlo as the center of the region, they lacked the military staff and political preparedness to carry out a revolution (Gunes and Lowe, 2015). In addition to this, "since 2004, Kurdish political parties in Rojava were in a constant exchange and tried to agree on a common agenda which they could act upon, and many forces, including the PYD and KDP-Syria, complied with this" (Interview, Qamishlo, online, 28.10.2021). However, the urgency of the situation and the fact that the PYD was more than prepared when compared to the other parties pushed the PYD to adopt a unilateral and centralist style of politics. Under these conditions, the Rojava revolution took place with the PYD assuming political and the YPJ and YPG military leadership.

But it was not only these conditions, but also the political strategy of the PYD in Rojava that made it possible for the revolution to materialize. This strategy, which was similar to the one implemented in Turkey, was labeled as the "third way" by PYD executives. The aim of this strategy was to ensure freedom by acting independently of but maintaining a dialogue with both the Baath regime, which was trying to perpetuate and socially consolidate its rule, and the mainstream opposition, which

pursued the goal of overthrowing the regime and establishing its own power. Meanwhile, neither the regime nor the mainstream opposition recognized the Kurdish question and simply stuck to their traditional Arab nationalist discourses. In other words, regardless of whether the opposition would topple the regime or the regime would suppress the uprisings, in their visions of the political order that was going to (re)established, neither side touched upon the rights of women and non-Arab peoples, especially the Kurds. In the struggle for power that commenced from the first days of the uprisings in Syria, both the regime and the opposition tried to instrumentalize Kurdish political organizations. The regime, for example, promised to renaturalize the denaturalized Kurdish population, while the mainstream opposition included the Kurdish question in the list of issues to be dealt with after the revolution. However, it was not even possible to discuss, for example, the issue of changing the official name of the state, the Syrian Arab Republic. Between these two different systems of denial, the leading forces in Rojava took action to establish a practice of self-defense and self-government, trying to institute a council system that would work from the bottom up. This strategy of the third way, though it has major problems, turned out to be the political strategy that helped to put the revolution in Rojava into practice (Sunca, 2021: 120–121).

In addition to these, we can discuss the durability of the revolution and the conditions that enabled it to survive to this day despite all its problems and shortcomings under four headings that stood out in the interviews. First, this concerns the global legitimacy of the war against jihadism. The struggle against jihadist structures such as the Al-Nusra front from the first days of the revolution, and especially against ISIS after 2013, which reached its peak with the Kobanê war/defense at the end of 2014, earned the revolution a global legitimacy. The numerous solidarity actions with Kobanê, which took place in many parts of the world, especially in the USA and Europe, and their great visibility in the media, eventually paved the way for the US-led anti-ISIS coalition to support, and coordinate with, the YPG/YPJ (and later the SDF) to end the territorial existence of ISIS in coordination with. In this process, the Kurdish forces gained great military acceptance and recognition.

The second important issue was that the ideological and political direction of the Rojava revolution caused global excitement among different social groups. Left-leaning, anarchist, feminist, and ecologist groups had a predilection for the revolution from the very beginning (e.g., Saed, 2017). Due to the fact that the revolution distinguished itself as a women's revolution, it was rendered as another exception to the exception from the point of view of an Orientalist and highly problematic Western perspective (Dirik, 2014). The revolution was considered as a peace project because

of its effort to guarantee the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups and particularly because of the participation of the Armenian and Syriac peoples in the revolution (e.g., Duman, 2016). The fact that the revolution did not aim to change the existing borders and considered itself as an autonomous administration inside Syria from the beginning did not yet produce any concrete results but has at least prevented aggression at the discursive level.

The third important aspect that allowed the revolution to last undoubtedly is that it united the Kurdish political space, even if only for a while, despite all its differences. This is most clearly demonstrated by the fact that fighters from all four parts of Kurdistan went to Syria to join the military defense of Rojava against ISIS, by the major protests that took place especially during the Kobanê war in the North and in Rojhilat,³¹ and by the fact that the Southern Kurdistan administration used Turkish territory to send military help to support the defense of Kobanê.

The fourth and probably most decisive factor for the future is that the revolution made several concessions while taking advantage of the geopolitical conditions. For example, despite the criticism that it was waging a proxy war on behalf of the USA, the administration was able to militarily and territorially decimate ISIS, which at that time figured as the most immediate threat to Rojava, thanks to the alliance it created with the USA and the anti-ISIS coalition. However, the US and Russia left the autonomous administration alone in the face of Turkey's intervention in Afrin in 2018 and Girê Spî and Serê Kaniyê in 2019. Part of this geopolitical dynamic is also that Russia and the US are constantly using the Syrian regime and the autonomous administration and Turkey and the autonomous administration, respectively, as trump cards against each other. While this means ongoing war and occupation for the people in the region, it also presents the states with a never-ending Kurdish challenge.

The point that everyone I talked to within the scope of this study agreed on was that the social transformations that occurred in the course of the revolution had been the source of great excitement until the Kobanê war in 2014. This excitement was directly related to the strong possibility that the Baath regime could disintegrate, the decrease in the decade-long pressures, and a feeling of liberation that had intensified since the proclamation of the cantons. However, one of the common observations regarding the period after 2014 is that the initial enthusiasm for the revolution is no longer as strong as it used to be. The first reason for this is undoubtedly the ongoing embargo. This

³¹ When I asked an activist from Rojhilat what the Rojava revolution meant for Rojhilat, his first answer was "Kobanê" (Interview-1, Germany, 28.06.2021).

embargo was implemented both by the Southern Kurdistan administration in the east and by the Turkish and Syrian regimes and caused a serious economic recession. In the wake of the embargoes a smuggling economy has emerged, resulting in high prices. Especially since 2015, Turkey has practically turned water into a weapon by using its dams to reduce the water flow of the Euphrates to Syria. This has directly affected agriculture in the region known as “Syria’s breadbasket.” In combination with Turkey’s military interventions, this has caused a significant decline in the excitement about the revolution after 2015.

One of my interviewees, a female politician who was negotiating between different Kurdish parties for the purpose of national unity, addressed the problems that arose at the social level in Rojava in way that somewhat summarizes the tenor of all interviews conducted in the scope of this study. She stated that Rojava had been a gigantic construction site in two senses ever since the revolution: first, physical reconstruction due to the destruction left behind by the war, and secondly, political, and social reconstruction due to the decades of devastation at the hands of the Syrian regime and the social and political destruction of the war. While the first required significant economic resources, the second depended on a social and political vision and cadres who could realize this vision. After all, society still functioned according to principles left over from the Baath regime. These prevailing tendencies, which directly contravene the claims of the revolution, can be grouped under three headings: Political corruption and kleptocracy in administrative processes; nationalism, religionism, and sectarianism, which have permeated society in a capillary manner and pose a constant threat; and a sexism that ignores women’s role as active members of society. Accomplishing this transformation inevitably requires social leadership. More specifically, women’s leadership is needed to achieve women’s liberation and transform the problematic sexist structure of society. The cadres leading the revolution took on the responsibility of bringing about a transformation in all these areas. However, these areas were also at the root of the contradictions of the revolution.

The Rojava revolution is ideologically rooted in the transformation processes of the PKK, which were inspired by the experiences of movements that contested the global system. This essentially meant to put the people in power, that is, to ensure that they governed themselves in the most local units. While this has brought about great changes especially in the context of women’s liberation, there are at least two vicious circles in terms of general administration practices. First, to really put into practice the model of democratic autonomy, it must be defended against those forces that try to bring it under its own control, e.g., tribal structures, other political

actors that try to seize power, or external forces that try to impose themselves through pressure. However, the necessity of this defensive task currently bolsters the authority of military cadres, which contradicts the ideological narrative of this project that is based on local direct democratic structures (Sunca, 2020: 11). A second vicious circle is the contradiction between internationalism and anti-imperialism. The Rojava revolution is an internationalist project, for which many internationalists from different parts of the world fought and died voluntarily. On the other hand, the revolution had to cooperate, for better or for worse, with many powers, especially the USA, to survive. In the eyes of outsiders and power centers in the region, this compromised the internationalist character of the revolution.³²

Although it has not yet gained political recognition, the establishment of self-government in Rojava undoubtedly is the most important achievement of the 2010s in the Kurdish political space. Defined as foreigners in their homelands and excluded from the system, the Kurds mounted a major resistance in Syria, especially against ISIS, and in the end managed to establish a form of autonomy. This autonomy is based on a model that does not exclude any of the identity groups that live in the region and emphasizes the importance of women's liberation. This model is based on strong internationalist solidarity and ecological sensitivity, even though the latter remains rather limited as of yet. The revolution meant the practical implementation of democratic confederalism, the political project that had started to crystallize in the 2000s. In the context of the Rojava revolution, the strategy of the third way took the shape of armed resistance and instated the self-defense of democratic autonomy. In addition, the efforts of other political parties, especially those aligned with the KDP, to grab their share of power instead of being a part of the newly established system, led to the emergence of a field of contention between democratic confederalism and classical nationalism. This became one of the major obstacles preventing Kurdish political actors from acting on a common agenda.

The resolution process in Turkey and the HDP

Considered together with the Rojava revolution, the solution process in Turkey can be identified as the second most important development in the 2010s, as it earned democratic confederalism a significant degree of acceptance and legitimacy and had an irreversible geopolitical and social impact on the entire Kurdish political space. (Ozkahraman, 2017; Savran, 2020; Sunca, 2016). Based on the interviews

³² It is not the internationalist fighters who voluntarily joined the revolution, but especially the Western communist parties that rely on greater ideological puritanism who consider this to be a serious problem (Interview, Brighton, April-2019).

and the relevant academic literature, four major headings emerge under which we can examine the conditions that made the start of the process possible: the transformations in the region, the AKP's efforts to stay in power (discussed in some detail above), the fact that the PKK abandoned its goal of independence after its ideological transformation, and the impossibility of a military solution.

To understand the transformations in the region, we basically have to look at the dynamics created by the near-independence autonomy won in Southern Kurdistan and the Rojava revolution. In the face of a growing political visibility of Kurds at the regional level in the 2000s, it became more acceptable for the Turkish state, especially the AKP government, to approach the Kurdish question on the basis of geopolitical interests. These interests were most visible during the historical "Kurdish-Turkish alliance" debates between 2013 and 2015, which the state pursued with the aim of controlling geopolitical processes in the region. But the fact that the AKP government, which was on the one hand negotiating with the Kurds and even engaging in military cooperation with them from time to time, so happened when it moved the tomb of Suleyman Shah to a safer place in coordination with the Rojava military administration in February 2015, at the same time supported the increasingly jihadist Syrian opposition, which was clashing with the Kurds, in order to be able to intervene in Syria, posed a major contradiction in terms of the solution process. For in addition to Al-Nusra or ISIS, who were directly fighting the Kurds, a profound Arab nationalism was dominant in almost every streak of the Syrian opposition. After all, the state's rationale in Turkey was mostly shaped by its effort to initiate a dialogue and contain the potential of the Rojava revolution to trigger a new uprising in the North.

From the point of view of Kurdish politics, on the other hand, the most important factor enabling this process was that the PKK, having abandoned its goal of an independent and united great Kurdish nation-state after undergoing a profound ideological and political transformation, continuously released statements in favor of a negotiated solution and rebuilt its international relations around such a discourse of peace. In fact, this kind of discourse was first observed in the late 1980s and found expression in various unilateral ceasefire declarations in the 1990s and 2000s, before it eventually became the primary political discourse in the second half of the 2000s. Parallel to this, after forty years of conflict, negotiation had also become the only option in military terms. The most decisive fact for both the state and the PKK was that a military solution to this problem had proven to be impossible, as the state could not extinguish the PKK by military means and the PKK could neither achieve independence (its goal until the 2000s) nor establish autonomy (its goal after the 2000s). In these circumstances, producing a result through negotiation emerged as the

most viable alternative. This also made it possible for legal parliamentary politics to assume a more prominent role.

At this stage, it would be good to consider the conditions of emergence of the HDP and the policy of the third way that the Kurdish political leadership followed especially during and after the Gezi Park protests. The Gezi Park protests marked a moment of utter indecision for the Kurdish political movement. On the one hand, the dialogues over the solution of the century-old Kurdish question were continuing. On the other hand, the ruling AKP, which carried out these talks on behalf of the state, and its leader Erdoğan were facing serious and justified social opposition (Wallerstein, 2013). What made this situation so ambivalent for the Kurdish movement was that it was stuck between negotiating with the AKP and being a part of the social opposition. Although there was strong participation in the Gezi protests from within the Kurdish movement, Kurdish political decision makers were concerned that the Kemalist state elites would bring these protests under its control (Interview, Brussels, 11.05.2014). Regardless of how realistic such a possibility was, the existence of this concern as such was enough to put the Kurdish political movement in an ambivalent position. Ultimately, this indecision was somewhat resolved when Öcalan used his meeting with the İmralı delegation, which was tasked with carrying out the solution process, on 29 August 2013 to intervene. As Cemil Bayık, one of the leading cadres of the PKK, would later admit, “we made mistakes during Gezi” (Hamsici, 2013). Afterwards, it became more evident that both the struggle and the negotiation for the solution process were to be pursued as strategies by the Kurdish movement at the same time. This approach was based on the conviction that the Kurdish movement should not allow the government and the state to instrumentalize the organized political opposition, including the Kurds, in order to establish or maintain their own power, but on the contrary, that it should follow a third way. The HDP was built exactly on such a social and political foundation, with the aim of organizing the social opposition based on the broadest associations possible (Burç, 2019; Kaya, 2019). The party would not only represent the project of democratic autonomy, which the Kurds tried to organize under the leadership of the DTK, in the state system, but through organizations like the HDK it would also try to assert its claim of representing all social segments. When the relative democratic openness made possible by the solution process combined with the HDP’s dynamic approach to politics that it had inherited from the Gezi resistance, the HDP achieved a great success first in the 2014 Presidential elections and then in the 2015 June general elections. However, the HDP, which was mainly designed for non-conflict and negotiation conditions, had a rather limited repertoire when it came to resisting against the subsequent heavy military conflicts and the repressions on the part of the state coalition.

In the face of the resistance against the process within the state, the global nationalist-neofascist wave and regional transformations, the solution process eventually ground to a halt. In the beginning, a significant faction within the state that was partially acting in coordination with the Gülen movement sought more drastic measures. This intention translated into different practices, especially actions intended at disrupting the solution process, such as the killing of three Kurdish female politicians in Paris. The relations established by the AKP government with the “old state” after negotiations with the defendants of the Ergenekon case, who would later be acquitted, in 2014 not only prepared the ground for the nationalist state coalition that was established in the second half of the 2010s, but was also one of the main reasons for the end of the solution process.³³ The fact that the AKP lost its majority in the parliament in the elections in June 2015 while the HDP was able to garner great support can be seen as the pragmatic reason for the AKP to end the solution process. Continuing a process that would not help the party to stay in power was of no value to the AKP. Moreover, the AKP was eager to keep the repercussions of the global wave of nationalism on Turkey under its own control and to maintain its power. Taking advantage of the crisis of global hegemony, the state coalition that was formed largely succeeded in this until the end of the 2010s. In June 2015, two separate bombs exploded during an election rally of the HDP. In July 2015, 34 persons were killed and 104 injured in a suicide bombing targeting socialist youth who wanted to deliver aid to Kobanê. In October 2015, a suicide bombing during a peace rally in Ankara left 102 people killed and more than 500 injured. Meanwhile, the state’s law enforcement made it impossible to conduct any oppositional political activity on the street. These developments practically ended the solution process and enabled the AKP to regain its majority in the November elections, thus preparing the ground for the regime that prevails today.

One of the main reasons why the process did not succeed was the lack of monitoring mechanisms. Although the idea that the EU or the US could assume the role of an independent observer was voiced in various requests and comments, this ultimately did not happen. For the West, the resolution of the conflict in Turkey would in fact have brought relief. A solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey would have greatly served the interests of the Western powers, especially the USA, which works in alliance with the Kurdish forces on Turkey’s southern borders. However, such a solution could not be achieved, mainly because of the internal build-up of the state

³³ I base this conclusion on an interview I conducted in Germany in July 2019 with a Kurdish politician who was personally involved in the solution process. The interviewee previously made similar statements in public, and these statements were never rejected by anyone.

coalition in Turkey, Erdogan's efforts to stay in power no matter what, and his alliance with Kemalist nationalists, especially the Eurasianists. The various concessions the USA and the EU made to this coalition in the person of Erdoğan due to many issues, especially the "refugee crisis" contributed to aggravating their own crises and the crises in Turkey.³⁴

Meanwhile, the fact that the solution process was designed almost entirely as negotiations between political actors with only limited involvement on the part of the public, i.e., different social and political groups, had the implication that society could not really develop a sense of ownership of the process (Sunca, 2016). Except for the political elites who were negotiating at the top level, only few people knew what was going on. Not at any stage was there a degree of participation that would have prompted society to champion the process. In this period, the PKK tried to find a balanced position for itself within the scope of the negotiations. Thus, it did not completely give up its fight against the state, but at the same time declared the goal of its struggle to be a dignified peace and freedom. The PKK's attempts to carry out its struggle and the negotiations at the same time, given that it mainly tilted towards struggle after self-government had been declared in different Kurdish cities, were one of the important factors that prevented any progress in the talks. When the state declared curfews various cities in response to the declarations of self-government towards the end of 2015 and the conflicts between the PKK and the state shifted to the city centers, this marked the beginning of a very dark period in which hundreds of civilians were killed, tens of thousands of people were displaced, and city centers were bombed by tanks.³⁵

The solution process and its aftermath also reshaped the social sphere in the Kurdish political space. In the latter, the social fatigue, which we discussed above as one of the long-term causes of the protest dynamics throughout the region, had to do with the fact that the "minority" position of the Kurds posed a constant problem and had to be negotiated violently. This created a war fatigue among Kurds. The solution process had come as somewhat of a surprise after intense clashes between the PKK guerrillas and Turkish soldiers in 2011 and 2012 following the end of the Oslo process.

³⁴ In relation to this last aspect, one should also mention an issue that was frequently repeated in some of the interviews conducted with people close to the PKK. Many interviewees voiced the opinion that the United States and the EU have historically always favored to leave the Kurdish question unresolved, especially in Turkey. Although this belief cannot be discussed in depth here, it should be underlined that it is partially constitutive of Kurdish politics.

³⁵ For a documentation of the human rights violations that occurred during this period, see: TIHV, *15 August 2015 – 20 April 2016 Fact Sheet*. <https://en.tihv.org.tr/curfews/16-august-2015-20-april-2016-fact-sheet/> (last accessed on 23.06.2016)

The prospect of an end to the war, together with the revolution in Rojava, which gained the Kurds an unprecedented visibility at the regional and global levels, and the momentum gained by the HDP, gave rise to great expectations, excitement, and hope. After three years of negotiations, the overall quality of life and security in Bakur had become better than ever before, making a negotiated solution the number one option among other alternatives. One can argue that this created a kind of complacency at the social and political level, as if the war was already over, while in fact the solution process was very fragile and in danger of ending any moment, as the dialogue had not yet progressed into fully-fledged negotiations and the overall political climate was all but stable. While the political will of both sides to the process undoubtedly played a leading role in creating this complacency, non-governmental organizations as well as broader civil movements and segments (with some exceptions) also contented themselves with writing reports and organizing meetings with politicians during this period. Ultimately, the despair caused by the resumption of armed conflict in the North was as at least as great as the hope created by the possibility of peace.

Eventually, it can be argued that the solution process was an important experience in the Kurdish political space in showing that even the possibility of peace within the borders of Turkey, where at least half of the Kurdish population in the region lives, is capable of prompting serious changes, given Turkey's position in the region and the historical, ideological, and political significance of the freedom struggle here. As in the 2000s, the attempt to solve the conflict by means of the liberal peace technologies once again failed in the 2010s. The dialogue nevertheless produced direct results in at least two respects. First of all, the internationalist position in the Kurdish political space was strengthened during this period because of the democratic confederal wing's effort to hold different social and political groups together around the goal of peace. Secondly, for the Kurdish movement in Bakur, the strategy of the third way meant to pursue freedom based on dialogue (as opposed to the military resistance in Rojava). However, the sheer scale of violence of the resurgent war, which did remain limited to the North, demonstrated the limits of this strategy. In the second half of the 2010s, a general climate of oppression prevailed. Politicians and civilians alike were subject to detention and punishment, the state's forces carried out mass killings (more than a hundred civilians burned to death in the basements of different buildings in the city of Cizre where they had sought refuge from the war), and elected deputies and mayors were removed by either lifting their immunity or appointing trustees in their place. All this widened the gap between the political and social sphere.

The Kurdistan Regional Government's independence referendum

In April 2017, the Kurdistan Regional Government announced that it would hold an

independence referendum. In the referendum held in September of the same year, an overwhelming majority of 92% voted in favor of independence. However, towards the end of October, after Kirkuk, which had previously been liberated from ISIS, was lost to the Hashd-e-Shaabi forces, resulting in conflicts between the KDP and the PUK, and strong opposition from regional and global actors, the referendum results were suspended.³⁶ Ultimately, the overwhelming democratic majority in favor independence was overruled. The results of the independence referendum, the reactions against it, and the fact that these reactions further torpedoed the non-existing internal unity, created lasting effects in the Kurdish political space.

Based on the interviews I conducted, I can talk about three main political openings on the way to the independence referendum: First and probably most importantly, there was a strong belief “in the streets of Kurdistan” and among the nationalist wing of the Kurdish political movement that an opportunity had arisen to crown the struggle of the Kurds, who had received great acclaim for their role in the war against ISIS, in the South and in Rojava, with independence (Interview, Sulaymaniyah, 22.09.2019). Secondly, taking notice of the Catalan independence referendum that was held around the same time, the Southern Kurdistan administration was convinced that such an opportunity was also offered by the global conditions at that moment. Third, Massoud Barzani, who, as the acting president of the KRG at that time, was mostly breaking his own laws, instrumentalized the Kurds’ longing for independence in order to overcome his own political predicament. Taken together, these three factors reinforced the general perception that it was finally time for independence, which the Kurds had already been seeing as one of the solutions to their problems for more than a century. However, it soon became clear that the geopolitical conditions for independence did not actually exist and that the KRG was not institutionally or socially prepared for this either.

With respect to the relations of Southern Kurdish political actors with the outside, it can be stated that “the KDP has good relations with Turkey and the KDP has good relations with Iran. Also, most of the leading executives of the KDP hold British citizenship, while a significant share of the KDP executives have US citizenship. This tells a lot about the relations between them” (Interview, Sulaymaniyah, 24.09.2019). However, despite these relations, on the geopolitical plane, none of the four states

³⁶ At this point, it should be emphasized that many military forces, including PKK guerrillas, went to join the defense of Kirkuk. But what could have been a major turning point in terms of creating a spirit of a united Kurdistan, ended up being but a missed opportunity. Although the majority of the PUK-affiliated peshmerga abided by the chain of command and withdrew, a relatively smaller share of them for a short time fought side by side with the PKK guerrillas to resist the militias.

in the Kurdish political space could accept independence. This also becomes clear when we look at the attitude the AKP-MHP coalition and the Iranian Islamic regime assumed towards the Southern Kurdistan government just before and after the referendum. This also explains how the Hashd al-Shaabi militias, which are linked to Iran and operate in coordination with the Iraqi central government, could lay siege to and eventually take control of Kirkuk and Sinjar without encountering great resistance. Again, on the global geopolitical plane, no power (except for Israel who supported the referendum), especially not the USA and Russia, favored a division of Iraq. Moreover, considering the dual structure of the administration in Southern Kurdistan, which we discussed in detail in the previous chapter, the deep divisions between the KDP and PUK regions, and the fact that the Peshmerga were split between these two powers, it was evident that there was no military, social, and political base for the project of independence to come to fruition. Having lost territory on the way to the goal of independence, the Southern Kurdistan administration later on tried to find a way to repair its relations with the surrounding states and maneuver itself out of the situation. Socially and politically, however, it suffered a great setback. It should also be noted that many Kurdish political actors, especially from the North, opposed the way independence was approach in the South. An activist I spoke to in Hewler expressed this in the following way: "The idea that Kurdistan is greater than the South is an important and basic principle that everyone should adopt. 5 million [the population of Southern Kurdistan] cannot be free, while 40 million [the remaining Kurdish people] live in slavery. Everyone should know that the two families [ruling] the 5 million will not be allowed to strike a blow to the freedom of Kurdistan" (Interview, Hewler, 11.10.2019).

At the time the first draft of this study was written, more than three thousand people, most of whom were Kurds from Bashur, were trying to enter the European Union as refugees from the Belarusian-Polish border. Why were people trying to flee from Southern Kurdistan, which had a thirty-year experience of liberation? Speaking to journalist Kamal Chomani, a Kurdish migrant at the border said, "The rule of mafia families has left our people starving for thirty years. Whenever we went out on the streets for our rights, we were arrested, intimidated, and beaten."³⁷ Meanwhile, a large student protest broke out in Sulaymaniyah against a decision to cut scholarships. Under the slogan "I am the revolution of the empty stomach" soon started spreading from Sulaymaniyah to other areas. Otherwise unable to agree on any issue, the two parties ruling Southern Kurdistan agreed to violently suppress the students' protests, while simultaneously trying to project the image of a democratic debate by using the

³⁷ See <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/why-are-iraqi-kurds-fleeing-to-europe/> (last accessed on 23.11.2021).

media under their control to air meetings with students that were affiliated with the regime. Ironically, though, student protests were continuing outside at the same time. When these are taken into consideration, the “revolutionary fatigue” discussed in the analysis of the 2000s has now given way to a profound hopelessness among society in the face of an apparently immutable system. This despair is most clearly manifested in the fact that people have started to flee Southern Kurdistan, even taking the risk of freezing to death. The suppression of street movements, on the other hand, is one of the primary reasons for people’s despair and their decision to migrate since it forecloses any possibility of transformation. The path chosen by the Gorran movement is a good example that can serve to illustrate the difficulty of changing these circumstances through representative democratic politics. Gorran was founded in 2009 under the leadership of former PUK member Nawshirwan Mustafa, who was a leading figure in the history of resistance in the South, and is known and cherished by the public. It mainly owed its rise to its critique of the rampant corruption and contradictions of the bipartisan order in the South. Even though Gorran emerged relatively successful from the 2014 elections, it “failed to keep its promises concerning corruption,” and especially after the death of Nawshirwan Mustafa in 2017, it “became part of the system it had formerly criticized and largely lost its strength” (Interview, Sulaymaniyah, 24.09. 2019). On the road to liberation, the current situation in Southern Kurdistan also casts severe doubt about how democratic the state and the ruling elites that dominate the state can be under the conditions of the Middle East, and in how far they can truly represent the interests and concerns of the peoples.

In conclusion, we can state that the project of independence of the officially recognized political entity in Southern Kurdistan, itself the result of more than a century of struggle with all its rights and wrongs, its virtues and vices, was basically thwarted by the geopolitical blockade that derived from the historical and political conditions of the region and resulted in failure at least until a new window of opportunity opens. In other words, “the independence referendum pulled such a trigger that all the actors in the region united against the Kurds” (Interview, Sulaymaniyah, 24.09.2019). The failed independence referendum demonstrated the geopolitical limits of classical Kurdish nationalism, which has been one of the two dominant ideological-political lines in the Kurdish political space since the 2000s. The clash of a Kurdish nationalism in pursuit of a nation-state with other nationalisms showed the limits of the nationalist political aspirations of landlocked regions like Southern Kurdistan. Meanwhile, the political system in Southern Kurdistan, which is built on the unconditional domination of two families, is also dealing with many internal problems deriving from citizens’ need for welfare and freedom.

The invasion of Sinjar and the Yazidi Genocide

The Islamic State's attack on Sinjar was one of the major events of the 2010s, not only because it reintroduced genocide and slavery in the Kurdish political space, but also because it played a central role in the profound political contradictions afterwards. In August 2014, ISIS mounted an offense to invade Sinjar. Faced with this attack, the KDP-aligned Peshmerga acted on a central order and withdrew from the region. These developments paved the way for the genocide, as Sinjar had no other mechanism to defend itself. In its genocidal attack, ISIS killed men and enslaved women, eventually making it virtually impossible for the Yazidi population to remain in the region. The population of around 50,000 who fled to the Sinjar Mountains when ISIS launched its attack was able to cross into Rojava thanks to a corridor opened by the guerilla fighter of the PKK, YPG and YPJ. After ISIS had to withdraw from Sinjar in 2017 as a result of joint military operations by PKK fighters and the Peshmerga, the extent of the destruction became even more visible: mass graves were discovered and with the community largely displaced, thousands of children and women are still missing today. When we tried to go to Sinjar with a delegation from Europe in 2019, a Yazidi activist who had grown up in Germany and was leading this delegation commented: *"Ku milletê Êzîdî nizanibe xwe biparêze, tu kes wan naparêze"* ("If the Yazidi people don't learn how to defend themselves, no one else will defend them either"). All three of our attempts to go to Sinjar were blocked by forces affiliated with the KDP, the central government and the Hashd al-Shaabi, none of whom were there when the genocide took place. The attempts of PKK forces to establish themselves in Sinjar in order to set up self-defense units and the KDP's opposition to this plan turned the area into a place of power struggle. In particular, the fact that Turkey, which did not take any action when ISIS pursued its genocidal campaign in the region, incessantly warns that it will take military action and occasionally bombs the area with warplanes and drones in order to clear the PKK from these areas, serves as a pretext for the KDP administration to argue that the PKK should get out of Sinjar. While the upper strata of the quite stratified Yazidi community maintain closer ties with the KDP, the lower strata, who were directly exposed to the genocidal threat, are closer to the PKK, YPG and YPJ due to their role in the defense of Sinjar.

The bitter experience of Sinjar once again clearly highlighted the importance of self-defense in the Kurdish political space. The painful experience of genocide, slavery and displacement has shown Kurds that under the given circumstances, they can trust neither the regional and global powers, nor the Kurdish political elites, which, one way or another, are in a relationship of dependency with them. In addition, the conflict between the KDP and the PKK that arose after the liberation of Sinjar emerged as one of the important areas of dispute in the Kurdish political space.

Turkey's interventionism, Rojava and the South

One of the main factors determining the dynamics of the Kurdish political space in the 2010s is Turkey's interventionism. There are many signs that these interventions target not only its first-degree enemy, the PKK, or the Kurdish movements that it considers to be affiliated with the PKK, but also the Kurdish political space more generally speaking.

What lies at the root of this interventionism is Turkey's foreign policy in the region, which has changed with the AKP. The AKP tried to establish Turkish influence, if not hegemony, in the region by combining various discursive elements inherited from the Özal period along the lines of neo-Ottomanism. In discursive terms, as discussed in the previous sections of this report, this was presented as an attempt to revive the remnants of the Ottoman Empire and develop good relations with the actors in the formerly Ottoman territories, but in practice this foreign political approach corresponded to a neo-imperial project. Naturally, the Kurdish political space was not exempt from this project. Based on my interviews with politicians from different parties, this new Turkish interventionism can be examined in two historical periods. This interventionism was pursued with soft power, especially in the 2000s, and with outright military methods in the second half of the 2010s. In the first period, Turkey mostly relied on diplomacy and trade relations to realize its neo-imperial project, especially in the context of Southern Kurdistan, before it turned to military interventions in the second period, especially following the liberation of Rojava and the establishment of the nationalist state coalition in Turkey.

There had already been constant interventions by Turkey in Southern Kurdistan through its operations against the PKK, but since the mid-2010s, these interventions have reached a new level, with Turkey having established military stations and points. In the end, Turkey has established a permanent military presence in the region that targets not only against the PKK, but also causes loss of life and property to the local population, systematically setting fires, which ultimately disrupt the ecological balance, as a military strategy. Meanwhile, the administration of Southern Kurdistan, has not been able to stand up against these practices because it was economically and politically pressed and especially also because of the good relations that the KDP executives had developed with the AKP and the businessmen close to it.

In Rojava, indirect interventions have taken place since the Rojava revolution, in the form of support, either directly or through connivance, to jihadist forces, especially ISIS. However, starting from the second half of the 2010s, when the solution process in Turkey broke down and the Rojava revolution began to establish its own institutions,

the state coalition formed between political Islamists and nationalists in Turkey began to directly intervene in Rojava. Maneuvering between the United States' inconsistent attitude, which was due to Trump's erratic policy, and Russia's efforts to use every opportunity to push Turkey away from NATO, the state coalition intervened by military means at any given opportunity. In addition to its covert or overt support to the jihadist forces in Syria and numerous small-scale bombings, Turkey has carried out two major operations. The first was the operation against Afrin between January and March 2018, and the other was the 30 km incursion into the Serê Kaniyê and Girê Spi regions in October 2019.

Throughout this whole process, it could moreover be observed very clearly that the USA has acted in a military alliance with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, while at the same time supporting or facilitating all kinds of Turkish military operations against the PKK in the South. This has caused tensions in the relationship between the USA and Turkey, because the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria is an extension of the PKK in the eyes of Turkey. The US, on the other hand, chose to distinguish between the PKK and the institutionalized structure of self-government in Syria. Although Rojava and the PKK, which, judging by their own discourses, are two different reflections of the same ideological perspective, did not have an organic relationship, this dual attitude of the US was in itself contradictory. According to PKK members, the US preferred a Rojava cleared of the PKK, in practice creating one of the major problems for both the PKK and the Autonomous Administration. In summary, especially when considered together with Turkey's opposition to the independence referendum in Southern Kurdistan, the main target of its interventionist policies was not the PKK, but the entire Kurdish political space.

Rojhilat: Strong civil resistance, silent political actors

Based on the interviews, it can be said that there have not been any concrete gains in Rojhilat in the 2010s, but that the wave of protest surging from within society has grown tremendously. Kurdish cities are at among the areas with the highest participation in protests across Iran, which also extend to topics like ecology (e.g., Hassaniyan, 2021). These protests formed against both the fact that society at large has to pay the price for a weakening economy that is debilitated due to the embargoes and, in a narrower sense, the execution of people who worked to promote the rights of Kurds. The Kurds were severely affected by the brutal violence which the regime unleashed against the massive and ubiquitous protests. These protests, which are still ongoing, were motivated by the hope that global and regional geopolitical processes might eventually lead to political changes in Iran.

The position of Kurdish political actors, on the other hand, is relatively weaker when compared to the 2000s. The traditional nationalist parties are currently engaged in limited military and organizational activities in their camps in Southern Kurdistan, without having much of an impact. A former Komala activist, whom I asked about the difference between the Komala and different KDP-I-related structures, stated that there is actually almost no difference between these structures anymore (Interview-2, Germany 28.06.2021). Also, none of these structures have a concrete project or any liberation strategy to offer for the people of Rojhilat. At first, the KDP-I organized action units to carry out sporadic military activities in Rojhilat, but all of these initiatives resulted in the destruction of the deployed units and did not tangibly contribute to the struggle for liberation. However, as the activist added, these activities were carried out to gain the favor of the people of Rojhilat based on a notion of martyrdom, creating the impression that the KDP-I had not given up the struggle, but was in fact willing to sacrifice itself for the freedom of the Kurds (Interview-2, Germany, 28.06.2021). Judged on the basis of the results, these comments seem rather justified, because in the absence of thoroughly discussed and practically applicable political and military strategies these Rojhilat-based parties, which were stuck in Southern Kurdistan and increasingly lost significance due to their inertia, might indeed have opted for suicide acts.

In addition, despite minor operations of the Iranian revolutionary guards and occasional activities of the PJAK guerrillas, the PJAK has remained largely inactive since 2011. When I asked a politician about this topic, he stated that the KCK-led political wing was already in resistance against many forces, especially Turkey, both in the North and in Rojava and that it would be very difficult and ultimately unrealistic to open a new front in Rojhilat (Interview, Belgium, 22.07.2021). It should also be noted that the USA tries to provide an incentive to the PJAK to slowly wear down the regime. In addition, the PJAK's political activity among the people in the 2010s has decreased compared to the 2000s, and the discursive and organizational superiority that the democratic confederal wing has managed to achieve in the North and Rojava mostly manifested itself in competition with other Kurdish political actors in Rojhilat in the 2010s (Interview-1, Germany 28.06.2021). This sounds plausible when considering the competitive trajectory of the Öcalanist wing in other areas.

Ultimately, what we see in Rojhilat is a more and more pervasive civil resistance which develops in parallel with Iran's general protest movements and the Kurdish political actors who, either from the lack of strategy (as in the case of KDP-I) or for strategic reasons (as in the case of PJAK), cannot respond to this resistance.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the growing hopes and surging liberation movements, which could be observed across the entire Kurdish political space in the first half of the 2010s, were gradually replaced by a certain despair, especially in the second half of the same decade. Undoubtedly, the harsh reality of war that took hold of the entire Kurdish political space is one of the primary causes of this shift. Under the conditions of war, the efforts of the four states and extra-regional powers to manipulate the Kurds in line with their own agendas and the Kurdish political movement's inability to create a common agenda cause demoralization at the social level. The factors that united and separated Kurdish political actors in the 2010s can be viewed in the context of common threats and diverging interests. Kurdish political actors mostly rally around issues related to a common threat perception. We saw the most concrete manifestation of this in their united defense against the Islamic State's attacks on Rojava. Similarly, the defense of Kirkuk, although it eventually resulted in a great disappointment, initially brought the KDP, PUK, and PKK together. In addition to these, it should be emphasized that the Yazidi genocide in Sinjar could probably have been prevented had the Kurdish political actors fought together.

Kurdish political actors have always tried to come together. However, these efforts were intensified in the 2010s. A particularly serious initiative was the negotiations on a Kurdish national congress, which eventually did not succeed. While the PKK, the PUK and many other actors, affiliated with them or not, have agreed on the least common denominator, the KDP has not been included in this agreement. Three main reasons were mentioned for this circumstance in the interviews: (1) The KDP's attempt to re-establish dominance in Sinjar after it had taken a strategic decision to withdraw during ISIS' genocidal campaign, the opposition of PKK-affiliated self-defense forces to these attempts of the KDP, and Turkey's constant threatening of these regions on account of the PKK's presence there have become one of the central crises in the Kurdish political space. Especially since the second half of the 2010s, this can also be observed in the similar discourses of the KDP and AKP, who both argue that the PKK should leave the Qandil region, where it has been settled for nearly forty years. (2) A similar confrontation also prevails in Rojava, where the main agenda of the KDP-linked ENKS was to institute a fifty-fifty solution in Rojava and call on the autonomous administration to include them and other actors in the socio-political system in Northern Syria. (3) Another major obstacle preventing the Kurds from coming together is the fact that KDP executives do not want to spoil their good relations with Turkey under any circumstances because, as they explain, Southern Kurdistan is a landlocked region.

In addition to these, the 2010s created the conditions to test the two different

peacebuilding approaches which were discussed in the previous chapter and which each envisage a different model for the Kurds' coexistence with the other peoples and states in the region. The nationalist-inspired federative solution encountered the opposition of regional and global powers on its way to establishing an independent state. Ultimately, it was not possible for the Iraqi Kurds to be included in the global peace regime through a nation-state. The domestic political system in Southern Kurdistan, which is based on the full control of the two ruling families, seems to have done serious damage to the internal peace that had been established after the overthrow of the Saddam regime. On the other hand, the model of peaceful coexistence among social groups through their political representations was partially tested in Rojava and in the North. The political strategy of this approach to peace consists in a policy of the third way which rests on negotiation in the North and the self-defense in Rojava. At this stage, the fact that the dialogue with the state has turned into war in the North and that the embargo and war conditions have prevented the system from being fully established in Rojava pose the major obstacles to the practical development of this approach to peace.

Conclusion

The weakening hegemonic power of the USA coincident with the rising economic competitiveness of China and the geopolitical influence, no matter how limited, exercised by Russia, can be identified as the factors that interact with the changing dynamics in the 2010s and, in certain aspects, determine these dynamics. We discussed the global manifestations of this in respect to the crisis of the liberal international order. We also discussed the direct impact of this crisis at the regional level on geopolitical transformations that occurred after the Arab uprisings. In the Kurdish political space, the major consequence of these geopolitical shifts was that they made the Rojava revolution possible. There no longer is any single dominant power that maintains the balance at the regional level. Instead, we can see a playing field whose actors are a (neo)liberal-imperialist USA (and EU), which is weakened in its hegemonic power, two autocratic-imperialist nations, Russia and China, which are getting stronger and pursue their own hegemonic offensives. This is nothing completely new to the Middle East. On the contrary, it acted as a similar area of encounter until the last years of the Cold War, which made the given conditions possible. However, the balances established since the end of the 1970s are transforming. It should be underscored that many political groups will survive to the extent that they are able to convince the societies from within which they emerged.

We can state the following concerning the transformations at the regional level. The reason for the uprisings in the Arab world cannot be found in a vague and opaque notion of freedom, but in the concrete social conditions that make life impossible for the populations of these countries. There is a direct link between social freedoms and the not having any bread to eat. It was and remains a fallacy to explain the global revolts not on account of the social, political, and economic order that caused these revolts, but with recourse to the crises caused by regimes worldwide. In other words, presenting the problems arising from the systemic configuration itself as the problems of a mechanism that fails to operate this system well, will not only keep us from solving the problem, but in narrowing our perspective, it will also exacerbate the crisis. Thus, as a result of the uprisings in the 2010s, the sovereignty of states was seriously shaken and new seeds of rebellion were planted in societies. Therefore, the conditions of social and inter-communal peace began to be renegotiated along with the forms of power. Moreover, although these state systems have not yet collapsed, it is certain that the structural causes of the challenges to regimes that emerged from among societies still prevail. After all, even though their exact forms, appearances, names and strategies may change over time, imperialist interventions from outside the region, autocratic state systems that have managed to re-assert themselves, the political approach of creating polarization between societies' different ethnic, religious, and sectarian groups, and political leaderships who invariably hope to profit from this approach in essence all remain the same.

We can directly connect this observation to the Kurdish problem. Simply defining the Kurds as a people trying to establish their own state in the face of state violence is tantamount to addressing the consequences of the dictatorial statist system while talking about its basic causes, or in other words, it means to acknowledge that one lacks the strength to do the latter and to settle for the lesser evil. In this respect, it is imperative to see the Kurdish issue as an integral part of the Middle East.

Concretely, while the USA and its allies in the EU ostensibly seem to favor the softening of the political practices of the states, they actually want the existing system to prevail in the region. Russia, China, and other emerging powers that have entered a hegemonic race in the region or pursue their own interests in the region do not have any problems with the existing borders and state systems either. Basically, they all benefit from this system in terms of oil and tenders. Meanwhile, the USA, which does not want to leave the region to Iran, which is supported by Russia, has indexed the speed of its withdrawal from the region to this dynamic.

Eventually, we have seen that the 2010s were a period in which the contradictions between the two ideological-political lines in the Kurdish political space became more pronounced and marked. If we put it in the words of Hamit Bozarslan, the main dynamic of the 2010s was the inability of Kurdish political actors to come together and act within the framework of a common agenda while the states ruling over the different parts of the Kurdish political space were weakening. For the conflict Islamism and secularism that occurred within these states, or the class and sectarian conflicts in their societies did not directly determine the Kurdish political space (Bozarslan, 2014: 17–20). However, the internal contradictions among Kurdish political actors became an obstacle to their unification. This is not a new situation, however. On the contrary, it is the direct result of the historical efforts of the Kurds to gain their freedom in spaces open to manipulation by different sovereign powers. To conclude, we can identify three political practices defined by these two ideological-political lines in the 2010s: traditional Kurdish nationalism dominates in Southern Kurdistan, whose independence was hindered by regional geopolitical dynamics; the form of autonomy in Rojava, a self-government that has not yet been officially recognized and developed on the basis of military self-defense; and finally, the politics of negotiation in the north, which was able to gain ground in legal politics, but at least periodically lost this ground gains due to the ensuing war.

CONCLUSIONS
AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

If we were to summarize the 2010s in one word, my choice would be “chaos.” Originating from Ancient Greek, this word denotes the void before creation. In French and English usages, it describes a state of absolute disorder. In Turkish, since it is derived from French, it is used in the sense of disorder, irregularity. In other words, since it indicates an absence before existence on the one hand and disorder on the other, it naturally forms a basis for what will come after it. Every chaos, that is, void or disorder, is followed by a state of being or order. The 2010s in the Middle East saw devastations, displacements, and social cleavages of unprecedented scale, occurring within political and economic equations that were difficult to resolve due to the interests of the elites and a confrontation between the global powers who constantly intervened in the region. Although the political, social, and economic system in the region, which was severely shaken by the Arab uprisings and the many subsequent instances of resistance, has achieved a new authoritarian consolidation in the meantime, the conditions that led to the uprisings in the early 2010s are almost unchanged. Moreover, there is a serious desire for transformation, a social will that expresses this desire in different ways and opposes states, patriarchy, various forms of capitalist exploitation, warlords, imperialist powers, and armies despite all the desperation and constraints. Today, the Middle East is caught in the struggle between the old, which is dying, and the new that cannot yet be born.

The new that is about to be born will not simply present the best of the days to us. On the contrary, it will bring along its own internal contradictions, forms of oppression and exploitation, and power relations. That is, the new will not necessarily bring what is “good, beautiful and moral,” but will be fraught with the bad, ugly, and immoral. Romanticizing the new simply means not to understand social processes.

When it comes to the Kurdish question, the new is going to be born, just as it has been until today, out of an interaction between the global hegemonic confrontation, the regional upheaval, and the conflicts in the Kurdish political space. In this respect, global processes and regional upheavals are not just a dimension, a cause, or a result of the Kurdish political space, but an inseparable part of them. In other words, the interaction between these three dimensions should be perceived not only as a correlation or a unidirectional cause-effect relationship, but as processes that mutually determine each other in profound ways. The 2000s and 2010s have provide us with enough data to show this.

In this context, the main objective of this study has been to show that the Kurdish problem, from the very moment of its emergence, has always been a regional problem, and that the dynamics of this problem within the individual states under

all circumstances take shape within the possibilities and constraints of the regional conditions. Beyond that, these possibilities and constraints are not only related to the internal relations of the region, but also to the global processes which are dominated by much more complex and intricate relations. To put it another way, for us to understand the Kurdish question in Turkey, for example, from a political perspective, we do not only need to know what the regimes in Iran or Syria want, but also what the limits of the social and political actors of those regimes are and what kind of transformations the relations of these different power groups have undergone at the global level. This study is far from covering all these relations and did not set out with such a claim either. The more modest aim of this study to apply this perspective in a stricter sense to gain a historical and political sociological understanding of the conflictual relationship between state policies and Kurdish political actors in the Kurdish political space.



In the light of the discussions throughout this study on the past twenty years in the Kurdish political space, we can focus on borders, mentalities and struggles as the major problem areas in terms of peaceful coexistence to venture an outlook of the early 2020s.

Borders

The most determining factor for the Kurdish political space is undoubtedly the borders that divide this space into four. These borders, which started to take shape evident in the imperial period, became manifest after the First World War, and turned into nation-state borders after the mandatory powers in the region withdrew, still prevail today, despite being seriously put to the test in the 2010s. While the borders of the sovereign states were maintained with force and violence in the early 2000s, these states are significantly weakened at the beginning of the 2020s. Turkey and Iran are dealing with the most drastic social, political, diplomatic and, more importantly, economic crises in their history. Iraq and Syria, on the other hand, can no longer survive without the support of regional and extra-regional forces. Of course, this does not mean that these states will collapse, but their weakening has given rise to profound concerns in terms of their ontological security. In other words, these states' survival has become the main concern from the perspective of their ruling elites or regimes.

In addition, Kurdish political movements have seized a rare opportunity in their last hundred years of history. Near-independence autonomy was established in the South, and self-government, albeit not yet officially recognized, in Rojava. Despite the serious setback in the North that followed a period of dialogue, the Kurdish political movement still largely maintains its organized power. In Rojhilat, there is a popular protest movement struggling against the current economic and political problems, despite the weakness of the political leadership and military strategy of the Kurdish political actors and the brutal violence of the regime. In other words, not only the upheavals at the regional level, but also the problems of the regimes and the current political situations in the Kurdish regions threaten the mental and physical borders drawn by the nation-states.

Mentalities

It would not be wrong to contend that the historically constructed mentalities determining the Kurdish political space have come down to two options for Kurdish political actors. Developing throughout the 20th century, traditional nationalism, Marxist-Leninist national liberationism, and Islamism, underwent transformations that originated in the dynamics of the Cold War but took place in practice after the 2000s. First of all, we see a traditional nationalism in national liberationist colors in the case of Bashur and Rojhilat. While tribalism is largely incorporated according to the regional differences of traditional nationalism, the Islamist wing still exists without having undergone any major transformation, but meanwhile having achieved representation at the parliamentary level. In addition, this traditional nationalism is in a contest with the democratic confederal wing in Rojava and Rojhilat. In the North, the ideological-political line that originated as national liberationism under the leadership of the PKK before gradually taking the shape of radical democracy and democratic confederalism is still the dominant project today. While tradition is still quite strong in Rojhilat despite setbacks in recent years, it achieved great success in Rojava where it became the dominant force despite all the wars, ongoing external threats, huge economic problems, and geopolitical uncertainties. While tribalism largely lost its importance in the North, social structures that still pursue a tribal agenda mostly sided with the state. Tribalism is no longer as strong as it used to be in Rojava, either, where the prevailing structures are integrated into the self-government.

In terms of other state-centered actors in the Kurdish political space, we see that the social structure in each of the states is growing increasingly nationalistic as a direct result of a deepening social, political, and economic crisis. At the same time, this nationalism tries to politically control the religiosity that exists at the social level,

especially in Turkey and Syria, but also, albeit to a lesser extent, in Iran and Iraq. It can be expected that the social opposition to this conservatism, which was made possible by the state – in Iran after the revolution and in Turkey after the 1980 coup –, will lead to political upheavals.

Struggles

All of the struggles in the Kurdish political space, except for short intervals, went through extreme militarization. Over the last twenty years, both states and Kurdish political actors have periodically changed their militarization and war practices. Kurdish movements in Rojhilat have not engaged in serious military activity since the early 2010s. There is a constant state of resistance or preparation for resistance against invasions and attacks in Rojava. Despite occasional military encounters with the central Iraqi government, there was no serious war in Bashur. Finally, in Bakur, military activity is considerably reduced, partially due to Rojava. But in each of these regions, there is a possibility of war at any moment. In addition, there was a serious military campaign against ISIS in the three parts other than Rojhilat, especially in Rojava and Bashur, in response to the massacres committed by ISIS. Besides, Kurdish actors also used diplomacy with the states as another means of struggle, but this yielded very little benefits under the given circumstances. Whether or not there will be any tangible results in the 2020s seems to depend on the start of a new dialogue process in the North, the international recognition of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, the relative democratization in the South, and the easing of pressures in Rojhilat.

However, we should underscore that a palpable war fatigue has spread among the Kurds in general. Although war has been an unchanging reality for the last century, the attacks of ISIS and Turkey's neo-imperial interventions in the South and Rojava have intensified in the last decade. This became more evident especially under the conditions of the ruling elite's inability to project any vision beyond family interests in the South, the poverty and social fatigue that grow due to the embargoes in Rojava, and the brutal and continuous state violence in the North and Rojhilat, also showing us the possibility that the Kurds might waste the current window of political opportunity because of the disagreements with each other.

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It would be beneficial to briefly mention some other results that emerged in the twenty-year period and mainly concern the geopolitical positions in the Kurdish political space. These are issues that need to be discussed to develop a notion of what peaceful coexistence in the Kurdish political space could mean from a decolonial perspective.

Under the new conditions, reinterpreting the Kurdish question requires us to go beyond recognitions based on political power or hegemonic power. Situating the Kurdish question in the context of the Kurds' "desire to establish their own state," as in the perception of the dominant states, ignores the historical complexity underlying the question and the fact that Kurds have try to develop a political will in the face of different forms of state violence that are reproduced in social processes. In other words, in failing to see the legitimate grounds for opposing the obvious oppression and exploitation, this perspective legitimizes oppression and exploitation by lending credence to the fallacious formula that "the main intention of the Kurds is to disrupt the unity of the state." This is very similar to portraying the Arab uprisings as a "longing for democracy" in a Eurocentric liberal perspective, while simultaneously silencing the search for social justice and freedom underlying the protests. In this respect, to understand the Kurdish question we are required to take a deeper look and stand clear from the position of power.

As far as Kurdish political actors in the Kurdish political space are concerned, their inability to unite or at least act within the framework of a common agenda has long been debated as the greatest problem. Under the current conditions, it does not seem possible for Kurdish political actors to unite. The discourse of unification, which is essentially based on a nationalist perspective, is one of the main dilemmas of the nationalisms developed by the non-Western states, ultimately corresponding to a social and political community united against an enemy. However, under the given conditions, there is not any one singular "enemy," and at the political and social level, where such a community would emerge, minds and imaginations are greatly fragmented. Therefore, "unification" in the true sense of the word is not possible. The problems that this discourse of unification contains in the context of peaceful coexistence is the subject of a wider discussion, so I will not mention them here. However, if the states and regimes' main concern in terms of their ontological security has its roots in the existence of the Kurds (and other social groups in similar situations), it seems indispensable and in the interest of each and every individual part of the Kurdish political space that Kurdish political movements act within the framework of a common agenda, even if at a basic level. To some extent, this actually happened in the Rojava defense, but this too was far behind being coordinated and

long-term. If there had been coordinated action around this common agenda, the genocide in Sinjar, for instance, could have been prevented.

Meanwhile, the Western perception of transformation processes led or brought about by Kurdish political actors as the “exception of exception” is quite problematic as it implies a stance regarding the areas which are problematized by this perspective. Middle Eastern exceptionalism is essentially a discourse that is based on Eurocentric liberalism firstly not understanding the region, secondly, ignoring the problems Eurocentric liberalism itself causes, and thirdly, viewing the powerless as unable to resemble itself from its position of power. The perception of the Kurds as the exception to the exception, then, mainly has to do with the belief that they are more like Europeans. In other words, this notion does not imply an admiration for the decade-long struggles of the Kurds, but the instrumentalization of this struggle from a Eurocentric perspective. Any step to be taken based on such a perspective will ultimately be detrimental to all the peoples in the region, especially the Kurds, maintaining an equation that fuels the oppression mechanisms of the states and regimes in the region. This was clearly seen with respect to each of the two ideological-political approaches that dominate the Kurdish political space. Southern Kurdistan’s independence was not supported despite all the good relations established with the West, and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which acted as a military partner against ISIS, was left to its own devices against Turkey’s intervention by the USA. These lessons will always be remembered in the Kurdish political space. We need to keep in mind that this, in the final analysis, is related to the dynamics of the Kurdish political space, which take shape in the force field between the ontological existence of the four states, extra-regional imperialist powers, and the historical struggles of the Kurds.

Another issue is the balance between a strict and sectarian anti-imperialist attitude and the relations necessitated by the geopolitical processes in the region. The strict anti-imperialist discourse manifests itself especially in the discourses of the states in which Kurdish political agencies are defined as “servants of imperialism” from a position of power. On the other hand, in the social imaginations of the Kurds, their cyclical partnerships with extra-regional powers, which are necessitated by geopolitical processes, turn out to be illusory and give rise to a problematic nationalism that is opposed to other peoples. This can be observed mainly in the South and to a lesser extent in the other regions. While regimes and oppositional structures’ relations with extra-regional powers are not discussed within the framework of anti-imperialism, the image of the “mercenary/traitorous Kurd” that is invoked when Kurdish political actors establish such relations has to do with the discursive superiority of the states. It would not be wrong to say that this discourse is

proliferated by the individual regimes of each state and all of the political formations that are opposed to the regime but embrace the nationalism of that state. In Turkey, this epistemic position dominates the right and even some leftist opposition structures, including the Kemalist CHP voters, and, thought self-contradictory, can be projected as a form of nationalism on the Kurdish public. The policy of the third way, which basically emerged in reaction to this discourse, can offer certain solutions, but it should not ignore the relations that are made inevitable by geopolitical necessities.

Parallel to these, a strong jargon of decolonization is being employed to discuss this issue in the last five years especially among Kurds in Turkey. Decolonization signifies a contestation of a world order constructed in a Eurocentric form. But if this contestation takes place on the basis of nationalism, the inevitable result is re-colonization. In other words, we have to keep in mind that racism against the Kurds within the borders of the four states is basically the discursive construction of these states and that peoples' experiences of coexistence are manipulated by the truth regimes constructed by these powers. Otherwise, there is a risk of getting stuck in an essentialist reading of racism and missing its political construction by the states. Such an approach presupposes not the denial but the unconditional acceptance of racism and is therefore suited to detecting its political origins. Understanding the difference between the origins of racism and its manifestations and translating this into a political project is one of the basic pillars of peaceful coexistence.



At the end of this study, I want to discuss civil initiatives and actors who work to promote peaceful coexistence in Turkey and to outline a number of recommendations to contribute to anchoring our perspectives of the future in a decolonial foundation and creating road maps to achieve this goal.

(1) First of all, the most important issue is the problematic of civil initiatives and actors itself. What is meant here by civil society is definitely not just associations, but any organized structure other than political actors with some sort of base in society. Although there is an old and extensive debate on the constraints of civil society, there are three main issues that I want to briefly highlight once again. First, it is imperative for civil society to not limit itself to NGO work but to proceed in communication and coordination with all kinds of religious, sectarian, ethnic groups, different women's organizations, youth organizations and initiatives and every structure displaying activity in the civil field and to develop relationships that can help to prevent manipulative maneuvering in politics. Secondly, it is equally important that civil

society establishes relations not only within the country, but also with the entire region, and uses these relations to create the conditions for peaceful coexistence. Thirdly, it is one of the most important issues that the peace-oriented initiatives and institutions in Turkey extend their intellectual focus beyond the Eurocentric worldview, and their political imagination and visions beyond the US- and EU-centered liberal peace perspective. By defining the region in which they are located as the center of gravity of their relations, civil initiatives can develop proposals on how to transform the opportunities arising from the crisis into a lasting peace.

(2) The dominance of the states in the region, which is based on their coercive practices, has been shaken but not collapsed in the last twenty years. One of the most obvious reasons for this is that the demands and struggles for freedom are stuck between the “hegemonic West” and the “traditional East.” The interventions of various powers, especially Western imperialist powers, which have continued uninterruptedly from the last periods of the Ottoman Empire to the present, particularly also in the last two decades, have seriously affected the transformation in the region. The fact that the societies in the region, shaped as they were by these interventions, partially internalized self-orientalizing practices, exacerbated existing conflict dynamics and made it even more difficult to solve the problems in the region. Political actors, who had the capacity to control or manipulate the social sphere, followed a political strategy mostly based on not letting any alternative liberation project develop outside of themselves. The various contradictions this has produced also trapped the imaginations of freedom between the poles of a liberal path to freedom within the framework of progressive Western modernization and liberation based on a return to essence in the context of the traditional regional realities. However, while the first maintains the given imperial-Orientalist and racist order of exploitation, the second is a fundamentalist project that ultimately negates/erases social diversity. Thus, there is no other alternative for the construction of peaceful coexistence, especially in the Kurdish political space, than to overcome the imaginations of freedom that are stuck between these two poles and start building a new plane. Otherwise, every newly emerging social or political structure will trigger another kind of conflict dynamics. The first step is to ground the efforts towards coexistence in a decolonial framework based on the notion of freedom.

(3) The conflicts in the region are not only internal issues of any one state but mostly have a cross-border character. Naturally, this cross-border character should be taken into account when discussing possible solutions to the conflicts. In Turkey’s solution process, the main agenda of almost every organization and initiative promoting a peaceful transformation was the political (and, to a limited extent, social)

transformation within the borders. However, as discussed in detail in this study, both at the beginning and at the end of the solution process that lasted from 2013 to 2015, the repercussions of developments unfolding outside of Turkey's borders on the power relations within Turkey were an important aspect. Therefore, if any new talks are going to be taken up, they should be designed in such a way as to take into account all actors, especially the political and social actors in the other parts of the Kurdish political space, that could affect the process positively or negatively. The aim here should be to include those who support the process and find ways to reduce the damage done by those who might oppose the process. In fact, in the dialogue process, today remembered as a sweet memory with an extremely bitter ending, the political actors were very aware of the crucial role played by geopolitical processes and took almost all their steps in consideration of transformations in the region, especially the situation in Rojava. But in the activities of civil actors work on peace in Turkey, this regional perspective was either absent or very limited. However, for example, when Salih Müslüm was invited to Ankara by the government, it could have had a very positive impact if there had been an initiative to invite civil actors from Rojava (religious and sectarian groups, different ethnic groups, women's and youth organizations, etc.) to Turkey to hold public panels and closed sessions to discuss the possibilities of a general peace perspective. Since we should no longer discuss peace in the context of the Kurdish question as an issue of individual states, taking such steps at even the faintest future geopolitical opportunity, despite all the political and legal risks that this involves, should be one of our primary goals.

(4) The crisis of the liberal international order harbors great risks. One of the most essential parameters of this crisis is the erosion of the normative global order, despite all its deficiencies and faults. Despite all its problems, massacres, genocides, great wars, etc., were not legitimate in the liberal international order due to the national and international legal infrastructure that somewhat restrained the workings of a global order based on oppression and hierarchies. However, the confrontation between the waning old hegemonic power and the emergent contenders for hegemony might result in the grass suffering in the elephants' fight, as the adage has it. Moreover, it is quite likely that the thistles, which are trampled on by the elephants, but still larger than grass, will be involved in this dynamic. In other words, in the absence of a hegemonic normative order, the regional powers, knowing that they will not have to face any consequences, may choose to solve their own problems by using great violence. The genocide of the Yazidis that took place as a result of the ISIS attack on Sinjar, or the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, the plundering of resources and the blatant settler colonialism that we witnessed after Turkey entered

Afrin all prove that this is a risk that cannot be underestimated. This is something to keep in mind both for the Kurdish political space and for actors who pursue a project/ plan of peaceful coexistence.

(5) Another aspect that is directly related to the hegemonic crisis is states or regimes' "survival" concern and wide range of things they are willing to do to address this concern. For example, the AKP government switched lane somewhere in 2014-2015 and started acting as if the continuity of its power was synonymous to the survival of the state in the second half of the 2010s. There are (at least) two factors that made this possible. The first is that political Islam and the new capitalist faction that has formed on this basis have continued supporting the AKP and Erdoğan despite their faults. The second is that as a result of the regional uprisings which erupted in the wake of the global hegemonic crisis, the *raison d'état*, the product of the political actors that dominate the state, has defined the question of survival as the number one priority after the regional border regime, which is based on the Sykes-Picot Agreement, was seriously tested, at times even abolished, but ultimately re-established. This border regime was seriously tested, for example, when the Northern Kurds crossed the borders to go to Kobanê during the 6-8 October protests, or it was temporarily abolished in practice by ISIS on the Iraqi-Syrian border. This is also one of the most important factors in the formation of the state coalition in Turkey. If we look at the "urban wars" or the "self-government resistances" from a wider perspective, we can see the state's concern for survival and the repercussions of the deepening regional crisis on Turkey. In this respect, it is necessary to keep in mind the possibility of other mass murders in the future and to prevent any processes that can lead to such atrocities. Once the arms start speaking, the role of civil initiatives naturally is limited. Therefore, the main issue is to create the necessary sensitivity before such a stage is reached.

(6) In addition to this great risk, it should be underscored that the global hegemonic confrontation opens up various windows of opportunity. If the normative order is to give way to the unknown, the latter will be determined by the complex combination of the existing political structures that aim to establish their power and the dynamics and imaginations of struggle that develop in society. It is the basic assumption of any historical sociological or political sociological study, including this one, that every social structure is a current process that evolved out of previous processes. Thus, the social and political structures of tomorrow will also be the product of such a combination. Meanwhile, focusing only on the analysis of power relations between political actors makes us lose sight of other political agencies that emerge from the society. In such moments of crisis, society is a form of existence that constantly

produces its own alternatives. Here, the main responsibility of every actor or initiative acting for peaceful purposes is to channel social dynamics into practices of peaceful coexistence. Strengthening the possibility of peaceful coexistence and discussing its political alternatives in the context of the current hegemonic crisis is the main responsibility of civil initiatives in Turkey.

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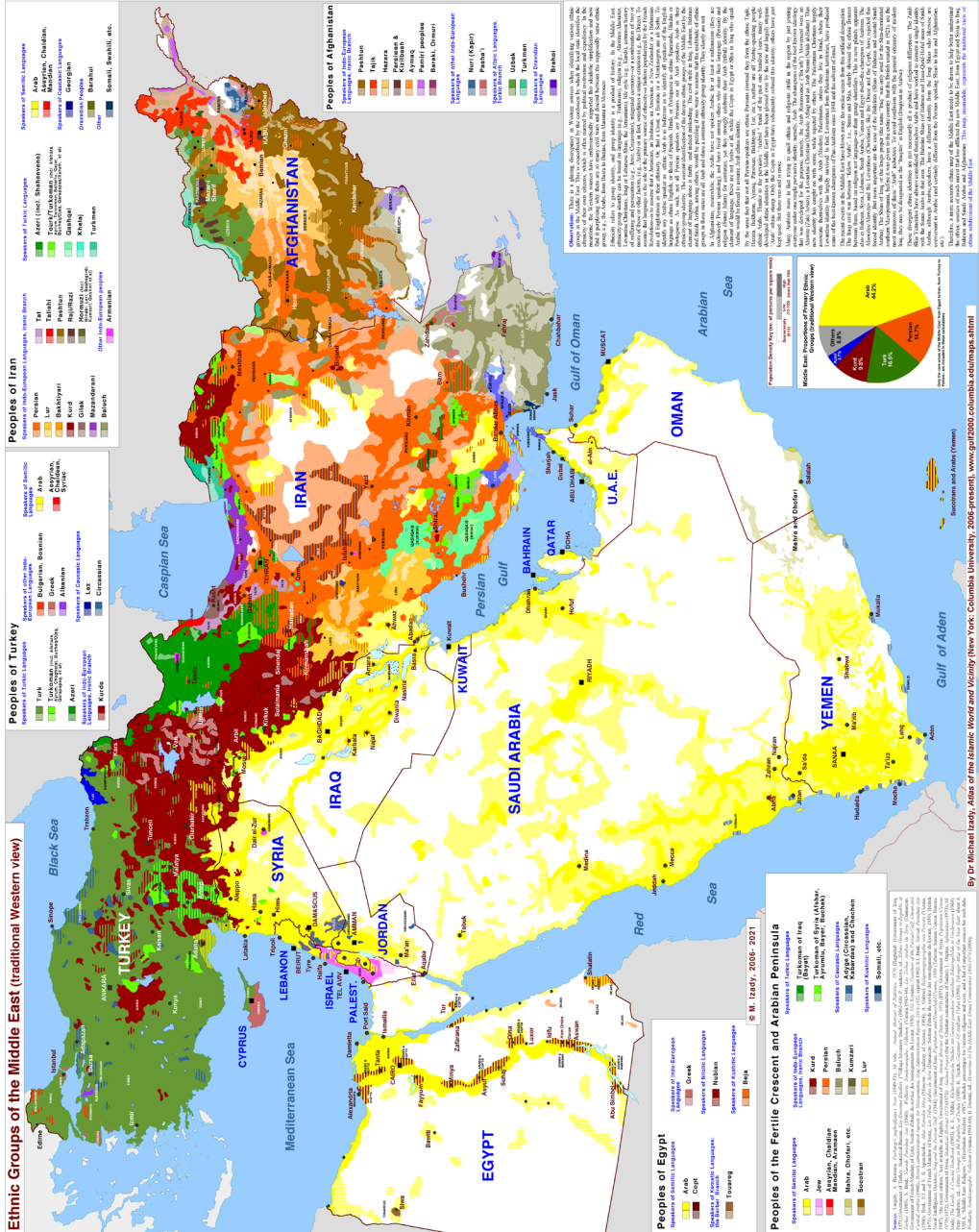
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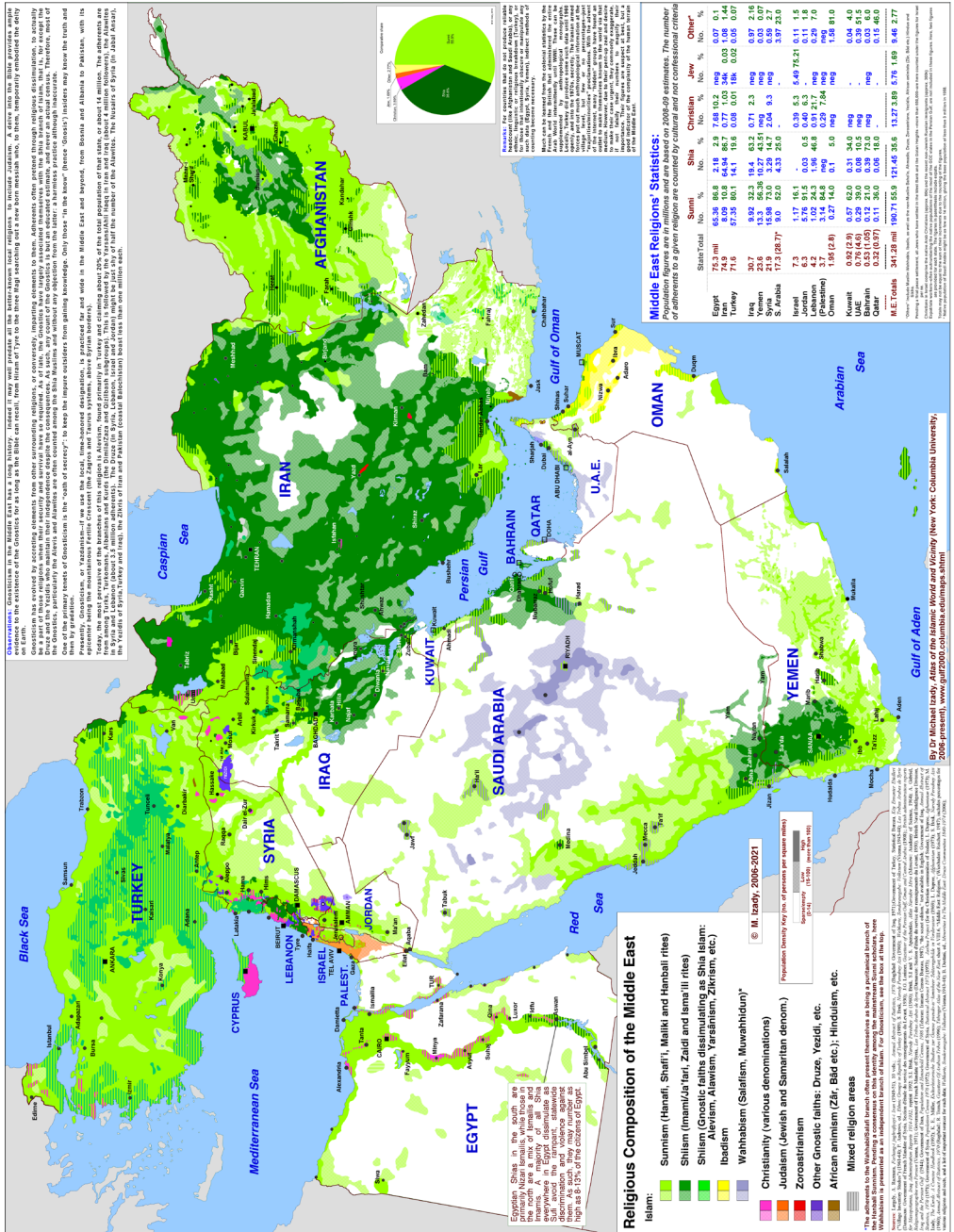
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Annex – 1: Ethnic Groups of the Middle East (traditional Western view).

Source: M Izady, *Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity* (New York, Columbia Univ., 2006-present) @gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml

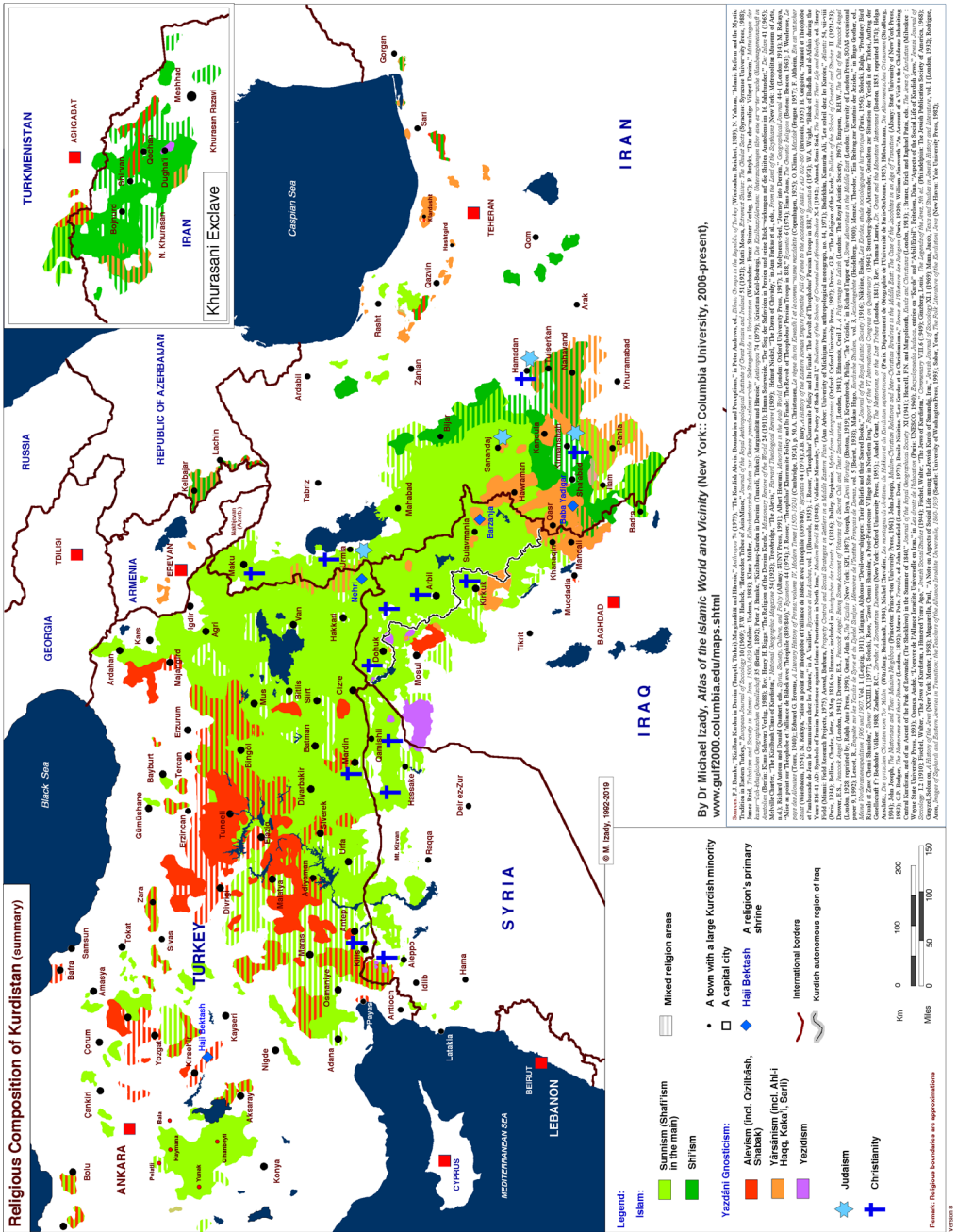
ANNEX AND MAPS



Annex – 2: Religious Composition of the Middle East.

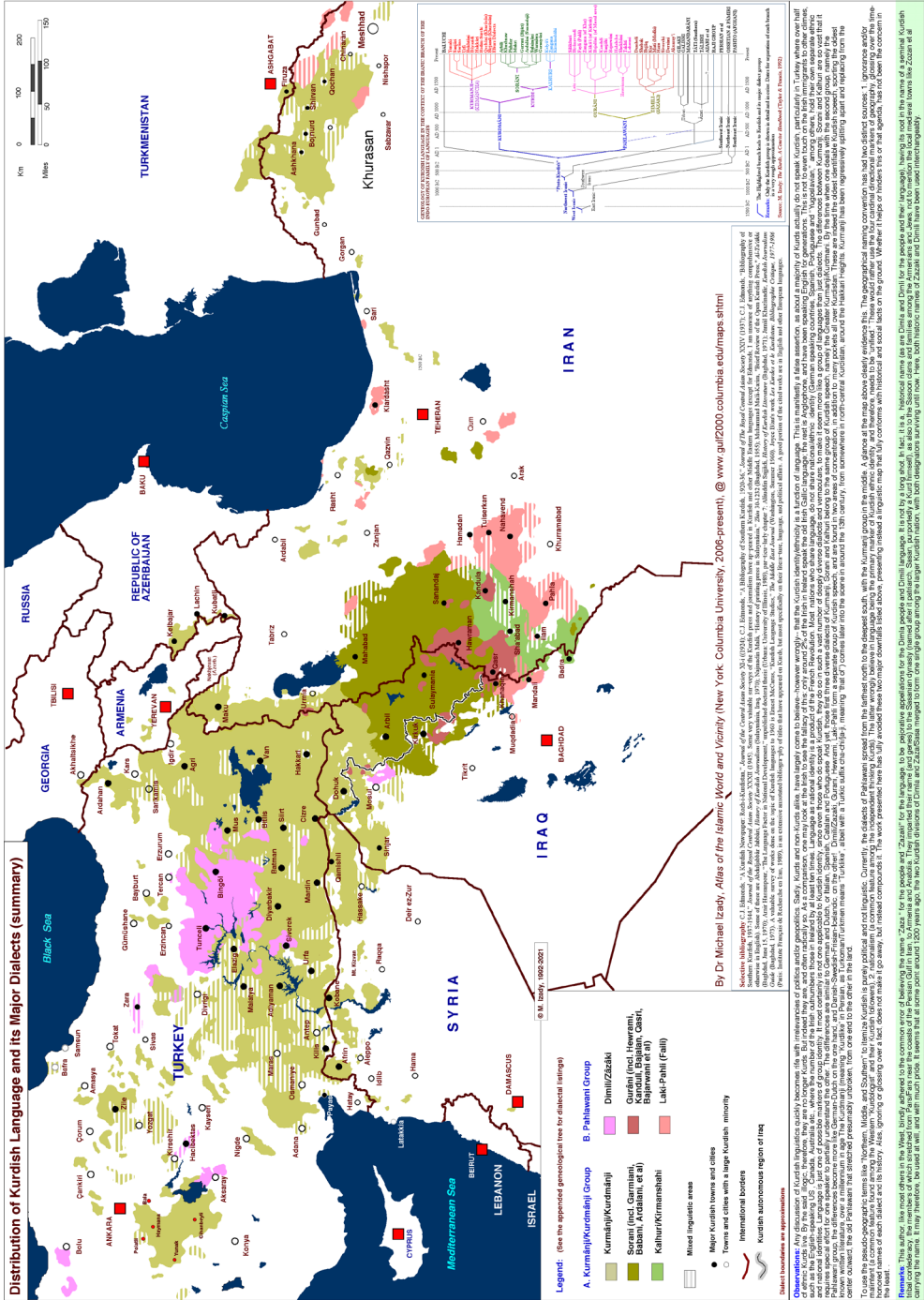
Source: M Izady, Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity (New York, Columbia Univ., 2006-present)

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Annex – 3: Religious Composition of Kurdistan (summary).

Source: M Izady, Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity (New York, Columbia Univ., 2006-present) @gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml



Annex – 4: Distribution of Kurdish Language and its Major Dialects (summary).

Source: M Izady, *Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity* (New York, Columbia Univ., 2006-present) @gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml

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Born in Kars in 1986. Until 2017, worked closely with the European institutions and different NGOs and parties on issues such as the Middle East, Turkey, and the Kurdish question. He completed his master's degree in Political Science at the Université Libre de Bruxelles in 2013. In 2020, he was awarded a joint PhD in political science and sociology from the University of Gent (Belgium) and the University of Bielefeld (Germany). He has taught undergraduate and graduate courses on nationalism, global politics and the history of revolutions. As a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bielefeld, he conducts research on Kurdistan, Chiapas, Western Sahara, and Tamil Nadu in the context of coexistence, nationalism, and colonialism. His work focuses on the Middle East and the Kurdish question in global politics, nationalism and internationalism, the nation-state and its dilemmas, and the history of revolutions.

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Although the Kurdish question inarguably is a regional issue, regardless of whatever perspective we may take, it has invariably been considered as an internal matter of states. Even efforts to factor in regional dynamics have largely been limited to contemplating the “outside’s influence on the inside.” This report suggests that if we want to understand the Kurdish question it is necessary for us to consider its historicity in conjunction with its geopolitical, regional and global dimensions and take into account not only the political actors but also the subjects and social segments affected by it. From this vantage point, the report discusses the internal dynamics of the “Kurdish political space” and their transformation since the beginning of the 2000s, while also addressing the geopolitical dimensions of this transformation.