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Constructing Kurdistan: Cross-Border Kurdish Relations and Ethnic Identity

An honors thesis presented by
Benjamin Meyer

to

The Department of Government and International Relations
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for honors in the major field

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Abstract

This thesis examines the emergence and politicization of ethnic identity in the Kurdish populations of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Through a historical analysis of Kurdish revolts and nationalist movements the late imperial and colonial eras, it demonstrates that 'Kurdishness', or Kurdayetî, has been instrumentalized as ethnonationalism primarily in a defensive capacity, in response to external coercive pressures forcing the Kurds to 'think like a state' and view themselves in increasingly ethnopolitical terms. By illustrating the extent to which ethnonationalism was imposed upon the Kurdish people and the limited appeal it enjoyed in the first half of the twentieth century, I aim to repudiate a 'cliched constructivism' prevalent in explanatory international relations as problematized by Rogers Brubaker. While most contemporary scholars of nationalism acknowledge the artificiality of the state, many depict 'ethnic ties' as the ostensibly ancient and natural proclivities upon which modern political communities are constructed. An objective analysis of early Kurdish nationalism, however, will demonstrate that ethnic linkages had little relevance in the emergence of Kurdish political sentiments and that the retrospective misunderstanding of Kurdish separatism as naturally occurring is rooted in a groupist doxa upheld by the socialized reinforcement of the ethnonational state as the default unit of political organization. Building upon this historical analysis, the thesis will proceed to examine the emergence of contemporary Kurdish political parties and separatist movements, all the while placing them in the local and global political contexts that produce them. It will demonstrate that, despite a perception by governments and scholars alike that Kurds would form collaborative co-ethnic dyads when given the opportunity, disparate Kurdish political parties prioritize their own strategic interests over those of their ethnic brethren, even when doing so requires the subjugation or elimination of rival Kurdish forces. Ultimately, the project will conclude by applying the theoretical and historical frameworks discussed above to two transversal dyads impacting the 'Kurdish question' in the Middle East today. By evaluating the similarities between the KRG's relationship with the PYD and KDP and previous instances of pan-Kurdish interaction, this thesis will provide insights into the future of Kurdish movements in the Modern Middle East, which are likely to be plagued by the same structural constraints and a lack of organic solidarity that has inhibited transversal collaboration between the Kurds for more than a century.

Abbreviations

ADYÖD: The Ankara Democratic Higher Education Association (*Ankara Demokratik Yüksek Öğrenim Derneği*), a short-lived socialist activist organization in Ankara and predecessor of the PKK co-founded by Öcalan in 1974.

ASLA: Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, a Marxist-Leninist militant national liberation movement that cooperated with the PKK throughout the 1980s.

CKI: Committee for Kurdish Independence (*Kurt İstıqlal Djemiyeti*), a proto-nationalist organization formed by Kurdish elites in Erzurum in 1922.

CUP: Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*), a revolutionary militant coup that came to power during the Young Turk Revolution and ruled as a de facto one-party state from 1913 to 1918.

DFLP: Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a Syrian-backed national liberation movement based in Lebanon led by Nayif Hawatmah and another early ally of the PKK.

HEP: People's Labor Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*), the first legal explicitly Kurdish party in Turkey's history, founded in 1990.

ICP: Iraqi Communist Party, a leftist party founded in 1934 and a frequent political partner of Kurds in Iraq.

ISIL/IS: The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, now just the Islamic State. A fundamentalist radical non-state organization that emerged from the conditions created by the United States in occupied Iraq and threatened much of the Kurdish 'homeland' in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and Syrian Civil War.

JK: Society for the Revival of Kurdistan (*Komalay Jiyanaway Kurdistan*), a Kurdish nationalist organization formed in 1942 with heavy Soviet influence following occupation.

KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*), the dominant Kurdish nationalist party since roughly 1958 and the main steward of the contemporary autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq.

KDPI: The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, originally the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Founded in 1946 by Qazi Muhammed and Ibrahim Ahmed to govern the Mahabad Republic, and was subsequently suppressed by both the KDP and Iranian authorities in subsequent decades.

KDPS: The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria, a Barzani-inspired nationalist organization founded in 1957 and marginally active ever since, though it has been largely overshadowed by the ascension of the PYD during the civil war.

KDPT: The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey, a marginal offshoot party of the KDP that drew criticism and suppression from the PKK.

KRG: The Kurdistan Regional Government, the political entity established in 1992 to govern the Kurdish region of Iraq.

KRI: The Kurdish Region of Iraq, also called Southern Kurdistan or *Basur*. The area of northern Iraq predominantly inhabited by Kurds and given formal autonomy in Iraq's 2005 constitution.

KTTJ: The Kurdish Society for Mutual Cooperation and Progress (*Kurd Te'avun ve Terakki Jem'iyati*), a cultural organization founded in 1908 that some scholars identify as proto-nationalist, an assessment I dispute.

NLM: National Liberation Movement, a term used to describe a diverse array of "socio-political movements which share the aim of establishing an independent state for what they consider their nation within the borders of a territory recognized by the international community."¹

PKK: The Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*), the second dominant actor in Kurdish politics. The organization is an NLM founded primarily by Abdullah Öcalan in 1979 that rejects the legitimacy of 'sovereign boundaries' altogether and has engaged in a decades-long insurgency against the Turkish state, supported by its mountain bases in the KRI.

PUK: The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (*Yekîtiya Nîştimanî ya Kurdistanê*), the main ideological and practical rival of the KDP in competition for control of the KRG and broader regional influence. Though founded in 1975, it has its roots in a 1964 split between Barzani and several leaders after the former signed an autonomy agreement without consulting the party leadership.

PYD: The Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*), a PKK inspired (or possibly controlled) organization in the Kurdish region of Syria that has taken a leading role in the establishment of Rojava following the Syrian Civil War.

SAK: The Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan (*Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti*), a political group founded in Istanbul in 1918 and possibly the earliest example of mobilized advocacy for Kurdish 'national' autonomy or independence.

SAVAK: The Organization of National Security and Information (*Sāzemān-e Ettlā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar*), Iran's infamous intelligence and secret police service under Shah Reza Pahlavi.

SCP: The Syrian Communist Party (*al-Hizb aš-Šuyū'ī as-Sūrī*), a frequently Kurdish-friendly leftist organization that existed from 1927 to 1986.

TWP: The Turkish Workers Party (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*), an ally of Kurdish activists and a proponent of 'Eastism' in Turkey during the 1960s.

¹ Amin, S. 2015. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition)*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, p. 241.

Maps of the Regions inhabited by Kurdish Communities

Depicting Kurdistan cartographically is an inherently challenging process, not only because “all maps are abstractions of reality”, but also because the demographic dispersion of Kurdish communities in each of their respective states are subjects of great contestation and controversy.² As a result, no accurate census data exists, and the precise distribution of the Kurdish population remains unknown. Nevertheless, while boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative, the maps represent the best possible estimate for where Kurdish populations reside, and serve as useful references for better understanding transversal interactions throughout the remainder of the thesis.³



Kurdistan

² O'Shea, Maria Theresa. 2004. *Trapped Between the Map and Reality: Geography and Perceptions of Kurdistan*. London: Routledge, p. 156.

³ All maps accessed in Stansfield, Gareth and Shareef, Mohammed, eds. 2017. *The Kurdish Question Revisited*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Kurds in Iran



Kurds in Iraq



Kurds in Turkey



Kurds in Syria: The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, 2016–

Introduction

The Kurdish people, comprising a loosely defined ethnocultural community inhabiting a mountainous territory encompassing parts of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, have frequently been identified by scholars of the Middle East and International Relations as the largest stateless group in the world, unjustly denied opportunities for self-determination by the careless partition of the Ottoman Empire and the parochialism of nationalizing states in the region. In the popular and academic discourse, the Kurdish story is one of repeated tragedy and betrayal, wherein the Kurdish people have defiantly and persistently fought for their own autonomy and self-governance in the face of massive external opposition. This narrative and depiction of Kurdish identity certainly contains objective truths- it is impossible to deny that the Kurds, by nature of their minority status in a modern state system based on the concept of congruent ethnopolitical units, have frequently been the subject of subjugation and violent erasure at the hands of their respective states. It is also true that the bravery of the Kurdish people in overcoming these obstacles while maintaining political organization and a sense of identity is a testament to the resiliency of marginalized communities in nationalizing states, and that in recent decades, Kurdish nationalist ambitions have in fact been constrained by exogenous forces.

A depiction of the Kurds as ‘a nation denied’ or as a distinct, bounded social group that has fought for independence and freedom since the imposition of the state system itself, however, is an ahistorical and oversimplified depiction of how differential expressions of Kurdish identity have been forged, challenged, broken, and reforged in the crucible of brutality that has been the Modern Middle East.⁴ In the first half of this thesis, I undertake a historical analysis of Kurdish national movements in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, with the objective of

⁴ McDowall, David. 1992. *The Kurds: A Nation Denied*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

contextualizing the emergence of the Kurdish nation within the national and regional dynamics impacting political mobilization in the region. I argue that the ‘ethnification’ of Kurdishness was adopted in a primarily defensive capacity against encroaching ethnonational ideologies in the first half of the twentieth century, but that an externally-imposed insistence by states in the region to pursue ethnic homogeneity in their respective territories caused them to view Kurdish populations as a threat to national unity. As a result, Kurdish cultural identity was preemptively denied where pragmatically possible, leading to a ‘dialectic of denial’ which in itself proved the central impetus for the development of a Kurdish ethnonationalism.

After establishing the emergence of Kurdish ethno-political identity as a reactionary, rather than spontaneously-occurring phenomenon, I proceed to an examination of the bifurcated evolution of Kurdish national movements along both regional and linguistic lines. Following another historical analysis examining the conditions that led to the establishment of ‘traditional’ ideology in Southern and Eastern Kurdistan and ‘radical’ ideology in the West that reiterates the contextually-dependent nature of ethno-political identity and challenges *ex post* depictions of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) as organizations arising from spontaneous expressions of ethnonational sentiment. The transversal interactions between these competing figureheads of the Kurdish cause, as well as cross-border dynamics throughout Kurdish history, indicate that ethnic solidarity plays only a minimal role in motivating the strategic priorities of Kurdish political groups on the ground. Although Kurdish organizations may make cross-border intra-ethnic alliances or even lend each other military assistance in extraordinary circumstances, an examination of the relationships between prominent Kurdish parties in the region will reveal that pragmatic considerations of self-interest and ideology far outweigh any sentiment of ethnic ‘groupness’ bringing Kurdish activists together. On the

contrary, this thesis will argue that intra-Kurdish reactions have had a net detrimental effect on the security and well-being of Kurds in the region as a whole, since competition between rival groups has frequently undermined the prospects for peace, federalism, or reconciliation with existing states in the region.

In all, then, the message of my thesis could be seen as rather defeatist or pessimistic, given my assertion that Kurdish political groups pursue their own strategic interests regardless of the consequences for their constituencies or ‘ethnic brethren’ as a whole. It is true that I do not view Kurdish political elites as dedicated champions for the cause of Kurdish nationalism, but I believe the critical instrumentalist analysis I have applied to the process of national construction in Kurdistan is the framework that should be utilized in analyses of all states which are, by their nature, an elite-imposed process of power centralization through propaganda. This fact, however, is not to discount the salience of ethnonationalism in Kurdistan or elsewhere, and it should not diminish the real struggle and suffering that the Kurds and other marginalized communities have experienced at the hands of fierce ‘imagined communities’.⁵

My aim in this thesis is therefore simultaneously circumscribed and highly expansive- while I aim to trace the historical contours of the Kurdish nationalist movements in states across the Middle East, my analysis is limited in its failure to examine the true impacts of these dynamics on everyday Kurds, for whom ideas of community and ethnicity likely look very different to those espoused by official party ideologies. It is also limited in its failure to translate and incorporate primary sources from the Kurdish region itself, which would prove invaluable in ascertaining the true motivations of Kurdish decision makers throughout the time period examined. Another factor that confines me in this academic project is my lack of extended

⁵ Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York, NY: Verso.

independent research experience in the Kurdish region or indeed at all, given the relative immaturity of my academic career as an undergraduate student. As such, I find it important to clarify that while my rhetoric is at times iconoclastic, it is not my intention to discredit or denounce established modernist scholars of Kurdish identity, almost all of whom have more experience studying this topic than I do myself. Nevertheless, I stand by my assessment that the academy continues to overestimate the significance of ethnicity and underestimate the significance of specific context in its examinations of Kurdish identity, just as it does throughout other case studies in ethnic conflict and secessionism churned out by scholars of explanatory IR. Given this fact, I will continue in my analysis identifying deficiencies where I perceive them, but simultaneously acknowledging the qualifications and experience of the scholars whom I aim to challenge. Even within my own analysis, regardless of how concerted an effort I make to expunge ‘groupist’ assumptions from my lexicon and analytical process, I find it likely that I may at times revert to assumptions of cliched constructivism, given simply the epistemological ease and ubiquity of that theoretical framework. By ‘deconstructing’ Kurdish identity and writing about it as a tangible concept, I am myself “actively tak[ing] part in the construction, and creation of the forms of identity [I] set out to study, analyze, categorize, explain and write about”- a paradox I suspect other modernist scholars of Kurdish identity have struggled with in their own analyses.⁶ In spite of all these factors complicating and clarifying the positionality of my study, the only way to avoid making mistakes in an analysis of social science as confounding and controversial as this one is to avoid writing it altogether, so in this thesis I have established as complete and objective a picture of how Kurdish ethnic identity has been constructed and instrumentalized in the modern era as effectively as possible.

⁶ Černy, Hannes. 2018. *Iraqi Kurdistan, the PKK and International Relations: Theory and Ethnic Conflict*. New York: Routledge, p. 83.

In order to position my argument within the broader discourse on nationalism and ethnicity, I begin in my literature review by outlining the current state of International Relations as a field and the deficiencies it harbors with respect to analysis of ethnic conflict. I engage in a brief survey of sociological and anthropological literature on the discursive construction of objective ‘truth’, and demonstrate the ways in which the [ethnonational] state has been imposed as the unchallenged ‘common sense’ modality of social organization in political discourse. Building upon this analysis, I provide an overview of dominant theories of nationalism arising from the works of Hobsbawm, Smith, and others during the 1980s, arguing that while these works make progress in acknowledging the artificiality of the ‘state’, many revert to ambiguous ‘ethnic bonds’ as the state’s supposed antecedent and enabler, an assumption that reflects an adoption of strategic essentialisms and a clichéd constructivism that merely absconds the difficult question of identity from the structural concept of state to the abstract field of ethnicity. I join Rogers Brubaker in his calls to move ‘beyond groupism’ in studies of social science and towards a “constitutive discourse analysis” based on Karin Fierke’s depiction of ethnicity as “a complex matrix of identities and interests without a hierarchical sequence”, entirely dependent on specific political contexts and not on objective ties.⁷ I briefly recontextualize my research question and place Kurdish scholars of nationalism in the context of the field of identity politics more broadly before engaging in the bulk of my analysis in the six substantive chapters of the thesis.

I begin with an analysis of Kurdish political mobilization in the Imperial Era, arguing that, despite the overtures of some essentialist Kurdish scholars, expressions of Kurdish ‘distinctiveness’ or a desire for freedom should not be retroactively deemed early expressions of Kurdish nationalism. ‘Nationalism’ in the manner we understand it today is an entirely modern

⁷ Fierke, Karin M. 2015. *Critical Approaches to International Security*. Cambridge: Polity, p. 81.

and constructed phenomenon, and would not have been a concept early Kurdish poets and scholars would have been familiar with, much less advocates of. Instead, religion served as the most salient nexus of personal identity for Kurds under both the Qajar and Ottoman Empires, as ‘ethnic affiliation’ had little relevance when compared with one’s religious adherence. As such, most efforts at political mobilization in the imperial power were centered around religious Sheikhs and tribal leaders, who capitalized on resistance to ‘westernization’ and ‘secularization’ during the *tanzimat* reforms to lead revolts challenging the empire for more personal autonomy. These revolts, exemplified by characters like Sheikh Ubeydullah and Ismail Simko, served as an early instance of ethnified Kurdishness in response to exogenous forces, but at this early historical stage Kurdish ‘nationalism’ remained a concept foreign to the multitude, employed by only a select few elites with exposure to European discourses in their efforts to expand their own individual power and influence. Even if some rebellions in the imperial era adopted the rhetoric of Kurdish nationalism, this chapter argues that such invocations were strategic overtures to gain external support rather than genuine expressions of ethnonational sentiment.

A disconnect between the Kurdish multitude and elite continued throughout the interregnum period, as detailed in the second chapter of this work. Although Kurdish parties made what little effort they could to advocate for their interests at the Versailles peace conference, the fact that Mustafa Kemal’s promises to protect the Kurds and the ‘caliphate’ from the West proved more convincing to the Kurdish population than nationalist proposals again reveals the lack of a natural proclivity towards ethnic mobilization in the Kurdish population. It was only when Kemal engaged in a policy of brutal ethnic cleansing and Kurdish erasure that Kurdish nationalist organizations sprung up in response, indicating that only the denial of Kurdish cultural rights resulted in the formation of a coherent ethno-political Kurdish identity.

This pattern is reflected in colonial Iraq, where a lack of coercive opportunity structures led to a relatively late-developing Kurdish nationalist project, which even then only formed again as a reaction to the Mahabad Republic and exogenous shocks in the region. Chapter three details the formation of the KDP and the brutal erasure of the Kurds in Turkey, all the while continuing to support my argument that Kurdish nationalism rarely if ever arises spontaneously, or even in response to ‘opportunities’, but almost always in response to a perceived external threat to the very idea of Kurdishness itself.

As explained in the fourth chapter, Kurdish national movements have in the post-colonial era bifurcated into ‘traditional’ and ‘radical’ elements, both of which emerged in response to the specific political contexts of their domestic environments. The PKK in Turkey was borne from a long history of Kurdish activists being excluded from legal avenues of dissent and a chaotic environment of political violence in 1970s Turkey, which resulted in the formation of numerous radical leftist political groups even beyond the PKK itself. The KDP, on the other hand, can to an extent trace its lineage back to pre-state and tribal ties of loyalty and has traditionally pursued a policy of negotiation and rapprochement with neighboring states. This chapter demonstrates that while transversal Kurdish collaboration or communication has the potential to inspire and ‘reignite’ Kurdish movements, it does not have the staying power to influence them meaningfully when compared to domestic political contexts, as illustrated by the case of the KDP’s Radio Broadcasts in East Anatolia. Furthermore, chapter four repudiates the ethnic alliance model through an analysis of KDP-KDPI relations, concluding that Barzani’s willingness to persecute his ideological and ethnic brethren for Iranian support undermine notions of a pan-Kurdish solidarity.

Although rival spheres of Kurdish liberation developed in relative isolation throughout the 60s and 70s, from the 1980s on the parties have engaged in cross-border collaboration, conflict, and betrayal, the contours of which are explored in the final two chapters of this volume. Drawing on Hannes Černý's pioneering study of transversal Kurdish relations, chapters five and six evaluate the significance of ethnicity in motivating the interactions between these spheres, ultimately concluding again that objective ethnic ties play a minimal role when compared with Kurdish parties' realist, even pathological, obsession with their own self interest.⁸

Although the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and KDP both entered into tenuous alliances with the PKK when political expediency required it, the brief period of alliance between the parties of Iraqi Kurdistan and the PKK serves as an exception to the general state of affairs between the groups, not the normal state. Marriages of convenience made between the camps between 1979 and 1983 were transgressed, first by the PKK and then the KDP, in favor of alliances with states hostile to their rival Kurdish organization. The final chapter engages in an analysis of contemporary dynamics and recent developments in the field of Kurdish studies, identifying Öcalan's post-1999 philosophy of 'democratic confederalism' and that project's reification in Rojava for the past decade as one ripe source for new transnational Kurdish cooperation and contestation.⁹ Never before have two Kurdish semi-autonomous entities had such formal control over a shared international border, and the opportunities provided by trans-Kurdish collaborations appear to be greater than they have been at any prior time in the region's history. Despite this fact, it still appears that the ideological division between the two governing philosophies and the KRG's increasing economic dependency on Turkey serve as insurmountable obstacles to the establishment of a genuine and ongoing Kurdish partnership

⁸ Hosseinoun, forthcoming

⁹ Hasan, Harith, and Khaddour, Kheder. 2021. "The Making of the Kurdish Frontier: Power, Conflict, and Governance in the Iraqi-Syrian Borderlands." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, p. 7

spanning the Syrian-Iraqi borderlands. Throughout the historical analysis contained within this thesis, I aim to repeatedly demonstrate the fallacy of relying upon ethnic bonds or ‘essentialist ties’ as motivators of Kurdish political action, contending that Kurds in the region have displayed no tendency to provide preferential treatment or consideration to their neighbors across the border by virtue of their ethnicity alone. The consistency and tenacity of this refusal to adopt ethnicity as *the* determining variable for political mobilization and collective action indicates that the weight theorists of International Relations lend to shared ethnicity in their studies of nationalism, identity, and violence are in dramatic need of reconsideration.

Literature Review

‘Clichéd Constructivism’ and Contested Roots of Ethnonational Identity

The field of International Relations is, at its core, an analysis of interactions between socio-political units and the conflicts that arise among them. In the contemporary global political landscape, these groups most frequently take the form of modern, centralized nation-states with wide institutional reach and cultural power, the governments of which rhetorically claim to represent the will of citizens in amalgam. The roots of nations and nationalism remain deeply contested topics within the field, with arguments ranging from primordialist depictions of identity as ancient and intrinsically imbued in the individual to constructivist conceptions of national identity as an inherently modern phenomenon, brought about through the homogenizing institutions of the nation-state. While the field of nationalism has made significant progress in acknowledging Benedict Anderson’s characterization of modern states as ‘imagined communities,’ even progressive scholars who rhetorically adhere to a critical interpretation of nation-building as an act of discursive construction tend to treat groups, once formed, as static and unchanging entities. Scholarly titans, including the likes of Anthony Smith, Ernest Gellner, and Eric Hobsbawm, whose works have defined the axes of contemporary debates on nationalism, acknowledge that national communities cannot be formed without institutions of mass socialization enabled by the proliferation of capitalist economies and popular media. They still subscribe to the assumption, however, that nationalism builds upon pre-existing group divisions in society, often depicting ethnopolitical groups as naturally emerging social sects, rooted in deep histories and retaining enduring significance to the present day. In doing so, these scholars have perpetuated the normalization of a now dominant ‘clichéd constructivism’ in the

field of International Relations by implicitly endorsing the formation of ethnic and national groups as grounded in a “pre-existing, historically inherited proliferation of cultures.”¹⁰

Sociologist Rogers Brubaker deems this approach to social science as ‘groupism’, the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis.¹¹ Despite advances to the contrary in the fields of sociology and anthropology, scholars of International Relations and Security continue to reify groups and treat them as quasi-natural and deeply constituted social entities, “framing accounts of ethnic, racial, and national conflict in groupist terms as the struggles ‘of’ ethnic groups, races, and nations.”¹² This perspective on global politics is perhaps best reflected in Samuel Huntington’s infamous ‘Clash of Civilizations’, which predicted that conflicts in the post-Cold War era would take place along the boundaries between ethnocultural groups as a result of natural and ancient grievances. This essentialist depiction of identity politics, one of the most frequently assigned readings for undergraduate IR students, was integral in shaping the axes of debate in American foreign policy and popular culture in recent decades, despite its tenuous-at-best relationship to historical reality. Despite a perception at more liberal institutions in the United States that ‘constructivism’ has become the dominant epistemological framing for studies of International Relations, the enduring strength of groupism is “made plain by a study of the required reading lists for general IR theory courses at the PhD level of the top ten US political science departments from 2005 until 2007 conducted by Thomas Biersteker”, which concluded that out of 809 different publications and a total of 454 authors, 69 per cent of readings can be categorized as unambiguously rationalist positivist, 10 percent as systemic constructivist, and only two out of ten reading lists featured authors dubbed ‘radical’– post-

¹⁰ Gellner, Ernest. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, p. 57.

¹¹ Brubaker, Rogers. 2004. *Ethnicity Without Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 8.

¹² Brubaker, Rogers. 2009. “Ethnicity, Race, and Nationalism.” *Annual Review of Sociology* (35), p. 29.

structuralist, feminist or critical constructivist.”¹³ Although progress in academia has doubtless been made in the past decade, it remains the case that scholars themselves are not immune to a lifetime of socialization in overtly and covertly political environments, which by their nature engage in we/they othering and contribute to a groupist ontology. Our process does not occur “in a social vacuum, unfiltered through the media, the advocacy of think tanks via political decision makers”, and processes of socialization more broadly.¹⁴ The perception, therefore, of ethnic and national groups as ‘common sense’ sources of social bifurcation is not intrinsic to human interaction but instead stems from the omnipresence of ethnonational narratives in the modern world.¹⁵ Nevertheless, as “analysts of naturalizers” scholars of identity must be cautious not to become “analytic naturalizers”, unintentionally reifying ‘common sense’ understandings of vernacular categories.¹⁶

Antonio Gramsci’s concept of common sense in the subaltern consciousness is a useful theoretical framework through which to examine this apparent invisibilization of groupism, which is disseminated out of political necessity by economic and social elites to legitimate the national project itself. Although Gramsci’s depiction of hegemonic narratives was squared firmly in the Marxist-Leninist school of thought and concerned itself primarily with the mobilization of the industrial proletariat, his description of contradictions in the political sociology of working-class citizens proves remarkably pertinent to contemporary constructivist approaches to nationalism and ethnicity.¹⁷ Just as many scholars rhetorically adhere to constructivism while furthering essentialist assumptions in their work, the “theoretical consciousness [of the worker]

¹³ Černý 2017, p. 85.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 2

¹⁵ Agnew, John. 1999. "Regions on the Mind Does Not Equal Regions of the Mind." *Progress in Human Geography* 23(1), p. 95

¹⁶ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Translated by G. Raymond and M. Adamson. Cambridge: Polity, p. 234; Brubaker 2004, p. 8.

¹⁷ Patnaik, Arun K. 1988. “Gramsci’s Concept of Common Sense: Towards A Theory of Subaltern Consciousness in Hegemony Processes.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 23(5), p. 2.

can indeed be in opposition to his activity. He has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness), one which is implicit in his activity and unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed.”¹⁸ In this sense, the ‘theoretical consciousness’ of clichéd constructivism can be viewed as working in opposition to a more holistic and objective understanding of ethnopolitical identity, which identifies all supra-local bonds as constructed in response to macropolitical contexts.

Bourdieu terms the imposition of a cultural habitus by a regime of power as *doxa*, “the drawing of the line between the field of that which is explicitly questioned...and of that which is beyond question and which each agent tacitly accords by the mere fact of acting in accord with social convention.”¹⁹ Similarly, Foucault famously stated “that power produces knowledge, and that knowledge is never neutral but a function of existing power structures.” The construction of “knowledge linked to power ... assumes the authority of ‘the truth,’ but also has the power to make itself true”.²⁰ This has been the case in the dissemination of modern nationalism, where an ahistorical epistemological justification for the ethnonational state has been fabricated by elites in order to legitimate a top-down process of power centralization.

These invisible and integral influencers of sociopolitical discourse are not limited to the manipulation of the multitude: they also have clearly influenced perceptions and practices of scholars in the field of identity for decades without sufficient scrutiny. It is a central aim of this thesis to problematize those social boundaries which are essentialized in our cultures, and to adopt a cognitive approach to nationalism and ethnicity that challenges “taken-for-granted background knowledge, embodied in persons and embedded in institutionalized routines and

¹⁸ Gramsci, Antonio 1971; quoted in Patnaik 1988, p. 4.

¹⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Translated by R. Nice. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 169.

²⁰ Foucault 1980, quoted in Černý 2017, p. 92.

practices, through which people recognize and experience objects, places, persons, actions, or situations as ethnically marked or meaningful.”²¹

This project is necessarily challenging for this reason—it explicitly calls into question many markers of difference we recognize in our day-to-day sociopolitical discourses, encouraging a post-structuralist approach to studying identity formation.

Support for a Critical Interpretation of Group Identity

Although depicting national and ethnic groups as wholly-constructed modalities of social organization remains a challenge for contemporary constructivist scholars, some theorists have furthered a cognitive and objective approach to group formation since the emergence of social science as a discipline. Max Weber, universally considered a seminal thinker in politics, economics, and sociology, briefly broaches the subject of ethnicity in his influential tome *Economy and Society*. Despite the highly racialized nature of dominant discourses on the subject of race and ethnicity in Weber’s macropolitical context of early twentieth-century Germany, he decisively argues for the artificial origin of ethnic differences, stating that “ethnic membership does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind—particularly in the political sphere.”²² Taking inspiration from the ancient world, Weber backs up his claim with the observation that Greek tribes (*phylai*) and their subdivisions took on highly ethnicized connotations, despite being formed out of political expediency by Cleisthenes. In this instance, he contends that “ethnic fictions were a sign of the rather low degree of rationalization of Greek

²¹ Brubaker 2009, p. 32

²² Weber, Max. [1922] 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by G. Roth and C. Wittich. Translated by E. Fischhoff et al. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, p. 389.

political life”, a framework which might be extended to the present day in that groups peripheralized from the state-building process often view ethnic divisions as especially salient.

Ultimately, though, Weber’s conclusion that “ethnically determined social action subsumes phenomena that a rigorous sociological analysis would have to distinguish carefully” fell on the deaf ears of an academy that preferred instead to extract from his work those passages that would reinforce the uncritical approach to the world necessary to justify colonial exploitation.²³ Thus, Weber has frequently been deemed an ethnic primordialist based in part on his definition of “nations” as including “notions of common descent and of an essential, though frequently indefinite, homogeneity”, but also because of some substantialist concessions he makes to legitimate his work in the eyes of his contemporaries. For example, his depiction of ethnic solidarity as the integral factor shaping the politico-nationalist claims of Spain, Holland, and Sweden in the face of receding Christian universalism in the sixteenth century does little to problematize ethnic construction in a European context.²⁴ Brubaker further suggests that “Weber’s contribution was largely ignored until recently [because] for Anglophone readers, the force of his critique has been blunted by translation problems.”²⁵ Whatever the reasons for the omission of Weber’s nuanced conception of ethnicity from mainstream discussions of identity politics, the clarity of his argument in favor of moving ‘beyond groupism’ at an early stage in the development of the social sciences demonstrates that viewing ethnic delineations as almost entirely fabricated is not purely a modern intellectual framing of the concept.

The field of anthropology, which concerns itself primarily with the study of human culture by examining individual activities through ethnography, has similarly been influenced by

²³ Ibid, p. 386, 394.

²⁴ Dawisha, Adeed. 2009. “Nations and Nationalism: Historical Antecedents to Contemporary Debates.” In *Ethnic Conflict*, edited by R. Ganguly. Los Angeles, CA: Sage, p. 57.

²⁵ Brubaker 2009, p. 28

societies that encourage essentialist depictions of ethnic and national identity. Nevertheless, the works of Fredrik Barth, a Norwegian anthropologist who conducted his doctoral dissertation on political organization in Iraqi Kurdistan during the early 1950s, contributed significantly to understandings of ethnicity by focusing on the impact of artificial boundaries imposed between communities.²⁶ In his introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Barth reiterates the fact that constructed ethnic groups primarily “provide an organizational vessel that may be given varying amounts and forms of content in different socio-cultural systems. They may be of great relevance to behavior, but they need not be; they may pervade all social life, or they may be relevant only in limited sectors of activity”—furthering the Weberian argument that ethnicity matters only when instrumentalized by societal elites, and is politicized primarily in response to external factors and opportunity structures.²⁷

Crucially, however, Barth emphasizes the critical role that borders, both internally and externally imposed, play in the construction of disparate ethnicities and group formation. Even if a given community retains broad cultural similarities, differing political contexts will lead to different manifestations of group identity. Of course “the same group of people, with unchanged values and ideas, would surely pursue different patterns of life and institutionalize different forms of behavior when faced with the different opportunities offered in different environments,” an asymmetry that is necessarily reflected in the political arena.²⁸ Barth focuses on how ‘cultural ecologies’ and geographic factors bifurcate group identities through case studies in Baluchistan and Papua New Guinea, but he also alludes to the impact that politically-imposed territorial

²⁶ Barth, Fredrik. 1953. *Principles of Social Organization in Southern Kurdistan*. Oslo: Brødrene Jørgensen Boktr.

²⁷ Barth, Fredrik. [1969] 1998. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, p. 14.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 12

segregation can have on ethnic boundaries “generally in a colonial context”, especially when asymmetries of relative power exist across borders.²⁹

Colonial divisions and constraints on cross-group interactions contribute to differing constructions of identity, but importantly, it becomes “the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” [original emphasis].³⁰ As a result, “ethnic boundaries could be maintained in the absence of major cultural distinctions [and] conversely, substantial cultural heterogeneity was perfectly compatible with ethnic commonality.”³¹ Even if circumstances change and lead to greater inter-ethnic contact and economic interdependence, categorical we/they distinctions persist despite a flow of personnel across borders. Ultimately, Barth’s contribution that “interaction in such social systems [need] not lead to their liquidation” is valuable because it challenged prevailing assumptions of ethnicity as “biologically self-perpetuating... realized in overt unity in cultural forms.”³² Instead, he believed ‘cultural’ boundaries would be maintained through a process of social conformism and discipline, maintaining normative differences between arbitrarily divided communities.

This insight has proved increasingly relevant in recent years as trans- and anti-national political movements have challenged colonial borders in the Middle East in particular, and his work remains influential in his field, making anthropologists “now very skeptical that ascriptive boundaries closely correspond to ‘culture’ boundaries” in recent decades.³³ Despite these advances in the fields of sociology and anthropology, dominant schools of thought in International Relations and Security are lagging behind the pace, implicitly and explicitly

²⁹ Ibid, p. 24-28.

³⁰ Sanders, Jimmy M. 2002. "Ethnic Boundaries and Identity in Plural Societies." *Annual Review of Sociology* 28(1), p. 328; Barth [1969] 1998, p. 15.

³¹ Brubaker 2009, p. 29.

³² Barth [1969] 1998, p. 10.

³³ Gil-White, Francisco J. 2002. "Are Ethnic Groups Biological ‘Species’ to the Human Brain? Essentialism in our Cognition of Some Social Categories." *Current Anthropology* 42(4), p. 531.

embracing essentialist depictions of ethnic groups while simultaneously examining the constructed nature of the political institutions which ostensibly naturally arise from them.³⁴

While most scholars of nationalism have at this point reached an uneasy consensus that “some nations may be more ancient than others, but all nations emerge in relation to the power of [modern, constructed] state institutions”, they often still resort to essentialist and substantialist presumptions of ethnic identities, frequently depicting them as the ‘underpinnings’ of the modern nation-state.³⁵ In practice, primordialism has by no means disappeared from the scholarly discourse on nationalism. Rather, it has obfuscated and entrenched its influence by retreating to the less-understood and less-easily examined arena of ethnic identity. The apparent dichotomy between ‘naive primordialists’ espousing explicitly racial or genealogical claims and ‘enlightened constructivists’ no longer holds water in contemporary IR: constructivists boldly identify themselves, but their supposed opponents apparently publish no articles. As Brubaker says, an analysis of recent publications in the field of nationalism demonstrate that at least in a rhetorical sense, “we are all constructivists now”. Let us waste no more time repudiating those who “argue that modern nations are a natural continuum of distinct [ethnolinguistic] communities and a natural consequence of their development”.³⁶ Since all serious scholars acknowledge at least some level of constructivism in the statebuilding process, the foci of the debate clearly require rejuvenation and revision.³⁷ An analogy might be made to the ‘good/bad binary’ described by Robin DiAngelo with reference to racial narratives in the United States. While the “open proclamation [of] belief in white racial superiority” is a significant transgression

³⁴ Černý, Hannes. 2014. "Ethnic Alliances Deconstructed: The PKK Sanctuary in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Internationalization of Ethnic Conflict Revisited." *Ethnopolitics* 13(4), p. 329.

³⁵ Ahram, Ariel I. 2019. *Break all the Borders: Separatism and the Reshaping of the Middle East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³⁶ Tunc, Huseyin. 2018. "Kurdîyetî and Kurdish Nationalism: The Need for Distinction." *Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies* 2(1), p. 45.

³⁷ Gil White 2002, p. 516; Barth [1969] 1998, p. 31-33.

in most American social contexts, depicting the mere rejection of such beliefs as sufficient to solve racial issues obscures the structural nature of racism itself.³⁸ Similarly, while overt declarations of primordialism are rejected in the academy, many scholars' rejections of essentialist assumptions are rhetorical and fail to interrogate the structural nature of groupism.

Dominant Macrodevelopmentalist Theories of Nationalism in International Relations

To demonstrate the lasting significance that groupist and ethnically essentialist explanations for national identity have in the field of International Relations today, I wish here to briefly review the works of a few scholars whose work on nationalism established constructivism (however clichéd) as the dominant analytical framework for state-building. Throughout the 1980s, scholars Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Anthony Smith, and Eric Hobsbawm all released their own individual and authoritative accounts of the macro-political contours of national identity development, and while each thinker's conviction that states serve as drivers rather than reflectors of ethnic identity supports the constructivist conception, each ultimately finds himself reverting back to the groupist assumptions which underlie perceptions of the social world in various degrees. The earliest of these works is Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism*, in which the author "delights in subverting nationalist ontologies" by chastising all those "who take the tacit assumptions of nationalism for granted erroneously [and] credit them to humanity at large" while failing to interrogate his own 'commonsense' understanding of ethnic groupism.³⁹ Gellner argues that the development of the state and nationalism is inextricably tied to a transition from agrarian to industrial political economy, furthering the Rousseauian view that

³⁸ DiAngelo, Robin. 2018 *White Fragility: Why it's so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, p. 166.

³⁹ Gellner 1983, p. 54. Brubaker 2009, p. 30.

‘agrarian man’ was a natural species in harmony with his environment. By contrast, the ‘industrial man’ is artificially produced and incubated by the institutions of nation, which provides the individual with a central focus of community identity and a higher quality of life through the provision of state services and infrastructure. Once the material benefits of modernization have been realized by a population, it is difficult if not impossible to return to a ‘pre-nationalist’ social ontology and organization, just as the privileges of the state are depicted as inexorably altering human consciousness and group behavior in Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*.⁴⁰ Ethnic and national identity is further reinforced through the dissemination of standardized education and the imposition of hegemonic narratives by political elites, through which national divisions can eventually become ‘naturalized’ and implicitly accepted within political populations.⁴¹

While Gellner concedes the purely synthesized nature of the modern nation-state and its associated institutions, he still maintains a conviction that the state must be built upon a foundation of essentialized common culture. He broadly endorses Hobsbawm's laconic decree that “nations create nationalism, not the other way around”, but while he interrogates the construction of the modern nation itself, he fails to extend this constructivist critique to the creation of social groups more broadly, asserting that “mankind has always been organized in groups, of all kinds of shapes and sizes, sometimes sharply defined and sometimes loose, sometimes neatly nested and sometimes overlapping or intertwined.” Therefore, while the imposition of nationalism is a distinctly modern phenomenon made necessary by evolving means of production and centralization in developing societies, it requires the presence of “pre-existing,

⁴⁰ Rousseau, Jean Jaques. [1762] 2002. *The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses*, edited by S. Dunn. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 122-127

⁴¹ Crehan, Kate. 2011. "Gramsci's Concept of Common Sense: A Useful Concept for Anthropologists?" *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 16(2): 273-287.

historically inherited proliferation of cultures or cultural wealth, though it uses them very selectively, and it most often transforms them radically.”⁴² To Gellner, nationalism is a form of self-deception and self-worship codified and instrumentalized by state institutions, but it is ultimately still built upon bounded ethnic groups. In nationalizing societies, the benefits and power of industrial development are distributed unequally amongst the population, frequently empowering members of one ‘group’ while disenfranchising another. Since the nation-state by definition strives for ethnopolitical congruence, the ‘in’ group emboldened by modernity can institutionalize their identity through the forms of modern communications identified above.⁴³ Those who are not established as members of the dominant group are forced either to assimilate to homogenizing national narratives or resist assimilation altogether and instead assert autonomy for their own ethnic group under the rhetorical auspices of a separate nation. In Gellner’s view, “if there is not a shared ‘ethnicity’, then assimilation will not occur but rather [disenfranchised groups] are excluded from society.”⁴⁴ Thus, while he makes the case for the nation as a social construction, he maintains the assumption that ‘men have always lived in groups’, and that some form of patriotism, abstractly conceptualized, has played a perennial part in human perceptions since a time immemorial.⁴⁵ In doing so, Gellner reifies the very abstract concepts he aims to debunk in his work while still contributing meaningfully to a halting evolution of the scholarly discourse towards constructivism.

The intersections and relative weights of ethnocultural and political conditions and identities with respect to the development of states bear clear relevance to the field of International Relations and geopolitical realities more broadly, but many scholars incorrectly

⁴² Gellner 1983, p. 57.

⁴³ Tunc 2018, p. 46.

⁴⁴ Gellner 1983, cited in Cuff, Matthew. 2013. “Ernest Gellner.” *MSc in Nationalism Studies Blog, University of Edinburgh*. Accessed on May 2nd, 2022 at: <https://nationalismstudies.wordpress.com/2013/10/09/ernest-gellner-2/>.

⁴⁵ Gellner 1983, p. 138

subsume the ethnic within the political or vice versa, instead of treating them as separate yet interconnected factors influencing reproductions of identity. Despite a turn towards constructivist theories in more recent scholarship, there remains “little agreement about the role of ethnic, as opposed to political, components of nation; or about the balance between ‘subjective’ elements like will and memory, and more objective elements like territory and language, or about the nature and role of ethnicity in national identity.”⁴⁶ This apparent gap in the literature spurred theorists like Anthony Smith to address more explicitly the challenges purportedly posed by ethnic bonds to constructivist conceptions of nation through his influential work *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, which aimed to integrate primordial understandings of identity while concurrently employing a modernist critique of the state and its associated institutions. Smith defines the nation as “a named human population sharing a historical territory, common memories, and myths of origin, a mass standardized public culture, a common economy, and territorial mobility, and common legal rights and duties for all members”, notably combining essentialist characteristics of ethnic reification with modernist aspects of the centralized state.⁴⁷ Smith further distinguishes between the two concepts by naming the state as a “legal and institutional concept” as contrasted with the fundamentally “cultural and social” nature of the primordial “nation.”⁴⁸ Since an integral aspect of the modern nation-state is, as the name dictates, to make the political and national unit congruent, the distinction between the ostensibly naturalized and historically rooted nation and the institutionalized state requires further interrogation.

⁴⁶ Hutchinson and Smith 1994; quoted in Dawisha 2009, p. 59.

⁴⁷ Smith, Anthony D. 1986. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, p. 154.

⁴⁸ Schnee, Walter. 2001. "Nationalism: A Review of the Literature." *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 29(1), p. 3.

A central framework utilized by Smith in resolving the internal conflicts in his theories of identity is that of ethnosymbolism, which seeks to ‘square the circle’ by contending that both historically bounded ethnic cultures and modern institutionalization contribute to the construction of national identity, as nationalizing societies draw upon pre modern historical, cultural, and linguistic ties unrelated to the state as a means of mobilizing populations and gaining legitimacy and popular support for political objectives. Ethnosymbolism is ultimately an iteration of constructivism in that it views the state as an artificial entity, but it also has the effect of legitimating the primordialist conviction that “assumed blood ties, race, language, region, custom” constitute the basic group identity.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, ethnosymbolist scholars acknowledge the divide between ethnic group identity and full-fledged nationalism, and frequently locate their research interests in the chasm between the two phenomena.

Smith describes pre-national cultural ties in the contemporary era as *ethnie*, which he defines as “human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity.”⁵⁰ He further distinguishes between *ethnie* and ‘fully fledged’ nations without sovereignty, drawing a distinction between fully stateless groups and those with codified and institutionalized national governments as in the case of Scotland or Catalonia. While some *ethnie* strive for independent sovereignty or federalist reformation, other groups are content to maximize their influence and privileges within their existing nation-state as a minority group. Smith acknowledges that the geopolitical landscape born of these overlapping and competing identities is a mixed and confusing one, in which it becomes difficult to draw a neat boundary between *ethnie* and nations, but in which the power of nationalist aspirations has transformed the nature and relations of all states and *ethnie*.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Isaacs, Harold R. 1975; quoted in Tunc 2018, p. 45.

⁵⁰ Smith 1986, p. 32.

⁵¹ Smith 1986, p. 130.

In the modern state era, where national sovereignty confers protection and legitimacy in the eyes of the international community, Smith contends that “many people, as a result of the nationalist drive, find themselves divided in their allegiances between loyalty to the state to which they belong, and a lingering but explosive solidarity to the ethnies of their birth and upbringing.” The operative question of contemporary national development to Smith, therefore, is how and why some ethnies transition to fully-fledged statehood while others do not. While structural and international factors are often the most cogent factor in suppressing ambitions of national self-determination for stateless groups, Smith emphasizes the central role of the statesman or nationalist in transforming ethnic communities into national communities. In short, nations need nationalists, who can mobilize their respective groups around immutable ‘perennial bonds’ and act as ‘social and political archeologists’ to mythologize their imagined community.⁵²

Much in the same vein as Smith, theorist Eric Hobsbawm distinguishes between ‘proto-national bonds’ and nationalism, critically contending that the former does and should not necessarily lead to the latter.⁵³ Hobsbawm clearly identifies the gap in modernist literature he seeks to address through ethnosymbolic frameworks in the introduction of his work *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, where he pushes back against depictions of ethnicity and nation as wholly modern phenomena furthered by “a new wave of social scientists and historians” whom he viewed as peripheralizing the “important role for ethnic ties and sentiments from earlier periods of history.” As a constructivist, Hobsbawm believes that national bonds can be artificially constructed even in territories without shared histories or ethnic bonds, especially in the case of recently created settler states like Israel, America, or Australia. Furthermore, he argues that on occasion we can observe “a total non-congruence of proto-nationalism and

⁵² Ibid, p. 134

⁵³ Tunc 2018, p. 46

nationalism even when the two exist simultaneously and in combination.”⁵⁴ In these cases, exemplified in Hobsbawm's view by the emergence of Greece to the modern state system in the nineteenth century, the national narrative of political and literary elites is entirely disconnected from the daily realities of the multitude. Nonetheless, “however great the differences between the two”, the state was still able to successfully centralize and institutionalize its power through the invocation of “existing symbols and sentiments of the proto-national community... mobilized behind a modern cause” through the invention and manipulation of factitious traditions and an emphasis on Greece’s ancient prominence as a political entity.⁵⁵ In the Greek case, the use of strong and apparently universal pre-national sentiments shared by the group allowed for the emergence of a modern state, even in the absence of widespread popular support for the contemporary nationalist project.

While the ethnosymbolic approach to nation-building has historical antecedents and proves effective at creating a strong emotional bond between the individual and the state in many modern communities, Hobsbawm is careful to clarify that proto-national bonds alone are “clearly not enough to form nationalities or nations, let alone states”, for the simple reason that “the number of national movements, with or without states, is patently much smaller than the number of human groups capable of forming such movements... and certainly smaller than the number of communities with a sense of belonging together which is difficult to distinguish from proto-national.”⁵⁶ Thus, Hobsbawm argues that different stages of national identity can be influenced by internal factors and domestic elites, but contends that the ultimate codification of a nation in the international system, regardless of the extent to which that community fulfills the

⁵⁴ Hobsbawm, Eric. 1992. *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2; Wodak, Ruth, et al. 2009. *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 24.

⁵⁶ Hobsbawm 1992, p. 76

requisites of a nation-state, is largely determined by structural factors shaping the geopolitical landscape more broadly. This incongruity between national identity and state recognition is perhaps best evidenced by the Palestinian case, where a distinct ethnic group shares a sense of solidarity and a will for self-determination accompanied by the governing infrastructure of a state but is denied that classification due to the asymmetries of power in global politics.

Within proto-national bonds, Hobsbawm further distinguishes between supra-local and political bonds as builders of group identity, ultimately asserting that communities experiencing premodern forms of political group association are more likely to materialize into nation-states in the modern era than groups who share only a common ethnicity or language. This assertion runs counter to dominant theoretical frameworks of International Relations in that it portrays ethnic divisions as secondary to political ones in the formation of group identity, but captures the realities of state formation more accurately than the theories preceding it. Hobsbawm supports his argument by demonstrating the relative historic congruity of political communities in Russia, Spain, and England during the imperial era with the contemporary state system, arguing that pre-established feudal systems of social stratification and centralization better-prepared communities to adopt bureaucratized state control. While substate political bonds often stem from economic pragmatism and convenience, more cultural supra-local bonds of association take the form of shared beliefs and practices, especially in the spheres of language, religion, and ethnicity.⁵⁷ Something Hobsbawm acknowledges, but does not emphasize, is the extent to which supra-local bonds become politicized *in reaction to* the external imposition of the ethnonational project. This omission is likely in part due to the Eurocentrism of Hobsbawm and similar scholars' analyses of nationalism, as reactionary ethnification proves especially prevalent in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Hobsbawm challenges the assumption that linguistic

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 72

proto-national bonds serve as a salient factor of distinguishing between communities by arguing that the widespread and often forceful adoption of a ‘national language’ succeeds rather than precedes the creation of the state.⁵⁸ It is precisely the modern communications infrastructure of the state that makes linguistic homogeneity possible through standardized education and mass media, so judging emergent communities’ worthiness as a state based on a shared language is, in a sense, putting the cart before the horse. As Benedict Anderson demonstrates, the assumption of linguistic homogeneity as a precursor to nationalism is an ahistorical myth, as compellingly illustrated by the enduring diversity of regional dialects in France throughout the twentieth century.

Although religious bonds of group association undisputedly predate national communities, Hobsbawm points out that, unlike other markers of group identity that serve to exclude the ‘other’, many religions are explicitly anti-national, aiming to transcend differences between disparate individuals in the name of a common faith and encompassing all of humanity. Thus, utilizing religious rhetoric in the process of state formation is a complex and challenging process, and is not typically used as a major justification of national identity. In cases where we see religion playing a significant role in the perpetuation of ethnic conflict (as in former Yugoslavia or the south Asian subcontinent), it is generally only made possible through the pre-existence of robust state apparatuses which can be used to socialize and pervert religious ideologies for political objectives.⁵⁹

If both language and religion are reproduced by the state as markers of identity rather than intrinsic characteristics imbued in a given population, the true root of group identity becomes increasingly difficult to ascertain. While the ‘state’ in its modern form is demonstrably

⁵⁸ Tunc 2018, p. 46-47

⁵⁹ Hobsbawm 1992, p. 81

a social construction, we cannot altogether disregard the possibility that the sociological roots of ethnic groups themselves may indeed be ‘buried deep’ and intertwined with the external influences of the modern world. Any conclusive assertion that sociopolitical identity can be attributed singularly to the process of modernization or ethnic construction does not take into account the scale and nuances of the topic at hand. Any individual’s sense of group identity is deeply personal and unique, and one person’s reason for embracing or refusing ‘nationalist’ ideologies might very well be entirely different from their neighbors’. As scholars, we cannot directly access the minds of millions across the world in disparate communities and situations, especially when studying societies organized differently from our own with diverse histories and cultures. For this reason, Hobsbawm warns that “the real relations between proto-national identification and subsequent national or state patriotism must remain obscure[d].” Interviews and discursive analyses can be invaluable in helping researchers to better understand a population’s grassroots sentiments, but analyses of nationalism are necessarily doomed to be imperfect by nature of the size, scope, and abstract nature of the field’s mandate.⁶⁰ While group formation is primarily dictated and instrumentalized by social elites, it cannot be understood “unless also analyzed from below, in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist.”⁶¹

Prioritization of the grassroots manifestation of ethnic and national identity can be well observed in Benedict Anderson’s 1983 work *Imagined Communities*, which is more effective than its contemporaries in integrating sociological and anthropological theories of group formation within an analysis of the nation-state framework. Like Smith and Hobsbawm, Anderson acknowledges the dramatic influences that forces of modernity have played in

⁶⁰ Hobsbawm, E., and Ranger, T. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 1.

⁶¹ Hobsbawm 1992, quoted in Brubaker 2004, p. 137-139.

centralizing and homogenizing populations, placing special emphasis on the role played by print capitalism. The decline of Latin as a sacred language and the increasing availability of standardized print media rapidly encouraged citizens to think about themselves and relate themselves to others in profoundly new ways through the discursive construction of identity, frequently within territorial or linguistic borders.⁶² To Anderson, the “confluence of the invention of the printing press, the stirrings of capitalism, and the rise of vernacular languages” together led to people's ability to conceive of communities larger than their immediate social environment in the form of national and social groups.⁶³ Unlike many of his ostensibly constructivist peers, however, Anderson consciously applies his designation of ‘imagined communities’ not only to nations but also to “all other communities that are larger than face-to-face groups”, resisting the urge to distinguish between communities not “by their authenticity, but [instead] by the way in which they are imagined.”⁶⁴ In other words, ethnicity is not more authentic or essential than nationalism, but rather another manifestation of elite manipulation and mass solidarity frequently emphasized in communities peripheralized by the state-building process. Perhaps ‘primordial bonds’ could be maintained between the inhabitants of a small and self-sufficient isolated village or at most an extensive ‘kin group’, but a “naïve assumption that each tribe and people has maintained its culture through a bellicose ignorance of its neighbors” was “no longer entertained” in the field of anthropology even at the time of Barth’s studies a half-century ago.⁶⁵

While Hobsbawm’s 1990 warning against minimizing the “important role for ethnic ties from earlier periods of history” in contemporary politics was directed only in part at Anderson, Stephen Cornell’s 1996 article “The Ties that Bind” more explicitly challenged Anderson’s

⁶² Fearon, James D., and Laitin, David D. 2000. "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity." *International Organization* 54(4), p. 849; Anderson 1991 p. 40-42.

⁶³ Fearon and Laitin 2000, p. 854.

⁶⁴ Wodak et al. 2009, p. 21.

⁶⁵ Barth [1969] 1998, p. 9; Anderson 1991, p. 14.

wholly modernist depiction of ethnic bonds.⁶⁶ Cornell deemed the “circumstantial (and the constructionist) argument as essentially valid but insufficient” in explaining the continued persistence and relevance of ethnic divisions in society, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR.⁶⁷ Although Cornell accepts the importance of ethnic boundaries in defining ethnic groups and behavior, describing Barth’s contribution as “invaluable in overcoming prevailing notions of the fixed and unchanging nature of ethnic identities... and [understanding] the logic of political mobilization along ethnic lines”, but simultaneously cautioning the field not to lose sight of what ‘the stuff’ within cultural boundaries really was and to examine more closely ethnicity’s continued relevance in the political sphere.⁶⁸ Anderson and other modernists, however, might suggest in response that the prevailing significance of ethnicity in shaping the aspirations and claims of political communities reflects the continued relevance of ethnonational legitimation in the international system rather than a grassroots gravitation towards ethnopolitical expression.⁶⁹

Regardless of these internal debates and tensions, nearly all major scholars in the field of nationalism agree that the dissemination of mercantile capitalism and the European nation-state model across the globe through Western expansion since the mid-sixteenth century has irrevocably transformed relations between communities through instrumental constructions of identity across and within boundaries. In the words of Fearon and Laitin, “economic modernization and the creation of ethnonational communities through modern mass media are processes that have affected all groups”, though rarely in an equal or equitable manner.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Hobsbawm 1992, p. 3.

⁶⁷ Cornell, Stephen. 1996. "The Variable Ties that Bind: Content and Circumstance in Ethnic Processes." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19(2), p. 265-267.

⁶⁸ Cornell 1996, p. 266.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 268; Sanders 2002, p. 329.

⁷⁰ Fearon and Laitin 2000, p. 851.

Universal agreement, however, rarely leads to meaningful progress or productive discourse, so the “resolutely macroanalytic [studies] tracing the long-term formation of nations... through profound socioeconomic, political, and cultural transformations” exemplified by the aforementioned works of the 1980s and further reinforced in contemporary scholarship have remained dominant frameworks of analysis in the field of nationalism and identity for decades.⁷¹

While a “developmentalist” temporal register is helpful to simplify and understand the complex processes of state formation, it also has the ultimate effect of portraying nations or ethnic groups, once formed, as static and substantial entities.⁷² It seems that mainstream schools of International Relations conceive (perhaps subconsciously) of national development as some form of sociological enzymatic reaction—a great deal of effort must be exerted by political elites to overcome initial popular pushback to ‘thinking like a state’, but once that resistance is catalyzed with institutions of modernity and reaches its activation energy through the continued imposition of hegemonic cultural narratives, citizens ostensibly adopt reproductions of national identity with little scrutiny or adaptation.

Moving ‘Beyond Groupism’ in Studies of Social Science

In line with this way of imagining political communities, both Gramsci and Bourdieu observed a tendency for “history to be seen as something that happens to cultures, rather than cultures being seen as themselves the ever-shifting products of history”.⁷³ In response to this perceived misconception, Brubaker encourages scholars to shift understandings of group formation and ethnic identity from things that *are* to things that *happen* or do not happen as

⁷¹ Brubaker 2009, p. 28.

⁷² Ibid., p. 30.

⁷³ Crehan 2011, p. 274.

events, in some cases through a “reputational cascade” triggered by an exogenous event and leading quickly to high levels of ‘ethnification’.⁷⁴ In response to political circumstances In these instances, ethnic identities “may not reflect individuals’ intrinsic preference at all, but rather their concern to protect their reputations by signaling ethnic affiliation in a dynamic environment” where others are increasingly doing so. Frequently, ethnification was adopted not only to protect the ‘reputations’ of a leader or political group, but also to ensure survival through collective action in an environment that encouraged mobilization in ethnic terms.⁷⁵ The First World War and its aftermath might present the most striking example of a ‘cascading event’, when the collapse of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman empires flung millions of people into a modern state system that rhetorically prioritized the legitimation of ethno-political units. In such instances, we should not conceive of ‘opportunity structures’ enabling the natural development of ethnonationalist claims, but rather ‘coercive factors’ forcing political communities into such claims in order to acquire legitimacy and international recognition.

Assumptions that ethnic and racial divisions underpin and predate nationalist bifurcations are especially prevalent in the field of International Security and studies of ‘ethnic conflict’, which have in recent years increasingly invoked ‘ancient hatreds’ and essentialist reasoning to account for the political instabilities that ultimately stem from inequalities in the geopolitical system. This attitude is exemplified in Western responses to innumerable crises and conflicts in the last decades, as reflected in simplistic depictions of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, Yugoslav War, Sierra-Leonean Civil War as stemming from natural and immutable ethnic and religious rivalries.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Brubaker 2004, p. 69.

⁷⁵ Kuran 1998 in Brubaker 2009, p. 31.

⁷⁶ Gilley, Bruce. 2004. "Against the Concept of Ethnic Conflict." *Third World Quarterly* 25(6), p. 1160.

The necessity of a ‘cognitive turn’ away from essentialism and towards a dynamic and multidisciplinary understanding of identity formation is especially pressing for studies of ethnicity, because the concept so frequently serves as the ‘underpinnings’ of the contemporary nation-state for ostensible constructivists. Even as the ‘natural characteristics’ of states have come under increasing interrogation by academics, a similar critical approach to ethnic construction has generally not been employed. This can be clearly demonstrated in theories of ethnic conflict, which remain profoundly influenced by outdated models of group substantialism including Barry Posen’s ethnic security dilemma and Davis and Moore’s ethnic alliance model.⁷⁷ These dominant analytical frameworks consider ethnicity to be the “pre-eminent, determining variable in relations between and within assumed ethnic groups, and equate ontologically those presupposed ethnic groups with states in their analyses of the internationalization of ethnic conflicts,” clearly subscribing to groupist assumptions of naturally-occurring intra-group solidarity, obfuscating the political realities that shape identity, secessionism, and conflict in practice.⁷⁸ While they acknowledge that even fully formed states maintain internal heterogeneity and disparate political communities, they do not extend this approach to definitions of ethnicity, which continues to be debated most often in essentialist terms.

Although studies of nations and nationalisms are prone to groupist depictions couched in constructivist rhetoric and terminology, contemporary studies of ethnic groups and ethnicity sometimes brazenly reject the premises of constructivism altogether and lay bare the primordialist ontologies and essentialist assumptions which continue to influence understandings of inter-group interactions in the field of International Relations and Security. Anticipating ethnic conflict as the natural result of multi-ethnic societies interacting within or across borders is based

⁷⁷ Brown 1996, cited in Černý 2014.

⁷⁸ Černý 2014, p. 239.

on unsubstantiated assumptions that pluralism necessarily leads to bellicosity. Despite the warnings of Huntington and his adherents, the state-formation process in the aftermath of the USSR's dissolution was, in retrospect, relatively peaceful. Similarly, in contrast to a broad cultural perception that ethnic conflict is 'everywhere on the rise', most evidence suggests an overall decline in ethnic conflict, as evidenced by a historic decrease in failed states and refugee crises in recent decades.⁷⁹

Even if we accept the reification of ethnic groups, when diverse ethnic communities separated by boundaries interact, "co-operation, not conflict, remains the norm"; recalling Barth's reminder that cross-border mobility between sociopolitical groups need not lead to either ethnic conflict or confluence. Tensions and violence that result from cross-border interaction more frequently stem from ideological divisions or external machinations than internal animosity.⁸⁰ Bruce Gilley, in his article "Against the Concept of Ethnic Conflict", observes with palpable frustration that "time and again predictions of ongoing ethnic violence based on immutable structural conditions have been disproved. Prominent predictions of ethnic violence or break-up in the Ukraine, for example, were disproved as structures changed", reflecting the importance of utilizing a temporally flexible rather than developmentalist approach to study of ethnic identity construction.⁸¹ The Ukrainian example specifically might require re-examination in light of recent events, but it should be noted that the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict is framed in ideological, imperial, and geopolitical terms far more than ethnic ones. The central flaw of the field to him is an implicit understanding that "ethnicity in identity and ethnicity in conflict" are congruent and interchangeable. Without distinguishing between ethnicity as it *happens* for people and ethnicity as it is *instrumentalized* for political purposes, "ethnic conflict,

⁷⁹ Gilley 2007, p. 1155.

⁸⁰ Gilley 2007, p. 1162.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 1156; Brubaker 1996, p. 19.

in the end, becomes not a concept at all but a messy descriptive label for a bunch of unrelated phenomena” beyond the scope of political science as a discipline.⁸² While these integral contradictions and challenges in the field ultimately lead Gilley to argue in favor of “severely limiting the field of ethnic conflict studies [in political science], if not abandoning it altogether” and leaving research on the topic to “historians, sociologists, and anthropologists”, he maintains that analyzing ethnicity, for reasons discussed throughout this chapter, remains important both to the development of group identity and political conflict.⁸³ Therefore, it remains entirely relevant to the scope of this study, and I believe that examining and improving poorly-operationalized concepts of ethnicity and national identity through multidisciplinary analysis instead of rehashing “tried and true notions like class and security” through established frameworks has the potential to yield useful future research directions in the field of International Relations.⁸⁴

The debates outlined above in the field of nationalism, ethnicity, and identity are globally and comparatively applicable to a plurality of issues and conflicts impacting contemporary political society, relevant to the politics of state and sub-state communities alike in developed and underdeveloped settings. A number of scholars in recent years have utilized these theories of group formation, boundary maintenance, and ethnic constructivism in analyses of diverse sociopolitical groups and interactions, through “a growing body of work that has framed these ostensibly separate fields as a single integrated family of forms of cultural understanding, social organization, and political contestation.”⁸⁵ To name just a few examples pertinent to this thesis, David Campbell utilizes post-structuralist theoretical frameworks in his enlightening analysis of foreign policy and the discursive construction of the enemy through social disciplines and categorical we/they

⁸² Gilley 2007, p. 1155.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 1161.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 1165

⁸⁵ Brubaker 2009, p. 22.

distinctions in the American political landscape, and race scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant expand upon the consequences of ethnic divisions in pluralistic contexts in their analyses of the theoretical status of race as a concept and racial formation in the United States.⁸⁶

Internationally, ‘groupism’ has been notably problematized by David Laitin in the context of Soviet successor states, and by Andrew Fisher and Matthew O’Hara in their analysis of racial identities in colonial and post-colonial societies in Latin America.⁸⁷ A cognitive approach to ethnic constructivism has also been employed as a useful tool to examine political mobilization in diasporadic and immigrant communities, through analyses of groupism and its manifestations in Australia, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, and other countries—though most of these studies square their focuses in how minorities from the global south navigate and resist hegemonic racialized narratives in Western political environments rather than how those narratives themselves are created.⁸⁸

Debated Roots of Kurdish Identity and Interaction

While the theoretical framework of post-structuralist constructivism and the analytical questions that arise from it can easily be adapted to societies across cultural and geographic divides, the ‘group’ in contemporary politics which arguably proves most relevant to a discussion of ethnic construction and its consequences is the Kurdish people, frequently identified as the largest stateless group in the world with a population of at least thirty million individuals dispersed in a mountainous region encompassing the sovereign territories of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The development of

⁸⁶ Campbell, David. 1998. *Writing Security*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; Omi, Michael, and Winant, Howard. 1993. "On the Theoretical Status of the Concept of Race" in *Race, Identity and Representation in Education*, edited by Cameron McCarthy et al. New York: Routledge.

⁸⁷ Laitin 1998; cited in Brubaker 2009, p. 23.; Fisher, Andrew B., and O’Hara, Matthew D. 2009. *Imperial Subjects: Race and Identity in Colonial Latin America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

⁸⁸ Cf. Wimmer 2004, Černý 2014, Siebers 2019, et al.

Kurdish nationalism has historically faced a litany of obstacles, stemming from both external and colonial machinations and internal ideological divisions. Nevertheless, the course of the twentieth century has seen the rise of robust and powerful Kurdish nationalist movements, both within the territorial boundaries of sovereign states and in transnational contexts. This thesis traces the development of Kurdish ethnification and nationalism in the analytical vein of post-structuralist constructivism, illustrating that Kurdish culture was initially ethnicized and politicized as a survival strategy, employed in response to external factors privileging the recognition of ethnonationalist claims. Taking inspiration from Barth's boundary theory, a historical account of Kurdish nationalism with an emphasis on transversal dynamics will reveal that territorially-bounded analyses of Kurdish identity are inherently limited, and that Kurdish identity has developed precisely through the vacillating rejection and reinforcement of arbitrary 'sovereign' boundaries with real consequences.

Ultimately, a historical examination of Kurdish transnational solidarity will reveal that political contexts and ideologies, not ethnicity, serves as the determining factor influencing intra-Kurdish relations. While a shared *Kurdayetî* exists and fosters solidarity between Kurds on a cultural and emotional level, this common ethnicity plays only a minimal role in determining the behavior of Kurdish political parties and elites.⁸⁹ Despite this, many contemporary analyses of transnational Kurdish dynamics in the wake of the Syrian Civil War and the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) revert to groupist assumptions in predicting and portraying Kurdish behavior. Although the ascension of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq (KRG) and weakening states across the region have facilitated a recent increase in cross-border Kurdish interactions, this thesis concludes that such collaborations do not reflect a rekindling of ancient ethnic bonds, but rather a strategy of political expediency employed by Kurds on both side of

⁸⁹ Akbarzadeh, Shahram, Laoutides, Costas, Gourlay, William, and Ahmed, Zahid S. 2020. "The Iranian Kurds' Transnational Links: Impacts on Mobilization and Political Ambitions." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43(12): 2275-2294.

the border. Kurdish elites frequently espouse pan-Kurdish rhetoric to lend legitimacy to their political objectives, but an impartial analysis of Kurdish behavior in the war against ISIL and interactions between the KRG and its compatriots in Turkey, Syria, and Iran over the past decade clearly demonstrates that such considerations have little relevance to political practices or outcomes. The fragmentation of Kurdish nationalism is a natural result of the territorial divisions imposed upon the region by imperial powers, but the reintegration of Kurdish nationalism in an era of state weakness is not a foregone conclusion, even with considerable diasporadic and international support. Assumptions that cross border Kurdish interactions will facilitate cooperation or cohesion reflect prevailing groupist and essentialist ontologies legitimating ethnic ties as natural avenues of mobilization, and this thesis's assertion that ideology and external manipulation surpass ethnicity as motivators for Kurdish statebuilding activities encourages the field of International Relations to reexamine the assumed role of ethnicity in nationalism, both in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Although the following section of this piece will enter into a more detailed analysis of Kurdish identity development from the imperial era to the modern day, beginning with a brief historic overview of the Kurdish condition in their respective states is necessary to set the stage for the forthcoming analysis and provide a brief overview of the complex Kurdish independence movement. Under the Ottoman and Qajar Empires, the Kurdish people were not viewed as a distinct ethnic minority due to the theocratic organizational structure of the caliphate. Ottoman Kurds were viewed as practically equivalent to their Turkish counterparts based on their status as Sunni Muslims, though the Kurdish region did historically suffer from underdevelopment and economic disenfranchisement.⁹⁰ Similarly, Shi'a Kurds were readily integrated into the Qajar elite, and while Sunni Kurds faced persecution based on their religious affiliation, they resisted this subjugation in tandem with other religious minorities, not fellow Kurds. While a distinct Kurdish culture and way

⁹⁰ Tunc 2018, p. 50-52

of life existed and was readily acknowledged, this difference did not take on any meaningful political significance.

As the Ottoman Empire, the ‘sick man of Europe’, ailed throughout the globalizing and centralizing forces of the nineteenth century, limited subsections of the Kurdish intellectual elites began the process of ethnonational identity construction inspired by their exposure to the European system. Famously, Sheikh Ubeydullah revolted against his Ottoman superiors in the name of Kurdish nationalism in 1880, though his patriotic motivations were likely in name only. These early stirrings of Kurdish self-assertion, represented individual political aspirations and did not extend to any subsection of the Kurdish population, who far preferred to remain part of the dominant group in the Ottoman *millet* system.⁹¹ Even after the First World War, when it became clear that ethnic self-determination was quickly being established as the *raison d’etre* for emergent political communities, Kurdish civil society was reticent to adopt the auspices of ethnonationalism, clinging to the idea of the caliphate even after the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP) coup and subsequent secularization.

It was only after the hegemony of ethnonationalism became painfully clear to the Kurds through Kemalist suppression, Iranian centralization, and mandatory subjugation at the hands of colonial powers that Kurds reluctantly adopted the premise of ethnic nationalism, proliferating advocacy and solidarity organizations across the region in the first half of the twentieth century. Many of these groups were transnational by design or necessity, since the variable and unpredictable political contexts of relevant states gave different Kurdish regions opportunities to express nationalist claims at different times.⁹²

⁹¹ Natali, Denise. 2005. *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.; Eppel, Michael. 2016. *A People Without a State: The Kurds From the Rise of Islam to the Dawn of Nationalism*. Austin, TX. Austin University Press.

⁹² Cf. Entassar 1992, McDowall 2004; Romano and Gurses eds. 2004; Phillips 2015; Meyer 2020 (unpublished essay)

Kurds in Turkey were initially welcomed into the governing fold during the formative years of the Turkish War of Independence, with Mustafa Kemal “advancing the idea of a unified Sunni Muslim community in which the Kurds and Turks were both a part”, and describing himself as a co-religionist, sending photographs of himself in religious garments and facilitating meetings with Kurdish tribal Sheikhs all while promising to “save the caliphate from the West”.⁹³ As soon as the Republic of Turkey was established and Kemal’s grasp on power was reasonably secure, however, he acted on entrenching his racialized and secularized ethnic Turkish identity in a Western-style nation-building project through the brutal erasure of a nascent Kurdish identity. This pattern of state suppression continues to this day and has been integral in shaping the ‘radical’ political ideologies of contemporary Kurdish movements in the country—though democratization and limited consociationalism have provided alternative avenues to express ethno-political dissent.⁹⁴

Kurds in pre-Baathist Iraq, by contrast, were afforded *de facto* autonomy, allowing them to experiment with the creations of political parties and unify under the charismatic leadership of Mustafa al-Barzani throughout the 1950s and ‘60s. Kurdish ethnonationalism was bolstered by the creation of institutions furthering Kurdish identity and interests, from the news daily Kha-Bat and an active radio station in the social sphere to the formation of a ‘revolutionary council’ with parliamentary powers of jurisprudence and tax collection and the formation of the Peshmerga guerilla army with an internal monopoly on the use of justified force in Southern Kurdistan.⁹⁵ These modalities of social organization were highly ethnicized and served to disseminate, reproduce, and refine everyday expressions of Kurdish culture for political means. During Saddam Hussein’s rule, the creation of a ‘fierce state’ in Iraq denied Kurdish autonomy, and the threat posed by an alternative to the regime’s structures of governance led Saddam to embark on the genocidal *Al-Anfal*

⁹³ Natali 2005, p. 71.

⁹⁴ Schulze 1994; cited in Wodak et al. 2009, p. 25-27

⁹⁵ Bengio, Ofra. 2012. *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State Within a State*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, p. 25-31

campaign in an effort to dismantle Kurdish identity altogether.⁹⁶ This cycle of co-option and coercion has altered and reformed Southern Kurdish identity, but the tangible benefits euro-centric ethnonational frameworks have brought the population in mandate Iraq and following the Gulf War have had the ultimate effect of perpetuating a more traditional and conservative approach to political mobilization in the KRG's dominant Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP).

While the political contexts of Iran and Syria have produced fewer and less-robust Kurdish social movements than those of Turkey and Iraq, in these states too we can observe constructions and reconstructions of Kurdish ethnicity and identity. Parties like the PYD in Syria and the KDPI in Iran have aimed to mobilize their populations around a Kurdish ethnonationalist message, but, in these cases, strategies of nation-building have been shaped primarily through cross-border interactions with neighboring Kurdish populations.⁹⁷ The extent to which Kurdish communities have been differentially operationalized and instrumentalized by elites in respective states supports a constructivist perception of the origins of Kurdish nationalism, but the prevalence of cross-border interactions and enduring ideological bifurcations arising from them despite relative cultural similarity suggest that the theories of Barth, Brubaker, and others remain relevant to Kurdish ethnicity, particularly in the globalized context of regional instability which has paved the way for increasing Kurdish autonomy in recent decades.

The demonstrable impacts that territorially bounded divisions have had on the development of Kurdish identity all but invalidate genuinely primeval depictions of a pan-Kurdish national project extending to a past immemorial, which frequently point to Median empire or Buwayhid Daylamites for evidence of early Kurdish political organization and the scholarly works of Idris-î Bitlis or

⁹⁶ Ayubi, Nazih N. 1995. *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris, p. 235-6

⁹⁷ Akbarzadeh et al. 2020

Ahmeî Xanî's *Mam u Zîn* as early manifestations of Kurdish nationalism.⁹⁸ Abbas Vali, a preeminent theorist of Kurdish politics and society, a career sociologist, and the current vice-president of the prominent *Institut Kurde de Paris*, is in line with most contemporary scholars in his assertion that Kurdish national identity is a distinctly modern phenomenon brought about by the dissemination of the centralized nation-state as the hegemonic modality of social organization.⁹⁹ Modernist scholars of Kurdish identity sometimes contend that Kurds have resided in relative geographic isolation and cultural homogeneity throughout their early history, but they universally agree that Kurdish nationalism was not ethnicized or politicized in a meaningful way until at least Sheikh Ubeydullah's rebellion against the Ottoman empire in 1880¹⁰⁰—or, as this thesis will argue, not until significantly later. Thus, just as Gellner, Smith, and Hobsbawm were successful in dispelling notions that nations were historical continuations of existing communities, Abbas Vali, Hakan Özoğlu, Denise Natali, Hamit Bozarslan, and other modernists have been successful in refuting assumptions of a genetic or biological pan-Kurdish national sentiment rooted in ethnic ties from time immemorial. Universal adoption of constructivist premises, however, is rife with pitfalls and contradictory avenues of inquiry, as demonstrated by the ongoing debates in the literature above. While an acknowledgment that political contexts and processes of modernization have been integral in disparate constructions of Kurdish ethno-political identity is certainly preferable to the alternative essentialist ontology, a broad endorsement of constructivist premises alone does not insulate the field from subtle influences stemming from a globally-perpetuated ethnicized *doxa* and the groupist assumptions which arise from them. This issue is manifested in two recurring flaws which continue to impact studies of Kurdish ethnicity.

⁹⁸ Tunc 2018, p. 49-50

⁹⁹ Vali, Abbas, ed. 2003. *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*. Irvine, CA: Mazda Publishing.

¹⁰⁰ Olson 1991 in Tunc 2018, p. 50

Central Deficiencies and Areas for Growth in the Field of Kurdish Studies

First, there remains in the literature a vestigial depiction of the Kurdish people as unjustly politically separated but somehow culturally or morally homogenous, which reifies ethnic constructions by implying that cross-border interaction or changing structural conditions would necessarily lead to a confluence of Kurdish identity rooted in ancient cultural similarities.¹⁰¹ Such depictions are furthered by David McDowall, arguably the most prominent Western scholar on Kurdistan, in his 1992 book *The Kurds: A Nation Denied*, where he portrays the Kurdish people as “wrestl[ing] between the strength of their long-standing and traditional identity, and the weaknesses of political development”.¹⁰² Similarly, while International Security theorist Gerard Chaliand engages in a concise but accurate account of how shifting structural conditions have differentially impacted Kurdish nationalism in the twentieth century in the introduction to his anthology *A People Without A Country*, he quickly reverts to referring to the “Kurdish movement” as uniform and homogenous in the abstract, falling back on the inclination to think of human organization in group terms.¹⁰³

Even firm modernists of the subject like Denise Natali, a long-time lecturer at the Kurdish University of Salahaddin who argues for a “direct relationship between ethnicized political boundaries and Kurdish ethnonationalism”, can resort to terminologies that involuntarily reinforce groupist notions.¹⁰⁴ In the eyes of Huseyin Tunc, Natali’s writings on Kurdayetî, literally translated as ‘Kurdishness’, conflated the proto-national and instrumentalized ties of ‘common custom’ with a full-fledged Kurdish nationalism, while barely “describing, contextualizing, or even defining” the

¹⁰¹ Chaliand, Gerard., ed. [1978] 1993. *A People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, translated by Michael Pallis. New York, NY: Olive Branch Press.

¹⁰² McDowall, David. 1992. *The Kurds: A Nation Denied*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, p. 4

¹⁰³ Bourdieu 1990.

¹⁰⁴ Natali 2005, p. 180

concept. Manipulating the meaning of *Kurdayetî* without proper conceptualization engenders confusion, and furthers groupist and essentialist assumptions that shared culture equates to nationalism in an exergonic process.¹⁰⁵ Natali identifies herself clearly as a constructivist, aiming in her work to “challenge views of Kurdish nationalism that focus on essentialist features of Kurdishness” and instead demonstrate how Kurdish nationalism emerges differentially according to boundaries and opportunity structures in disparate political contexts. At the same time, her language frequently reveals her assumption of an intrinsic and powerful ethnic identity underlying the national project. Just as Anthony Smith considers ethnicity to be the ‘roots’ of nationalism, Natali argues that the proper sociopolitical contexts can ‘awaken’ ethnic groups’ “distinct historical trajectories and objective group characteristics...that provide a pre-existing basis for national identity”.¹⁰⁶ Though Natali’s constructivist depiction of Kurdish-state relations presents a fantastic depiction of how the Kurdish ethnonational project has been driven by external forces and ideological divisions, I would problematize her vestigial assumption of naturally-occurring Kurdish confluence or solidarity, an undertone that might reflect the success of rhetorical pan-Kurdish nationalism in the KRG today, the context of which likely influenced her work.

Thus, even as the broad adoption of basic constructivist premises has attained near-hegemonic status in recent years, some constructivism in the field remains ‘clichéd’—albeit at times unintentionally. Only by acknowledging that the ‘ethnic ties’ bonding Kurdish populations together are equally as constructed as the ‘political ties’ of all modern states can we move towards a deconstructive understanding of Kurdish identity, one which “critically examines the discursive processes of materialization that produce settlements; such as the idea of pre-given subjects...in this case the ethnic group”.¹⁰⁷ In his study of PKK/KDP relations, Hannes Černý contends that many

¹⁰⁵ Tunc 2018, p. 51-53

¹⁰⁶ Natali 2005, p. 187

¹⁰⁷ Černý 2014, p. 329

studying Kurdish ethnicity and ethnic conflict more broadly “subscrib[e] unquestioningly to these strategic essentialisms, and by doing so reproducing their logic and reifying the politics of ethnic division they set out to describe”.¹⁰⁸ Both ethnonationalist elites and IR scholars studying them are protagonists of ethnic conflicts; yet while elites, by essentializing the group they claim to represent, are acting within the confines of their supposed social roles, we as scholars are responsible for problematizing such assertions—and not becoming ‘analytic naturalizers’ as cautioned by Bordieu.

The second central deficiency in Kurdish studies that this thesis aims to address is the tendency of constructivist scholars to focus on territorially-bounded Kurdish identity development as case studies of national development in relative isolation, which also unintentionally contribute to the groupist assumptions such theorists intend to dispel. Most books published on Kurdish ethnonationalism in recent years approach the complicated Kurdish question by dividing their analysis into subsections: ‘Kurds in Iraq, Kurds in Iran’, and so on.¹⁰⁹ Although this structural approach is pragmatically convenient and does run contrary to essentialist pan-Kurdish assumptions, it has the effect of minimizing the influence of boundaries and cross-boundary interaction in the formation of Kurdish identity. Transnational cooperation and conflict has been a driving force in fostering or undermining Kurdish nationalism, but the plethora of international interactions that have guided the course of Kurdish political mobilization inevitably fall into the cracks of a broader analysis with its attention focused on the interactions between Kurds and states in their respective environments, not on the interactions between Kurds and Kurds in disparate contexts. Even the modernist, authoritative, and impressive *Cambridge History of the Kurds* relegates an analysis of ‘transversal dynamics’ to the final chapters of the thousand-page volume, minimizing the permeating

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ C.f. Natali 2005, McDowall, David. 2020. *A Modern History of the Kurds*, Fourth Edition. London, I.B. Taurus, et al.

significance of transnational interaction throughout Kurdish national development.¹¹⁰ As a result of this structural marginalization, attention paid to ethnic boundaries and the frontiers of discursive construction are frequently relegated to the introductions, conclusions, and footnotes of works on Kurdish nationalism when they should be placed at center stage. The works of David Romano, David Phillips, and Hannes Černý in recent years have made progress in establishing a chronological and thematic rather than territorial approach to analyses of Kurdish nationalism, but geographically segregated analyses still dominate the bulk of the literature on the subject.¹¹¹

Barth's theories of ethnic group formation illustrate that such a segregated approach to understanding Kurdish ethnicity is fundamentally flawed, because it is precisely challenges to and reinforcements of ethnic boundaries themselves which define and shape communities.¹¹² This literature underestimates too the influence of a prominent Kurdish diaspora in the global north, which like other expatriate communities frequently advocate for pan-ethnic [Kurdish] mobilization without engaging with the politics of the community on the ground, in a process Salehyan describes as 'long distance nationalism'.¹¹³ Nuanced approaches to development within respective Kurdish territories are valuable and necessary, but too strong a macro analytic and developmentalist focus can obfuscate the temporal flexibility of identity and risk losing the context of the Kurdish question more broadly.

Despite the contradictions and complications of Kurdish ethnonationalism in cross-border conflicts, recent years have seen a budding growth of new scholarship utilizing a cognitive approach to understanding Kurdish ethnicity, though the relative nascence of the post-structuralist approach to ethnicity limits the existing body of literature. Although Natali's book *The Kurds and the State*

¹¹⁰ Bozarlsan, Hamit, Gunes, Ceniz, and Yadirgi, Veli eds. *The Cambridge History of the Kurds*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹¹ Entasser 1992, Phillips 2015, Černý 2017, Romano and Gurses 2017.

¹¹² Barth [1969] 1998, p. 14.

¹¹³ Salehyan, Idean. 2011. *Rebels Without Borders: Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, p. 33.

follows the aforementioned state-by-state organizational structure, it still provides valuable insights into “the significance of transnational spaces” in reshaping Kurdish identity “at home”, and a 2004 article of hers addresses the transnational networks of Kurdish elites directly, primarily through the lens of a newly-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan.¹¹⁴ Abbas Vali has and continues to advocate for an understanding that the origins of Kurdish nationalism arise from “disparate and dissenting things with diverse histories, which escape the authority of essentialist meanings”.¹¹⁵ Furthering Barth’s theories of ‘cultural ecologies’, Maria O’Shea and Ariel Ahram emphasize the role that geographic realities play in the relative isolation of Kurdish groups, and their persistent resistance to state-backed campaigns of violence and erasure.¹¹⁶

Most relevant to this thesis, however, Hannes Černý applies specifically the theories of Rogers Brubaker and his call to problematize groupism to the Kurdish case, engaging in an in-depth analysis of PKK, KDP, and the PUK in his masterful 2017 book “Iraqi Kurdistan, The PKK, and International Relations”. In this volume, as in his previous works, Černý challenges dominant models of International Relations theory and ‘common sense’ ascriptions of the ‘internalization of ethnic conflict’, encouraging scholars of Kurdish nationalism to analyze developments in the region without ascribing to culturally-ubiquitous and naturalized essentialist assumptions.¹¹⁷ This thesis seeks to expand upon Černý’s directive first by depicting the historically constructed and trans-national nature of Kurdish identity politics as described above. A more nuanced understanding of how Kurdish nationalism has evolved differently and transversally in response to domestic, international, and transnational conflicts and opportunity structures will allow this project to examine in greater depth contemporary cross-border Kurdish activities in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and

¹¹⁴ Natali 2005, p. 173-179; Gunter, Michael M., Natali, Denise, Olson, Robert, Özcan Nihat Ali, Salih, Khaled, and Yavuz, Hakan M. 2004. "The Kurds in Iraq." *Middle East Policy* 11(1): 106-131.

¹¹⁵ Barth 1969 [1998], p. 24-28

¹¹⁶ Ahram 2019, p. 123; O’Shea, 2004.

¹¹⁷ Černý 2014, p. 328-329

Iran, and make informed predictions about how Kurdish nationalism will evolve in an era of instability and globalization. Ultimately, a historical and contemporary analysis will reveal that ideological and external factors are likely to continue impeding the emergence of a unified Kurdish nationalism in the foreseeable future, and conclude that while increasing cross-border Kurdish interaction has the potential to stimulate new and diverse nationalisms rejecting the validity of colonial boundaries, such a confluence stemming from ethnic similarity is neither a natural or inevitable result of increasing Kurdish autonomy.

Chapter One

The Emergence of Kurdish Identity in the Late Imperial Era

If you were to walk down the streets of Diyarbakir, Erbil, Kermanshah, or any number of cities located within the roughly defined Kurdish homeland and spoke to an average patriotic citizen about their thoughts on the root of Kurdishness, it is likely that the response you receive will be a primordialist depiction. The mainstream Kurdish nationalist views the Kurdish nation as a “primeval and natural formation rooted in the nature of every Kurd, defining the identity of people and communities throughout history”, with ethnic commonality serving as the central impetus for social organization.¹¹⁸ It is certainly true that the Kurdish people feel a sense of cultural distinctiveness and a strong connection to their established territory, but the historicist conception of primordial Kurdish nationalism today should be correctly identified as a strategic reconstruction of the past undertaken by Kurdish elites rather than a reflection of actual reality. Widespread acceptance of essentialist Kurdish nationalism in popular and political discourses, moreover, reflects the successes of Kurdish elites in constructing a mythical national identity in their relative spheres of influence.

As discussed in the previous section, the origins of nationalism are frequently more modern and artificial than is commonly believed in states around the world, and this appears to be especially true in the Kurdish case. Abbas Vali, a highly influential Kurdish modernist, reminds his readers that the “historical past is a discursive construct [used to create] myths of uniform historical origins and identities” for political purposes, and the example of the Kurds is no exception to this general theoretical perspective.¹¹⁹ Contemporary Kurdish nationalists have much to gain from an agreed-upon national origin story, which proves a useful tool for political

¹¹⁸ Vali 2003, p. 59.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 11.

mobilization and lends legitimacy to ethno-territorial claims. Given this fact, it is perhaps not surprising that many modern Kurds claim direct descendency from the ancient Median empire, while the true historic origins of the Kurds are complex and shrouded in uncertainty.¹²⁰

Although sporadic references to tribes with familiar names including *Kardu*, *Kharduchi*, and *Kar-Da* inhabiting the mountains of Central Asia can be found in the records of antiquity, Ofra Bengio and Jack Eller agree that by the time the word *Kurds* was first used to identify a group by Arab leaders in the seventh century, it was a term used “as basically a regional or even socioeconomic term—meaning something like ‘mountain people’ or ‘nomad’—rather than an ethnic one”.¹²¹ Similarly, Michael Eppel identifies the etymology of *Kurd* as originally meaning ‘shepherd’, while simultaneously acknowledging that “debates on the meaning of the signifier Kurd and the relationship between modern Kurdish nationalism and the ancient population of the mountains of Kurdistan have continued among scholars for more than one hundred years”—and are unlikely to be resolved in the immediate or distant future.¹²² Regardless of the name’s specific origin, most historians agree that the term had little ethnicized meaning until the nineteenth century, repudiating Smith’s assertion that pre-national modalities of group formation were primarily *ethnie* based.¹²³

The reality of the matter is that the regional political landscape in the imperial region was not ethnicized, so ethnicity rarely emerged as a locus for powerful self-identification, let alone widespread political mobilization. Both the Ottoman and Iranian empires conceived of ‘minority’ populations in almost entirely religious terms, with ethnic background having limited relevance in sociopolitical life. In the Ottoman Empire, Sunni Muslim ideology assumed “a central role in

¹²⁰ Eller, Jack David. 1999. *From Culture to Ethnicity to Conflict: An Anthropological Perspective on International Ethnic Conflict*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, p. 152

¹²¹ Bengio 2012, p. 2; Eller 1999, p. 154.

¹²² Eppel 2016, p. 1.

¹²³ C.f. Natali 2005; Vali 2003, p. 84; Olson 1991; Bengio 2012.

centrally administered institutions”, and the *millet* system differentiated populations specifically according to religious affiliation rather than ethnicity.¹²⁴ Indeed, through much of the empire’s history, Sunni Muslim Kurds were afforded positions within the Ottoman bureaucracy, and would almost certainly have felt far more politically aligned with their Arab Sunni peers than with a Yazidi Kurd. In the Qajar dynasty, the thirty percent of the Kurdish population that was Shi’a were provided special incentives to integrate with other non-Kurdish Shi’a groups in order to maximize their benefits from the clerical bureaucracy, while non-Shi’a groups preferred to organize collectively with other religious minorities rather than on the basis of ethnicity. Furthermore, even Sunni Kurds were frequently “provided with opportunities as part of the tribal community”, compensated by the state for defending the empire’s borders in land and government posts.¹²⁵ The imperial political landscape, therefore, did not encourage Kurds to view themselves in an ethnic sense, and actively discouraged political mobilization on ethnic rather than religious grounds. As Hobsbawm notes, the theocratic mode of organization is explicitly anti-national, since religious ideology can be adopted regardless of heritage and culture. For this reason, the meaningful social divisions for the Kurds in the imperial era were between Sunni, Shi’a, and Christians, not between Kurds, Arabs, Persians, and Armenians.

This is not to deny, however, that Kurdish peoples prior to this period felt a sense of cultural distinctiveness and distinguished themselves from neighboring populations. Trapped between the borders of the rival Ottoman and Safavid empire for centuries, the immensely diverse Kurdish people retained similar cultural practices and cultivated some form of group consciousness, as evidenced by Ahmedî Xanî’s famous 1695 poem *Mam u Zîn*, which was provocatively written in native Kurmanji and contained a passage lamenting the ongoing

¹²⁴ Natali 2005, p. 38.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

subjugation of Kurds by neighboring empires. While Xanî's hope for a single leader of "us... to reduce to vassalage Turks, Arabs, and Persians... [and] to perfect our religion, our state" can certainly be read as an appeal to ethnonationalism and has indeed become the 'national epic of the Kurds' in the eyes of modern nationalists, Hakan Özoğlu deems it misleading to label *Mam u Zîn* as nationalist literature since Xanî's mere resentment of Ottoman and Persian rule does not constitute a claim for ethno-territorial sovereignty, a concept which would not have existed at the time. Although scholar Amir Hassanpour's developmentalist argument that the expressions of identity in *Mam u Zîn* and other literature of the era constitute stirrings of an awakening Kurdish *ethnie* has some merit and deserves consideration, Özoğlu's assertion that it is "not the epic, but the political and the intellectual environment of the [contemporary] nationalist era that retrospectively qualified this piece of literature as nationalist" better represents the modernist viewpoint of the historical past as a discursive construct.¹²⁶ While it is unlikely that *Mam u Zîn* was an assertion of Kurdish nationalist claims by modern standards, Xanî was indisputably a Kurd and felt a sense of shared distinctiveness with his compatriots, however he defined them. This certainly supports Smith's assertion of pre-national and spontaneous expressions of ethnic solidarity, but as Eppel and others suggest, it is likely that 'Kurd' to Xanî was a sociocultural rather than ethnic term, and his definition of ethnicity would look dramatically different to those espoused by modern Kurdish nationalists. Instead, it is primarily the discursive reconstruction of history through the lens of ethnonationalism, something that did not occur until the latter half of the twentieth century in the Kurdish political space, that contributes to perceptions of Xanî's work as nationalistic or secessionist.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Özoğlu, Hakan. 2004. *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries*. Albany, NY. State University of New York Press, p. 33; Hassanpour, Amir in Vali 2003; Tunc 2018.

¹²⁷ Vali 2003, p. 89.

Stirrings of a 'Passive Revolution': Sheikh Ubeydullah's Revolt of 1880

While a historic survey reveals that Kurdish populations have in some form expressed their cultural distinctiveness and a sense of Kurdayetî since the pre-nationalist era, Kurdish nationalism in its modern sense arose only in response to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the partition of the Middle East in the aftermath of WWI. Even in the early twentieth century, the rhetoric of Kurdish nationalism was used almost exclusively by urban elites and religious figures, who quickly recognized that an ethnoterritorial claim to statehood was important to security and international support in the emerging modern state system and could provide them with considerable personal power. Many scholars of Kurdish nationalism and history from a diversity of analytical backgrounds date the origins of the movement to the 1880 rebellion of Sayyid Ubeydullah, a prominent Kurdish notable and religious leader who revolted against both the Ottoman and Qajar states, ostensibly “in the name of Kurdish nationalism and Islam” with the aim of establishing a Kurdish state.¹²⁸ In reality, though, an analysis of Ubeydullah’s rebellion and its circumstances quickly reveals that ethnic solidarity was a peripheral motivator of his actions at best and that his true allegiances were to the Ottoman state and personal profit.

Even if Ubeydullah was not the progenitor of modern Kurdish nationalism as some suggest, the fact that he draped his communications with foreign audiences with the rhetoric of ethnic nationalism demonstrates the permeating power of European-style sociopolitical ideology in the Ottoman empire, a phenomenon that would increase exponentially over the following decades. To understand Ubeydullah’s motivations, it is important to first understand the factors that suddenly swept him to power and allowed him to mobilize Kurdish tribal leaders more

¹²⁸ Natali 2005, p. 5; C.f. McDowall 2020; Entasser 1992; Natali 2005.

effectively than his predecessors. Sayyid Ubeydullah was a member of the Semdinan family, a highly respected lineage with considerable trans-tribal influence and ancestral links to the Prophet himself.¹²⁹ This religious authority alone was highly significant and applicable to theocratic power structures, but it was further supplemented by the power vacuum and economic opportunities provided to Kurdish elites by the *tanzimat* reforms, which opened the Ottoman Empire to Western markets and influence.

The reforms coincided with Sultan Mehmet II's policies of economic centralization and direct taxation, which put an end to semi-autonomous Kurdish *vilayets* in the region throughout the 1830s and 40s.¹³⁰ At the same time, the empires' increasing links to Europe and policies of secularization adopted as a part of the *tanzimat* "left a void in its relations with the Kurds, which was structurally based on a religious understanding" as codified in the *millet* system.¹³¹ The weakening of the link between Islam and authority in the Ottoman Empire led Kurds to feel "increasingly disconnected from the imperial core", especially since the abolishment of the *vilayets* was not replaced with state services or security, leading to a period of relative instability and, in the opinion of anthropologist Martin Van Bruinssen, "a step backward in social evolution, away from the creation of a potential state".¹³² Despite Van Bruinssen's depiction of national development as a developmentalist process inevitably culminating in the nation state, the fact that the emergence of Kurdish identity was stunted and reversed at times through external intervention reflects Olson and Tucker's early post-structuralist assertion that nationalism is not a one-directional, inevitable, or irreversible process.¹³³ Even if the Ottoman reforms under Mehmet

¹²⁹ Özoğlu, Hakan. 2001. "'Nationalism' and Kurdish Notables in the Late Ottoman-Early Republican Era". *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33, p. 384

¹³⁰ Olson and Tucker 1989, p. 4.

¹³¹ Eppel 2016, p. 66.

¹³² Van Bruinssen, Maarten M. 1978. *Agha, Sheikh and State: On the Social and Political Organization of Kurdistan*. (Doctoral Dissertation), quoted in Olson and Tucker 1989, p. 5.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

If were negative for the Kurds in general, wealthy latifundists like Ubeydullah could reap huge profits from his access to new global agricultural commodity markets that had been unattainable prior to the *tanzimat*..

The Şemdinan family had already established wealth through the spice trade and donations from followers, but during the 1870s and 80s Ubeydullah began buying large tracts of land and villages from both the Ottoman and Qajar authorities, creating pastures and crop fields spanning the border between the empires. The average value of land increased by 75% in the reform period Ubeydullah took advantage of, and it is likely he was able to leverage his position to profit from globalizing agricultural markets. Although Ottoman Kurds were in a position to accept centralized leadership and Ubeydullah was equipped to supply it, the central catalyst of the 1880 rebellion was the 1878 Russo-Ottoman War, its aftermath, and the resultant Treaty of Berlin. A resounding defeat in the war demonstrated to the Kurds the “debility” of the Ottoman forces and the weapons provided to Kurdish troops during the conflict armed the population for the upcoming conflict.

When the Empire signed the capitulatory Treaty of Berlin in July 1878, the West imposed provisions that required the Ottomans to provide protection for Armenians and other Christians and continue further reform.¹³⁴ Ubeydullah immediately reacted, writing to an Ottoman official: “What is this I hear, that the Armenians are going to have an independent state in Van, and that the Nestorians are going to hoist the British flag and declare themselves British subjects? I will never permit it, even if I have to arm the women.”¹³⁵ Though it is true that Ubeydullah badly wanted to prevent an Armenian ascendancy, this can be attributed more to Armenian territorial claims encroaching on the Sheikh’s property than it could be to genuine patriotism. In fact,

¹³⁴ Eppel 2016, p. 69.

¹³⁵ Özoğlu 2001, p. 390.

Ubeydullah initially framed his rebellion as “an attempt to restore peace and order in the region”, not a nationalist endeavor. Even more strikingly, he sought the support of Nestorian Christians against the Persian and Ottoman states “by complaining that these two states had done nothing to stop the aggression of two rival Kurdish tribes—namely, the Shekak of Persia and the Herki of the Ottoman Empire”.¹³⁶ Soliciting military support from the Nestorians at the expense of fellow Kurds does not reflect the behavior of a Kurdish nationalist, only a Kurdish individual maximizing the benefit he can gain from his circumstances.

In 1879, tensions reached a boiling point when an Ottoman regional governor imposed prison sentences on a group of Kurds loyal to Ubeydullah for looting a village. In response, he called for a revolt against the tyranny of the *regional governor*, and after an apparently underwhelming military stalemate the two sides reached an agreement once the governor was dismissed at Ubeydullah’s request.¹³⁷ This interaction distinctly lacks the flavor of national rebellion. Even his 1880 invasion of Qajar Iran, ostensibly undertaken for the nationalist objective of fighting “the suppression of the Kurds by the Shi‘ite Iranian authorities, the harm done to the tribal notables, the monetary penalties imposed on the Kurdish population, and the assault on the honor of Kurdish women by Iranian officials”, was not devoid of personal motivations.¹³⁸ Eppel notes that Ubeydullah had loyal supporters in many Qajar Kurdish tribes and villages, and owned many orchards and agricultural lands which had recently begun to be taxed by the provincial authorities. The previous year, the Qajar governor had also arrested nobles loyal to Ubeydullah, so yet again it seems likely that personal considerations played a significant role in what was ostensibly a nationalist revolution.¹³⁹ Some Western and Turkish

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Eppel 2016, p. 69.

¹³⁸ Özoğlu 2001.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 71

scholars further assert that the Ottoman Empire funded the invasion and provided Ubeydullah with additional weapons to frustrate their imperial rivals.¹⁴⁰ Still, when Ubeydullah did cross the border in 1880 with an impressive force of Kurds and Christians under his control, the results of the rebellion were relatively underwhelming—though the force briefly captured Mahabad, it was swiftly dispelled by a Qajar military force, supplemented by rival Kurdish tribes.¹⁴¹ Even upon his return, Ubeydullah's men were not immediately disarmed, and rather than execute the leader and risk further inflammation, the Porte chose to exile the Sheikh to Medina, where he would reside until his death in 1883.

Given this apparent lack of nationalist motivations, how can we account for a perception within academia that Ubeydullah's revolt constituted “the origin of the Kurdish nationalist struggle”, or Robert Olson and William Tucker's claim that Ubaydallah's rule was characterized by nationalist goals?¹⁴² A contributing factor is certainly the tendency of academics to interpret the past through an ethnicized lens, a bias imposed by socialization in ethnicized political spheres. Ubeydullah himself, however, also presented his revolt in nationalist terms—especially to Western audiences. In a letter written to an American missionary named Cochran, the sheikh lamented the “Kurdish nation” as “a people apart” in need of self-determination. He warns:

¹⁴⁰ Olson and Tucker 1989, p. 7.

¹⁴¹ Eller 199, p. 159; Özoğlu 2004, p. 390

¹⁴² Olson p. 1,13

*“We want our affairs to be in our hands, so that in the punishment of our own offenders we may be strong and independent, and have privileges like other nations... otherwise the whole of Kurdistan will take the matter into their own hands, as they are unable to put up with these continual evil deeds and the oppression which they suffer at the hands of the [Persian and Ottoman] governments.”*¹⁴³

Although this threat clearly reflects a desire for territorial autonomy, historian Wadie Jwaideh’s claim that such statements “certainly [leave] no doubt as to his strong nationalist sentiments” fails to consider the possibility that the rebellion was personally or economically motivated, and that Ubeydullah was strategically utilizing nationalist rhetoric to gain international support. Primary sources from British consulates at the time depict the Sheikh as “more or less personally loyal to the Sultan”, and even describe Ubeydullah’s plan to send his son to Constantinople in an effort to literally purchase his *de facto* authority over the Kurdish population from the Ottoman authorities.¹⁴⁴ Although Olson points to the Sheikh’s creation of a ‘Kurdish league’ bringing together over two hundred tribal leaders as evidence of early nationalistic sentiments, the salience of that organization was minimal at best, and historian David McDowall suggests that the Kurdish league may have even been simply a rumor—it “certainly never accomplished anything or made any statements”.¹⁴⁵ Ultimately, Ubeydullah’s rebellion is most accurately described as an effort to maximize his control of the region, not an effort to liberate the Kurds from imperial despotism. The Sheikh demanded territorial autonomy, but not all autonomous movements can be considered nationalist. Critically, “nationalist

¹⁴³ Letter from Ubeydullah to Cochran Dated 5 October 1880, in *Parliamentary Papers*; cited in Özoğlu 2001.

¹⁴⁴ Özoğlu 2001, p. 391-2.

¹⁴⁵ Eller 1999, p. 158.

movements are concerned more with the self-rule of a *community* than a territory” by definition, and Ubeydullah’s aspirations were primarily latifundistic.¹⁴⁶

Even though a constructivist analysis of Ubeydullah’s rule suggests that it should not be considered a manifestation of Kurdish nationalism, his ascendancy, and subsequent exile did serve the function of centralizing the Kurdish people and exposing Kurdish elites to the rhetoric of ethnonationalism, though its scope was still limited and institutional conditions did not support its perpetuation. In the Imperial Era, it is clear that the Kurdish multitude endorsed religious, rather than modern, structures of authority, even while Kurdish elites exposed to European nation-building utilized the rhetoric of ethnonationalism to support their personal claims.

Kurdish Elites and the State in the Final Decades of the Ottoman Decline

This pattern only accelerated while Ubeydullah remained in exile, as Sultan Abdulhamid II utilized the armed Kurdish population as a defensive force against Russian and Qajar forces, and as the sharp end of the spear in the Empire’s campaign of ethnic cleansing of Armenians. Organized into the powerful and influential Hamidiye cavalry, Kurdish forces were provided with greater opportunities for social mobility and patronage from the Porte in exchange for acting as the border guard of the Empire. The state further used membership in the cavalry as a means of controlling Kurdish tribes and preempting the development of nationalism, making “every Hamidiye commander a *derebey* (large landowner), similar to the [Kurdish] emirates that had existed until 1847. Affiliation to the Hamidiye once again superseded any expression of pan-Kurdish solidarity. Every grievance and feud was settled in favor of the Hamidiye Kurdish

¹⁴⁶ Özoğlu 2001, p. 376.

tribes”, which confiscated the land of Alevi and the Kurds unaffiliated with the Ottoman state.¹⁴⁷ Even following Ubeydullah’s revolt, ethnopolitical sentiments in the broader population were all but irrelevant, and integration to the Empire was a more tantalizing proposition than separatism.

At the same time, however, participation in the Hamidiye contributed to the development of Kurdish national identity among the intelligentsia and upper salariat—or at the least exposed them to the ethnonationalism rampant in European discourses at the time. Hamidiye regiments were utilized heavily in the Balkan Wars and interacted consistently with Arab and Turkish commanders, environments where nationalism was a major social phenomenon. Although “research on this topic is scarce, the Kurds, especially the officers who had been trained in the schools established by Abdulhamid, became aware of the international politics that had contributed to the Balkan wars” and became familiar with the tenets of ethnonationalism. The Hamidiye further provided educational opportunities to Kurdish elites, who at this time were educated in secular military schools and, on occasion, even studied abroad in France and Switzerland.¹⁴⁸ Although the cavalry allowed the Kurds to ‘see the world’, what they saw was a political environment dominated by the doctrine of nationalism, which was subsequently internalized and disseminated within Kurdish communities. Mere exposure to ethnic nationalism, though, did not result in a cascading ethnification of Kurdish identity, as elites continued to prefer remaining in partnership with their Ottoman patrons.

Even following the deposition of Sultan Abdulhamid II in the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, Kurds did not aim to take advantage of the instability to espouse ethnicist claims. In fact, Kurds were instrumental in the founding of the Young Turks’ infamous Committee for Union and Progress, and occupied some of the highest spaces in the Ottoman parliament and military at

¹⁴⁷ Olson and Tucker 1989, p. 11.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xvii.

the time of the coup. In the brief period between 1908 and the First World War, Kurdish nationalism was tolerated and even encouraged at times by the new regime, although the Young Turks began to suppress public expressions of Kurdish culture as time went on. The Young Turks' ideological emphasis on ethnic nationalism and their aim to establish "ethnic Turkishness as the central axis around which the Ottoman state revolved" impacted Kurdish perceptions of self and ethnicity, and encouraged notables to think of themselves in increasingly ethnic rather than religious terms, marking a departure from the imperial status quo.¹⁴⁹

Critically, the Young Turk Revolution superseded the Islamic concept of *umma*, replacing it with secular concepts of 'nation, society, and national differentiation'.¹⁵⁰ This cognitive shift was reflected in a proliferation of Kurdish cultural clubs, publications, and language centers that emerged in urban centers across the empire. At this point, "opportunity structures" emerged for the creation and dissemination of Kurdish national ideology. These 'opportunities', however, were not embraced by the majority of Kurds, for the simple reason that ethnically-based social mobilization does not arise unless it does so out of necessity. Since the CUP, despite being more secular than its Ottoman predecessor, did not explicitly exclude Kurds from its political project on an ethnic basis, there was no reason for Kurds to view themselves through the lens of ethnicity precisely because it is not an intrinsically political phenomenon.

Most of the Kurdish institutions that did take advantage of these new avenues of political expression were less nationally-minded than they might appear at first glance. The Kurdish Society for Mutual Cooperation and Progress (KTTJ), founded by Sheikh Ubeydullah's son Sayyid Abdulakir (who had become integrated into the Ottoman elite and served as a Hamidiyan commander), is one of the most prominent examples of a quasinationistic Kurdish institution.

¹⁴⁹ Eppel 2016, p. 94.

¹⁵⁰ Radpey, Loqman. 2021. "Kurdistan on the Sèvres Centenary: How a Distinct People Became the World's Largest Stateless Nation." *Nationalities Papers*, p. 4.

The organization served essentially as a ‘cultural club’ for Ottoman Kurdish nobility, and while it did produce Kurdish language journals and publications, these “were never intended to reach the rural areas or common Kurds in Istanbul”.¹⁵¹ Although modernist Denise Natali states that the dissemination of Kurdish nationalism was a central goal of the organization’s newspaper *Kurd Te’avun ve Terakki Gazetesi*, historian Michael Eppel contests that claim, instead describing “the KTTJ and its paper [as] clearly Ottomanist in nature, present[ing] the Kurds as loyal to the Empire and the Sultan”.¹⁵² Even the fiery urgings of intellectuals, like Said Nursî’s call for Kurds to “wake up from their five hundred years of sleep and develop national solidarity” ultimately advocated for greater minority rights within Ottoman institutions and education rather than ethnic separatism.¹⁵³ During the imperial period, Kurdish elites on the whole appeared to be uninterested in the coordinated pursuit of a Kurdish national project. Although a few of these activists may have dreamed of heading a Kurdish nation-state, “the separatist vision—that is, secession from the Ottoman Empire and an independent Kurdish state—was shared by only a few”.¹⁵⁴

Nevertheless, these civil organizations present a likely antecedent to Kurdish nationalism, and Denise Natali describes several incidents in which the rhetoric of these groups attained a distinct ethnonational flavor.¹⁵⁵ It is critical to remember in our analysis, however, that this ethnonationalism did not naturally emerge from an innate ethnic commonality or desire for cooperation. Instead, Kurds were encouraged to conceive of themselves in ethnic terms by the increasing encroachment of external ideologies, and the reality that ‘ethnic groups’ were becoming increasingly salient as units of autonomy and political mobilization. Ethnicizing

¹⁵¹ Bozarslan in Vali 2003, Özoğlu 2001, p. 393.

¹⁵² Eppel 2016 p. 91

¹⁵³ Natali 2005, p. 13

¹⁵⁴ Eppel 2016, p. 97

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 12

Kurdishness was not a choice made by Kurds themselves—it was a delineation imposed upon them by external powers. Although the primordialist (or even the clichéd constructivist) approach to Kurdish history might lead one to expect Kurds to take advantage of any opportunity to assert ethnic distinctiveness, in reality, Kurdish nationalism was adopted reactively, not proactively, by elites. In an analysis of the late imperial period, Hakan Özoğlu ultimately concludes that “only when the Ottoman state began to collapse did Kurdish notables begin to articulate a nationalist ideology as a way to legitimize the perpetual desire for self-rule in Anatolia... Kurdish nationalism was not a cause but, rather, a result of the Ottoman Empire’s disintegration”, further noting that the Kurds were the last of the *millet* populations of the Empire to espouse ethnonationalist claims.¹⁵⁶

In conclusion, the experiences of Kurdish populations in the late imperial era comprehensively demonstrate that a politicized ethnic Kurdayetî did not exist at this time, and that those limited ‘nationalist’ movements that did arise did so from a confluence of external factors and Ottoman Kurdish elites pursuing their own interests. Critically, Kurds did not ‘naturally’ flock to aspects of their shared culture or language when navigating the Imperial political space, instead preferring to maneuver within the religion-based *millet* system when advocating for regional rights and development. The ethnification of Kurdishness happened in fits and bursts, reflecting Abbas Vali’s depiction of national development as halting, stuttering, and omnidirectional. Ultimately, while miniscule subsections of the Kurdish intelligentsia were exposed to the rhetoric of ethnonationalism through their international exploits, the majority of the Kurdish population did not embrace these frameworks of social organization, only beginning to do so as a survival strategy following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. For this reason, the First World War and subsequent Ottoman Partition can correctly be viewed as an influential

¹⁵⁶ Özoğlu 2001, p. 404.

exogenous event impelling the ‘reputational cascade’ of Kurdish nationalism in the 1920s, as Kurdish elites and peasants realized that in a world dictated by nation-states, the only avenue to survival was the formation of an ethnonational project.

Chapter Two

Incipient Kurdish Nationalism in the Transition to the Modern State System

Although the Kurdish region was only a secondary front in the devastating global conflict that was the First World War, the Kurdish people and others in Eastern Anatolia experienced immense suffering throughout the hostilities, due in part to their position precisely at the intersection of Ottoman, British, and Russian forces. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were forced to flee from their homes, and those who remained were forcibly conscripted by the Ottoman Army and sent as cannon fodder to the Caucasian front, resulting in up to 150,000 Kurdish casualties. Scorched earth tactics employed by advancing and retreating armies and Ottoman food confiscation policies led to severe and widespread famine in the region.

Michael Eppel estimates that up to two-thirds of the population in dozens of Kurdish villages starved to death, even in settlements such as Sulaymaniyah that were removed from the worst of the fighting.¹⁵⁷ Further casualties stemmed from smaller clashes between Kurdish and Armenian forces, the latter seeking vengeance for earlier massacres committed by the Kurdish-dominated (but Ottoman-controlled) *Hamidye* cavalry in the later imperial period. Though these more local disputes might at first glance appear to be an early instance of ‘spontaneous’ ethnic discord, it is important to note that this animosity, too, was based on religious rather than ethnocultural grievances, and driven primarily by the political machinations of the Ottoman and Russian empires aiming to gain prominence in contested territory. Nevertheless, these killings contributed to the development of a distinct Kurdish ethnic identity, and the Russian-and-British-influenced Armenian national project increasingly presented ethnicity as a framework for political mobilization and legitimacy.

¹⁵⁷ Eppel 2016, p. 113

Throughout the war, despite the obvious military inferiority of the Ottoman Empire and the privileged treatment of Turkish soldiers over Kurdish ones by military leaders, “a considerable portion of the Kurds remained loyal to the Ottoman Empire as an Islamic state”, by means of both cooption and coercion. Many Kurds had no choice but to take up arms for the empire, but some did so willingly out of fear of Armenian retribution or existing loyalties to tribal leaders.¹⁵⁸ Kurdish elites had a vested interest in maintaining the Ottoman status quo, which still offered considerable social and economic opportunities for tribal latifundista. Not oblivious to broader geopolitical shifts, however, Kurds also aimed to forge ties with both Britain and Russia, hoping to ensure their own safety under a European protectorate after the war. Despite the Russian state entertaining a Kurdish envoy and promising material support to ameliorate the devastation in Kurdistan, Czarist Russia did not seriously entertain thoughts of a close partnership with the Kurds, and Russian commanders (some of whom were of Armenian descent) on the ground outright rejected the proposition, having “far more in common with Armenian Christians than with Muslim Kurdish tribesmen”.¹⁵⁹ The rejection of Russo-Kurdish cooperation by a majority of both Russian and Kurdish elites reflects the enduring significance of religious linkages in the late imperial period, as Islamic loyalties usurped realist attempts to align with the eventual victors of the conflict.

Even as the majority of Kurds retained Ottoman loyalties, an increasingly ethnicized political sphere during the war led to the creation of the first bona fide Kurdish nationalist groups. Some of the earliest groups included the Kurdistan Ta’ali Jamiyati (Society for the Recovery of Kurdistan), an Istanbul-based organization that advocated for Kurdish autonomy according to Wilsonian principles of self-determination, and the Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti

¹⁵⁸ Eppel 2016, p. 117.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 110.

(Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan or SAK)), founded in December 1918.¹⁶⁰ Like the KTTJ before them, these institutions were intended to foster an appreciation for Kurdish culture and distribute tangible aid to Kurds in need—but unlike the KTTJ, their explicit *raison d'être* was to advocate for Kurdish autonomy or independence in ethnic terms.¹⁶¹ Again, these societies were founded and patronized by only limited strata of the Kurdish intelligentsia, most of whom would have been intimately familiar with the ethnonationalist politics of twentieth-century Europe and could have inferred that the post-war partition of the Ottoman Empire would be approached in ethnic terms. Therefore, such organizations were a rational response to the political context, and as ethnification metastasized in the early nineteenth century, increasing numbers of Kurds endorsed the autonomist/secessionist movement, though Wilsonian principles of self-determination had not yet been encountered or adopted by the vast majority of the ordinary population.¹⁶²

Consequences of an Underdeveloped Kurdish National Sentiment in the Interregnum

The relative ‘immaturity’ of Kurdish nationalist development can be further evidenced in the findings of the King-Crane Commission, a group of researchers sent by the United States to the Levant to evaluate the various nationalist claims arising from and imposed upon the region. While imperial depictions of local culture and aspirations should always be viewed with suspicion and taken with a grain of salt, the commission’s demographic and local political research was relatively high-quality and included innumerable meetings with tribal leaders and local elites addressing the topic of national determination. Ultimately, the commission

¹⁶⁰ Gunter, Natali, et al. 2004, p. 161.

¹⁶¹ Chalihand 1979, p. 161.

¹⁶² Özoğlu 2001, p. 387.

recommended that separate Turkish, Armenian, and Syrian states be created under the tutelage of American mandates, which they believed would ensure the safety of minority groups and facilitate development.

On the topic of Kurdish independence, however, the commission was less confident in the prospects for immediate nationalization. While full statehood was recommended as the eventual mode of organization for other political communities, the Kurds were deemed as requiring only “a measure of autonomy... under close mandatory rule, with the object of preparing them for ultimate independence or for federation with neighboring areas in a larger union”.¹⁶³ Despite the Kurds having a larger population than other communities examined by the commission, their existence is only sporadically addressed throughout its pages—suggesting that as the researchers traversed the Middle East in search of grassroots nationalists, few Kurds answered their call. Furthermore, the King-Crane commission viewed the topic of Kurdistan’s desired ethnic homogeneity with suspicion, proposing that a Kurdish state could only become a reality if it included ‘voluntary exchange[s] of comparatively small numbers of Turks and Armenians’—further imposing upon the Kurds eurocentric ideals about the importance of ‘ethnic homogeneity’ in political organization.¹⁶⁴

The reality of the matter is simply that Kurdistan’s geographic location and religiously-motivated sociopolitical integration within the Ottoman *ancien regime* stunted the proliferation of Kurdish ethnonationalist sentiments, despite the efforts of elites to portray the Kurdish nation as ethnically unified and politically coherent to outside powers. Even if there was an element of popular nationalism emerging in the immediate post-war context, the death of as

¹⁶³ King Crane Commission Report, cited in Rapdey 2021, p. 8.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

many as 700,000 Kurds during the war and the resultant turmoil in Kurdistan made any impactful campaign for Kurdish independence at the Paris Peace Conference an impossibility.¹⁶⁵

When the time eventually came for the Ottoman Empire's formal rendering at the hands of European powers at Versailles, the Kurds were unable to assemble a united and coherent diplomatic force advocating for Kurdish independence. General Sharif Pasha served as the representative for the Kurdish delegation on behalf of the SAK, which had been formed less than a year prior to negotiations. Notably, Pasha himself did not speak Kurdish and had never visited Kurdistan. Pasha was a member of the Ottoman elite, but had lived in Europe for over a decade at the time of negotiations after dissent resulted in his expulsion from the CUP in 1909. Pasha did represent Kurdish interests to the best of his ability at the conference, but his nationalism was unlikely to have arisen from a deep personal linkage to Kurdish ethnicity or culture—instead, Eppen speculates that “his loss of status [following his exile] was apparently the reason he turned toward Kurdishness and Kurdish nationalist activity” as he saw a chance to regain influence in the transitional period. Another event in the negotiations that merits attention is Pasha's efforts to cooperate with the Armenians—a surprising choice of ally given the protracted and violent Kurdish-Armenian conflicts that had plagued the region over the previous decades.

Repudiating contemporary historical depictions of these interactions as natural ethnic discord, Pasha asserted that hostilities were caused by “Turkish incitement”, an account further corroborated by Armenian delegate Bogos Nubar Pasha's willingness to enter into a Kurdish-Armenian commission and draw the border between the territories in collaboration.¹⁶⁶ Ultimately, Kurdish diplomatic efforts, particularly Pasha's repeated appeals to British notable policymakers in the Middle East including Winston Churchill and Percy Cox, were rewarded in

¹⁶⁵ Chalihand 1979, p. 163.

¹⁶⁶ Eppel 2016, p. 124.

the Treaty of Sevres' support for Kurdish autonomy.¹⁶⁷ The treaty made provisions in Articles 62-64 that required a consociational “commission [be made] that shall draft within six months [...] a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas [to] decide what rectifications if any, should be made in the Turkish frontier”, with a further requirement that a Kurdish autonomous region could become a state within a year by petitioning the league of nations.¹⁶⁸ Although this treaty was immensely significant in that it codified the Kurdish ‘nation’ in international law for the first time, it did not ultimately provide any great boon to Kurdish self-determination efforts due to a litany of concerns regarding the treaty’s legitimacy and enforcement.

Divided Loyalties and Ethnonational Ambivalence Towards the Treaty of Sevres

Among Kurds themselves, there was widespread discord regarding the treaty and the territorial boundaries it imposed upon Kurdistan. Emir Amin ‘Ali Bedir Khan, co-founder and vice-president of the SAK at the time of the negotiation, was furious that Pasha had made territorial concessions that favored Armenia and Iran out of ‘sober political pragmatism’.¹⁶⁹ This ideological schism in the SAK mirrored an earlier debate between autonomists and secessionists in the society, and eventually led to its dissolution only a few years later. Hakan Özoğlu compellingly argues that this bifurcation occurred according to pre-existing tribal divisions, as supporters of the influential Semdinan and Bedirhan families ascribed to their respective nationalist objectives. Özoğlu states that the SAK case demonstrates the significance of ‘primordial’ ties in mobilizing populations behind a tribal leaders’ political ideology, setting the

¹⁶⁷ McDowall 2020, p. 513.

¹⁶⁸ Treaty of Sevres, cited in McDowall 2004, p. 137.

¹⁶⁹ Eppel 2016, p. 124.

groundwork for popular Kurdish nationalism implemented through local elites in coming decades.¹⁷⁰

Just as the SAK was divided on recognizing the legitimacy of the treaty, the Kurdish intelligentsia was similarly skeptical of the validity of its territorial delineations. Most Kurds were rightly suspicious of externally-imposed political ideologies and borders, and preferred to instead retain the status quo within the post-Ottoman space with a *millet*-system-like model of tribal and religious authority. As early as 1919, Mustafa Kemal was making active attempts to co-opt Kurdish elites in his struggle for Turkish independence. As a rising star in the CUP, he traveled to Eastern Anatolia and presented himself as the “savior of Kurdistan” and the “defender of the Muslim lands soiled by the impious Christians”, all the while emphasizing the “fraternity between Kurds and Turks or the Ottoman nation in conflict with foreign occupation forces”.¹⁷¹ Kemal frequently sent photographs of himself to tribal Kurdish Sheikhs wearing Kurdish garments, and emphasized his religiosity through promises of protecting the caliphate from the ‘West’.¹⁷² The success of these efforts is evidenced in the Erzurum Congress of July 23rd-August 6th, 1919, in which fifty-four delegates from five Kurdish vilayets neighboring Armenia agreed to fight under Turkish officers along Turkey's northern front, thus winning the “first major military victory of the Turkish War of Independence”.¹⁷³

This Turkish-Kurdish cooperation continued throughout the interregnum period- believing Kemal’s false promises, a majority of Kurds rejected the terms of the treaty and lent him military assistance in the Turkish War of Independence, actively fighting to retain a sociopolitical system based on religion rather than ethnonationalism. Even in the aftermath of

¹⁷⁰ Özoğlu 2001, p. 387.

¹⁷¹ Chalihand [1978] 1993, p. 46.

¹⁷² Natali 2005, p. 71.

¹⁷³ Chalihand [1978] 1993, p. 48.

World War I and the emergence of a small but persistent Kurdish nationalist movement, the Kurds' apparent willingness to integrate into a multi-ethnic Caliphate further supports the argument that ethnicized Kurdish nationalism is a distinctly modern phenomenon primarily imposed by outside forces. Despite the successful cooperation between the Kurdish and Armenian delegates in Sevres, two diplomats who understood that the rhetoric of ethnic nationalism was quickly becoming hegemonic in the post-war world, regular Kurds still overwhelmingly identified with "the other Muslims of Anatolia", and were compelled to cooperate with Mustafa Kemal in large part due to "their fears of falling within an Armenian, and therefore Christian, state".¹⁷⁴

It was only after Kemal had consolidated power that he ruthlessly pursued his Western-inspired objective of a secular capitalist state with ethnonational homogeneity, in doing so employing policies of brutal ethnic cleansing against the Kurds. Mustafa Kemal's duplicitous but successful consociational rhetoric took advantage of Kurdish hopes that the post-Ottoman political space could resist externally-imposed ethnonationalism. Although a small minority of Kurdish intelligentsia correctly determined that ethnicizing Kurdishness and advocating for Wilsonian-style self-determination could provide security and autonomy for the Kurdish people in an increasingly exclusionary political landscape, "for the vast majority of the Kurds, 'Kurdishness' was in fact another way of expressing their Muslim and Ottoman affiliation", not a political identifier. Even when this 'cultural nationalism' formulated 'political claims', such claims generally "understood Kurdishness in the conceptual framework of a renewed Ottoman contract, without formulating claims to sovereignty and independence."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Ali, Othman. 1997. "The Kurds and the Lausanne Peace Negotiations, 1922–23." *Middle Eastern Studies* 33(3), p. 521.

¹⁷⁵ Bozarlan, Hamit in Vali 2003, p. 167.

The lack of local, grassroots Kurdish separatist and independence movements outside the spheres of Westernized elites in the transitional period reflects the reality that ethnicity did not serve as a natural or even preferred method of political mobilization for the Kurdish people. Despite a proliferation of local revolts, an open political space, and the existence of established ‘Kurdish nationalist organizations’ patronized by elites, there was no ‘reputational cascade’ in the interregnum period organically proliferating throughout the multitude. This is simply because most Kurds saw no need for such a political project, since Kemal’s promises had suggested they could thrive in an independent, Islamic, co-ethnic Turkey.

Even had local Kurds seen through Mustafa Kemal’s lies and mobilized en masse to fiercely advocate for a Kurdish state, it is still unlikely that the promises made at Sevres would be kept by European powers due to external instability. Weary and financially strained from the grueling conflict, the British and French in the post-war era were reticent to engage in any military activity, and putting down Kemal’s revolt would have required resources and lives they were unwilling to expend. The British themselves “kept virtually all that they had wanted”, but “they were not prepared to negotiate for the Armenians, or for the Kurds” beyond guaranteeing control of oil-rich Mosul, fully aware that doing so would require military enforcement in a difficult climate and country, and run contrary to the desires of the British public and newly-elected leadership.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, the primary foreign-policy objective in post-war Britain quickly became countering Bolshevik expansion, so allowing a West-friendly Turkish state to emerge with as little animosity as possible quickly became a higher priority than keeping promises made to the comparatively insignificant Kurds.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 523

¹⁷⁷ McDowall 2020, p. 433

While these political machinations were clear to see, the British Foreign Office made its flexibility explicit to Kemal in a letter dated March 1921, in which it indicated that “in regard to Kurdistan the Allies would be prepared to consider a modification of the Treaty ... in conformity with the existing facts of the situation, on condition of facilities for local autonomies and the adequate protection of Kurdish interests”—backtracking on earlier promises to ensure an “independent Kurdish State”.¹⁷⁸ Similarly, France’s decision to “re-establish friendly relations with Turkey” a year *before* the Turkish military victory concretely demonstrated that the West was willing to tolerate an independent Turkey provided it served as a bulwark against Bolshevism. This further emboldened Mustafa Kemal, who now faced little opposition in securing his control of Anatolia and centralizing power. In short, the Kurds as a whole were at best ambivalent on the validity of the Treaty of Sevres, Turkey ignored it, and colonial powers declined to enforce it.

At what was essentially the re-negotiation of Sevres at the Lausanne Conference of 1922-23, the British agreed with little resistance to drop Articles 62-65 of the previous agreement, relinquishing calls for Kurdish independence in exchange for Turkey joining the newly-formed League of Nations to complete the isolation of Bolshevik Russia.¹⁷⁹ In the new Treaty of Lausanne, the Kurds were not mentioned by name, and no Kurdish nationalists openly advocated for Kurdish autonomy. Some Kurdish tribal leaders did appear at negotiations to advocate against their own independence and in favor of integration with the Turkish Republic, indicating the success of Kemal’s collaborative efforts. The delegation justified its rejection of statehood on the grounds that ‘Turks and Kurds were not racially separable’, foreshadowing later

¹⁷⁸ Rapdey, Loqman. 2020. “The Sèvres Centennial: Self-Determination and the Kurds.” *American Society of International Law* 24(20).

¹⁷⁹ Ali 1997, p. 534.

official state rhetoric and demonstrating the early entrenchment of ethnonational ideology in international discourses about cultural and minority rights.¹⁸⁰

Just as Brubaker states that national identity does not necessarily constitute an ethnic one, Jongerden and Akkaya note “the fact that a growing national consciousness does not automatically foster state consciousness is illustrated by the stance of the Kurds at Lausanne ”.¹⁸¹ Thus, the window of opportunity for an independent Kurdistan in East-Anatolia, home to a majority of the overall Kurdish population, disappeared as soon as it had come. Again, Kurdish willingness to integrate into an ostensibly multiethnic independent Turkey may have been a tragic miscalculation in retrospect, but at the time it further demonstrated Kurdish recalcitrance towards the ethnonational project. The Treaty of Lausanne was not renegotiated, and the borders imposed by that agreement officially divided the Kurdish people between the borders of four separate and (nominally) sovereign states, all with different dominant groups, levels of colonial occupation, and nation-building strategies.

The majority of Kurds were now under the legal jurisdiction of the Turkish republic, with the remainder dispersed across northwest Syria, northern Iraq, and northeast Iran. The arbitrary delineations established by the Treaty of Lausanne remain unchanged to this day, and the disparate political environments in each of the four states with significant Kurdish populations have contributed to the development of disparate Kurdish nationalisms. As previously noted, however, even though Kurdistan was nominally divided and borders did have the effect of isolating once interconnected Kurdish communities, Kurdish nationalism and identity did not develop in four respective vacuums. On the contrary, transnational collaboration and conflict have played a major role in the development of Kurdish identity, both on a pan-Kurdish and local

¹⁸⁰ Ibid; Brubaker 2009.

¹⁸¹ Jongerden and Akkaya in Bozarslan et al. 2021, p. 810.

level. Broadly speaking, though, the sociopolitical contexts of Kurds in the years following 1923 can be divided into two broad categories—the ‘hands off’ approach frequently taken by the British and French in Iraq and Syria respectively, and the violent statebuilding policies of repression and ethnic erasure employed by nationalizing independent states in Turkey and Iran. Though each Kurdish population was subject to differing levels of brutality at the hands of their respective states, all centralization and statebuilding processes were violent affairs, and the Kurds were frequently a target of subjugation and oppression.

Chapter Three:**The Political Ethnification of Kurdayetî in the Colonial and Early State Period**

The division of the Kurdish space into newly formed territorial states in the aftermath of the first World War created new structures of opportunity and coercion for Kurds, in the context of four distinct imagined political communities with disparate ideologies and attitudes towards their Kurdish minorities. Given the permeating influence of these new equally unique and complex political incubators on the development of separate Kurdish identities, scholars including Jordi Tejel, Abbas Vali, and Hamit Bozarslan have previously emphasized the difficulty of expressing a non-parochial Kurdish history in comparative perspective.¹⁸² Nevertheless, the chronological and transnational approach to historical analysis undertaken in this thesis identifies several major themes in the development of a Kurdish identity, the most central of which is that objective ethnicity has rarely served as a meaningful unifying force or catalyst for popular mobilization in the Kurdish political space. This section will argue that throughout the colonial and early-state period, the Kurdish ‘distinctiveness’ that emerged in the contexts described above was ethnified and politicized only *in response to* the threats posed by the imposition of external ethnonational sentiments or ideologies, and never spontaneously simply as a result of an open political space or ‘opportunity structures.’ Furthermore, even when Kurdish elites were driven to national advocacy as a means of self-preservation or personal advancement, the multitude of Kurds did not organically flock to ethnically-oriented political organizations, but instead preferred to retain tribal and religious structures of authority wherever possible. Such an assertion is supported not only by the ethnopoliticization of Kurdishness as a direct response to the attempted erasure of Kurdish identity in Kemalist turkey, but also by the failure of Kurds in Iraq, Iran, and Syria to

¹⁸² Tejel 2009, Cited in Bozarslan 2021, p. 231

develop ethnonational sentiment or secessionist aspirations when their political contexts were theoretically rich for such an emergence.

The Violent Erasure of Kurdish Identity in Kemalist Turkey

In the earliest years of the Independent Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal continued to nominally support a level of Kurdish autonomy while simultaneously suppressing the creation of Kurdish nationalist movements, foreshadowing his increasingly violent suppression of Kurdish identity as he consolidated the Turkish state. Despite his promises as late as 1923 to grant “a kind of local autonomy to the provinces inhabited by the Kurds” and include “the deputies of both Kurds and Turks” in the Grand National Assembly with “unified interests and fates”, the Kemalist regime consistently suppressed Kurdish advocacy throughout the war for independence, smothering nascent organizations in Diyarbakir and Kocgiri in 1919 and 1921, respectively.¹⁸³ The Kemalist regime employed increasingly ethnonational rhetoric, exemplified by minister of justice Mehmet Bozkurt’s claim that “the Turk must be the only lord, the only master of this country [while] those who are not of pure Turkish stock have only one right, the right to be servants and slaves”.¹⁸⁴

In response to this threat, Kurdish elites skeptical of consociational promises established the *Kurt İstiklal Cemiyeti* (Committee for Kurdish Independence, CKI) in Erzurum sometime in late 1922. Unlike the insular organizations that preceded it, the increasingly obvious threat posed to Kurdish survival by the Kemalist regime stimulated an unprecedented popular proliferation of Kurdish nationalism outside urban intellectual centers. Fears that the Turkish government would

¹⁸³ Yüksel in Bozarslan et al. 2021, p. 209.

¹⁸⁴ McDowall 1992, cited in Eller 1999 p. 171.

adopt the Unionish policies “induced even sheikhs and religious leaders to join the Committee as early as 1923, exemplified by the membership of Sheikh Said of Piran, Sheikh Sherif of Palu, and Sheikh Abdullah of Melkan”.¹⁸⁵ Supporting the argument that Kurdish nationalism was adopted as a defensive mechanism to pre-empt exclusionary claims of Turkish ethnonationalism, Abbas Vali asserts that “the Kurdish dignitaries realized, even before any concrete Kemalist measures were initiated against them, that the project of a nation-state meant the [ethnic] homogenization of a country by coercion, and indeed, when necessary, by massacre”. Perhaps unsurprisingly, prominent Kurds who had participated in the Armenian massacres and the Hamidiye cavalry were among the earliest members of the anti-Kemalist Kurdish opposition, having observed firsthand the proliferation of ethnonationalism and its violent consequences.¹⁸⁶

The worst fears of these Kurdish leaders were confirmed on March 3rd, 1924, when the Kemalist government formally abolished the Caliphate and issued a decree that “banned all Kurdish schools, associations, publications, religious fraternities, and *medressehs*”, making the break between Kemalism and the Kurds formal and absolute.¹⁸⁷ The new legislation even outlawed the use of the words “Kurdish” or “Kurdistan” altogether, referring to Kurds as ‘mountain Turks’ in official state discourses and folklore. Although a widespread anti-Kemalist reaction was already emerging in the Kurdish region, the secularization of the state even more so than the explicit denial of Kurdishness “was seen as further proof of the betrayal of the initial project of independence”, and the absolute dissolution of the religious institutions that made up the backbone of Kurdish society prompted fierce resistance from Kurdish elites and masses alike. Kemal explicitly reversed his earlier promises of a unified Muslim community, stating that “the Turkish nation cannot become a nation of sheikhs, dervishes, religious fanatics, and charlatans.

¹⁸⁵ Chalihand [1978] 1993, p. 51.

¹⁸⁶ Bozarslan in Vali 2003, p. 182-3.

¹⁸⁷ Chalihand [1978] 1993, p. 51.

The most correct and truest path to the nation is the path of contemporary civilization”- that is, one based on ethnic rather than religious exclusion.¹⁸⁸ The CKI had been preparing for military struggle since its formation two years prior, anticipating the abolition of the Caliphate and suppression of Kurdishness as a consequence of Kemalist statebuilding. Its leader, Sheikh Said of Piran, travelled throughout rural Kurdistan giving speeches and issuing *fatwa* claiming that “Mustafa Kemal and his companions have denied God and His Prophet and driven out the caliphate”, thus making “the overthrow of the illegitimate regime” an obligation for every Muslim, not just every Kurd.¹⁸⁹

Although the framing of political grievances through the lens of Islam illustrates the enduring significance of religious rather than ethnic ties, there can be little doubt that Said’s goal was the creation of an independent Kurdish state, and Kendal argues that “nationalism was the core of the whole issue, as was quite clear to various lucid [contemporary] observers who would hardly qualify as agents of imperialism,” indicating that a robust and popular Kurdish identity was developing in response to Turkish bellicosity.¹⁹⁰ Said utilized some religious rhetoric in his attempts to mobilize the Kurdish population in opposition to Ankara, but so too did Mustafa Kemal in his own independence struggle against the West, despite his ultimate national project explicitly rejecting religious authority. The most important factor in the Sheikh Said revolt was the fact that it advocated for the self-governance of a community, not of a territory as observed in Ubeydullah’s case.

Sensing a growing Kurdish resistance movement in the east, a detachment of Turkish troops arrested members of the Sheikh’s entourage in Piran, in an effort to provoke a premature uprising before the CKI could organize its forces. The subsequent “massacre of the whole

¹⁸⁸ Natali 2005, p 81.

¹⁸⁹ Bozarslan in Vali 2003, p. 182.

¹⁹⁰ Chalihand [1978] 1993, p. 54.

Turkish detachment by overexcited villagers' ' prompted a series of organically-proliferating uprisings across most of Northern Kurdistan despite the Sheikh's efforts to prevent the skirmish from turning into a premature insurrection. The rebellion made initial gains and briefly seized control of about a third of Kurdistan in Turkey, but was quashed within a month by a combined force of over 100,000 Turkish and French troops.¹⁹¹ The relative popularity of the rebellion made the subsequent repression even more brutal. In September of 1925, not only were Said and fifty-two of his followers were publicly hung in Diyarbekir, but "thousands of anonymous peasants were massacred and hundreds of villages were burned to make sure the lesson stays learnt", and Kemalists hung hundreds of Kurdish patriots throughout the region in subsequent months. The Bill Indicting Sheikh Said echoed contemporary claims about the nationalist nature of the Kurdish movement, claiming that while "the uprising took place under the pretext of raising the banner of the Prophet, its main goal was to separate off a part of the Turkish homeland and destroy the unity of the country."¹⁹² The Tribunal further declared the "causes and origins of the latest revolt... identical to those which flared up in Bosnia-Herzegovina... or those which pushed the Albanians to stab the Turks in the back"- attributing the conflict entirely to ethnic, rather than religious or economic, animosity (despite publicly declaring that the Kurds were merely 'Mountain Turks' and not a distinct ethnicity).¹⁹³

Sheikh Said's rebellion was certainly a more definitive reflection of grassroots Kurdish nationalism than any movement that preceded it, but for all its popularity, "the insurgency did not attract or hold the various Kurdish constituencies into a solid front" based on the ideology of Kurdish ethnonationalism. The revolt "did not appeal to or mobilize non-tribals from the plains nor the urban population of key centers as Diyarbakir." Participation was further limited to

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Bozarlan in Vali 2003, p. 181.

¹⁹³ Bozarlan in Vali 2003, p. 184; McDowall 2020, p. 622.

primarily *Zaza* speaking tribes, and did not attract any Shia Kurdish support. The Sasunah and Tatukan tribes, both Kurdish, declined to join Said's movement and were subsequently attacked by fellow Kurdish forces.¹⁹⁴

Therefore, although support for Said's rebellion was popular, it was by no means pan-Kurdish or based entirely on ethnicist claims. Confidential reports of Turkish authorities regarding the revolt at the time "make it clear that the Kemalist government over-emphasized the nationalist features of the Sheikh Said rebellion" as a means of supporting their long-term strategic goal of Turkifying the entire republic. Abbas contends that "for the majority of participants, the 1925 rebellion conformed to the general pattern of a traditional Kurdish uprising, and was not fundamentally different from many others that occurred throughout the Ottoman Empire".¹⁹⁵ In the imperial era, those rebellions served as tools of negotiating, "an instrument for the renewal of the unwritten contract of rights versus obedience and legitimization", but the massive coercion employed by the new Turkish state in the form of special military rule, massacres, and the prohibition of symbolic resources in Northern Kurdistan made it clear even to the most traditional leaders that the political landscape had undergone a profound and irreversible transformation. Hamit Bozarsalan describes how this sudden realization led to the sudden proliferation of rural nationalism in Northern Kurdistan:

¹⁹⁴ Eller 1999, p. 172.

¹⁹⁵ Bozarslan in Vali 2003, p. 185.

*“many tribal chieftains and sheikhs who joined the opposition against the state only after the failure of the 1925 uprising... could easily live under the Ottoman Rule without resistance or opposition to the state. The measures taken against them by Ankara left them no choice but rebellion. In the course of their move from conformity to opposition, they opened up a non-modern, ‘traditional’ route towards nationalism. Kurdish nationalism, previously limited to the intelligentsia, provided both an instrument of legitimization of their struggle and a universal discourse that could explain their new situation. Nationalism thus became a narrative code that allowed Kurdish traditional dignitaries to understand and relate to the meaning of the end of the Ottoman tacit contract.”*¹⁹⁶

Although Kurdish identity became ethnicized through the ‘reputational cascade’ process described by Brubaker in the years following the abolition of the Caliphate, it was suppressed by Kemalist forces equally effectively through violent policies of ethnic erasure and mass-deportation. In the winters of 1925-28, almost one million people were deported, primarily across the southern border to mandate Syria.¹⁹⁷ Kurdish nationalists who had fled Anatolia following the 1925 revolt regrouped on the peripheries of the Kurdish homeland and formed the transnational organization *Khoyboun* (Independence) in the Lebanese town of Bihamdun in 1927, which notably also included co-ethnic cooperation with the Armenians in opposition to Republican Turkey.¹⁹⁸

Kurdish nationalists from Turkey enjoyed some success in operating across the border from the relative safety of Syria under the French Mandate, but their failed attempt to defeat the

¹⁹⁶ Bozarslan in Vali 2003, p. 189.

¹⁹⁷ Chalihand [1978] 1993, p. 55.

¹⁹⁸ Allsopp, Harriet. 2015. *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Turkish military in the Mount Ararat revolt of 1930 resulted in a redoubling of violence imposed upon the Kurdish territories. Firsthand accounts describe “intellectuals sewn into sacks and thrown into the lake... people shut up in caves and burned alive by Turkish soldiers, and planes still burning villages several months after the revolt had been crushed.” All of these actions were legally endorsed by the Kemalist regime, which codified in law No. 1,850 that “[M]urders and other actions committed individually or collectively, from June 20, 1930 to December 10, 1930, by representatives of the state or the province... or by any civilian having helped the above during the pursuit and extermination of revolts which broke out in [Northern Kurdistan] and surrounding areas... will not be considered as crimes”.¹⁹⁹ Ethnic cleansing was further entrenched in May 1932, when the state established the “Sark Islahat Planı (Plan of the Reformation of the East)”, a strategy of forceful deportation and dispersion that would never allow the Kurds “to form more than one-tenth of the total population of a municipal district” and forbade “those who speak a mother tongue other than Turkish [to] form villages, quarters, or groupings of artisans and employees”.²⁰⁰ The Turkish military forcibly evacuated and ‘Turkified’ Kurdish villages one by one in an immensely violent process, resulting in up to a million and a half deaths and displacements by the time the ‘notoriously defiant’ final Kurdish holdout of Dersim fell after a protracted battle with Kemalist forces in late 1938. Although this event would mark the end of early Kurdish resistance to the Turkish state, the dialectic of denial and the violent preemptive suppression imposed upon the Kurds in the early state period fostered a militant and radicalized Kurdish defensive proto-nationalism that foreshadows the dynamics of the Northern Kurdish resurgence starting in the 1960s.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 56

²⁰⁰ Yüksel in Borzsalan 2020, p. 210.

Transversal Dynamics and Kurdish Activism in Mandatory Syria

Although the Kemalist regime's determination to exploit and subjugate the Kurdish people was effective in unifying the Turkish citizenry in diametric opposition to the 'backwards' Kurds and succeeded in suppressing Kurdish separatism in the short term, the "militarism of Turkish nationalism" in this self-assertive phase "left a mark so deep during the years of colonial campaigns in Kurdistan that it can still be felt at every level of Turkish political and social life today" by imbuing in its Kurdish population an enduring ethnicized and politicized identity centered around resistance to the state.²⁰¹ Had the Kurds constituted a geographically isolated minority contained within the Turkish borders, the 'quiet years' of desolation that preceded the fall of Dersim might have continued indefinitely, perhaps resulting in the eventual extinction of 'Kurdishness' as a concept itself. The transnational nature of the Kurdish homeland, however, provided nationalists ample opportunities to seek refuge in more tolerable political landscapes and develop cross-border Kurdish partnerships.

It was in this transversal political environment that the Kurdish nationalist political movement in Syria began. Of the four states containing significant Kurdish minorities, the Kurdish community in Syria is the lowest in both proportion and absolute number, and has as a result been excluded from several notable studies of Kurdish nationalism.²⁰² The Kurdish population in Syria has historically been dispersed between a significant urban minority in Damascus and several discontinuous territories in the northwest of the country, most notably Kurd-Dagh, Ain al-Arab, and Jezira, along the Iraqi frontier.²⁰³ During the Ottoman period in

²⁰¹ Chalihand [1978] 1993, p. 60.

²⁰² C.f. Natali 2005, Entasser 1992, et al.

²⁰³ Nazdar, Mustafa in Chalihand [1978] 1993, p. 194.

Syria, as in Anatolia, many urban Kurdish elites were ‘Arabicized’, integrated into the power structures of the Levant, while rural Kurdish society was characterized by semi-feudal relations governed by *agahwat* (latifundists). As a result, there was no strong sense of ethnic solidarity or Kurdish nationalism widespread amongst Kurds native to the Levant.

On the contrary, a significant portion of the urban Kurdish intelligentsia welcomed the French administration, and rural Kurds had little sense of belonging to a larger Syrian state, and their lives “continued to be defined by their tribes and land, far from the centers of power and economic heartlands of the Syrian state.”²⁰⁴ As such, the main orchestrators of Kurdish nationalism in the region “were not Kurds native to the Kurdish areas encompassed by Syria, but Kurds who had fled from repression by the government of the Turkish Republic. These Kurdish leaders, full of grievances against the new Turkish state, began to organize both culturally and politically within Syria under the banner of Kurdish nationalism,” empowered by the protection provided to the Kurds under consociational French mandatory policy. French Jezira in particular became a major destination for Kurdish refugees from Turkey and Iraq alike, and while the flow of refugees “caused great resentment among Arab nationalists”, emigrés from Turkey quickly became the dominant influencers of Kurdish advocacy in the region given the complete lack of any “Kurdish political organization with a nationalist agenda at that time in Syria”.²⁰⁵

The aforementioned Khoybun organization was established primarily by Kurdish nationalists residing in Damascus, and although the league incorporated Kurdish intellectuals, leaders of tribes, sheikhs and rebel fighters from Iraqi and Syrian regions, the single goal of the organization was “the liberation of the Kurds from Turkish ‘claws’”, since the Arab nationalist governments that would later threaten Kurdish identity had not yet been established, and the

²⁰⁴ Allsopp 2015, p. 54.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

mandatory powers were seen as “temporary authorities that maintained a decentralized state” and did not jeopardize Kurdish survival. In an effort to avoid inflaming regional tensions, Khoybun’s policy stipulated specifically that “relations with the governments of these countries should be developed, that in Iraq and Syria the rights granted to the Kurdish people by the mandate authorities were sufficient and that no demands for other political rights should be made”.²⁰⁶ Thus, while the membership of the league was undeniably transnational, the objective of this organization was not to establish a sovereign state unifying the Kurdish homeland, but simply to ensure the survival of Kurds in Turkey. Given the restrictive nature of the Turkish political space and the ethnic chauvinism of Kemalist policy, these struggles necessarily took the form of separatist and independence movements, culminating in the failed organization of the Ararat revolt. Following the ultimate suppression of that movement in 1930, the tribal and military leaders of Khoybun retreated again to Syria and were subsequently exiled from the Kurdish region or put under house arrest by French authorities.²⁰⁷

Although Khoybun itself was short lived as an organization and membership was primarily comprised of urban intelligentsia, it was notable for its widespread distribution of nationalist propaganda to Kurdish tribes in an effort to ethnicize Kurdishness in the political sphere. While this propaganda was “appealing to the Kurdish immigrant population from Turkey for its strong anti-Kemalist overtones, in Iraq this strategy was less successful” because there was no need to adopt nationalist objectives when not faced with subjugation at the hands of British colonial rule.²⁰⁸ Fuccaro notes the externally-shaped nature of early nationalist rhetoric in Western Kurdistan, noting that “the nationalist literature Khoybun circulated among tribes expressed ideas of national community clearly influenced by 19th century European nationalism.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ McDowall 2020, p. 580.

²⁰⁸ Fuccaro, Nelida in Vali 2003, p. 201.

These conveyed the emotional expression by means of strongly romantic imagery, borrowed from local traditions. In much of Khoybun's nationalist discourse, the Kurdish people were portrayed as a uniform and historic national entity, to be 'revived and reconstituted' on modern grounds by the united efforts of Kurdish nationalists".²⁰⁹ Thus we see the beginnings of a mythic essentialized Kurdish ethnonationalism extending to a 'time immemorial', reflecting the adoption of Western rhetoric of political groups in the region. A failed attempt by Khoybun's central committee to justify Kurdo-Armenian cooperation based on a supposedly common ethnic origin not only demonstrates the absolute malleability of Kurdish ethnicity, but also the recognition that ethnonational claims had to be used as the fundamental justification for Kurdish independence in order to achieve international support or recognition.

The activities of Khoybun did not last long enough to achieve tangible results and enjoyed only minimal success in its time, but its ethnonationalist discourse "had a lasting effect on the subsequent development of Kurdish nationalist consciousness [by] providing the ideological and political frame within which many Syrian Kurds came into contact with national ideas."²¹⁰ Although the comprehensive defeat of Khoybun's separatist goals in Turkey dissuaded Kurdish nationalists in the region from pursuing armed struggle as a means of liberation, Western Kurdistan remained an important site of Kurdish intellectual activity throughout the mandatory period, as a "Kurdish cultural revival" in the open political space resulted in the proliferation of journals and newspapers "concentrated on propagation of the Kurdish alphabet and the development of grammar as well as the publication of Kurdish classics, folklore, and historical and ethnographic studies". These journals, the most prominent of which were called *Hawar* (The Calling) and *Ronahî* (Light), were printed in Kurmanji throughout what were the 'silent years' in

²⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 203

²¹⁰ Ibid., p. 206

Northern Kurdistan, disseminated in Syria before being smuggled across the border to Turkey, thus exposing the population there to the nationalist myths and language so brutally policed by the state and externally sustaining a Kurdish identity.²¹¹

Political Development Without (Explicit) Coercion: The Case of the Kurds in Mandatory Iraq

Although the navigable political space for Kurds in Syria was relatively large and a Kurdish political identity certainly developed, this identity rarely advocated for full-on separatism or regional autonomy. This was in part due to co-ethnic opportunity structures provided by the Kurdish friendly Syrian Communist Party (SCP), founded in 1927 by a Syrian of Kurdish descent. Geographically speaking, however, the territorial discontinuity of the Syrian Kurdish homeland acted as an obstacle to Kurdish autonomy movements, since their focuses were divided between separate enclaves of ‘Kurdishness’ and hampered by pragmatic obstacles to mobilization.²¹² Not so in Iraq under the British protectorate, where the Kurdish population was relatively concentrated in the mountainous and inaccessible Mosul province and was not a target of widespread oppression in the decades immediately following the partition of the Ottoman Empire. Concurrent with the denial and violent erasure of Kurdish identity in Kemalist Turkey, the Kurdish communities encompassed by the newly-formed Iraqi state experienced *de facto* autonomy empowered by British mandatory rule. In the aftermath of the First World War, British troops continued to occupy the former Ottoman *vilayets* of Mosul and Suleymaniah throughout the Turkish War of Independence, denying Mustafa Kemal’s claims to the Kurdish areas south of Anatolia and protecting valuable oil reserves. Despite the military occupation, the

²¹¹ Allsopp 2015, p. 61; Fuccaro in Vali 2003, p. 210-212.

²¹² Tejel, Jordi. 2009. *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society*, translated by E. Welle and J. Welle. London: Routledge.

British maintained a limited political presence in the occupied territory from 1918 to 1926, when both provinces were officially integrated into the British mandate of Mesopotamia. **Source** From the earliest days of occupation, British authorities endeavored to co-opt rather than coerce the local Kurdish population, having little strategic or material interest in disrupting the status quo of an ostensibly backward, underdeveloped, and bellicose tribal community. In November of 1918, army Major Edward Noel was sent to the area, his assignment being to “arrange with local chiefs the restoration and maintenance of order” in the war-torn community while simultaneously explaining “that there is no intention of imposing upon them an administration foreign to their habits and desires”.²¹³

Noel set upon his task enthusiastically, gaining the confidence of local Sheikhs and tribal chiefs by offering them political posts and financial incentives and, critically, through repeated promises to protect the caliphate- reflecting the salience of religion rather than nationalism as a means of organization. Exhausted from the many conflicts of the Great War and its tributaries and experiencing increased isolationism at home, the British authorities “tried to control the Kurdish tribes with a light hand using only a network of political officers to maintain general relations [and] ensure the collection of revenue”, interfering in Kurdish political development far less explicitly than in Turkey or Iran. As a result, ‘Kurdishness’ in mandatory Iraq was not identified as a threat to the state or something to be violently suppressed.²¹⁴ Without being faced by a coordinated attempt at ethnic erasure, the ‘opportunity structures’ provided by the large political space did not become ‘coercive structures’ encouraging the ethnification of Kurdayetî.

Even though the Kurds in early Iraq were not subjected to violent ethnonational centralization, it must be noted that more subtle shifts in the political landscape encouraged

²¹³ McDowall 2020, p. 463.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

Kurdish leaders to view themselves in increasingly ethnopolitical terms. The 1921 Iraqi constitution unilaterally “asserted that Iraq was made of two ethnic groups- Arabs and Kurds”, and the League of Nations made numerous statements aimed at ensuring the safety of the Kurdish “ethnic minority” in Iraq, primarily through guaranteed language rights. Denise Natali, in concert with the scholarly consensus on mandatory Iraq, observes that in general, “rather than neutralizing ethnic and religious differences within the heterogeneous Iraqi society” by fostering a civic nationalism, the “British reinforced them by elevating Sunni Kurds above other groups”, in doing so employing tried and true ‘divide and rule’ tactics but also creating a fundamentally ethnicized political sphere with lasting consequences even to Iraq’s infamously sectarian political sphere today.²¹⁵ Although this analysis certainly rings true, I would argue that the British *created* new ethnopolitical dichotomies as much as they reinforced them. Although this external imposition of ethnicity had more immediate and dramatic consequences for Sunnis and Shi’as in the south of the country, the political sphere it created still guaranteed that any future assertions of Kurdishness would have to be justified through the rhetoric of ethnonationalism. Even if Kurdish communities in Iraq faced little material coercion to politicize their ethnicity, global machinations and colonial practices acted as a form of structural coercion, providing only one avenue for the maturation of Kurdish political society: ethnonationalism.

This tension between traditional and ‘modern’ forms of authority can be observed in the exploits of Sheikh Mahmoud Barzanji, a prominent tribal chief in Suleymaniah who was appointed as regional governor by the British authorities in 1918. Although Barzanji faced considerable internal opposition, particularly from the southern regions of Kirkuk and Kifri, his external support and sizable British stipend empowered him to attain near-hegemonic power over

²¹⁵ Natali 2005, p. 28

the Kurdish territories, providing ample opportunities for a state-building project.²¹⁶ Barzanji, however, much like Ubeydullah before him, presented his qualifications and objectives as ethnonational to external actors while primarily advancing his personal interests at home. Barzanji consolidated his own base of power and bought the loyalty of as many chieftains as possible to expand his influence. Rather than utilizing this newfound administrative power to “form a confederation of tribal leaders for the settlement of their public affairs under the guidance of British officers”, Barzanji determined to “fill every post with his own relations regardless of their character or capability, and to exclude all whom he did not consider personal adherents”, requiring every public administrator in the province to declare allegiance to him personally as a condition of employment.²¹⁷ These factors make it clear that while Barzanji wished to lead a community of Kurds, he did so out of his personal interest rather than for the good of his broader political community. As his power and influence grew in the region, and Britain continued to vacillate on its commitment to the Mesopotamian mandate, Barzanji detected an opportunity to expand his sphere of influence and establish full control over the Kurdish territory. Although Barzanji’s declared objective to create a “free [and] united Kurdistan” and his public display of Wilson’s Principles of Self Determination in the fly-leaves of a Quran strapped to his arm certainly imply nationalist motives, historian David McDowall warns that, like many other retrospectively-dubbed early twentieth-century Kurdish nationalists, “his vocabulary and style did not appear to the nationalist sentiment.” Instead, Barzanji advocated for jihad against the external occupiers and the creation of a Kurdish fiefdom under his own *personal* control.²¹⁸ Although his rhetoric was more developed than Ubeydullah and his navigable political space was more conducive to ethnonationalist claims, it remains clear that

²¹⁶ Yüksel in Bozarlan et al. 2021, p. 216.

²¹⁷ McDowall 2020, p. 464.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

Sheikh Barzanji was focused more on the control of a territory than a community. This is further evidenced by the fact that the Jaf and Pizhdar, two of the most powerful Kurdish tribal confederations in the region, leant military assistance to the British in suppressing the revolt. Clearly, this was no unified assertion of Kurdish nationalism. Barzanji was exiled to Iran in the aftermath of the failed uprising, but negotiated his return with the British two years later before launching a second revolt in 1924. This rebellion, too, was suppressed by British and opposing Kurdish forces in conjunction. Unlike in the Turkish case, where the Kurds presented a united (albeit weak) front against Kemalist annihilation, Kurdish elites in Iraq did not see ethnonationalism as a survival strategy, and therefore adopted it sporadically and in response to specific contexts. In Iraq, the ethnonational state was not yet established in the Kurdish consciousness as the only means of ensuring security or self-determination.

In this type of sociopolitical space, a pre-state modality of social organization dominated by “kinship and marriage practices [and] the lack of formalized offices or even formalized scales of hierarchy”, no one means of stratification has gained hegemonic power in the political arena. Without the state or empire as the ‘common sense’ modality of organization, a “normatively or legally defined ‘right state’ of power” ceases to exist altogether.²¹⁹ In such an arena, no unified Kurdish movement emerged because “when one tribe or tribal leader has mounted a revolt against central authority... other tribes and leaders fail to support or actually oppose the movement- to the point of siding with a foreign power against rebelling Kurds, just to restrain the ascension of the leading tribe.”²²⁰ This behavior is obviously counterproductive and self-destructive from a ‘national’ standpoint, for the simple reasons that political motivations

²¹⁹ Barth 1954; Eller 1999.

²²⁰ Eller 1999, p. 165.

were “often not national in any serious way but personal or provincial, aiming at the aggrandizement of the leader” rather than the establishment of a unified political community.²²¹

Although this ‘fertile ground’ for the development of a Kurdish national movement in Iraq did not lead to secessionist or ethnonational claims, linguistic and cultural autonomy fostered a new class of intellectuals educated in the Kurdish language, who had an awareness of the violence and suppression imposed under the Kemalist regime. Still, while flows of Turkish refugees into Syria and Iraq and a large political space produced a great deal of Kurdish scholarship, little of it was nationalist or secessionist in nature. While Syria served as somewhat of a safe haven and ideological incubator for Kurdish nationalists who had escaped from Turkey, Kurds in Iraq focused their attention primarily on their own status and that of the newly-formed state as a whole.

When Iraq became nominally independent under heavy British influence in 1932 during the reign of Faisal II, very little changed for the Kurdish population in the north. As the political sphere haltingly liberalized, most educated Kurds with political aspirations were more than willing to participate in nationwide movements, resulting in a strong alliance between the Kurdish intelligentsia and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) beginning in the 1930s.²²² The vast majority of rural Kurds continued to adhere to tribal and local loyalties, with little outside pressure to adopt the rhetoric of separatism or ethnonationalism. It is true that some British reports describe the Kurdish drive for a state as being stubbornly embodied in their local contacts, but it seems likely that this observation was heavily influenced by the exaggerated nationalism of Kurdish elites who wished to benefit from the mandate and the interpretation of a desire for local autonomy as a grassroots expression of national sentiment. The fragmented

²²¹ Ibid., p. 168.

²²² McDowall 2020, p. 825.

nature of Barzanji's tribal coalitions, and the lack of widespread support for or participation in his attempted uprisings, demonstrate that the Kurds in Iraq did not organically pursue the establishment of a unified ethnonational community even when the appropriate 'opportunity structures' were present. The open political space in Southern Kurdistan during the mandatory and Hashemite periods lasted for a duration of several decades but produced relatively few nationalist projects, further supporting the argument that the ethnification of Kurdish identity in the political sphere has occurred primarily as a reactionary and protective measure in response to external developments that can have cascading effects.²²³

The Republic of Mahabad and its Symbolic Significance

One such external development was the establishment of the Republic of Mahabad in 1946, empowered and essentially created by the Soviet invasion of Iran during the Second World War. Although the Republic lasted less than a year and had 'limited resonance' in the Kurdish space as a whole at the time, which to date remains the only example of a nominally sovereign and independent Kurdish state. Empowered and essentially created by the Soviet invasion of Iran in 1946, the Republic lasted for only a year and had "limited resonance" in the Kurdish space at the time, in retrospect Mahabad has taken on great symbolic significance for the Kurdish nationalist movement as a symbol of resistance.²²⁴ To date, the Republic remains the only nominally sovereign and fully independent Kurdish state, and its formation and subsequent disintegration served as a catalyzing force for the foundation of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq and Mustafa Barzani's rise to prominence.

²²³ Brubaker 2009, p. 32.

²²⁴ Yüksel in Bozarlan et al. 2021, p. 231.

Prior to the occupation of the region by Soviet forces, Iran appeared perhaps the least likely of the four states containing sizable Kurdish minorities to yield a sovereign Kurdish political entity. The Kurdish political movement in Iran was fragmented and underdeveloped, and rarely made concerted attempts at secession or even territorial autonomy. Eastern Kurdistan had escaped the post imperial dissection of the Ottoman Kurdish territories under the tenuous protection of the Qajar dynasty, and as a result was excluded from the Kurdish state promised by the Treaty of Sevres and many early discussions of the ‘Kurdish question’ in the international arena.²²⁵ Although self-avowed Kurdish nationalist Ismail Agha Simko, leader of the influential Shakak tribe in Urmiya, made periodic attempts to gain British support from across the border and mobilize his community around an Islamic Kurdish identity, neither he nor any members of his ‘grand council’ of Kurdish chiefs made a serious effort to manifest a cohesive ethnonational sentiment.²²⁶ Instead, much like Ubeydullah and Barzanji in Anatolia and Iraq respectively, he aimed to consolidate his own base of personal loyalty and did not engage in any concerted nation building efforts. Absent this elite-imposed reorientation of political society, Kurdish society retained its tribal character, with all the divided loyalties contained therein, and did not organically adopt nationalist aspirations.

Even after Reza Shah set about centralizing and modernizing the Iranian state by ‘terminating the tribal way of life’ and abolishing the caliphate in 1924 just as Mustafa Kemal did, the suppression of Kurdish political organization did not catalyze widespread ethnic solidarity or separatism. Hamit Bozarslan is correct in observing that “Turkey and Iran stand out for their similarities with respect to their Kurdish policies” in that they both subjected their large and geographically consolidated Kurdish communities to politics of “denial, forced assimilation,

²²⁵ Natali 2005, p. 118.

²²⁶ McDowall 2020, p. 657

and resettlement” in the context of a nationalizing independent state.²²⁷ Nevertheless, by the Second World War, an ethnified Kurdish political identity was “barely existent” in Iranian political discourse and “rarely manifested itself in the supralocal sphere”.²²⁸ There are a few key reasons accounting for why Kurdishness was not operationalized as nationalism in Iran during the early state-building period, the most central of which is the fact that the Kurds did not constitute the largest or most identifiable ‘minority group’ in the country following independence. Other ethnic communities retained languages and customs that diverged from the Persian more dramatically than the Kurds’, so the Kurdish people did not present the greatest threat to ethnic homogeneity. From the state’s perspective, “the problem of Iranian unity centered not on the Kurds, who were similar to the Persians, but on non-Persian communities racially linked to Arabs and Turks”. The Azeri people in particular had a larger population than the Kurds and were repressed more harshly by the state during the early state-building process.²²⁹

The Kurds were integrated into the nation building fold more than they were excluded, with the Shah claiming “natural cultural similarity between Kurds and Persians as descendants of the Medes and speakers of a shared Indo-European language”.²³⁰ Iranian identity was “de-ethnicized” at politically expedient moments and the Shah incorporated religious and anti-imperialist rhetoric more readily than Kemal did, allowing Kurdish people to view themselves as Kurds in the cultural sphere and Iranians in everyday political life. Like colonial Iraq and unlike Kemalist Turkey, the objective of the state was to “destroy the political and military organization of the Kurdish tribes, *not their ethnic identity*”.²³¹ Both rural and urban Kurds willing to embrace the Iranian project were rewarded for their loyalty, as the Shah

²²⁷ Bozarslan et al. 2021 p. 814.

²²⁸ Natali 2005, p. 119.

²²⁹ Ibid, p. 121.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid. (emphasis added)

“tempered smaller and settled tribesmen by giving them semi-legitimate authority in their localities” and placated the Kurdish intelligencia by appointing them to minor government posts in Tehran.²³² Since Kurdish distinctiveness itself was not under imminent threat, it was generally not viewed as a nexus of political mobilization, much less a justification for territorial secessionism. The lack of grassroots support for the idea of a Kurdish nation can be observed in Simko’s 1926 revolt against the Iranian authorities, where more than half of his military force defected upon contact with state forces.²³³ Natali’s ultimate conclusion that constitutional Iran “limited incentives and opportunities for Kurds to manifest their ethnonational identity” is reasonable, but I believe her rhetorical framing of ethnification again assumes such mobilization arises spontaneously. As previously demonstrated, Kurdishness has been ethnified and politicized as a survival strategy and response to regional developments, not as a spontaneous process in a liberal political space.

Although the suppression of Kurdish identity in Iran was far less virulent or aggressive than it was in Turkey, it was nevertheless the case that the Shah’s government demonstrated a consistent preference for Persian Iranians in state posts and economic policy. Higher offices, such as that of Provincial Governor, were reserved exclusively for Persians, and many of the land and market reform policies passed in the early decades of the monarchy further disenfranchised Kurds in the underdeveloped northwestern region of the country.²³⁴ These grievances, while not sufficient to provoke a separatist movement in itself, found an external supporter in 1941, when the Soviet Union invaded Iran to prevent the latter from lending its support to Germany during the Second World War. The Soviets’ true objective was to gain oil concessions from the Iranian monarchy, but their occupation of Western Iran provided an opportunity for disaffected Kurds in

²³² Bozarlsan et al. 2021, p. 221; Natali 2005, p. 123.

²³³ Hassiyan 2021 p. 8.

²³⁴ McDowall 2020.

Iran to exploit the vacuum of power.²³⁵ The Soviet army occupied much of Western Iran, and “actively encouraged Kurdish nationalism in the Mahabad region by disseminating printing presses, providing military aid, and establishing the Society for the Revival of Kurdistan (*Komalay Jiyanaway Kurdistan*) or JK with the assistance of local religious leader and intellectual Qazi Muhammed”, not only allowing but *encouraging* local Kurds to establish a self-governing organization.²³⁶ Still, this externally-stimulated ethnification of Kurdishness initially resulted in the creation of a Kurdish manifesto that only demanded cultural and linguistic rights within the framework of an Iranian state, but by 1946 under four years of de-facto autonomy under Soviet Occupation Qazi and his supporters officially founded the Republic of Mahabad in a relatively small town near the Iraqi border, with it creating the Kurdistan Democratic Party (retroactively Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iran) or KDPI, to govern the new ‘state’.²³⁷ The Republic quickly took on all the trappings of an established, sovereign nation state, creating its own constitution, parliament, flag, and police force. By all accounts, Mahabad became a self-governing territory, even if its territory and population was confined to a rather miniscule proportion of the greater Kurdish homeland in Iran.²³⁸ Led by a group of educated Kurdish intelligentsia who had learned the modern ideas of equality, democracy, freedom, and nationalism in the schools established by Reza Shah’s government, the establishment of the Republic as an ostensibly national community can be viewed as another instance of passive revolution, wherein the aspirations of a select few elites leads to the creation of social structures not necessarily reflecting the loyalties of the multitude.²³⁹

²³⁵ Phillips 2015, p. 31.

²³⁶ Ibid, p. 30, Hassiyan 2021, p. 11; Ahmadzadeh, Hashem, and Stansfield, Gareth. 2010. "The Political, Cultural, and Military Re-Awakening of the Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Iran." *The Middle East Journal* 64(1): 11-27.

²³⁷ Yüksel in Bozarlsan et al. 2021, p. 231.

²³⁸ McDowall 2004, p. 224.

²³⁹ Eller 1999, p. 165

This ‘passive revolution’ was indicative of a broader divide in Kurdish political organization along the axes of urbanism and ruralism, a lasting dichotomy that has continued to impact the governing style of Kurdish movements to the present day. At Mahabad, that tension was reflected in Qazi Muhammed’s tenuous alliance with Mullah Mustafa Barzani, a rising Kurdish nationalist who had been instrumental in establishing the *Hawar* party in the KRI six years prior. Barzani and his tribal militiamen had fled to Iran following a failed 1943 revolt against the Hashemite Dynasty, and subsequently entered into a marriage of convenience with Muhammed, who begrudgingly allowed Barzani to serve as the military guard for the Republic but reportedly refused to let Barzani or any of his troops enter the gate of Mahabad itself while they were stationed outside the city.²⁴⁰

Qazi Muhammed and the KDPI’s doctrine emphasized a non-violent and diplomatic approach to achieving Kurdish autonomy, and he viewed Barzani and his tribal affiliates as backwards and bellicose, perhaps even as an obstacle to the realization of a true centralized Kurdish nation.²⁴¹ Although Barzani and Qazi may have disagreed on aspects of how best to advocate for Kurdish autonomy and cultural rights, the Mahabad Republic ultimately would not serve as the Kurdish experiment in statebuilding that its founders may have initially hoped it would. Less than a year after the foundation of the Republic, and following the Soviet Union winning oil concessions from Iran, forces rapidly withdrew in 1946 and the Republic was subsequently surrounded and defeated militarily in a matter of weeks. Mustafa Barzani proved his military ability and valor in driving back Iranian forces at the beginning of the re-occupation, but a lack of Soviet support meant that military defeat was an inevitable eventuality. Faced with overwhelming opposition, Barzani and approximately four hundred of his best fighters from

²⁴⁰ McDowall 2004, p. 242; Phillips 2015, p. 31.

²⁴¹ Garapon and Çelik in Bozarlsan et al. 2021, p. 234.

Suleymaniah, including some Kurds from Mahabad who preferred Barzani's more direct approach to gaining autonomy from the central government, fled to the Soviet Union in 1946 where they would remain, attempting to rebuild the Kurdish movement in Iraq and Iran for over a decade.²⁴² It was here that Barzani re-formed the Kurdish Democratic Party-Iran as the KDP in Iraq from exile, much to the chagrin of many Kurdish political leaders in Iraq, who preferred to continue their alliances with the ICP. Nevertheless, Barzani's considerable tribal influence led to the split of Rizgari, the Kurdish contingent of the ICP, between national and regional politics.²⁴³

During Barzani's ten year exile, the KDP enjoyed modest grassroots support and was led in large part by Ibrahim Ahmed, a prominent leftist Kurd from Suleiymaniah who had played a significant role in the foundation of JK in Iran directly preceding the Soviet occupation. Under Ahmed's rule, the Kurdish democratic party actually continued many of the alliances that carried over from the ICP, a strategy that led to frustration amongst many tribal aghas and ideological conflict within the party that only increased between the years of 1947 and 1958, when the next major chapter in Kurdish history would begin with the toppling of the Hashemite monarchy.²⁴⁴

Although it is true that the early state period contains many examples of transnational Kurdish relationships sustaining resistance to newly emergent central governments, the frequency ease with which these cross-border alliances between various Kurdish movements were formed in the early state period only "attest to a notorious inability of the weak nationalizing states to control their territory, but also to the existence of a degree of solidarity among Kurdish tribes and movements transcending the recently established borders".

Ultimately, however, I agree with Hannes Černy when he argues that "to deduce from this degree of solidarity common ethnicity as the independent variable determining relations between

²⁴² Ibid, p. 235

²⁴³ Černy 2017, p. 117.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 119

various segments of Kurdish societies in all four nationalizing states of Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria, as the ethnic alliance model and related groupist frameworks do in their reification of ethnic identities, would be a gross simplification of the complex dynamics within the matrix of interests, identities, and resulting behaviors of actors in this context.”²⁴⁵ As the following sections will comprehensively demonstrate, when political circumstances change such that transnational Kurdish cooperation is no longer in both parties’ mutual self interest, pragmatic considerations almost universally overcome ethnic solidarity as a motivator for political behavior.

Therefore I endorse Shahram Akbarzede’s depiction of Kurdish “transnational identity as a form of ‘groupness’, an ‘intensely felt collective solidarity’, which as Rogers Brubaker contends is not ‘enduring or definitionally present’, and rather emerges “intermittently due to specific circumstances.”²⁴⁶ In specific instances, the perception of a shared enemy threatening transnational Kurdish communities in tandem might cause “issues of ethnicity and politics [to] become entangled”, but, in the laconic words of Charles King and Neil Melvin, “identity politics is more about politics than identity”. As such, moments of transversal Kurdish cooperation emerge not in response to essentialist instincts, but in response to political circumstances, which can change dramatically and without notice.²⁴⁷ Thus, the only way to understand transnational Kurdish relationships and their motivations without resorting to ‘parochial groupism’ described by Jordi Tejel is to examine in depth the sociopolitical contexts that lead to the emergence of Kurdish political movements.²⁴⁸

It is for precisely this reason that this thesis contains such extensive historical analysis. It attempts to employ a multidisciplinary and non-groupist analysis that “requires we ‘look and see’

²⁴⁵ Černy 2017, p. 131.

²⁴⁶ Brubaker 2009, cited in Akbarzede 2020, p. 2287.

²⁴⁷ King and Melvin 1999, Akbarzede 2020, p. 2288.

²⁴⁸ Tejel 2009, cited in Yüksel in Bozarlsan et al. 2021, p. 231

the matrix of identities and interests and the process by which they are gradually transformed through historical interactions. These interactions do not by definition magnify the difference between identities; they may also attempt to renegotiate a different type of relationship between self and other,” both in inter- and intra-group contexts.²⁴⁹ This chapter supports Abbas Vali’s contention that “Kurds’ minority status and the hegemonic nature of [nationalizing] states create a dialectic of denial (by states of Kurdish political demands) and resistance (by Kurds), generating a politics marked by exclusion and/or violence”, but more importantly, it contends that there is nothing about Kurdish ethnicity itself that is intrinsically political.²⁵⁰ Ultimately, an analysis of how Kurdish identity became ethnified in four separate political contexts reveals some similar patterns, but reflects that contexts shape movements, and upholds Černý’s assertion that the “analytical equation of ethnic groups with states and their presupposed predecessors is not only demonstrably untenable but should not be made in the first place.”²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ Černý 2017, p. 12.

²⁵⁰ Vali 2006 p. 52-3; Akbarzadeh et al. 2020, p. 2281.

²⁵¹ Černý 2017, p. 104.

Chapter Four

Kurdish Nationalism in the Postcolonial Space: Competing Spheres of Influence

In the contemporary era, numerous scholars of Kurdish nationalism and identity identify the emergence of “two main traditions in Kurdish politics grounded in different zones in Kurdistan, one growing from the east part of Iran and northern Iraq and born from the KDP, and the other in southeast Turkey and Syria, born from the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).²⁵² The distinct approaches to Kurdish activism employed by each of these dominant parties can be attributed to ideological rather than territorial bifurcations, as both schools of thought have emerged from and been shaped by their respective political contexts. While the previous chapters have examined the historical underpinnings of contemporary Kurdish nationalist movements, this section will analyze the emergence of these parties and ideologies in detail, with an emphasis on the impact of transnational interactions. Ultimately, I argue that while transversal dynamics can play an important role in rekindling or sustaining some level of Kurdish identity, ‘ethnic bonds’ have only peripheral relevance to the actual motivations of Kurdish political communities. Despite a demonstrable lack of co-ethnic collaboration, the assumed fear of such ostensibly natural alliances has driven states to perceive and respond to ‘ethnic threats’ emanating from their Kurdish populations even when such threats stem from unrelated grievances or do not exist at all, in doing so driving previously ambivalent Kurds towards ethnonationalism in a self-perpetuating cycle. Kurdish identity stemming from the ‘dialectic of denial and resistance’ to the state, critically, does not necessarily correlate to transnational Kurdish solidarity, as evidenced by the emergence of Northern and Southern Kurdistan as the dominant and opposing foci of Kurdish nationalism.²⁵³

²⁵² Jongerden and Akkaya in Bozarslan et al. 2021, p. 810.

²⁵³ Vali 2006, p. 52-3

As noted by Maria O'Shea and Shahram Akbarzadeh, geographic and demographic factors influence the contours of political organization and relative balances of power in transversal Kurdish interactions.²⁵⁴ By virtue of their relatively large and territorially consolidated Kurdish populations, as well as through the imposition of policies that drove Kurds to view themselves in ethnonational terms, the sociopolitical contexts of Iraq and Turkey in the first half of the twentieth century set the stage for the emergence of strong national liberation movements in the modern era, albeit for different reasons. As a result, the Kurdish movements in these states became the dominant drivers of Kurdish ethnonationalist discourse as a whole, and the interests of Kurdish nationalists in Syria and Iran became secondary to the policy preferences of elites in Turkey and Iraq, respectively.²⁵⁵

The ultimate consequence of this dominant/auxiliary dynamic is that transnational linkages in the modern era of Kurdish nationalism have been lopsided, with a dominant Kurdish group pursuing its own political objectives even when the consequences have stifled the interests of its auxiliary Kurdish brethren.²⁵⁶ Ofra Bengio describes Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan as the 'big brothers' in the region influencing Kurdish political thought and mobilization²⁵⁷ - but, as analyses of cross-border relations in this thesis demonstrate, if this relationship can be described in any way as fraternal, political elites in each region certainly play their part in making the Kurds a dysfunctional family.

²⁵⁴ O'Shea 2004; Akbarzadeh et al. 2020, p. 2276.

²⁵⁵ Jongerden and Akkaya in Bozarslan et al. 2021, p. 812.

²⁵⁶ Bengio, Ofria in Stansfield, Gareth and Shareef, Mohammed, eds. 2017. *The Kurdish Question Revisited*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 82.

²⁵⁷ Bengio, in Stansfield and Shareef 2017, p. 83.

Describing the Two Schools of Thought in Modern Kurdish Politics

The first strand of Kurdish politics identified by Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya has its roots in the Mahabad Republic and the charismatic leadership of Mullah Mustafa Barzani, and can be reasonably termed the ‘traditionalist camp’ of Kurdish nationalism for its willingness to maintain the status quo and advocate for autonomy rather than separatism.²⁵⁸ Influenced by decades of ‘hands-off’ policy towards the Kurds in mandatory Iraq and powerful enduring tribal and religious structures of authority, the traditionalist camp has generally aimed to work within the confines of the existing international system by gaining protection and autonomy for Kurds through clever political maneuvering. The now-dominant KDP is primarily concerned with the sanctity and governance of its own territory, and pragmatically engages in trade and diplomatic cooperation with other states in the region to maximize its influence and opportunities- forging especially close economic ties with Turkey despite historical and popular animosity. The second strand of Kurdish nationalism, which emerged following the domestic upheaval in Turkey during the 1970s and was spiritually and militarily guided by the thought of prominent nationalist Abdullah Öcalan, retains a distinctly more radical flavor.

Inspired by Marxism-Leninism and originally intended more as a tool for socialist revolution than ethnic separatism, the PKK’s party ideology traditionally called for the creation of an independent and ethnically Kurdish state, though in recent decades it has advocated for the transcendence of the [ethnic] state as a nexus of authority altogether in favor of local administration through ‘democratic confederalism’- a cognitive turn of ideology that will be

²⁵⁸ Jongerden and Akkaya in Bozarslan et al. 2021, p. 814.

discussed at greater length in chapter six.²⁵⁹ Furthermore, while the KDP has consistently taken steps to protect the sanctity and security of its borders with neighboring Kurdish populations, the PKK rhetorically embraces the idea of transnational activism by rejecting the legitimacy of ‘artificial’ borders in the region altogether. From the PKK’s point of view, therefore, ‘transversal’ Kurdish dynamics are not transversal but regional, a philosophy that can be reflected in the parties’ willingness to establish bases and affiliated organizations outside of Turkey’s territory. Unsurprisingly, this approach has been met with skepticism by other Kurdish groups pursuing their own objectives in the region, and most aim to minimize the PKK’s presence except for in times of crisis or insecurity.

Just as the conciliatory nature of the KDP’s traditionalist approach stems from an ambiguous relationship with the state and international system in early Kurdish-Iraqi history, the radical nature of the PKK’s tactics to achieve national liberation is the natural consequence of a long history of regimes and political elites Turkey that brutally suppressed assertions of Kurdish autonomy or advocacy in the political sphere and denied the existence of the Kurdish people as a whole for decades. Armed with an understanding of the historical construction of Kurdish identity in its respective sociopolitical environments, it should not come as a surprise that the policies of ethnic erasure employed by the Turkish state with regard to its Kurdish population fostered the emergence of a radical liberation movement in Southern Kurdistan and among Kurdish refugees in Syria employing the rhetoric of separatist ethnonationalism.²⁶⁰

Prominent scholars of the Middle East have long since established a causal relationship between repression and radicalization in analyses of extremist groups in the region, convincingly demonstrating that the criminalization of political dissent only drives opposition underground

²⁵⁹ Černý 2017, p. 211.

²⁶⁰ Vali 2003, p. 61.

and increases the likelihood of violent extremism. In keeping with this pattern, the emergence of the PKK as an extremist organization was primarily a consequence of Turkey's deeply embedded Kemalist ideology, which underpinned the state's refusal to provide legal avenues for Kurdish dissent in the multiparty system established after 1961.²⁶¹ Critically, the ethnification of Kurdish grievances was not an inevitable conclusion of political liberalization, as evidenced by Kurdish politicians' willingness (in fact, preference) to collaborate with nationwide leftist forces in Turkey in an open political space.

It should be noted before we proceed further that the dichotomy I propose between 'traditional' and 'radical' Kurdish activism is a generalization and oversimplification of the many nuances influencing political behavior on both a local and regional level. Establishing such a broad bifurcation in Kurdish society has the potential to unintentionally contribute to the 'cliched constructivism' or 'groupist ontology' I aim to repudiate, but to abstain from any categorization or objective analysis of these parties would make my undertaking an analytical impossibility. Therefore, I will utilize these spheres of influence throughout my analysis while simultaneously cautioning my reader that the priorities and ideologies of any political movement emerge as a function of its specific space and context, and can be subject to rapid change or evolution through exogenous events.²⁶² There are many examples of peripheral parties from one 'dyad' adopting the rhetoric of and collaborating with the other, but the most prominent challenge to the ideological/regional divide I propose is that posed by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), an opposition party formed in response to Barzani's individualistic power centralization in the 1960s. The leftist and secular ideology of the PUK stemmed from

²⁶¹ C.f. Dalacoura, Katerina. 2011. *Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Gerges, Fawaz A. 2009. *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁶² Brubaker 2004, p. 69.

transnational interaction with Iranian Kurds and in explicit opposition to Barzani's governing strategies, but like the KDP and KDPI, it views the state itself as legitimate and generally does not advocate for fully-fledged separatism or revolution.²⁶³ Although this broad categorization is incapable of fully capturing the nuances and contradictions inherent to the Kurdish national question, it nevertheless serves as a useful conceptual framework through which to examine the development of contemporary Kurdish political movements.

The Emergence of Modern Kurdish Nationalism in Independent Republican Iraq

Although both movements described above can trace their ideological lineage to the period immediately following the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, the KDP-dominated camp of Kurdish political thought was established three decades prior to the formal establishment of the PKK in 1978, and remains the most practically influential ideology in the region today. Although the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq has been operating under Ibrahim Ahmed's leadership since Barzani's escape to the Soviet Union after the fall of the Mahabad Republic in 1946, the year 1958 constituted a 'watershed moment' for the Kurds of Iraq and is identified by historian Ofra Bengio as the beginning of the modern Kurdish nationalist movement.²⁶⁴ When Abd al-Karim Qasim and his Free Officers successfully overthrew the Hashemite Dynasty in the 14 July Revolution in 1958, Ahmed immediately issued a declaration hailing the new government and encouraging freedom and equality for Kurdish and Arab peoples. In turn, Qasim -who viewed the Kurds as a powerful potential ally to be utilized rather than resisted- included in his provisional constitution an article stipulating that "Arabs and Kurds are partners in the homeland,

²⁶³ Černy 2017, Natali 2005.

²⁶⁴ Bengio 2012, p. 32.

and their national rights are recognized within the Iraqi entity”.²⁶⁵ For the first time, the newly empowered Kurds of Iraq enjoyed ostensible parity with their Arab compatriots under the national government. Qasim also made symbolic gestures to convince the Kurds that he was serious, such as placing the Kurdish sun on the Iraqi national flag, the Kurdish dagger on the republic’s coat of arms, and releasing political prisoners from jail.²⁶⁶ Intent on centralizing his authority in an insecure political environment, Qasim invited Barzani to return to Iraq and take formal and legal control as chairman of the KDP. Barzani gladly did so and facilitated a close relationship with Qasim during the early years of his rule. Qasim provided Barzani with a car, villa, and generous federal stipend, and in return received the assistance of Barzani’s formidable tribal *peshmerga* (literally translated as ‘those who face death’) forces in political purges. This partnership proved useful early on, as Barzani’s men played a critical role in quelling a serious nationalist-Ba’athist uprising in Mosul in March 1959.²⁶⁷ Between the years 1958 and 1962, there were a full twenty-nine coup attempts levied against the Qasim government- a clear indicator of how valuable the co-option of Barzani’s powerful forces were to the new leader.²⁶⁸ In this period of state weakness when Kurdish revolt might have yielded victory or autonomy, however, Barzani was more than willing to work in partnership with Qasim to form a multi-ethnic federal state rather than fight for full independence.

The honeymoon period of relations between Barzani and Qasim quickly soured, as Qasim became suspicious of Ibrahim Ahmed’s continued communiques with his Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Arif. Fearful that full recognition of Kurdish autonomy in the final constitution would provide his Arab nationalist rivals with ammunition to overthrow his rule and concerned

²⁶⁵ McDowall 2020, p. 855.

²⁶⁶ Natali 2005, p. 49.

²⁶⁷ McDowell 2004, p. 303-5; McDowell 2020, p. 860.

²⁶⁸ Phillips 2015, p. 35.

by the increasing ruthlessness of Barzani's power centralization in the north, Qasim outlawed the KDP in 1959 and began providing military support to Kurdish tribes opposed to Barzani's authority.²⁶⁹ This reversal can be further contextualized in the increasingly ethnified political space of the country in the region, as Nasserite pan-Arabism swept the post-colonial Middle East. Across Iraq, the "multi-ethnic alliances that had brought down the monarchy ruptured and... competing ethno-nationalisms amplified and faced each other in an incrementally violent struggle over the future of the country", a political space that further reinforced the Kurdish conviction that ethnonational mobilization was the only avenue to cultural autonomy.²⁷⁰ Still, reflecting the enduring effects of a non-coercive early national development, "territorial separation was not part of Kurdish claims, because *most* Kurds did not see themselves as a separate political entity [or] autonomous ethnic group."²⁷¹ This rhetoric is reflected in a 1959 article in KDP's nationalist pamphlet *Hetaw*, which congratulated Qasim for "bringing freedom to Kurds and Arabs" through his struggle against imperialism, "a goal of Kurds and Arabs alike".²⁷² Although it is true that the multivariagated Kurdish tribes of the north were far from monolithic and that Kurdish nationalism in Iraq was initially cultural rather than political in nature, as the "boundaries of inclusion and exclusion became ethnicized and politicized, Kurdish nationalists began to express a highly ethnicized and violent form of Kurdish nationalism" as a *defensive response* to external coercion.

In contrast to earlier periods, the defensive impetus for Kurdish ethnonationalism in Iraq in the 1960s was supported by necessary mobilizing structures- namely a "semi legitimate national leader, an organized umbrella political party, clandestine networks, external support, and

²⁶⁹ Natali 2005, p. 51.

²⁷⁰ Černý 2017, p. 120.

²⁷¹ Natali 2005, p. 48.

²⁷² *Hetawm* no. 127, cited in Natali 2005.

financial resources”, all of which increased the salience and significance of their nationalist projects.²⁷³ As a result, the 1958 coup and the resultant Kurdish mobilization and struggle for autonomy served as a significant source of inspiration for Kurdish political movements in the region, though the KDP provided minimal material support to Kurdish nationalists in neighboring countries. Furthermore, a decade and a half of military and political struggle against Baghdad in explicitly ethnonational terms served as a potent force in disseminating the rhetoric and ideology of nationalism to the majority of the Kurdish population in Iraq. It was during this period that the term *Kurdayeti* first became instrumentalized for political use, and that many of the mythicized connections between contemporary Kurds and their supposed ethnic antecedents in the Gutis, the Medes, the Buwayhids, and any number of ancient societies once residing in the region.²⁷⁴ Barzani’s ambitious power centralization, aided by a now-unimaginable triumvirate of American, Israeli, and Iranian aid, was effective in disseminating uniform ideology and political praxis throughout his extensive tribal and urban networks.²⁷⁵ His drive to manifest a united and autonomous Kurdistan under his exclusive control, however, wrought as many challenges as it did benefits to the Kurdish movement in Iraq and fostered internal division. His choice to sign a brief ceasefire and autonomy agreement with Iraqi President Arif “in his personal capacity rather than as KDP president” served as the last straw for Ibrahim Ahmad and Jalal Talabani, who had become increasingly frustrated with Barzani’s overbearing control of the KDP and traditionalist political priorities. After expressing their dissent and being expelled from Barzani’s Sixth Congress in July 1964, Ahmad, Talabani, and roughly four thousand of their supporters crossed the border to seek refuge with Kurdish communities in Iran, where they would remain until the

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 52

²⁷⁴ Tunc 2018, p. 59.

²⁷⁵ McDowall 2020, p. 1172-8.

collapse of the KDP and Barzani's death created a new political vacuum from which the PUK would emerge.²⁷⁶

Mullah Mustafa Barzani's ascension to the status of nationalist icon and unambiguous leader of the Kurdish political movement in the 1960s and 70s served as a period of intense ethnification and politicization for the Kurds of Iraq, but the territorial integrity of Southern Kurdistan was tenuous, and the continuation of a campaign against Baghdad was contingent upon a) Barzani's charismatic leadership, b) foreign military assistance, and c) a weak Iraqi state. All three of these preconditions began to dissolve during the 1970s, beginning with Saddam Hussein's rise to power enabled by the Ba'athist coup of 1968.

During the early years of his rule, Saddam, like both Arifs and Qasim before him, was forced to conciliate Kurdish demands for autonomy based on the significant military threat they posed to his tenure.²⁷⁷ Negotiations between Barzani and Saddam culminated in a twelve-point agreement for autonomy known as the March Declaration of 1970, which established Kurdish as the official language of the region and promised both cultural and territorial autonomy within four years.²⁷⁸ Both Barzani and the regime appeared satisfied with the terms, and Saddam oratorically praised the agreement as "a full, fundamental, political, and constitutional solution which will guarantee brotherhood between the Arabs and Kurds forever." Saddam's rhetoric proved to be pure political posturing, however, as Kurdish autonomy was repeatedly postponed by an increasingly secure state that no longer felt pressure to capitulate to Kurdish demands. Saddam walked back his guarantee of territorial autonomy for the Kurds, claiming that liberty was "given to the people, not the land" in direct contradiction to the agreement signed only one year earlier. The contentious Kirkuk oil fields were nationalized by the central government in

²⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 1185.

²⁷⁷ Černý 2017; Natali 2005

²⁷⁸ Bengio 2012, p. 46-51.

1972, inciting widespread Kurdish riots and resulting in some shelling of Kurdish territory, and trust between Saddam and Barzani eroded as a result of several assassination attempts levied against the Kurdish leader and his family orchestrated by the regime.²⁷⁹

Although Barzani and the Kurdish *peshmerga* had the ability to effectively resist Saddam's military campaigns with arms and artillery provided by their Iranian, American, and Israeli allies, this source of external aid dissolved following the 1975 Algiers Agreement (see below) and Barzani's subsequent departure to Iran and later the United States. Unsurprisingly given the extent to which the KDP had come to reflect Barzani's personal ties and alliances, his absence combined with foreign abandonment shattered the Kurdish nationalists' spirits, and the KDP was temporarily disbanded in 1975. Although the organization was reformed under Barzani's nephew Massoud Barzani the following year, the Algiers agreement set the KRI down a path of repression and state violence that fostered defensive nationalism in a different way through a dialectic of denial, setting the stage for the eventual resurgence of both the KDP and PUK in the aftermath of the Gulf War.

The Re-emergence of Kurdish National Sentiments in Quasi-Democratic Turkey

While Mahabad rose and fell and Barzani strategically consolidated his control over the Kurdish movement in Iraq from exile, expressions of Kurdish identity in Turkey remained dormant, at least in the national political discourse. No meaningful rebellions or assertions of Kurdish autonomy had occurred in the country since the destruction of Dersim in 1938, leading some scholars to deem the period between 1940 and 1960 the 'silent years' in Eastern Anatolia and

²⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 122.

propose that Kurdish political identity was dwindling to extinction.²⁸⁰ Although it is true that Kurdishness was almost entirely absent from the political landscape, Hamit Borzsalan argues that Kurdish identity was ‘personalized’ rather than eliminated, and merely went underground for fear of repression by the state.²⁸¹ According to this account, when the news of the successes of Southern Kurdistan reached Turkey through refugees and the clandestine distribution of political journals the embers of Kurdish identity were rekindled and set the stage for a resurgent assertion of ethnonational separatism. Although this might at first glance appear a reawakening of the traditional and primordial ties ostensibly uniting the Kurdish nation as a naturally-coagulating political community, it is more likely that it reawakened memories of Kemalist oppression and juxtaposed the brutal underdevelopment of northern Kurdistan with the comparatively utopian conditions in the south.²⁸² This is not to discount the significance of the KDP in fostering Kurdish political identity in Turkey, but it does suggest in line with my general argument that historical and political context played a greater role in the ethnification of Kurdishness than Kurdishness itself.

The most important way news of the Kurdish exploits in Iraq disseminated throughout the region was through radio broadcasts, which Beatrice Garapon and Adnan Çelik deem “the most important innovation of that time... in forging Kurdistan as a culturally [but not politically] unified space.”²⁸³ The ease with which ideologies and stories could be shared across borders and distances was unprecedented, and could even be considered of equal significance to the emergence of the internet and instant messaging technologies in recent decades. Starting in the 1940s, several radio stations in Baghdad, Yerevan, and Jordan began broadcasting to Eastern

²⁸⁰ Tejel 2009; Allsopp 2015; Natali 2005.

²⁸¹ Borzsalan 2007 cited in Černý 2017, p. 123.

²⁸² Černý 2017, McDowall 2020.

²⁸³ Garapon and Çelik in Bozarlsan et al. 2021, p. 242. (note added)

Anatolia in the Kurdish language, in some cases espousing fiery nationalist rhetoric. Especially to the Kurds in Turkey, the Kurdish voice in the radio broadcasts was an altogether new experience. The criminalization of the Kurdish language and ‘Turkification’ of the region aimed to humiliate the Kurdish culture, but Radio Yerevan in particular “broadcast traditional Kurdish songs as well as dengbêj songs about their recent history and interpreted these songs by inviting Kurdish historians”.²⁸⁴ The objective of Radio Yerevan in particular was explicitly political-covertly funded and regulated by the Soviets and supported by the KDP, broadcasts frequently described the nationalist struggle of Barzani to the south in glowing propagandistic terms.

Although the salience and intensity of ‘underground’ Kurdish nationalism increased following Barzani’s return and the proliferation of ethnonationalism in Iraq, Kurdishness did not publically re-emerge in the Turkish space until opportunities emerged for them following the 1960 military coup, which (perhaps at first rather surprisingly), ushered in an era of limited political pluralism under a multi-party constitution.²⁸⁵ Again reflecting the limited popular appeal of ethnic mobilization in a political space that does not explicitly threaten ethnicity, the Kurdish ‘movement’ that emerged during the 1960s in Turkey was fractured among a plurality of leftist organizations and did not present a cohesive ethnic or economic agenda²⁸⁶ Still, while the civilian government established in 1961 did not violently target the Kurdish region and even legalized the language in limited contexts, it made it clear that any references to the Kurds as a distinct group or publications espousing Kurdish sentiments were opposed by the state and quickly suppressed. Though Kurdish people could participate in political life and advocate for their material interests, they could not publicly mobilize around their ethnicity.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Černý 2017, p. 140.

²⁸⁶ Garapon and Çelik in Bozarslan, p. 245; Chaliland [1978] 1993.

Anthropologist Jack Eller succinctly captures the changing space by observing the “minor improvement that people were no longer executed for claiming that the Kurds existed as they would have been a few decades earlier. But it was still impermissible to write or say anything about the Kurds *as* Kurds, about their culture or history.”²⁸⁷ This tension between liberalization and suppression resulted in the emergence of a new philosophy called *doouculuk* (‘Eastism’) through which Kurds and their leftist allies advocated for economic development in the neglected east without expressing their grievances in explicit ethnic terms.²⁸⁸ Kendal Nazan, president of the influential Kurdish Institute of Paris, describes Eastism as a “transitory period in the rebirth of the Kurdish national movement” and a stepping stone to the realization of ethnonationalism, in doing so capturing the popular consensus on this period of Kurdish development.²⁸⁹ Although it is true that the constrained liberalization of the 1960s denied Kurds opportunities to ethnicize in the legal political sphere and several illicit Kurdish organizations emerged throughout the decade, I believe depicting the evolution of ‘Eastism’ into ethnonationalism as an inevitable result of liberalization again makes a groupist assumption about Kurdish mobilization not grounded in actual reality.

Instead, it was the consistent denial of any public expression of Kurdishness whatsoever that drove Kurds in Turkey to radicalize and rally around the revolutionary thought of Abdullah Öcalan. The state’s suppression of a Kurdish alphabet book and an objective study by prominent Turkish sociologist Ismail Besikci on the “socioeconomic and ethnic foundations of Eastern Anatolia” illustrated to the Kurds that their participation in political life was inherently limited.²⁹⁰

The socialist Workers Party of Turkey (TWP) proved a highly popular party for Kurdish voters

²⁸⁷ Eller 1999, p. 174.

²⁸⁸ Hughes, Edel. 2006. "Political Violence and Law Reform in Turkey: Securing the Human Rights of the Kurds?" *Journal of Conflict Studies* 26(2), p. 76

²⁸⁹ Hughes 2006; Nazan cited in Gunter, Michael M. 1988. "The Kurdish Problem in Turkey." *Middle East Journal* 42(3).

²⁹⁰ Chaliland [1978] 1993, p. 92.

in the 1960s, and provided the first opportunity for Kurds to participate in the national assembly for decades. As a result, the TWP eventually became the first party in Turkey to acknowledge the Kurds as a distinct people with grievances and legitimate demands in Turkish society, and eventually adopted a motion calling on the party to “support the Kurdish people’s struggle for the realization of all its democratic aspirations and demands” and condemning the “fascist authorities representing the ruling class [who] have subjected the Kurdish people to a policy of assimilation and intimidation which has often become a bloody repression”.²⁹¹ For the first time since the founding of the republic, a legal political party had come to recognise the existence of a Kurdish minority within national borders, and it had done so in the context of an intra-ethnic coalition based on ideology rather than identity. Of course, the expression of Kurdish grievances in such a public setting was deemed unacceptable by the state and was subsequently banned a few years later.²⁹²

Kurdish-Leftist alliances proved instrumental in rekindling a political consciousness amongst the Kurdish elite and multitude, but Gerard Chalihand cautions us against overstating the extent to which Kurdish grievances were addressed through multi-party cooperation. Despite the divergences of opinion and robust debates surrounding foreign and economic matters, “the threat of repression and the deep-rooted legacy of Greater Turkish chauvinism made the Kurds an issue to be avoided if possible”.²⁹³ The best a revolutionary Kurdish party could do was form an alliance with progressive Turkish forces and join the struggle for democratization and federalism- though their interests were frequently peripheralized by their Turkish partners.

Frustrations naturally arose from this unequal alliance, culminating in a series of local demonstrations across Northern Kurdistan in the fall of 1967, the first massive movement against

²⁹¹ Chalihand [1978] 1993, p. 87.

²⁹² Černý 2017, p. 141

²⁹³ Chalihand [1978] 1993, p. 87.

state authority in the Kurdish region since 1938.²⁹⁴ The increasing threat socialism and eastism posed to the established status quo was at last rejected by Turkish elites in 1970, when another military coup rolled back the civil liberties established in the 1961 constitution and re-instituted martial law in the eastern provinces. In the decade that followed, the Turkish political space descended into factional chaos, with “unprecedented political violence reaching almost civil war like dimensions... pitting the state apparatus and the ultranationalist, paramilitary Grey Wolves against a myriad of radical leftist movements, who after 1974 came out of hiding and fought for such diverse ideals as enhancing civil liberties, workers’ rights and economic equality, defeating the capitalist- imperialist nexus, or outright socialist world revolution”.²⁹⁵

Given this violent political sphere where no hierarchy of ‘right authority’ is established and the rejection of Kurdish interests by mainstream Turkish parties, it is no surprise that a radical secessionist Kurdish party emerged. Thus, Jongerden and Akkaya suggest that “the PKK does not have its political background in Kurdish politics... but [was] born from the polarized revolutionary left in Turkey”, under combination of a complex of manifold but interrelated socioeconomic and political factors, cursorily summarized by Černý as “wider global phenomena, [and] the imposition of laissez-faire capitalism and top-down modernization programmes that fuelled inequality in agrarian Eastern Anatolia.”²⁹⁶ Lending support to this claim is the language of PKK’s founding congress , in which Öcalan and his followers clearly perceived the Kurdish peasants of rural Eastern Anatolia, analogous to the proletarian worker in Marxist- Leninism, in class terms first and ethnic terms second, and understood them as a vanguard in a class- based revolution turning Turkey as a whole into a socialist utopia”.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁴ Garapon and Çelik in Bozarslan, p. 245.

²⁹⁵ Černý 2017, p. 142.

²⁹⁶ Ibid; Jongerden and Akkaya in Bozarslan et al. 2020.

²⁹⁷ Černý 2017, p. 143.

Öcalan himself preferred political activism based on economic inequality rather than ethnic liberation, as evidenced in the fact that the PKK's practical and ideological predecessor the Ankara Democratic Higher Education Association (ADYÖD) advocated for socialist revolution on purely a class basis and was led by three ethnic Turks and Kurds in conjunction.²⁹⁸ It was only the suppression of ADYÖD, culminating in a police raid that arrested 163 student 'sympathizers' and the closure of the association in 1975, that Öcalan ultimately determined that "effecting revolutionary change by legal means and as part of an official movement was doomed to fail," choosing instead to go underground in East Anatolia in the hopes of catalyzing a nation-wide workers revolution by utilizing Maoist and Guevarist foco-theory-inspired guerrilla warfare tactics that put the disenfranchised peasants at the vanguard of the revolutionary struggle.²⁹⁹ Although it is true that some of Öcalan's writing and PKK rhetoric throughout the 1980s played up the ethnic aspect of their liberation struggle, this again reflects the deployment of 'strategic essentialisms' rather than genuine ideological conviction.

This point is supported by the fact that Öcalan has, since 1999, again rejected the ideal of the nation state in favor of his Bookchin-inspired project of 'democratic confederalism,' which advocates for governance based on the interests of local rather than imagined communities. The PKK was certainly 'born from the left', and party doctrine only emphasized the ethnic separatist aspect of Kurdish liberation for a small minority of its existence- thus calling into question the extent to which the organization can be perceived as a wholly ethnonationalist group in the first place.

²⁹⁸ Jongerden, Joost, and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, Ahmet Hamdi. 2010 "Born from the Left," chapter in *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, edited by M. Caizer and J. Jongerden. London, Routledge, p. 124.

²⁹⁹ Černy 2017, p. 143.

This economic and ideological underpinning of Kurdish separatism in Turkey does not in itself make the PKK's objective anti-nationalistic in itself- after all, it was Lenin himself who first advocated for the establishment of the nation-state as a means of resisting imperialist domination-³⁰⁰ but it certainly problematizes groupist assumptions that its formation as a radical Kurdish ethnonationalist NLM reflects "ethnically determined social action", which, as Weber cautions, "subsume phenomena that a rigorous sociological analysis would have to distinguish carefully."³⁰¹

Repression Contagion and the Spread of Kurdish Suppression

Interpreting these non-violent protests against economic marginalization and cultural erasure as a threatening expression of Kurdish nationalism, the Turkish government led by Cevdet Sunay responded to the protests with violence, and "was particularly repressive even against harmless demonstrations of 'Kurdism'", returning to Kemalist policies of Kurdish erasure and denial.³⁰² As mentioned above, a central reason for this continued insistence on the myth of an ethnically homogenous Turkey was the entrenched influence of Kemalism in nationalist discourses. Another key factor, however, was the threat posed by the Kurdish national movement in Iraq, which continued to pick up steam throughout the course of the 1960s. The threat of Kurdish nationalist rhetoric seeping into Turkey from Mullah Mustafa Barazani's movement was a major concern for the Turkish elite, although evidence for meaningful cooperation between the two groups other than a short lived KDP offshoot in Turkey is scarce.³⁰³

³⁰⁰ Lenin in Bozarslan 2021, p. 807.

³⁰¹ Weber [1922] 1978, p. 394.

³⁰² McDowall 2020.

³⁰³ Eller 1999, p. 175; McDowall 2020.

Nevertheless, an assumption that the Kurds would espouse ethnically secessionist claims also contributed to the stubborn refusal of Kurdish grievances during the liberalizing period.

Kristen Braithwaite provides a theoretical framework through which to view this dynamic in her ‘repression contagion’ model of ethnic conflict, which ultimately argues that ethnicity itself plays a minimal role in the spread of separatism, rather “it is state responses to perceived ‘ethnic threats’ - even when such threats stem from unrelated grievances or do not exist at all, that cause the most violence and ethnonationalist conflict”.³⁰⁴ Arguing against mainstream theories of international relations espoused by the likes of Huntington that argue “actual ethnic links to the group in the conflict zone make a state more likely to have its own conflict” due to the tendency of “secessionist movements in neighboring countries... to join their ethnic kin in the creation of a new ethnically homogeneous state”, Braithwaite asserts that “understanding the spread of ethnic conflict requires understanding the dynamic interaction between state perceptions of security threats, repression, and ethnic group behavior.”³⁰⁵ This stance echoes Hannes Černý’s conviction that ethnicity can only be understood in relation to “complex dynamics within the matrix of interests, identities, and resulting behaviors of actors in [each specific] context”, and ultimately leads to an endorsement of Bruce Gilley’s conviction that ethnic conflict as currently operationalized in explanatory IR serves as little more than “a messy descriptive label for a bunch of unrelated phenomena”.

Through the use of several case studies, Braithwaite convincingly demonstrates that “ethnicity does not play a motivating factor” in the behavior of transnational Kurdish interaction.³⁰⁶ The state’s perception that ethnicity *does* play a motivating factor in Kurdish behavior, however, has made all the difference- another example of ethnonationalism’s

³⁰⁴ Braithwaite 2014, p. 487.

³⁰⁵ Braithwaite 2014; Gilley 2004, p. 1161.

³⁰⁶ Braithwaite 2014, p. 475.

discursive reification. Throughout the 1960s, “Turkish leaders tended to interpret any political unrest in its Kurdish areas as secessionism and as having spread from Iraq or Iran, even when the movements themselves had more to do with economic than ethnic demands,” another reason why Turkish leftists were generally reticent to lend recognition to the Kurdish question.³⁰⁷ Kurds in Syria and Iran, too, were subject to the negative reactions to an emergent Kurdish proto-state in Iraq by their own governments. From when the British and French troops withdrew from the Syrian territory in 1946 to the Qasim revolution of 1958, “Arab-Kurdish relations were still fairly good”, albeit threatened by the increasing salience of pan-Arab nationalism.

The establishment of the United Arab Republic in conjunction with Nasser’s Egypt combined with the aforementioned ‘repression contagion’ mechanism resulting from Barzani’s struggle resulted in the Syrian government perceiving its miniscule and disjointed Kurdish population as a threat. In part motivated by fears of Kurdish migration across its shared borders with Iraq and Syria, the Ba’athist government in 1961 conducted an unannounced census in the Kurdish regions, requiring all citizens to provide paperwork and documentation of their Syrian citizenship. Although apparently only intended to affect those who had crossed into Syria illegally, the decision deprived over 120,000 Kurds in Syria of their citizenship, and with it any opportunity for state subsidies or public employment.³⁰⁸ Similarly, the Arab Cordon Plan of 1963 aimed to plant Arab settlers along the Syrian frontiers to act as a buffer between Kurdish communities displaced as many as one hundred thousand Syrian Kurds, and was intended to produce demographic change and reduce the apparent threat of co-ethnic alliances.³⁰⁹ Muhammad Talab Hilal, the Syrian Arab official in charge of spearheading the establishment of the forty-kilometer Arab belt (*hizam `Arabi*), concisely captured the groupist approach to

³⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 485

³⁰⁸ Tejel 2009; Allsopp 2015.

³⁰⁹ Chalihand [1978] 1993, p. 204.

ethnonationalism employed by state elites when he asserted that “for all their conflicting tendencies and the enmities and rivalries between them, the Kurdish tribes in *al-jazira* [the region in north-east Syria in which they are concentrated] are united by ... ‘the Kurdish race’ ... and the dream of national homeland”.³¹⁰

Hilal’s assertion of ‘organic ties’ between transborder Kurdish communities posing an ethnic threat, when no evidence for such a threat had yet arisen, perfectly reflects Braithwaite’s thesis that states perceive ethnicity as a greater source of political contestation than it is- and that by reifying ethnicity as a politically-relevant source of identity, states therefore contribute to the development of defensive ethnonationalism.³¹¹ The Syrian position that a “common religion, Islam, could not be the glue between Arabs and Kurds since for the latter, Kurdish national identity had first priority” is altogether ahistorical as previous analysis has elucidated, and in this instance again we see a state with a Kurdish minority pursuing ethnonational homogeneity prompted by exogenous factors.³¹²

The preemptive measures taken in Syria to stunt the ostensibly natural development of Kurdish nationalism, while stopping short of the drastic military measures employed by other states in the region, reflect the repression contagion described by Braithwaite in that the September Revolution in neighboring Iraq caused the Ba’athists in Syria to fear a Kurdish problem that presented no real or pressing issue- in this way, they also set the stage for a later radicalization of Kurdish nationalism in that state when the political space allowed for its emergence.³¹³ Kurds in Iran continued to be subjected to periodic state suppression and the denial of their cultural or territorial claims, and though the Mahabad Republic had ignited a wave of

³¹⁰ Bengio in Stansfield and Shareef 2017, p. 82.

³¹¹ Braithwaite 2014, Brubaker 2009.

³¹² Bengio in Stansfield and Shareef 2017, p. 83.

³¹³ Braithwaite 2014.

support for Kurdish nationalism during the 1950s it was blunted somewhat by the Shah's repressive policies and SAVAK security services. Although this continued repression was undoubtedly brutal and had dramatic consequences for Kurds engaged in the nationalist struggle in Iran, it did not have the same galvanizing effects throughout the multitude as it did elsewhere, due in part to the factors discussed in the second chapter of this thesis (namely, the fact that Iranian nationalism was somewhat inclusive of the Kurdish ethnicity and that the suppression of ethnic minorities was the general *modus operandi* of the Shah's regime.)³¹⁴

In his attempted suppression of Kurdish national sentiments in Northwest Iran, Reza Pahlavi found an apparently unlikely ally in Mustafa Barzani and the KDP. Following the fall of Mahabad, a number of prominent Kurdish nationalists had fled to Iraqi Kurdistan during Barzani's exile, where they initially enjoyed safe haven under the leadership of Ibrahim Ahmed, himself a founding member of the KDPI. After the September Revolution, the Shah cracked down on underground KDPI cells throughout the region and imprisoned many hundreds of party members in what has subsequently been referred to as the Year of Destruction (*salî q̄fan*).³¹⁵ This repression led to another mass exodus of refugees to Iraqi Kurdistan, which was now coming under the control of Barzani with Qasim's early support. The Shah perceived an opportunity to advance his interests on two fronts by providing "a safe haven, financial and military support, and even radio and other publishing and communication technologies" to the Kurds of Iraq to antagonize his rival neighbors- on the condition that the KDP assist him in suppressing the KDPI and Kurdish national movements in Iran.³¹⁶ Faced with the opportunity to gain valuable international support, Barzani readily assented and quickly set about removing all KDPI bases from Iraqi territory by consent or by force. Historical accounts describe how "Barzani forces,

³¹⁴ Gunther, Natali, et al. 2004, p. 27.

³¹⁵ Hassaniyan, Allan. 2021. *Kurdish Politics in Iran*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 68.

³¹⁶ Hassiyan 2021, p. 69.

alongside the Iranian army in areas such as Piranshar, Sardash, and Banê, hunted members of the KDPI inside Iranian Kurdistan.”³¹⁷ In the 1960s, KDPI members living in areas under Barzani’s authority suffered from persecution and assassination, their bodies frequently handed over to SAVAK authorities for public display in Kurdish Iranian villages.³¹⁸ This cold betrayal of fellow Kurds came in spite of the fact that Barzani’s ascendancy and indeed his party itself was enabled by Kurdish nationalists in Iran at the very moment he most needed their assistance.

Of course, in the rapidly shifting and complex landscape that is global politics, particularly in the Middle East during the 1970s, alliances and positions have the potential to shift overnight, and a Kurdish ‘imagined community’ dependent on external military assistance was, as previously discussed, fundamentally unsustainable. This proved to be the case in 1975, when Iraq and Iran temporarily normalized their relations in the Algiers Agreement at an OPEC conference, agreeing to a formal settlement on outstanding border disputes in the Shatt al-Arab region and pledging to cooperatively “maintain border security and prevent subversive infiltration in either direction”- a thinly-veiled reference to the threat of Kurdish conflict contagion and transnational aid. Overnight, Iranian forces were withdrawn and supplies to Mulla Mustafa suspended, and a subsequent Iraqi offensive was successful in driving Kurdish forces into the mountains.³¹⁹ Entirely defeated and dejected, Barzani developed lung cancer the following year and gained medical care in Iran, where he was provided amnesty by his former ally the Shah but kept under house arrest and forbidden from engaging in political activities. After seeking advanced treatment in the United States, he eventually succumbed to his illness on March 3rd, 1979 and was subsequently buried in Mahabad.³²⁰

³¹⁷ Ibid., p. 70.

³¹⁸ Gunther, Natali, et al. 2004; Bengio 2012.

³¹⁹ McDowall 2020, p. 887.

³²⁰ Gunes in Bozarslan et al. 2021, p. 254.

Clearly, the historic emergence of Kurdish parties and their interaction is no reflection of a deeply embodied or enduring sense of collective ethnic solidarity. In contrast, it reflects the limited relevance of shared ethnicity in determining political behavior or mobilization, a theme that runs true throughout transnational studies of Kurdish activism. In this relationship, while we see some examples of transnational collaboration in the Mahabad republic and the brief safe haven provided to the KDPI in Southern Kurdistan, even these cases remain historically contested. Some scholars, including prominent Professor Ofra Bengio, have exhibited a tendency to downplay the extent to which Kurdish parties have contributed to each others' suppression and extermination- reflected in her euphemistic assessment that the Kurds of Iraq have ensured their survival "by *turning a blind eye* to persecution of their Kurdish *brethren*" in other countries.³²¹ Instead, I believe an objective historic analysis demonstrates that, particularly in the bellicose relationship between the KDP and KDPI, Kurds have advanced their interests by *participating in*, often with great zeal, the persecution of their Kurdish *rivals*. An assessment that concludes otherwise, in my view, overemphasizes rhetorical 'strategic essentialisms' while peripheralizing actual historical events which better portray true motivations. Overwhelmingly, we see pragmatic considerations overcoming ethnic solidarity as the drivers of Kurdish elite behavior, even as the rhetoric of ethnonationalism matured and the ideology spread throughout the multitude.

This fact, along with the relatively insignificant role of ethnic identity or solidarity in determining the ideological emergence of the PKK from revolutionary Turkey, indicates that the behavior of Kurdish nationalist groups is the result of a complex co-constitutive relationship between the Kurds and the state in specific temporal and territorial contexts. Contrary to enduring depictions of solidarity in the discourse on Kurdish nationalism and ethnic separatism

³²¹ Bengio in Stansfield and Shareef 2017, p. 91 (emphasis added)

more broadly, objective ethnic ties have played a very minimal role in the emergence and maturation of diverse Kurdish political identities.

Chapter Five- **Transversal Dynamics in an Era of Kurdish Tragedy and Resurgence**

Following the concurrent blows to Kurdish nationalist aspirations across the region dealt by General Kenan Evren's 1980 coup, the dissolution of foreign aid to the Kurdish parties in Iraq following the Algiers Agreement of 1975, and Ayatollah Khomeini's rebuffing of Kurdish autonomy claims following the 1979 revolution, Kurdish movements across the region were in a position of great instability and were central targets of their respective states. As a result, a number of prominent Kurdish nationalists from Iraq and Turkey were forced to seek shelter in the hands of the regimes of the states containing their marginalized 'auxilliary' Kurdish brethren. Immediately following the temporary collapse of the KDP in 1975, the defeated Barzani became the Shah's 'guest' at one of his villas under SAVAK guard until his health worsened and he moved to the United States before dying in 1979.³²² The dissolution of Barzani's party presented a window of opportunity for Ibrahim Ahmed, Jalal Talabani, and roughly four thousand of their followers, who had been taking refuge in Western Iran since their expulsion from the KDP in 1964.³²³ These nationalists codified their rejection of the KDP's methods by establishing the PUK with assistance from the Assad regime in Syria in 1975.³²⁴ As discussed briefly in the previous chapter, the bifurcation between the KDP and PUK is often depicted as an ethnoterritorial one between speakers of the Kurmanji and Sorani dialects. While the demographic preferences of Kurds in Iraq and the de facto political partition of Southern Kurdistan is impossible to deny, the actual factors precipitating the breakaway and formation of the rival political entity are primarily ideological and political. The competing governing

³²² Phillips 2015, p. 36.

³²³ McDowell 2021.

³²⁴ Hassiyan 2021, p. 42.

strategies, and the extent to which both parties have converged in their ultimate goals somewhat over recent decades, will be a subject of analysis later in this section.

Early Stages of Cross-Border Diplomatic Contact

For now, though, it suffices to say that in a period of Kurdish weakness following the Algiers agreement, Talabani and the PUK were given a lifeline in Syria and Lebanon, from where the party headquartered much of its politiebureau, disseminated propaganda, and pursued strategic alliances. Such was the context in June of 1979, when Öcalan and one of his compatriots fled the increasing violence of martial law in East Anatolia to pursue their strategy of national liberation from abroad. With the assistance of Iranian agents, Öcalan made his way to Beirut through the Syrian border, where he was introduced to Adel Murad, a co-founder of the PUK working for the party in exile. Murad, though entirely unfamiliar with Öcalan or the mission of his fledgling PKK, nevertheless provided the young man with ten kalashnikovs and, more importantly, a meeting with Nayif Hawatmah's Syrian-backed Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP).³²⁵ Although this incident appears at first a clear-cut example of ethnic solidarity in transversal Kurdish cooperation, interviews conducted with Murad himself by Hannes Černý comprehensively dispel any notion that ethnicity played a central role in the PUK's decision to lend minor assistance to the as-yet-insignificant PKK. Describing his first meeting with Öcalan, Murad recounts:

³²⁵ Černý 2017, p. 153.

“One evening I met with two of my Iranian contacts who told me that two persons had come from Turkey, that they were the new left there... we met then in my apartment at night, that was the first time I met Abdullah Öcalan. Öcalan started talking, for an hour he kept going, but I could barely understand anything, his Kurdish was difficult [to understand], the Iranians, who spoke Turkish, had to translate. I let Öcalan stay with me until I could find a translator ... Öcalan did not like the Iranians [translating] our talks, he later said he wanted to talk to me directly because I’m a Kurd ... so I got a translator, and Öcalan stayed with me ... in the end he stayed for three months in my apartment.”³²⁶

From this description, it seems quite clear that Murad conceived of Öcalan and his followers in political terms first and ethnic terms second- just as Öcalan viewed the Kurds in Turkey as representing the dispossessed proletariat more than as a subjugated ethnic community.³²⁷ The fact that Murad says this group (which he described as a “Turkish group” in his communiques to Talabani), represents the ‘new left’ rather than the ‘Kurds’ in any meaningful way is revealing. It is further evident that the two men did not feel an immutable ethnic bond upon introduction- even their ostensibly similar language had to be translated into Turkish by Iranian mediators, a third-party intervention about which Murad did not appear to share Öcalan’s concerns. Nevertheless, it is still true that Murad and the PUK were instrumental in ensuring the survival of the PKK during this time of vulnerability- but to attribute this short friendship to ethnic solidarity alone would be to discount the innumerable other factors influencing the decision to assist. First and foremost, at this point in Kurdish history each party had suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of their respective states and found it necessary to

³²⁶ Interview with Adel Murad, Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, 3 September 2010 in Černý 2017, p. 154.

³²⁷ Chalihan [1978] 1993, p. 51.

engage in mutual alliances and make external contacts. Both the PUK and PKK were “political refugees, leading a paltry existence in exile, with little to lose from working together and equally dependent on the charity of others”, especially states nominally friendly to the Kurdish cause in the region.³²⁸ Furthermore, Öcalan in 1979 was a ‘nobody’, and no one could reasonably have foreseen the PKK’s meteoric rise to prominence and the decades-long insurgency that would ultimately result from this brief collaboration. It is important to remember that the assistance Murad provided was at the time viewed as a “simple act of charity and hospitality towards an ideologically related Kurdish organization in need” rather than concrete political assistance- he himself ‘saw no great difference’ between offering Öcalan a couch to sleep on and facilitating contacts with the DFLP, since the consequences and extensive impact of his doing so were impossible to anticipate in that moment.³²⁹ Although the fact that Öcalan was a Kurd may have played a limited role in Murad’s hospitality towards him, it was the “concurrence of two ideational factors, ethnicity and a radical leftist ideology” that allowed for the initial communication between the PKK and PUK.

Once the meeting with the DFLP had occurred and been successful, however, Kurdish groups in Syria and Lebanon played a negligible role in the militarization and training of PKK insurgents, and Öcalan himself forged ties with the Syrian state and Palestinian NLMs more readily than he did with his fellow Kurds. Assad viewed the Kurdish movements in Syria as too weak and fragmented to pose any threat to his power and, like the Shah throughout the 1960s, determined to “shrewdly manipulate the Kurdish movements in Turkey and Iraq” to destabilize rival governments and leverage his own regional interests.³³⁰ As a result, Assad and the Palestinian groups under Syrian control welcomed this new insurgent movement with open arms,

³²⁸ Černy 2017, p. 157

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Phillips 2015, p. 74.

establishing an extensive training facility for the PKK in Lebanon's Beqqa Valley and providing considerable financial and military support to Öcalan's group.³³¹ Although it is true that the PUK 'opened the door' for the PKK's resurgence, it was really Assad and Palestinian NLM's that made the group an effective fighting force, as reflected in PKK official Selahettin Çelik's assessment that "in reality, [the PKK was] finished as an organization after 1980... but in Syria we could gather ourselves together. From the Palestinians we learned things. We learned about making demonstrations for martyrs, about ceremonies. We did a lot of reading on a people's war [together], we also had armed training. They gave us clothing, cigarettes. We owe the Palestinians something."³³² Clearly, while the PUK and PKK had some limited links on the highest level of party communication, the lion's share of support for the PKK's cause came from Syria and Palestine, and the majority of insurgents viewed their partnership as such. Even Öcalan fostered close ties with the Syrian state, owning a villa in Damascus, "traveling around in a red Mercedes provided for him from Syria and protected by Syrian Kurds who [were] his only bodyguards. In every way, he was living the life of a Syrian official," facilitating the interests of the Syrian state despite its history of Kurdish subjugation. Given the ease with which these intra-ethnic ties were discarded for inter-ethnic ones, it is difficult to make the case for ethnicity as the determining variable in this early showing of transversal solidarity.

The collaboration of the PKK and Syrian state, beyond being a means by which Assad could destabilize or at least irritate his regional rival in Turkey, also served as a convenient outlet to alleviate the grievances of the domestic Kurdish population in Syria. As discussed in previous chapters, the Kurdish movement and national sentiment in Syria was relatively weak and fragmented owing to a small and geographically discontinuous Kurdish population and the

³³¹ McDowall 2020, Natali 2005.

³³² Murad interview in Černý 2017, p. 154.

relatively late emergence of a Syrian nationalism following the end of the French Mandate. Although it is true that the “weak capacity of the Syrian Kurdish parties to mobilize did not require Damascus to initiate harsh repressive methods” in the form of military intervention as was the case in Turkey and Iraq, the Kurds were still marginalized from a state ideology built upon Arab nationalism, as codified in the Ba’athist constitution of 1973.³³³ Though the exclusion of the Kurds and the Kurdish language became an official aspect of state doctrine, the regime had to “tone down its official ideology in order to become socially viable”, and in reality the state fostered local alliances with Kurdish notables to keep the Kurdish ‘problem’ under control and depress revolt.

This “balance between redistribution and coercion” was successful in placating enough of the Kurdish population to avoid collective rebellions throughout most of the twentieth century, but police raids, arrests, and economic marginalization still caused alienation particularly among younger members of the Kurdish community.³³⁴ The PKK’s prominence in Syria following 1979, while actually collaborating with the regime, still fought for the cause of Kurdish liberation and therefore served as a means by which disaffected Kurds could attain economic and social advancement. Again reflecting Assad’s security in his ‘Kurdish problem’, the recruitment of Syrian Kurds to the PKK was actively encouraged by the regime- government officials worked shoulder to shoulder with PKK recruiters in Kurdish villages, and fighting with the PKK excused an individual from mandatory service in the Syrian forces.³³⁵ Here too, pragmatic considerations outweighed ethnic solidarity in driving Syrian Kurds to participate in the PKK, but it should also be noted that many of the Kurds recruited had familial ties to refugees from Kemalist ethnic cleansing a half century earlier and therefore an additional motive for bellicosity against the

³³³ Tejel 2009, p. 62

³³⁴ Braithwaite 2014, Tejel 2009, p. 65.

³³⁵ Černý 2017 p. 157

Turkish state.³³⁶ While ethnicity might have played a role in the mobilization of Kurds in Syria around the PKK, it was only made possible through state assistance, which in turn only came because the Syrian state did not view its Kurds as a mobilized or threatening political force. Furthermore, Öcalan, despite his rhetoric about liberating all Kurds from subjugation, viewed the Kurdish population

For several years after the PKK's relocation to the Beqqa Valley, the group focused primarily on rebuilding its military forces and preparing for guerilla warfare. Increasing militarization and subjugation of the Kurdish region under Evren's military government, however, made launching a revolution from Turkish soil a near impossibility. Though the PKK's stronghold in Syria provided a valuable base of operations near the Turkish border, the flat desert-like landscape along the boundary made it a poor location for military mobilization. Furthermore, the Assad regime, cautious of provoking Turkish intervention, refused Öcalan's request to launch attacks on Turkish positions directly from Syrian territory.³³⁷

In need of a new international sponsor, Öcalan turned back to Iraq and began negotiations with the newly-re-formed KDP, now under the control of Mullah Mustafa's nephew, Masoud Barzani. Although the actual content of the initial communications between the KDP and PKK remain obscured from scholarly study, the cooperation culminated in a joint declaration of "Principles of Solidarity", signed by both Massoud Barzani and Abdullah Öcalan at a meeting in Damascus during October 1984.³³⁸ This eleven-article declaration authorized the PKK to establish military bases of operation in Southern Kurdistan and pledged a joint effort, "depend[ing] on the force of the Kurdish people" against "every kind of imperialism and the

³³⁶ Tejel 2009, p. 90-94.

³³⁷ Černý 2017, p. 158

³³⁸ Gunter, Michael in Olson, Robert, ed. 1996. *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: its Impact on Turkey and the Middle East*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, p. 50.

struggle against the plans and plots of imperialism in the region”.³³⁹ On the surface, this formalized and highly publicized expression of ethnic solidarity appears the most concrete example of transversal Kurdish cooperation in the modern era, but again a detailed analysis will reveal that each party entered into this agreement suspiciously, and only to the extent they felt it could advance their own domestic interests. Article ten of the declaration reflects this trepidation and clarifies that “the organizations would not side with actions which could damage the unity of the parties and that they should respect the organizational and political independence of each other”, with stipulations that the alliance could be terminated if one of the parties withdrew their support.³⁴⁰ The PKK’s motivations for entering the alliance are self-evident- without the ability to operate along the inaccessible and mountainous Turkish-Iraqi border, their objective of guerilla warfare against the Turkish state would have been unachievable. Despite the fact that the KDP sat on the opposite end of the ideological spectrum to the PKK and Öcalan’s repeated denigrations of the Barzani’s ‘primitive’ and ‘defeatist’ ideology in speech after speech, Öcalan now depended on collaboration with the KDP to achieve his strategic goals. For the KDP, motivations for the alliance are less easily discernible. Barzani himself played up the ethnic component of the collaboration, boasting that

*“For us, it is always a source of pride that in the regions that we have liberated with the cost of our blood, we have opened the area as a fortress for every Kurdish fighter. We signed the alliance with the PKK with this logic and for these reasons.”*³⁴¹

³³⁹ Černý 2017, p. 155.

³⁴⁰ Massoud Barzani in an interview with Turkish journalist Rafet Balli in 1993, in Černý 2017, p. 159.

³⁴¹ Ibid., p. 162

As with the earlier PUK-PKK collaboration, this declaration would appear a clear expression of pan-Kurdish nationalism and ethnic solidarity, but it is critical to recognize that Barzani here is employing ‘strategic essentialisms’ to portray his motives as noble to the Kurdish multitude. Reflecting Brubaker and Černý’s emphasis that as ‘analysts of naturalizers’ we must not become ‘analytic naturalizers’, it is important not to take such instances of ‘ethnic outbidding’ at face value but instead subject them to strict scrutiny. Hannes Černý proposes that the KDP’s decision to enter the alliance was a fundamentally strategic one, motivated in small part by increased cross-border mobility during the ongoing Iran-Iraq war and in larger part by Talabani’s attempted rapprochement with Saddam in Baghdad in 1982. Talabani aimed to regain an autonomy agreement similar to the 1970 manifesto, and pursued military aid from Saddam which never materialized. His brinkmanship backfired, and the PUK was evicted from its safe haven in Syria for changing sides in 1983.³⁴²

Faced with the prospect (and indeed, the reality) of PUK-Ba’athist cooperation against KDP forces as well as empowered by aid from Khomeini’s Iran, Barzani and his peers likely viewed the PKK fighters as a useful bulwark against their own domestic opponents, Kurdish and Arab alike. The KDP also recognized the need for allies given the inherent instability of their political context, in which relative freedom was only possible because of the ongoing conflict with Iran.³⁴³ This repudiates the depiction of events furthered by prominent scholars of the Kurdish nation including Denise Natali and David McDowall, both of whom also assume the alliance was a strategic move, but one to play up Barzani’s ‘pan-Kurdish’ credentials in his own constituency.³⁴⁴ While this might be at least in part true, it seems unlikely that Barzani would invite the PKK, the Kurdish group most radically opposed to his own leadership and ideology,

³⁴² Černý 2017, p. 166.

³⁴³ Ibid, p. 164.

³⁴⁴ Natali 2005, McDowall 2020.

into his territory had he not felt a compelling military and strategic need to do so. In sum, the ‘Principles of Solidarity’ should be viewed as two independent entities entering a tenuous partnership based on mutual self-interest, not shared culture or ethnicity- in this way, it is not dissimilar to alliances entered between disparate nation states, a fact that challenges the relevance of ethnic solidarity in transnational party interaction.

The Breakdown of Relations Between the PKK and KDP

From the earliest months of the PKK presence in Southern Kurdistan, it became immediately clear that the group’s sole objective was to mobilize in a campaign of guerilla warfare against the Turkish state, regardless of the consequences for Kurdish populations on either side of the border. In early 1983, “Turkish intelligence sources had identified a force of some 12,000 Kurdish guerrillas in an area stretching approximately 70 kilometers along the Turkish-Iraqi frontier”, composed of a mix of KDP and PKK forces.³⁴⁵ Forces from the PKK and its ally the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASLA) conducted frequent raids into Eastern Anatolia, stealing money, food, and other supplies from Kurdish villages and attacking Turkish patrols. Following a lethal attack in May 1983, the Turkish state invoked the ‘hot pursuit’ agreement signed with Baghdad five years earlier permitting Turkish forces to travel up to forty kilometers over the border in search of insurgents and conducted air raids that destroyed Kurdish camps and killed between one and several hundred Iraq Kurds, depending on which side’s propaganda is to be believed.³⁴⁶ These Turkish incursions proved an altogether unwelcome distraction to Barzani’s KDP, which continued to engage in periodic skirmishes with

³⁴⁵ Gunter 1988, p. 396.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

the PUK, Baghdad, and its proxy the embattled KDPI. Having initially underestimated the capability of Öcalan's group to wage guerilla warfare in Turkey, the KDP from 1984 began trying to convince the PKK to abstain from operations that could provoke Turkish raids, but the PKK was uninterested in what it perceived as more 'defeatism' from the KDP, who's authority or territorial sovereignty it did not recognize within its Marxist-Leninist ideological framework. This attitude is reflected in the testimony of Selahettin Çelik, who attended one of these meetings with the KDP in 1984 in Iran. By his account, PKK representatives "listened to Barzani['s delegation], assured them of our good intentions, and then chose to ignore them," continuing to escalate attacks and establish an insurgent presence in Turkey throughout the 1980s.³⁴⁷ Eventually, tensions reached a breaking point in May 1987 when, after another severe Turkish air raid causing KDP casualties, Barzani issued a formal warning to the PKK before declaring the 'Principles of Solidarity' null and void under the provisions laid out in article ten.³⁴⁸ At this point, however, the tide of the Iran-Iraq war had turned decisively in Iraq's favor and there was very little the KDP could do to root out the PKK 'occupiers' entrenched in several camps in Iraqi Kurdistan under their own exclusive control, where some fighters remain to this day.

In fact, the Kurds in Iraq by 1987 were in a desperate struggle for their own survival, as Saddam's increasing confidence in victory allowed him to turn some of his focus to eliminating the 'Kurdish problem' in the north once and for all. With the backing of the United States and the international community in his fight against the threatening Islamic Republic of Iran, Saddam felt empowered to engage in a campaign of brutal ethnic cleansing and resettlement in the Kurdish region that has come to be referred to as the *al-Anfal* campaign, a misappropriation of the Quranic term meaning 'spoils' (of war).³⁴⁹ Although Saddam attempted to negotiate with

³⁴⁷ Interview with Selahettin Çelik, San Louis, France, 9 May 2010 in Černý 2017, p. 168.

³⁴⁸ Černý 2017, p. 169.

³⁴⁹ Bengio 2012, p. 178.

both the Talabani's and Barzani's in 1982, when concrete aid from the United States began trickling in from 1984 onwards, it became clear that making Kurdish concessions were not necessary to achieve Iraqi victory.³⁵⁰ Consequently, Saddam began a campaign of aggression against the north. By November 1985, "199 Kurdish villages had been razed, and as Iraq's advantage in the war solidified, over one hundred thousand civilians and peshmerga were killed in a series of shelling campaigns and deadly gas attacks".³⁵¹ In the wake of increasing Kurdish persecution, Talabani's PUK realized the futility of partnership with Saddam and 'reluctantly reconciled' with Barzani and his Iranian backers in 1986, when the tide had already turned against the Kurds' favor.³⁵² In Baghdad, genocidal intentions reached their zenith when Saddam appointed a cousin, Ali Hassan al-Majid, secretary-general of the Baath Party's Northern Region on March 29, 1987. Al-Majid, now infamously known by his *nom de guerre* 'Chemical Ali', was instructed to "take care" of the Kurds using all necessary measures to clear a twenty-kilometer buffer on the Iraqi side of the Iraq-Iran border of its Kurdish residents.

He accomplished this through the implementation of Directive SF/4008, which established "prohibited zones" in the Kurdish populated areas of Iraq. Al-Majid ordered that "all persons captured in those villages shall be detained and interrogated by the security services, and those between the ages of 15 and 70 shall be executed after any useful information has been obtained from them, of which we should be duly notified," making as explicit as is possible a campaign of state genocide against the Kurds.³⁵³ The *al-Anfal* campaign was a years-long endeavor that comprised dozens of aerial strikes, but the most significant event by far and the one that lives most poignantly in the Kurdish cultural memory is the Halabja Massacre on March

³⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 178.

³⁵¹ McDowell 2004: 359.

³⁵² Černý 2017, p. 166.

³⁵³ Phillips 2015, p. 39.

16th, 1988. On that day, up to five thousand Kurdish civilians, primarily women and children, were murdered with mustard, VX, and sarin gas from chemical shells launched by the Iraqi army.³⁵⁴ One week later, al-Majid initiated ‘Anfal II’, a campaign intended to destroy everyone in the Kurdish region of Qara Dagh, south of Sulaimani. Again, “chemical attacks on one village after another preceded ground action”, driving fleeing Kurds north into the mountains where all male citizens were subsequently rounded up and summarily executed.³⁵⁵ Similar scenes occurred in the five subsequent campaigns, and especially in areas where Kurdish resistance was fiercest, women and children were not exempt from extermination, beatings, and rape. Exact estimates for the number of Kurds who were massacred during the genocide are difficult to determine, but the scholarly consensus places it somewhere in the range of one to two hundred thousand, with millions more displaced and traumatized by the conflict. Clearly, even if the KDP and PUK were unified in their intention to evict the PKK from Southern Kurdistan in mid-1987, the horrific domestic conditions and lack of external support precluded any such action.

In an act that should absolutely disintegrate any vestigial conception that ethnic ties play a significant role in motivating the actions of the Kurdish political parties examined in this study, both the PKK and some Kurdish tribes in Iraq aligned themselves with Baghdad during the brutal campaigns in an attempt to advance their own self interest. As has been the case throughout the history of Kurds in Iraq, neither Barzani nor Talabani had a monopoly over their respective constituencies, and a number of individual chiefs retained their political autonomy and lent their tribal support to whatever party they deemed most expedient. Pejoratively deemed by Kurdish nationalists as the *jash*, these forces primarily consisted primarily of villagers and local townspeople who pursued lucrative rewards for their services and “were willing to assist in any

³⁵⁴ McDowell 2020; Natali 2005; Entasser 1992 et al.

³⁵⁵ McDowall 2020, p. 974.

way that would ingratiate themselves with an oppressive regime”.³⁵⁶ On the whole, David McDowall suggests that these collaborators “were dutiful servants of the Anfal”, and demonstrated little solidarity with the Kurds they assisted in rounding up and executing. Clearly, even within the relatively coherent national community of Southern Kurdistan, ethnonationalism was far from a ubiquitous sentiment.³⁵⁷

While one could argue that the *jash* were merely apolitical or antiquated adherents to their prior ‘tribal loyalties’, a similar characterization cannot be made of the PKK, who also directly benefited from Baghdad’s Kurdish repression. By 1988, the KDP, PUK, and any organized Kurdish resistance to Saddam had been comprehensively broken, and the PKK with its several thousand guerilla fighters gained uncontested control of Southern Kurdistan.³⁵⁸ Viewing an opportunity to co-opt a rival Kurdish group, Saddam pursued lines of communication and military aid to the PKK as early as 1985, a gesture the PKK reciprocated by sharing their own estimates of troop positions and emphasizing their readiness to assist in putting down the KDP.

Secret Iraqi documents published by the Turkish Daily News in 1992 revealed that by 1987 “the PKK, in exchange for equipment, weaponry and the Iraqi army turning a blind eye to their activities, provided the very regime that [was in the process of committing] genocide against the Iraqi Kurds with intelligence on them, indeed, even offered to fight them for Baghdad.”³⁵⁹ This development, which is entirely absent from the literature other than in Černý’s detailed analysis, runs entirely in contrast to assumptions scholars of explanatory IR make in their depictions of ethnic group solidarity between the PKK and KDP. Even optimistic analyses that posit increasing transnational Kurdish links in times of instability and violence, such as that

³⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 976.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 978

³⁵⁸ Černý 2017, p. 170-171.

³⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 171

of William Gourlay in his article entitled *Pan-Kurdish Solidarity and Cross-Border Links in Times of War and Trauma*, fail to hold up to a strict historical analysis.³⁶⁰ As the development of transversal relations between the aforementioned ‘spheres’ of Kurdish influence in the 1980s comprehensively demonstrates, Kurdish parties enter into intra-ethnic partnerships to advance their material and strategic interests. Nothing more, nothing less. If that alliance apparently continues to serve both parties it may prevail, but if it does not, ‘ethnic ties’ have little weight in motivating collaboration. The early alliances formed between the PKK and the PUK/KDP, though they at first appear textbook examples of ethnic solidarity and primordial confluence, in fact reflect the specific political circumstances in which they were formed, and had no lasting relevance in motivating ‘we-ness’ or ethnic groupism.

New Structures of Opportunity and Coercion Stemming From the Gulf War

The Kurdish national movement in Iraq following the conclusion of the *al Anfal* campaigns in 1989 was comprehensively defeated, abandoned by the international community, and incapable of violently resisting the Iraqi state. Both the KDP and PUK held no territory and were forced to retreat to secluded mountain caches of food and weapons, making only limited lightning raids and ambushes against Iraqi forces. The PKK reigned supreme in military might throughout the region, continuing to terrorize Turkish forces and Kurdish communities alike in Northern Kurdistan from their bases to the south, now tacitly permitted by Saddam’s regime.³⁶¹ Regional dynamics, however, shifted suddenly as a result of Hussein's ill-advised decision to invade Kuwait in August of 1990. To explore the factors that led to this invasion and the

³⁶⁰ Gourlay, William. 2018. "Kurdayeti: Pan-Kurdish Solidarity and Cross-Border Links in Times of War and Trauma." *Middle East Critique* 27(1): 25-42.

³⁶¹ McDowall 2020 p. 1015; Černý p. 175

resultant coalition response is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is a fair generalization to make that the incursion stemmed from a combination of Saddam's hubris and Iraq's crippling economic debt to the oil-rich gulf states following the taxing eight year conflict with Iran.³⁶²

Regardless of the motivations, the immediate consequence of this action was the withdrawal of all Iraqi troops from the Kurdish region, with the exception of 'sensitive points'- namely the Iran-Iraq-Turkey border triangle and several border crossings in the north.³⁶³

Although Kurdish leaders were hesitant to openly declare allegiance with the U.S. led coalition invading Iraq in response to the Kuwait incursion in January of 1991, they did take advantage of the vacuum left by reassigned troops by remobilizing as many as 3,000 peshmerga fighters and establishing strongholds in a few towns across southern Kurdistan. After Saddam had been crippled by a resounding defeat at the hands of the combined military might of the West, the United States was ironically reticent to adopt a policy of enforced regime change in Iraq to avoid the country falling into chaos, and ultimately the Iranian sphere. Still, the Bush administration wanted Saddam out, and the President of the United States in February 1991 called upon "the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside and then comply with the United Nations' resolutions and rejoin the family of peace-loving nations," an explicit encouragement and implication of American support for dissident groups in Iraq to revolt against the weakened regime.³⁶⁴ Two weeks later, on March 4th, 1992, Shi'ite's revolted en masse after decades of marginalization under the Ba'athists in the Sha'aban Intifada, which directly inspired uprisings in Southern Kurdistan only one day later.³⁶⁵ Although both Barzani and Talabani (and subsequently some scholars) portrayed the protests as

³⁶² Bendigo 2012.

³⁶³ McDowall 2020 p. 1017.

³⁶⁴ Phillips 2015, p. 43.

³⁶⁵ Bendigo 2012 p. 197.

spontaneous and it is certainly true that the events of the prior decade had sparked an intense defensive ethnification of Kurdish identity, it is also true that the PUK and likely the KDP had deliberately placed ‘ sleeper agents ’ in communities across the region, who were ready to lead an uprising should exogenous events lead to such a possibility.³⁶⁶

This strategy was effective in mobilizing Kurdish civilians *en masse* against Saddam, who transparently viewed the Kurds as a threat to be permanently exterminated and had by now betrayed both the KDP and PUK too many times to make any overtures for reconciliation. Kurdish forces were further bolstered by a joint PUK/KDP declaration that all those who had collaborated with Saddam during *Al-Anfal* would be forgiven if they joined the present uprising. According to McDowall, this unconditional amnesty ballooned the Kurdish forces by nearly ten-fold over the span of only a few days, an estimate which if true reveals the extent to which Kurdish militants were divided over the question of national liberation as well as the effectiveness of the Iraqi state’s efforts in decimating the capabilities of the Kurdish front.³⁶⁷ Given this numerical superiority and the two-front revolt Baghdad faced in 1992, the popular revolt made significant initial progress in capturing contested territory in the North, taking Kifri, Kalar, Chamchal and even Kirkuk, the oil-rich ‘ jewel in the Kurdish crown ’ .³⁶⁸

The state, however, demonstrated that its ability for retaliation was not yet entirely spent, and by the end of March government forces had re-seized most of Kurdistan with further chemical attacks and helicopter raids, killing up to twenty thousand more Kurds in their suppression of the revolt and causing the flight of another two million.³⁶⁹ This brutality re-traumatized the Kurdish population who had experienced the horrors of *al-Anfal* only a few

³⁶⁶ McDowall 2020, p. 1020.

³⁶⁷ McDowall 2020, p. 1070.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 1021

³⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 1023, Bozarslan et al. 2021 p. 279.

years earlier, but this time their subjugation occurred “under the spotlight of many international TV channels”.³⁷⁰ Unlike in 1988, when the West preferred to turn a blind eye to Saddam’s war crimes amid fears of regional instability, the massacre of Kurds in 1991 fit in well with post-Gulf-War portrayals of Sadam as a frenetic and murderous madman, and the international sympathy that the Kurds had been denied for the prior decade at last materialized. The United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 688, establishing a ‘safe haven’ north of the 36th and south of the 32nd parallel in the Kurdish region of Iraq that came to be known as ‘Operation Provide Comfort’, providing air security and military assistance to the victimized Kurds.

This resolution and protection bestowed upon the Kurds by the West was not, however, an instance of genuine good will towards the Kurdish people or even a desire to instill ‘soft power’ in the region. Instead, it was directly in response to pressure exerted by the Turkish President Turgut Özal, who was fearful of letting the refugees accumulating on his border into the Kurdish region of Turkey but simultaneously wanted to avoid “CNN broadcast[ing] the Turkish military refusing a million civilian refugees entry into Turkey and safety – thus leaving them at Saddam Hussein’s mercy or freezing to death in wintry mountains”, something the state could get away with during *al-Anfal* in 1988 but not in the international spotlight in 1992.³⁷¹ Özal personally appealed to the leaders of Britain, France, and the United States, and ultimately proved instrumental in the establishment of the ‘safe zone’ and therefore, the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the most powerful and independent Kurdish political entity emerging from the region to date.³⁷² This sudden reversal of Turkish policy towards the Kurds of Iraq, which until 1991 was one of denial mixed with animosity, reflects not

³⁷⁰ Bozarslan et al. 2021, p. 279.

³⁷¹ Černý 2017, p. 173.

³⁷² Phillips 2015, p. 99.

only the liberalizing nature of the Turkish political space under Özal but also the changing loyalties of the KDP and PUK *vis a vis* the PKK and Turkey.

As mentioned above, the PKK had gained military superiority throughout most of the KRI following their partnership with Baghdad in 1987, and continued to launch periodic attacks against villages and perceived ‘collaborators’ across the border. Although the PKK certainly made some gains in its military objectives and gained a foothold in some villages across Eastern Anatolia, “most Turkish Kurds seemed to resent PKK's violent tactics and began to view it as brutal, reckless, and irresponsible”, meaning that the movement had limited mass appeal in Northern Kurdistan. In response to PKK raids, the Turkish state “introduced the system of ‘village guards’, Kurdish villagers armed, paid, or at least as often press-ganged into the service of the army, to defend remote villages against guerrillas operating in the area”, yet another example of intra-Kurdish fighting that undercuts presumptions of ethnic solidarity. Kurds were also given increased opportunities for participation in legal political movements during Özal’s tenure, most notably in the formation of the Halkın Emek Partisi (HEP or People’s Labor Party), the first explicit Kurdish political party in Turkey’s history.³⁷³

Özal also called for a lift on the ban on the use of Kurdish language in public everyday but not official discourse, indicating a halting effort at liberalization aimed at ameliorating Kurdish dissent in the East.³⁷⁴ He enthusiastically advocated for a political resolution to the Kurdish issue by facilitating dialogue with the HEP and moderate Kurdish leaders, while simultaneously militarily occupying the Kurdish region and forcefully relocating all citizens within a “fifteen to forty kilometer wide ‘security corridor’ along the border with Iran, Iraq, and Syria.”³⁷⁵ Such a contradictory policy fomented contradictory resistance as evidenced by the

³⁷³ McDowall 2020, p. 1178.

³⁷⁴ Černý 2017, p. 179

³⁷⁵ Olson 1996, p. 16.

Serhildan uprisings beginning in 1990, when a funeral procession of a fallen PKK insurgent “turned into an outpouring of public anger, which law enforcement tried to muzzle by force, lighting a spark that triggered a wave of public demonstrations in the tens of thousands.”³⁷⁶

Despite a brief period of mass popular resistance wherein “the number of guerilla fighters multiplied [and] there was no part of Kurdistan in which the [PKK] could not operate and carry out raids”, the PKK’s violent tactics limited its capacity for mass mobilization and Özal’s limited reforms presented an alternative venue through which to express Kurdish grievances.³⁷⁷ As the power of the PKK waned and that of the KDP strengthened in accordance with domestic dynamics and regional changes to the balance of power, Özal recognized a powerful potential ally in the Kurds of Iraq, who had already broken off ties with the PKK and denounced them as occupiers and enemies of the Kurdish cause.

In March 1991, just under a year before he advocated for Kurdish protection in the international arena, Özal sent out feelers to representatives of both Barzani and Talabani, both of whom responded enthusiastically to his proposal to form a partnership. Talabani himself and a representative of Barzani met with the under-secretary in the Foreign Ministry, Ambassador Tugay Özceri, on Özal’s behalf at an airport in Ankara, culminating in an agreement that Turkey would ensure steady flows of military and humanitarian aid to Southern Kurdistan if both the PUK and KDP agreed to counter the PKK’s influence in their territory. These terms proved amenable to all parties involved, given the Kurds’ dire need for assistance and the fact that they already viewed their relationship with the PKK as more of a rivalry than an alliance, as well as Özal’s declared intention of bringing the former *vilayet* of Mosul back into Turkey’s economic sphere of influence.³⁷⁸ This new alliance bore fruit immediately for the Turkish state, as Talabani,

³⁷⁶ Černy 2017, p. 175.

³⁷⁷ Çelik 2002, cited in Černy 2017

³⁷⁸ Černy 2017, p. 178

ever the statesman, quickly tried to play the role of mediator between Özal and Öcalan, who had begrudgingly acknowledged that he might be open to a diplomatic solution given Turkey's 'first step' liberalization efforts. Negotiations quickly fell apart, however, when Turkey continued raids against PKK positions *during* the talks themselves and Talabani tried to pressure Öcalan into making concessions through an ultimatum warning that "if the PKK failed to cease activities against Turkey [from Iraqi Kurdish territory], it would be purged from the region", something that only enraged the PKK leader further.³⁷⁹

In response, Öcalan accused both Barzani and Talabani of "trying to stab the PKK in the back by cooperating with Turkey... The first thing we must do is remove these leeches, [who] espouse the views of the fascist Turks. These two leaders are now our enemies"- taking on an indignant tone that seems rather less genuine considering the PKK-Baghdad cooperation that had occurred only a few years earlier.³⁸⁰ Just as the Öcalan had absconded ethnic ties for opportunistic ones with the Iraqi state during the *al-Anfal* period, Barzani and Talabani shrewdly cooperated with the Turkish state rather than their ethnic brethren, for the simple reason that they had disparate goals and ideologies. Conflict was bound to erupt given these rhetorical escalations, and did so in June 1992 when the KDP reportedly ordered the killing of tribal leader Sadik Omer for joining a PKK affiliate group, setting off a cycle of retaliatory assassinations culminating in a coordinated attack against PKK camps at the Turkish border.³⁸¹ In response, Öcalan's men bombed border crossings in the region, effectively placing an embargo on foreign aid and exports to all of Southern Kurdistan and threatening the region's survival. By September, the situation had become dire and the Iraqi Kurdish Front joined together in an all-out assault against the PKK across the region, aided by considerable assistance and

³⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 181.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Bozarlsan et al. 2021, p. 280.

coordination with Turkish forces.³⁸² Faced with an insurmountable conglomeration of its enemies and former allies, the PKK formally surrendered to the PUK on October 30th, 1992, when it signed a capitulative ceasefire agreeing to “cease all activities of a military nature [and] abandon all its camps along the Turkish border” in Kurdish Iraqi territory. Much to Barzani’s frustration, Talabani allowed about 1700 PKK fighters to remain a camp in PUK territory north of Sulaymaniyah, where “they were allowed to keep all their weapons, ammunition, and supplies, as well as to continue their peaceful political activities for as long as they did not oppose the activities and policies” of the PUK or KDP.³⁸³ In this instance, we again see the PUK stepped in to save the PKK in its hour of need, another ostensible showing of ethnic solidarity. However, Hannes Černý, one of the few scholars who has examined this period of transversal Kurdish dynamics in detail, proposes that this too reflects pragmatic self interest and the PUK’s desire to retain a weakened PKK presence was intended to be used as a bargaining chip against both Turkey and the KDP.³⁸⁴ It might also be true that the PKK and PUK, by nature of their apparently shared ideological pedigree, had a mutual interest in blocking the rise of a hegemonic KDP, just as the KDP allied with the PKK to minimize the risk of a PUK ascension a decade earlier.

Clearly, this complex and interconnected matrix of intra-ethnic cooperation and betrayal, and alliances made and broken between Kurds and neighboring states fighting their own ethnic kin, does not reflect an analytical framework that provides ethnicity any meaningful weight as a determinant of political behavior.

³⁸² Çelik, Selahattin 2002, cited in Černý 2017, p. 183.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Černý 2017, p. 184; Fierke 2015.

The Establishment of the KRG and a Struggle for Control of the KRI

Despite violent contestation for territorial and ideological supremacy between the aforementioned spheres of influence in Kurdish politics following the vacuum created by the Gulf War and Operation Provide Comfort, the KDP and PUK managed to briefly put aside their rivalry in May of 1992 when they united to run democratic elections and codify their autonomy in the form of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). This proto-state apparatus established a formalized parliament and executive committee, and further intended to create a “unified peshmerga force of about 80,000 men and a police force of 20,000 to replace the estimated 400,000 or so fighters at large on the streets of Kurdistan.”³⁸⁵ The election itself took place on May 19th, and despite a few discrepancies took place without excessive violence or political interference from Kurdish elites- thus resulting in a great deal of international attention and praise lavished upon the Kurds of Iraq for conducting a ‘free and fair election,’ something the international community perceives to be especially rare and valuable in the Middle East.

The election was organized on the basis of proportional representation, with parties requiring at least seven percent of the vote to qualify for office. Smaller opposition parties including the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan and the Society of Kurdish tribes enthusiastically agreed to this arrangement, confident that they could meet the threshold and break up the KDP/PUK hegemony dominating political life and discourse in Southern Kurdistan. Such aspirations of a multi-pluralist governing body, however, were rebuked when the KDP and PUK won 45 percent and 43.6 percent of the vote respectively, a distribution that given election

³⁸⁵ McDowall 2020, p. 980.

irregularities was judged a dead heat.³⁸⁶ Instead of creating a parliamentary system that incorporated diverse political projects and encouraged the formation of multi-party coalitions, the KRG election codified and entrenched the bifurcation of the territory into PUK and KDP camps, a two-party polarization that is inevitably unsustainable to the productive maintenance of any democracy.

In light of the apparently equal popularity of both parties, the KRG implemented an apparently elegant *penj-a-penj* (50/50) power sharing agreement, in which “governmental posts were shared equally. Where a minister belonged to one party, his deputy belonged to the other, an uneasy condominium with two parallel administrations reaching down to the police on the street or the teaching staff in a school. Joining one or other party became the essential prerequisite to advancement, [and] the patronage role of both political parties became disastrously entrenched in the sociopolitical fabric of Iraqi Kurdistan.”³⁸⁷ While this system was effective in gaining legitimacy across the Kurdish population, it also “had within it a built-in power struggle between KDP and PUK cadres. It would take very little in the tense atmosphere of Kurdistan in the mid-1990s to see this animosity erupt into violence.”³⁸⁸

Escalating local clashes between the military and political wings of both parties resulted in what Gareth Stansfield deems an “internecine civil war” by 1994, in which the KDP controlled territory in the West of *Basur* and the PUK in the East. Each party “ran a KRG in their respective zones; each had a prime minister, and each claimed legitimacy in a setting where, arguably, legitimacy remained with the Iraqi state” as a result of the fragmented nature of the Kurdish space. The conflict reached its peak in 1996, when Barzani actively enlisted the assistance of Saddam and the Iraqi army for assistance in driving Talabani’s supporters out of the

³⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 982

³⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 986.

³⁸⁸ Stansfield in Bozarslan et al. 2020, p. 367.

contested town of Erbil.³⁸⁹ As should not be surprising at this point, Barzani's choice to collaborate with the Iraqi state against fellow Kurds even in a political space that privileged Kurdish autonomy is yet another repudiation of 'ethnic solidarity' as an explanatory variable. Many scholars decry the 'patrimonial' structures that emerged as a result of this political contestation, reducing Massoud Barzani's actions of power centralization to a political phenomenon described by McDowall and others as 'neotribalism.' One must consider, however, whether that terminology would be employed to describe the KRG if it had the status of a sovereign state, since many contemporary states also retain legitimacy through structures of personalistic and patrimonial authority. Hannes Černy problematizes this depiction through a comparison of Barzani and Ben Ali of Tunisia, making the case that while "it would not be a gross exaggeration to view the KDP as a vehicle for the power politics and political ambitions of the Barzani clan," such a prioritization of personal interest in political society is not unusual for states with a single charismatic leader, particularly those empowered by a rentier economy.³⁹⁰ Still, Barzani's power aspirations differ from those of Barzanji, Ubeydullah, and Simko before him, because his ultimate objective is the control of a *political community*, not personal territory or financial resources as was the case in previous manifestations of Kurdish political organization. The struggle between the PUK and KDP in the 1990s can therefore be considered political rather than personal, with the objective of each respective group being to attain hegemony in the region. A further consequence of their continued clashes was the retrenchment of the PKK in their mountainous bases in the North of the region, which remain a thorn in the side of PUK and KDP leadership alike in the contemporary era.

³⁸⁹ McDowall 2020.

³⁹⁰ Černy 2017, p. 133-5.

To explore in depth the relations between the PUK and KDP in the statebuilding period during is somewhat beyond the scope of this thesis given its focus on transnational interactions, but the specific leadership styles employed by each party have relevance to the ideological grounds of contestation in contemporary Kurdish politics, as reflected in the contemporary Kurdish project in Rojava. The KDP's political structure can be identified as one of "dynastic republicanism," a term coined by Sadiki to describe a ruling complex sustained by "labyrinth of dependent or "parasitic" social forces... that have come to directly benefit from the preservation of the status quo and the continuing power of the ruling house. [These patronized elites] form the very basis on which the power of the ruling house rests, and they are handsomely rewarded for their 'supportive function ... with the distributive rewards the system has to offer, "deepening and nurturing their [lasting] dependence."³⁹¹ Though the PUK rhetorically adheres to the Leninist system of 'democratic centralism' similar to that of contemporary China, wherein potential political can be contested only prior to a decision by the ruling party, it too embodies the patrimonial and rentier approach to nation building, only with a less overt emphasis on tribalistic and hereditary leadership. In fact, parties themselves have congruent more than opposing goals in the majority of their political objectives, and even Omar Sheikhmous, a co-founder of the PUK, acedes that "today the ideological differences between PUK and KDP are minimal – both promote a separatist Kurdish ethno-nationalism with the aim of wresting ever greater autonomy from the Iraqi state," and both have pursued increasing economic rapprochement with the Turkish state in recent decades.³⁹² Although the 1999 Washington Agreement and subsequent renegotiations of consociational frameworks following the 2003 Iraq War have been broadly successful in pushing the tensions between the parties to the non-violent political sphere (with

³⁹¹ Sadiki 2010, p. 101, cited in Černý 2017, p. 135.

³⁹² Bozarlsan et al. 2021, p. 295.

the effect of pervasive governmental deadlock within the KRG), even today the grounds of political power and contestation in the region are primarily defined by the dichotomy between these two parties.³⁹³

A historical analysis of transnational Kurdish party interaction in the 1980s and 1990s definitively repudiates depictions of ethnically motivated cross-border Kurdish collaboration as a “particular hallmark of Kurdish identity and important source of solidarity between Kurds in different regions,” as asserted by Allan Hassaniyan.³⁹⁴ Although transversal dynamics fostered the early emergence and sustenance of the PKK, its ideology and political priorities clearly arose from the revolutionary political context of Turkey’s domestic space. When the PKK did gain meaningful political capital, it used it to advance its own priorities, even at the detriment of Kurds in Iraq, just as the KDP subjugated the KDPI throughout the 1960s and 70s. Even within one region of Kurdistan, historic rivalries and political contexts eclipsed solidarity and even pragmatism to affect a lasting conflict that is not only intra-Kurdish, but intra-Kurdish within the boundaries of one territorial state. This historical analysis of transversal Kurdish interaction conclusively asserts that disparate ethnonational movements across the divided regions of Kurdistan, while impacted by cross-border exchanges of ideology, arms, and people, do not act under the aegis of pan-Kurdish nationalism or even solidarity. Such a conclusion might be obscured by a groupist reading of Kurdish history, in which instances of nominal Kurdish alliance and collaboration are emphasized and the true dynamics of interaction are obfuscated. By delving into the complex matrix of events and competing hierarchies through which ethno-political identity ‘happens,’ I have aimed to present a more nuanced depiction of Kurdish interaction, wherein objective ethnicity has little relevance as a variable for analysis.

³⁹³ Phillips 2015, p. 158.

³⁹⁴ Hassaniyan, Allan. 2019. "Cross-border Kurdish solidarity: An endangered aspect of Kurdishness." *Kurdish Studies* 7(2): 135-160.

Chapter Six

A People Beyond the State? Rojava and the New Frontiers of Kurdish Identity

Over the course of the past two decades, the Kurdish political sphere, and that of the Middle East more broadly, has undergone a dramatic period of structural transformation exceeded in significance only by the initial partition of the region one century ago. The protests and revolutions of 2011 known in amalgam as the Arab Spring and the rise and fall of the Islamic State in the Levant and Syria serve as the two central factors influencing a shift in the political discourses of the region, challenging not only the unjust ‘ruling bargains’ imposed by elites in the region but also the legitimacy of Sykes Picot and the nation-state system in its entirety.³⁹⁵ These existential threats posed to the status quo of the region’s political landscape have contributed to rampant state instability and the rise of numerous sub-state political actors, particularly in the context of the Syrian civil war. Challenges to the state system in the Middle East present opportunities and challenges for Kurdish movements in the region, who have alternatively embraced or rejected traditional forms of governance in the instability wrought by regional developments.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring, and ISIL all combine to make an analysis of Kurdish collaboration (or lack thereof) in the contemporary era an even more complex than examinations of it in previous eras, a fact that is made even more confusing by the fact that much of the practical information about Kurdish parties and activity remain unknown or sources of contestation. As a result and as previously mentioned, the prioritization of this thesis is to examine the historical emergence and interactions of Kurdish parties, but prior to my conclusion

³⁹⁵ Kamrava, Mehran. 2002. “Military Professionalization and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East.” in *Political Science Quarterly* 115(1): 67-92.; Ahram 2014.

I wish to very briefly depict the emergence of Rojava and the new grounds for political contestation in the Iraqi-Syrian Kurdish borderlands.

The Kurdish organization perhaps best poised to inherit the title of symbolic inspiration for subjugated Kurds in the contemporary era is the PYD, a Syrian organization that is frequently portrayed as a mere offshoot of the PKK. While the extent to which the PYD serves as either an ideological adherent to the PKK's ideology or as a puppet party in earnest is the subject of ongoing intense debate both in the scholarship and on the ground, but it is demonstrably true that the party derives substantial military and political aid from its 'parent party.'³⁹⁶ Still, The KDP, for its part, has also aimed to gain influence in Rojava through the establishment of a 'Kurdish National Council,' comprised of ideological and political allies of the Barzani family. Although this division reflects that Kurdish politics are never monolithic and that the two spheres of influence identified earlier cannot serve as an immutable bifurcation, the PYD has quickly ascended to prominence in the region following its relatively recent founding in 2003.³⁹⁷

This is in part due to its aid from the PKK, but also due to the long-standing linkages between Kurds in Syria and Turkey and the anarchical political space that led to Rojava's emergence. Just as the PKK was born from the left in revolutionary Turkey, one might reasonably assert that the PYD was born from the Syrian civil war and resultant social turmoil. Although the PYD explicitly espouses the ideals of 'democratic confederalism' advanced by Ocalan in his post-1999 thought, the rejection of Sykes Picot and leftist nature of the Arab Spring as a whole led to the establishment of non-Kurdish as well as Kurdish sub-state organizations in Syria built around the concept of local self-governance and autonomy, demonstrating yet again that while transnational links can serve as inspiration for Kurdish

³⁹⁶ Kaya and Lowe in Stansfield 2017, p. 278.

³⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 283, Hasan and Khaddour 2021.

mobilization, domestic political contexts dictate the contours of political emergence.³⁹⁸

Furthermore, the extent to which the autonomous administration in Syria serves as a true utopian project in self-governance is a topic of great contestation. For all its rhetoric about emancipation from the nation state and the authority of imagined communities as ‘colonies of capital’, numerous scholars have identified a distinct authoritarian streak in the PYD, wherein it wins the loyalty of local notables through coercion and the threat of violence, and actively suppresses voices dissenting against its increasing authority. This form of organized hypocrisy is nothing new in the field of International Relations or the history of Kurdistan, but it demonstrates that even this liberal contemporary manifestation of Kurdish nationalism retains a significant gap between supposed policy and practice.

Nevertheless, the project of Rojava still has to be identified as an overall success, and despite challenges from the Syrian state, ISIL, and Turkey, it remains the pre-eminent political actors governing the lives of Kurds and Arabs alike in Northeast Syria. The PYD has engaged in power centralization and retains tenuous control of the region’s borders and political economy, something of particular note on the eastern border shared with the KDP. The PYD has now controlled the boundary it shares with Iraq for a full decade, a long enough period that patterns of behavior between the two groups have emerged and can be identified. The KRG, for its part, has continued to ascend in prominence and power over its population, though not without considerable internal strife. Both the KDP and PUK were the objects of mass protest during the 2011 Arab Spring demonstrations, as Kurds took to the streets to reject their parties’ leadership and protest corruption, violence, and the suppression of dissent in Southern Kurdistan. Although both parties continue to primarily advocate for autonomy within Kurdistan, Massoud Barzanji attempted a snap referendum for independence in 2017 in a move that some scholars speculate

³⁹⁸ Cerny, p. 267.

was a shrewd attempt to play up his Kurdish nationalist credentials for an upcoming KRG election. Although the referendum received lukewarm support from both the PUK and *Gorran*, both reticent to explicitly oppose Kurdish independence, the successful vote for secession instead triggered a dramatic response from the Iraqi government that erased what territorial gains the KRG had made in its fight against ISIL.³⁹⁹ Still, even though the grounds of debate are slowly shifting in Southern Kurdistan and the failure of the independence referendum is likely to have the effect of pushing the movement left and ‘beyond the state,’ the Barzani-led KDP continues to exercise outsize influence in the administration and political action of the KRG.⁴⁰⁰

This can be reflected in the autonomous region’s continued interactions with the autonomous federations, which have endeavored to toe the tenuous line between rhetorically supporting Kurdish emancipation while simultaneously advancing the KDP’s own self interest and relationship with the Turkish state. Both the KDP and PKK appear willing to aid in the plight of Kurds in Syria through political and military support, but the KDP explicitly excludes the PYD from any collaborative action and refuses to acknowledge it as a legitimate political entity given its ideological or practical links to the PKK. Again, this prioritization of self-interest and ideology over ethnic solidarity reflects ethnicity’s lack of explanatory significance as a variable of analysis, and suggests that the KDP would prefer Rojava dissolve altogether than fall into the hands of a rival Kurdish party. Although the Kurdish Supreme Council, established in 2012, is apparently intended to unify representatives of the National Council and PYD, this expression of solidarity is undermined by reports that Barzani ordered members of his own delegation “to attack PYD checkpoints, using weapons supplied from Turkey, and to use propaganda against them.”⁴⁰¹ The veracity of this claim cannot be accurately determined given

³⁹⁹ Bozarslan et al. 2021, p. 872.

⁴⁰⁰ Cerny 2017.

⁴⁰¹ Mansour 2012, Al Jazeera.

the temporal proximity and covert nature of such an assignment, but the fact that it appears an entirely possible eventuality again illustrates the extent to which ethnic solidarity is absent from the Kurdish political sphere.

As for the boundary between the sub-state entities itself, the KRG and PYD control several border crossings in tandem designed to facilitate the flow of goods and personnel between the two countries. This territorial proximity and Kurdish regulation has facilitated the transversal exchange of ideas and personnel, but the checkpoints themselves are subjects of contestation and have periodically been closed in response to political disagreements between the two parties. Despite factors of water policy and mutual energy interests facilitating the creation of collaborative Kurdish policy between the KDP and PYD, there is little evidence that these groups have attained meaningful consensus in their grand strategies, and the KDP's prioritization of Turkish demands over Kurdish rights have caused a fundamental schism in their relationship. This can be evidenced in the KRG response to the Turkish operation 'Euphrates Shield', which on 24 August 2016 invaded the Sinjar region for the proclaimed objective of countering ISIL, but also the secondary aim of "reviv[ing] the area's character before the Syrian civil war... ensuring that the Turkmen and Arab population that was driven away from this area by the PYD-YPG and ISIS, can return to their villages, towns and cities." This campaign happened not only with Barzani's assent but assistance, as he withdrew support from Rojava and shuttered border crossings while Turkish forces carved out a military enclave of operation across the Syrian border. Although PKK, KDP, and PYD forces fought arm-to-arm in the conflict against ISIL, the cooling of relations following the retrenchment of the state provides cursory indicators that optimistic scholarly depictions of pan-Kurdish nationalism in the past decade

reflect only a temporary mobilization of ‘groupness’ as emerging “intermittently due to specific circumstances, rather than as a quality of Kurdish politics itself.”⁴⁰²

⁴⁰² Akbarzadeh et al. 2021, p. 2276.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have engaged in a historical analysis of Kurdish ethnonational movements and the parties that emerge from them in four distinct historical periods: late imperial, early state, postcolonial, and contemporary. By examining the ‘Kurdish question’ in chronological rather than territorial perspective, I placed at center stage the extent to which transversal dynamics have supported or suppressed Kurdish political identity and emancipation, a question that is frequently relegated to the periphery of Kurdish analyses in the state-centric approaches dominant in the literature. Analyzing Kurdish ethnic identity is an especially challenging scholarly undertaking, given not only the Kurds’ position in one of the more nuanced and paradoxical regions in geopolitics, but also their dispersion across the territories of four separate states with disparate nation building practices, ideologies, and political environments. In spite of and precisely because of this question, examining how Kurdishness has been differentially adopted, ethnified, and operationalized in accordance with political space elucidates several key themes that have relevance not only to the future of the Kurdish story, but also to studies of ethnicity and nationalism in the field of International Relations more broadly.

I propose that we can draw three central and interdependent takeaways from the above analysis of Kurdish ethnicity and cross-border interaction: first, that Kurdish ethnonationalism has been adopted in almost exclusively a *defensive capacity*, in response to exogenous coercive structures threatening the material interests of Kurdish communities. Second, I conclude that ethnicity has rarely served as a natural societal

coagulant of the Kurdish people. When it appeared practically possible, the multitude of Kurds preferred local, tribal, and religious frameworks of social organization and authority to that proposed by the ethnonational project. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century, where the establishment of the state as the ‘right’ modality of social organization was made possible through increasing Kurdish control in Iraq, that ethnonationalism became salient in broad swaths of the population. Even still, significant portions of the Kurdish political community reject the ideal of the nation state, particularly in the explicitly anti-statist and anti-ethnicist autonomous administration of Rojava.

This fact dovetails into the third and final central conclusion of this thesis, namely that Kurdish parties do not foster Pan-Kurdish sentiments or ethnic solidarity in their political priorities and objectives, particularly in a transnational context. In fact, transborder Kurdish party interactions most frequently run in direct contrast to frameworks like the ethnic alliance model, and Kurds have subjugated their peers in neighboring states more frequently than they have uplifted them. This fact challenges depictions of isolated incidences of ‘misconducted’ cross-border Kurdish interaction as an exception to the groupist whole- transversal Kurdish bellicosity should be seen as the normal result of two distinct parties interacting with separate interests, not as an externally-stimulated perversion of natural ethnic solidarity.⁴⁰³

In the literature review, I laid the epistemological foundations for understanding the ‘cliched constructivism’ I contend permeates many contemporary studies of ethnic

⁴⁰³ Hassaniyan 2019.

conflict and international relations. Although most scholars of identity are now self-declared modernists, I echo Rogers Brubaker's assertion that many still implicitly subscribe to invisibilized essentialisms that subtly influence the grounds of debate in our political discourse. As a result, many scholars reify ethnicity as an operational variable underpinning the modern state, and afford it far greater analytical and objective relevance than is reasonable- particularly given studies problematizing the concept of ethnicity itself in sociology and anthropology, which explanatory International Relations largely excludes from its macro developmentalist theoretical approach. These issues impact the field of Kurdish studies, which, despite momentous advances in recognizing the discursive nature of all social constructions in recent years, still frequently makes groupist assumptions about the Kurds as a cohesive sociocultural unit *in amalgam* and provides too much legitimacy to the 'strategic essentialisms' deployed by party elites in their rhetorical analyses.

This thesis has aimed to fill part of that gap in the literature through an objective (as is possible) analysis of how Kurdish identity has come to be from the breakup of the Ottoman Empire to the current day, thus attempting to somewhat bridge the gap between the historicist camp and post-structuralist camps of Kurdish analysis, which have developed effectively in their respective spheres but been less frequently integrated into a single narrative. Of course, this is a rather gargantuan undertaking given the complexity of the Kurdish question and the diverse nature of scholarship on the topic. It is absolutely true that by analyzing the Kurds themselves, I am "participating in the discourse on ethnic conflict by way of studying, analyzing, categorizing, explaining, or writing about

it,” therefore making me “intrinsically part of the discursive formation on ethnic conflict and actively part of the construction and creation of the forms of identity” I aim to analyze.⁴⁰⁴ Still, this is the case for any scholar who undertakes an analysis of this topic, and I have done my very best to present Kurdishness in as objective a social science as I can. I do believe that my work is therefore a coherent analysis of how Kurdish political parties have emerged in the crucible of the Middle East and interacted with each other from a historical perspective, a valuable contribution to the literature that has not been undertaken in amalgam elsewhere. Still, despite my efforts to integrate Fierke’s ‘diverse matrix’ of factors, my analysis is narrow in scope and should not be viewed as an authoritative depiction of Kurdish political culture. An examination capturing the true dynamics of Kurdish subjugation would require a developed understanding of not only political science and ethnicity, but also economics, ecology, gender, religion, language, and geography. Whether writing a truly pan-disciplinary study of Kurdish relations within a single cohesive narrative is even possible is a question that I think remains an open one in the field of Kurdish studies, my epistemic foundations of analysis and practical capabilities are not yet sufficient to undertake an analysis of that complexity and scope. Another significant factor in Kurdish movements that is absent from this thesis is the increasing significance of diasporadical Kurdish organizations and NGOs, which in the modern era have played a significant role in shaping Kurdish political ideology and raising awareness about Kurdish subjugation in the global community. While good work has been done on the means by which these organizations increase transversal interaction,

⁴⁰⁴ Černy 2017, p. 83.

particularly by Denise Natali, I remain unconvinced that these organizations have dramatically impacted the contours of Kurdish political party behavior on the ground—that does not discount their significance for Kurdish movements as a whole, but somewhat lessens their applicability to the research objectives of this thesis.

Reflecting upon this project and the potential future directions my own research or those of scholars in this field could take, I identify two key areas that I believe require further analysis for elucidation. Firstly, applying the theoretical frameworks I establish in this thesis to the past decade of Kurdish interaction in greater detail than I was able to in Chapter Six might answer the question of whether the last decade has constituted a genuine sea change in the nature of Kurdish liberation movements, or whether it represents yet another period of state stability to be followed by retrenchment and Kurdish bellicosity as has so frequently happened in the past. The increasingly contested relationship between the PYD and KDP in the aftermath of ISIL's withdrawal from the region provides an early indicator that the latter is correct, but Kurdish history is still being written, and it is true that many scholars of Kurdish politics who are frequently pessimistic about 'pan-Kurdish solidarity' have exhibited a recent optimism about the 'rising tide' of Kurdish collaboration. This is largely stipulated by the increasing relevance of mass politics to Kurdish political movements, particularly in the political space of the Middle East following the Arab Spring. The 'new media', the ostensibly autonomous cantons under the PYD, and the emergence of the *Gorran* (change) party in the contemporary KRG suggest that the sentiments of the multitude are becoming more relevant to Kurdish party behavior than they have been in the past. This observation leads

into the second central area for future research that I believe would expand on the claims of this thesis, namely a detailed study into the extent to which Kurdish political party activities reflect the desires or priorities of the multitude. The fact that many leaders employ ‘strategic essentialisms’ with reference to Kurdish unity before betraying that rhetoric suggests that the Kurdish populous finds intra-ethnic mobilization a compelling possibility, but the rejection of the state system in Öcalan’s post-1999 thought might mean that ‘ethnic solidarity’ as a whole will have decreasing relevance in contemporary Kurdish political discourse. Such a study on the disconnect between elite and mass politics in Kurdistan would likely be even more challenging than the above undertaking and require extensive field research, but it would be an invaluable contribution to the literature and a promising avenue for further inquiry.

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