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Kurds, states, and tribes[*]

Martin van Bruinessen

Until two decades ago, it was widely assumed that tribes, which had since time immemorial been the most prominent social formations of Kurdish society, were gradually dissolving. The last few nomadic tribes were succumbing to pressure to settle, and the inexorable process of urbanisation appeared to be breaking up old solidarities and bringing forth new types of social relations. The Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) and the guerrilla war between the PKK and the Turkish army (1984-99) speeded up both developments, destroying much of traditional Kurdish society in the process. The past two decades of great social upheaval have not led to the extinction of the tribes, however. The apparently pre-modern phenomenon of the tribe has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability, and in several respects tribes and tribalism are even more pervasive in Kurdish society now than twenty, thirty years ago. Most Kurdish tribes had long been sedentary anyway, so the decrease of space for nomadism did not affect them much. Moreover, it appeared that tribal organisation had a distinct survival value in periods of insecurity and political strife, and was quite appropriate to various modern types of enterprise.

It was not only modernisation theory that prophesied the extinction of the tribe; various critical voices questioned the very concept of tribe: wasn’t it just another ideological construct, an artefact of the Orientalist gaze or imperialist intervention? This had been argued with some justification for the case of the large ‘tribes’ of Africa, which appeared to owe their existence to the way the colonial powers had carved up territories. A similar radical deconstruction of the tribe made little sense in the Kurdish case, for Kurdish tribes had a well-documented existence independent of Western observers. Although no doubt also an ideological construct, the tribe — just like the family — had a considerable degree of substance to it. It was an almost tangible reality, on which people could rely, vastly more concrete than the Kurdish nation or the Islamic *umma*. The deconstructionist critique served, however, as a cautionary reminder that tribal ideology should not be confounded with the actual functioning of the tribe. It is almost meaningless to speak of tribes in the abstract. The size, composition, degree of hierarchy or egalitarianism of a tribe and its relations with its neighbours are affected by changes in the economic and political environment. The most crucial factors are, probably, relations with the state and shifts in the economic resource base exploited by the tribe. In the case of the Kurds, the existence of more than one state in the direct environment has long been a factor of major importance.

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At most times, Kurdish society has existed on the periphery of, and functioned as a buffer between, two or more neighbouring states. From around 1500 C.E. until the First World War, the relevant states were the Ottoman Empire in the West and Safavid (later Qajar) Iran in the East — with Russia and the British Empire gradually encroaching upon the region from the North and South, respectively. In the aftermath of the World War, Kurdistan was divided among four of the modern would-be nation states succeeding these empires, becoming a peripheral and often mistrusted region in each of them. All these states, whether empire or nation state, have exercised various forms of indirect rule over Kurdistan, which have had a profound impact on the social and political organisation of Kurdish society. The specific tribal formations that existed in Kurdish society in various historical periods were in important respects the products of the interaction of these states with Kurdish society.

Continuity and variability

Comparison of the names of Kurdish tribes mentioned in various sources over the past four centuries shows that some tribes disappeared while new ones kept emerging, but that many of the larger tribes showed a remarkable continuity over time.[1] The size and the degree of complexity of these tribes fluctuated considerably over time, however, and it cannot be taken for granted that, say, the Millî, the Shikak or the Jâf of 1950 — three of the largest and most famous Kurdish tribes — resembled in all respects the tribes of the same names in 1850 or 2000. All three tribes have at one time or another incorporated smaller tribal groups of different origin as clients or full members, and all three have experienced fission as well, when entire sections broke away under rival leaders.[2] It is significant, however, that there is still a close correlation between tribe and dialect (preserved, no doubt, by the strong tendency to clan endogamy). Many Kurdish dialects are commonly named after the tribes speaking them, and the peculiarities of a person’s speech may give an indication of his tribal affiliation. On the other hand, not all Kurds belong to tribes; there has always been a stratum of non-tribal peasants, commonly held in subjection by tribal overlords.

The tribes of which more or less reliable descriptions exist, valid for one period or another, vary widely in size and complexity of organisation.[3] Some of them are, or were until recently, pastoral nomads, others combine settled agriculture with transhumant animal husbandy, others again consist of settled peasant farmers. Nowadays large parts of many tribes are urbanised without having completely given up tribal values and tribal organisation — which in certain urban contexts may even be an advantage. (From the point of view of the older urban classes, notably so in Istanbul or Ankara, the massive immigration of Kurds into those cities during the past decades had the effect of steering local as well as state-level politics into 'tribal' directions — referring to family, tribe or regionally based patterns of patronage.)

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[1] Major sources on Kurdish tribes are: the *Sharafnâma* (a history of the Kurdish emirates compiled in the late 16th century), Türkay 1979 (a compilation of data on tribes from Ottoman documents), Hursîd Pasa 1997[1860] (written by an Ottoman member of the commission that delineated the Iranian-Ottoman boundary in 1848-52), Jaba 1860, Sykes 1908, Mayevski 1330/1914, Noel 1919, Gökalp 1992 (written in the early 1920s), `Azzâwî 1937-56, Razm-ârâ 1320, Hütteroth 1959, and the anonymous *Aşiretler raporu* (the most complete list of Kurdish tribes in Turkey, compiled by one of the intelligence services, probably in the 1970s).

[2] For an example of such changes in composition over a relatively short period of time, see Bruinessen 1983 (on the Shikâk tribe).

Some of the tribes, especially the smaller ones, approximate real descent groups, although there are commonly at least some hangers-on whose genealogical relationship to the core lineages is dubious or who are recognised as unrelated but loyal members. In the larger tribes, the aspect of political affiliation and loyalty to a common chieftain or chiefly lineage is more clearly present, although kinship ideology is important. Since the Kurds do not share the fascination with their genealogies for which Arab tribesmen are famous, even in large tribes the belief in common descent of all members can establish itself within a few generations after a tribe first emerged as a political coalition.

Some of the large tribes have a hierarchical structure, with a leading lineage, a number of commoner clans/lineages, client lineages and subject non-tribal peasantry. Some of these tribes explicitly recognise the heterogeneity of their component parts (for which reason some authors would call them *confederacies*): thus the large Millî tribe (now settled in a wide area between Urfa and Mardin in Southeastern Turkey) in the 19th century consisted not only of Kurdish sub-tribes but included some Arab sections as well, and the Kurdish sections included Yezidis as well as Sunni Muslims. Somewhat further East, the Hevêrkân of the Tûr `Abdîn (East of Mardin) had Yezidi as well as Sunni Kurdish sections and Christian client lineages.

Although the autonomous dynamism of Kurdish society should not be underestimated — inter-tribal conflicts and coalitions impacted profoundly on tribal structure — the degree of complexity and internal stratification of the tribes appears to have depended primarily, as already observed, on two external factors: the available resource base and the extent of state interference in the region.

Indirect rule and tribal structure

The role of the state is clearly illustrated by the history of the Kurdish emirates, chiefdoms that consisted of confederacies of tribes (which kept their own names and many of which survived the emirates) and that were led by dynasties of chieftains who were formally recognised by the (Ottoman or Safavid or Qajar) state. These emirates first emerge into our view in the

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[3] See Bruinessen 1992, Ch. 2: "Tribes, chieftains and non-tribal groups" for a more detailed overview of the range of forms of tribal organisation in Kurdistan.

Sharafnâma, a chronicle completed in 1597 by the Kurdish ruler of Bitlis, Sharaf Khan. Although Sharaf Khan attributed a venerable age to most of the emirates, none of his accounts is concrete before the Karakoyunlu period (15th century), and his account emphasises the differences in the treatment of the Kurdish dynasties at the hands of the Karakoyunlu, Akkoyunlu, Safavids and Ottomans. The structure of the emirates is reminiscent of that of the Turcoman empires, the tribes being organised into a left and a right wing, kept in balance by the ruler. Each of the tribes in turn had a hereditary chieftain (in some cases two competing ruling families alternating as leaders), whose sons or other close relatives had to live at the court of the emir as a means of keeping the tribes in check.

It has been suggested (by the French geographer Xavier de Planhol) that Kurdish mountain nomadism as it was known in Ottoman times first emerged as a cultural synthesis of the Turcomans' long-distance horizontal nomadism and the originally short-distance vertical transhumance of the Kurds. We know that nomadic Kurdish-Turkish tribal confederacies existed into Ottoman times (the Boz Ulus being the most important of them).[4] It is not impossible that at least a number of the Kurdish emirates also emerged from the Turcoman-Kurdish encounter. At any rate, the emirates became more or less stabilised and consolidated upon their incorporation into the Ottoman Empire, which granted formal autonomy and backed up the authority of the emirs with the potential sanction of state power. In the course of their interaction with the Ottoman state, the courts of the Kurdish emirates became more and more like smaller models of the Ottoman court.[5]

Each of the emirates was made a separate Ottoman administrative unit, and most or all of the administration was delegated to the emirs. Some emirates paid a lump sum in taxes, others not even that. The only obligation that all of the emirates had towards the central Ottoman state was to perform military services at times of military campaigns in the region. Not surprisingly, we find the autonomous emirates in the most geographically peripheral areas, where revenue collection would be very costly anyway. Productive agricultural regions near urban centres were administered directly through centrally appointed governors and other agents. (Bitlis is the only one among the major emirates that commanded an important strategic position on a major trade route and had a large population of craftsmen and merchants.)

Large nomadic tribes had a similar status as the smaller emirates: a large degree of autonomy, and delegation of all tasks of revenue collection to the chieftain, who paid the state a lump sum or nothing at all.[6] Neither the emirates nor the large nomadic tribes were creations of the Ottoman state in a literal sense; they existed when the first fiscal surveys were made. However, their recognition and delegation of powers to them by the Ottoman centre fixated the state of affairs in the Kurdish periphery and solidified them as political units.

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[4] See Demirtaş 1949, Gündüz 1997.

[5] See the observations on the Bitlîs, Bâbân and Jazîra emirates in Bruinessen 1992, pp. 161-80.

[6] This is brought out very clearly in the 16th-century Ottoman documents on the Tûr `Abdîn region analysed in Göyünç & Hütteroth 1997.

It should be noted that Safavid policies towards the tribes were different from those of the Ottomans. Whereas the latter consolidated those tribal formations that they found willing to collaborate with them, the Safavids attempted — in many cases successfully — to forge new large tribal units out of many disparate smaller groups of heterogeneous origins. In the case of the Kurds, the most spectacular case of such tribe formation by the state is that of the Chamishkazaklu, who allegedly numbered some 40,000 households of various smaller tribal groups originating from Asia Minor and the Caucasus, whom Shâh `Abbâs settled in Northern Khurasan around 1600 to guard Iran's frontier against Uzbek incursions. They were held together by a centrally appointed *îlkhânî*; later they split up into three large *îl* (as large tribal units were called in Iran), each under a centrally appointed but henceforth hereditary *îlkhânî*.[7]

Some emirates responded to the weakening of the Ottoman centre in the 18th and early 19th centuries with the expansion of the territories under their control and usurpation of revenues previously accruing to the treasury. The military reforms and efforts at centralisation that were carried out under the sultans Mahmud II (1808-1839) and Abdulmajid (1839-1861), however, heralded the end of the last autonomous emirates. The emirs were replaced by centrally appointed governors, but these governors lacked the traditional legimacy needed to keep the notables and chieftains of their districts in check and saw themselves forced to leave the latter a large degree of autonomy. Thus it was that individual tribes or confederacies, which previously had been parts of the emirates, became the most important social and political units. Chieftains everywhere made efforts to extend their power and influence at each other's expense. Missionaries and other travellers in the region in the mid-19th century repeated local people's claims that security had seriously decreased since the abolishment of the emirates and that there were unceasing feuds. The segmentary nature of Kurdish social organisation was more in evidence than it had been under the emirates.

Each time that there was a new drive for administrative reform and centralisation, representatives of the central government penetrated further into the region. Each new generation of centrally appointed officials had to find an accommodation with the tribal environment and ended up practising some form of indirect rule, be it at ever lower levels of administration. The tribal entities that we see articulating themselves in each consecutive phase of administrative centralisation became correspondingly smaller, less complicated, and more genealogically homogeneous: emirates gave way to tribal confederacies, confederacies to large tribes, large tribes to smaller ones.[8]

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[7] Bruinessen 1978: 215-220; Tawahhudî 1359/1981. On the relations between state and tribe in Iran in general, see Lambton 1970.

[8] This process is sketched in greater detail in Bruinessen 1992 (see the summary at pp. 192-5).

Segmentary alliance and opposition versus alliance with strangers

The well-known anthropological model of segmentary alliance and opposition corresponds well with the map of social reality that many Kurdish tribesmen have in their heads. The feud was my informants' favourite example by which to illustrate what a tribe is and how it functions. It is perhaps not an accident that the cases of feuds that proceeded more or less according to the ideal rule concerned relatively small and genealogically homogeneous tribes and involved killings of common tribespeople rather than chieftains.

The ‘purest’ case of a tribal feud that I came across in my fieldwork took place in Uludere, a small town near the Turkish-Iraqi border consisting of a number of wards that were each inhabited by a different lineage of the same tribe. The feud had been triggered by an elopement, in the course of which a man had been accidentally killed, and it had been going on for several years, mobilising two entire lineages against each other.

In the case of conflicts between or within leading families, however, the segmentary principle is only one of the organising principles of the pattern of alliances that develops. Chieftains, as tribal ideology has it, reach and maintain their position due to a combination of descent, character ('manliness', i.e. generosity and courage) and consensus of the members of the tribe. In practice, however, their position is based on political skills and the support of outside allies. One of the major functions of a chieftain is to constitute a bridge between the tribe and the world outside, in which other tribes and the state (or states) are the most important actors. The recognition of a chieftain by the state — which in the case of the emirates took the form of sumptuous robes of investiture and beautifully calligraphed deeds of confirmation, and presently at the lowest level that of collusion with the regional gendarmerie commander — is the best possible prop of a his position.

In the not uncommon case of a conflict within the leading family of a tribe, for instance between two rival contenders for paramount chieftainship, the conflict will tend to spill far beyond the two groups of closest relatives involved and may split the entire tribe. It is usual for both rivals to attempt to enlist the support of the most powerful external forces, i.e. neighbouring tribes and especially a powerful state in the region. Kurdistan differs from many other peripheral regions in that there has always been more than one nearby state with which a chieftain could ally himself.

Thus we find around 1600 the large Mukrî confederacy divided in two violently opposed factions because two closely related candidates for leadership allied themselves with the Safavids and the Ottomans respectively. In one particular battle, one part of the tribe fought on the Ottoman, another part on the Safavid side. We have no precise information as to how the tribe was split, but since the rivals were close relatives, it can hardly have been according to a neat segmentary pattern.[9]

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[9] Malcolm 1815: 541-2. Cf. (for a later but similar incident involving the Mukrî tribe) Eskandar Beg Monshi 1978, pp. 1015-9.

The proximity of Kurdistan to more than one state has also had the effect of enabling Kurdish chieftains to play off one state against another, or at least to seek protection from one with the other. The *Sharafnâma* contains several examples of Kurdish princely houses alternating between sultan and shah as their royal sponsor. The author of this work, Sharaf Khân, spent a considerable part of his life in Safavid service himself before returning to Bitlis and establishing excellent relations with the Ottomans.

More recently, British political officers, who were stationed in Southern Kurdistan during the years after the First World War, observed on many of the larger tribes that these had one chieftain who was 'loyal' (i.e. willing to co-operate with the British authorities) and in favour of law-and-order but that there were also one or more rival chieftains, usually close relatives of the former, who were 'rebellious'.[10] A chieftain's 'rebellion' was often provoked by a conflict within the leading family of his tribe (or a conflict with a neighbouring tribe) rather than by disaffection with the government of the day.

Since the early 1960s, Kurdish nationalists have waged a guerrilla struggle against the central government, in which both sides mobilised Kurdish tribes against the other in a complicated pattern of alliances and oppositions. In several large tribes, some leading members were actively involved in the Kurdish movement (which was a state-like actor) whereas others co-operated with the government and even led sections of their tribes as pro-state militias.

The same phenomenon could also be observed in Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s, when the PKK fought a violent armed struggle against the central government and its Kurdish 'collaborators'. Many leading families had a few members in government service and others active in the PKK.[11]

A very striking example is that of the Bucak tribe, the leading family of which has long been split in pro-government and Kurdish nationalist factions. Fayik Bucak was in 1965 one of the founders of the KDP of Turkey. He was assassinated in circumstances that remain unclear, possibly in a tribal feud. His children have since become prominent in the Kurdish movement, one of them, Serhat, closely associating himself with the PKK. Another branch of the family, led by Mehmet Celal Bucak and his successor Sedat Edip Bucak, has closely co-operated with the state. The PKK targeted Mehmet Celal Bucak in its first symbolic attack on a Kurdish 'collaborator' in 1979, which led to an extended feud between this branch of the Bucaks and the PKK. Sedat Edip Bucak has led a large 'village guard' militia force, established in the context of the war against the PKK (but which he used primarily to establish his domination over neighbouring tribes.) In the past two decades, members of the Bucak tribe were killed fighting on both sides.[12]

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[10] Numerous examples in Edmonds 1957, the most striking one perhaps that of the Pizhdar tribe, pp. 217-220 and 228-259.

[11] This is brought out in an interesting report prepared for Turkey's Chambers of Commerce and Industry in 1995. 1267 respondents in Eastern Turkey, most of them locally prominent persons who were well integrated into Turkey's political and economic life, were asked whether they had relatives or acquaintances who were with the PKK. Two thirds declined answering this question, but 15% (or 45% of those who did give an answer) mentioned that they had a relative with the PKK (TOBB 1995: 19).

The apparent breaking up of tribes or their leading families into pro- and anti-government factions is not always the reflection of a serious conflict dividing the family, however. In some cases it appears to be the consequence of a deliberate decision not to put all one's eggs into one basket — a time-honoured strategy of elite families everywhere.

The conflict between the PKK and Mehmet Celal Bucak illustrates yet another aspect of the perseverance of tribal relations under modernisation. The PKK had a strongly anti-tribal discourse then and had declared itself opposed to all tribal leaders. (Its leader Öcalan was later to repeatedly affirm his non-tribal roots.) In the feud that ensued between them and Bucak’s men, however, the young PKK activists saw themselves forced to enter into an alliance with traditional enemies of the Bucaks, the Kirvar tribe. Elsewhere too, the PKK entered alliances with some tribes against other tribes or rival political organizations. In the Mazidağ district of Mardin, a conflict over control of the district between the PKK and another Kurdish organization, KUK, turned into a blood feud, in which both parties acted very much like tribes — reflecting no doubt the fact that they drew their membership largely from different tribal backgrounds. Tribalism is not only a source of conflicts, but in certain situations conflict also strengthens or even engenders tribalism.

Tribal militias

The impact of the state on tribal society has been particularly pervasive in those circumstances where it organised tribal militias. The prototype of Kurdish tribal militias, with which later militias are often compared, was the *Hamidiye* regiments established under Sultan Abdulhamid II in 1891, allegedly on the model of the Russian Cossacks. Both the Ottomans and the Safavids had made extensive military use of their tribal subjects before, moving them over large distances to recently conquered or threatened parts of their empires as colonists or frontier guards, in order to consolidate territorial control. The case of the Chamishkazaklu, welded into a tribal confederacy by Shah Abbas and sent to the Uzbek frontier, shows how radical intervention by the state in tribal organization could be. The Hamidiye were something different, however, both in organisation and in function. Existing Sunni Kurdish tribes (as well as a single Karapapakh tribe and a few Arab tribes) were made into irregular cavalry regiments commanded by their own tribal chieftains and integrated (at least in theory) in a formal command structure. A regiment numbered between 500 and 1150 men; some large tribes constituted more than one regiment (the Millî, for instance, raised four regiments). By the end of the decade, there were altogether 55 regiments.[13]

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[12] On the Bucak tribe see Şahin 1995. Sedat Edip Bucak gained great notoriety for his central role in the so-called Susurluk scandal, which involved the profitable but illegal co-operation of counter-insurgency forces, right-wing activists and organised crime.

The Hamidiye regiments remained outside the command structure of the regular army, but all regimental commanders were placed under the authority of the commander of the 4th army corps in Erzincan, Zeki Pasha. The ostensible duty of the Hamidiye was to guard the frontier against foreign (i.e., Russian) incursions and to keep the Armenian population of the Empire's Eastern provinces in check. For the sultan they represented a parallel system of control of the East, independent of the regular bureaucracy and army which he did not fully trust. The Hamidiye enjoyed a high degree of legal immunity — neither the civilian administration nor even the regular military hierarchy had any authority over them, and no court had the competence to adjudicate crimes committed by members of the Hamidiye — and the regiments turned into virtually independent chiefdoms. Their commanders could not only consolidate their control of their own tribes but also expand it at the expense of neighbouring tribes that did not constitute Hamidiye regiments. The establishment of the Hamidiye did not entail the creation of new tribes but it strengthened some of the existing tribes economically and politically at the expense of their neighbours and it made them internally more hierarchical. It also sowed the seeds of tribal conflicts that would surface decades later.[14]

The Hamidiye regiments were dissolved by the Young Turk regime that deposed Sultan Abdulhamid in 1909, but within a few years they were revived under another name. Kurdish tribal regiments took part in the World War and disappeared, along with the Ottoman Empire itself, after the war. The British in Iraq briefly experimented with a tribal police force but soon enough gave up when they discovered that the deployment of these levies exacerbated tribal conflicts rather than making the British occupation palatable to Kurdish society at large.

A new type of tribal militia, mobilised to fight Kurdish nationalist guerrillas with their own methods, first emerged in Iraq in the 1960s. Even before the first armed clashes between Kurdish nationalists and Iraqi army troops broke out in 1961, the relations between the Barzanis and neighbouring tribes, especially their traditional rivals the Zibari, Bradost and Lolan, had been rapidly deteriorating and occasional fighting had occurred.[15] The return of 850 Barzani warriors from their Soviet exile had changed the local balance of power and was experienced as a serious threat by these neighbour tribes. The Barzanis believed that the central government was inciting the other tribes against them in order to keep the Kurds divided. Be that as it may, once

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[13] Kodaman 1987: 21-66; cf. Duguid 1973. Klein reproduces a document showing that the number of regiments peaked even at 64 or 65 around 1900, but adds that this high number was only briefly reached and lightly shrank after (Klein 2002: 37 and Appendix A).

[14] Fırat (1970) describes how his own tribe, the Alevi Hormek, turned against the Shaykh Sa`id rebellion in 1925 out of resentment of the Sunni Cibran tribe, which played a leading role in the rebellion and which had in the past as Hamidiye oppressed the Hormek. Janet Klein’s dissertation (2002) investigates the shifts in the balance of power in the region as a result of the establishment of the Hamidiye.

[15] For the chronology of the events and the role of the tribes, see Kinnane 1964: 59-81, Dann 1969: 198-9, 332-47, Jawad 1981: 50-4, 65-85, McDowall 1996: 302-13.

Mulla Barzani and the KDP were openly at war with the central government, the latter actively supported the tribes that were hostile to the Barzanis and used them as its proxies in the guerrilla struggle.

Initially both the Barzanis and their Kurdish opponents fought the war as a 'traditional' tribal war; neither side had any sort of formal military organisation. From 1963 on, the government attempted to impose some form of order on the tribal forces, integrating them in the army command structure as irregular cavalry regiments (*al-Fursan*). The number of tribes who were mobilised as *Fursan* gradually expanded over the years.[16] The tribes happily accepted the arms and pay that the government offered them but their participation in the conflict continued to depend more on the dynamics of their own relations with the Barzanis (and with the other Kurds who had allied themselves with the Barzanis) than on policy decisions by the central government. The tribes who joined the *Fursan* (nicknamed *jash*, 'donkey foal' by the nationalists) were not at all times hostile to the nationalist movement and its tribal allies. In fact, the nationalists claimed that they secretly received some of their arms and ammunition from '*jash*' tribes. There are also reports of tribes switching allegiances more than once, depending on the perceived fortunes of the government and the Kurdish movement.

The Kurdish war thus provided the occasion for very considerable government subsidies to tribes (or rather, to tribal chieftains) and gave these tribes a new relevance as forms of social and political organisation. There are no concrete descriptions of how incorporation into the *Fursan* affected any single tribe, but the general effect was one of consolidation of these tribes and of the leadership of those chieftains with whom the government dealt. These militia regiments were treated as collectivities; all arms, money and commands were communicated through the chieftain. This had the effect of reinforcing the chieftains' control over their tribes, strengthening the hierarchical and centripetal rather than the egalitarian, segmentary aspects of tribal organisation.

Initially, it was existing tribes that were made into *Fursan* regiments, but later similar units were formed that were not properly tribes (in the sense of named socio-political formations with an ideology of common descent) and that were commanded by influential personalities other than tribal chieftains. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, peasant followers of one particular religious leader, a shaykh of the Qadiriyya Sufi order, also made up a *Fursan* regiment, that acted more or less as a tribe although they were by no means a descent group.[17]

During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), a considerable part of the Kurdish population was incorporated into the militias; this was considered as a substitute for military service and therefore permitted young men to stay away from the front. The militia commanders (named *mustashar*, 'counselor') received arms and salaries for all their men, often even in excess of the real number of warriors under their command, and were allowed a measure of autonomy. Under these conditions the tribes, or more precisely their chieftains, became more powerful than they had previously been. Most, but not all, *mustashar* were chieftains of well-established tribes. Some appear to have been self-made power brokers who, with arms and money from the central government, bought the loyalties of a diverse bunch of men.

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[16] Besides the Zibari, Bradost and Lolan, the powerful Herki and Surchi tribes, who also had been in conflict with the Barzanis before, were among the first the be recruited as *Fursan*. Other tribes that followed played less prominent roles in the fighting.

[17] On the role of this Sufi order, and the particular shaykh referred to here, Shaykh Abdulkarim of Kripchina, see Bruinessen 2000.

In March 1991, in the wake of the operation 'Desert Storm' that expelled Iraqi troops from Kuwait, the Iraqi Kurds rose up against the weakened central government. In most places it was, significantly, the *mustashar* who started the uprising. The Kurdish nationalist parties had, out of fear of reprisals against the civilian population, kept a low profile during the occupation of Kuwait and appear to have been surprised by the uprising. Even after the parties had succeeded in regaining leadership they saw themselves forced to share power with the former *mustashar*, and this has remained so throughout the 1990s. Permanently in rivalry with each other, the two leading parties had little choice but concluding alliances with as many of the *mustashar* as possible, in exchange for which the latter brought a large share of the economic resources of the region under their control and continued ruling as warlords over their own districts. One foreign observer described the Kurdish parties in the mid-nineties as 'tribal confederacies', which perhaps is an exaggeration but at least shows an appreciation of the prominent role that the large tribes have come to play in Iraqi Kurdistan.[18] The tribes commanded by these warlords appear to have become less egalitarian, held together by strong clientelist links rather than kinship.

In Turkey, the authorities responded to the guerrilla offensive unleashed by the PKK in 1984 by establishing a similar Kurdish militia, the 'village guards' (*köy korucular*i). The first recruits to the 'village guards' belonged to tribes of the districts North of the Iraqi-Turkish border, the region where the PKK had carried out its first military actions. One of these tribes were the semi-nomadic Jîrkan, whose chieftain Tahir Adiyaman had for years lived as an outlaw after killing several soldiers in an armed encounter. He was pardoned on condition that he prevent PKK fighters from passing through his tribe's territory. Several of the first *korucu* units were well-known smuggler tribes, who knew better than anyone else how and where the border could be crossed; they could continue smuggling with impunity because of the military services they rendered to the state.[19]

The 'village guard' system was gradually expanded. Wherever there had been PKK activities, villagers were persuaded, sometimes coerced to accept arms and become *korucu*. The numbers increased steadily; by the end of the 1990's there were officially some 65,000-70,000 of them. Some chieftains in fact maintained a private armed force that far exceeded the official number.[20]

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[18] Wimmer 1997. For observations on the economic and political roles of the former *mustashar* and present warlords in Iraqi Kurdistan, see Leezenberg 1997.

[19] On the first *korucu* tribes and their relations with the authorities and with other Kurdish tribes, see Dağlı 1989, Aytar 1992, Wiessner 1997: 298-302.

Initially, ‘village guards’ were only expected to deny PKK guerrilla fighters access to or passage through their own districts. They were given arms, a monthly salary, and a bounty for every ‘terrorist’ killed. In the following years they were also expected to take part in military campaigns against the PKK. The *korucu* units were commanded by their own chieftains (who received the arms and pay for their men, which greatly strengthened their positions) and were loosely integrated into the command structure of the *gendarmerie*, the military force that polices the countryside. Civilian authorities had no jurisdiction over them, and they were not placed under the district gendarmerie commander but under officers at higher levels. Predictably, this gave them immunity to exercise violence for their own ends, oppressing, looting, raping and even killing their neighbours. In response, these neighbours had to draw together and reassert their tribal solidarity. One of the striking effects of the establishment of the ‘village guards’ is what one could call the re-tribalisation of large parts of Turkish Kurdistan.

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[20] The most notorious case is that of Sedat Edip Bucak (cf. note 12 above), who has a private army of around 1000 men, of whom only 350 to 400 were officially registered as "village guards". A report prepared by special rapporteur Kutlu Savaş for Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz in 1997 noted that Bucak used this force to establish his hegemony over Siverek district at the expense of other tribes, notably the old rivals Kirvar and Karakeçili. See Internationaler Verein für Menschenrechte der Kurden, 1998.

Another prop of the tribe: the electoral process

The re-tribalisation of Kurdish society in Turkey is not only due to the ‘village guard’ system but started well before this was put in place. Tribal organisation acquired a new function when in the wake of the Second World War Turkey became a multi-party democracy with free elections. Since Turkey opted for a district system, in which each province elected a number of deputies to parliament, it became imperative for the competing political parties to have strong grass roots representation. Each party sought local workers and candidates who could be expected to mobilise numerous votes. In the Kurdish-inhabited provinces — most notably in Hakkari, the most ‘tribal’ province — the big parties' candidates were often either tribal chieftains themselves or they were men put forward by tribal chieftains as their representatives.

Affiliation with a political party was highly profitable for tribal chieftains for a number of reasons. When their party was in power, it had the possibility to reward it loyal supporters in various ways, most conspicuously in the form of infrastructural investments and government contracts. Elected deputies, even for opposition parties, were the best advocates for local interests. In fact, a large share of deputies' time is spent in receiving people from their constituencies who request various services. The political parties therefore found many tribal chieftains quite eager to join them, irrespective of their political programmes.

Chieftains who were in conflict or rivalry with one another would, obviously, join different parties. Competition between the political parties thus became intertwined with tribal conflicts and rivalries. Elections became the occasions for the redistribution of important resources (in the form of government patronage) at the provincial and local levels. No tribe was large enough to send a deputy to parliament by itself; to do so, it had to forge a coalition with other tribes and/or interest groups. The electoral process thus came to shape important aspects of the mode of operation of tribes.

This was most visible in Hakkari, the smallest province and the one most dominated by tribes. For a long time only the two major parties contested the elections for Hakkari's single seat. The leading two tribes affiliated themselves with either of them, and the other tribes followed, depending on their conflicts or alliances with the first two. Thus a checkerboard pattern emerged, in which only minor shifts occurred over time as a result of new conflicts, that forced one tribal group out of its own coalition into the opposing camp. Because Hakkari had long only one seat, the stakes in the elections were high, as a result of which the tension between competing tribes significantly increased in periods preceding new elections. Tribal solidarities were strengthened (or, to put it less benevolently, strict control was exercised so that all members of the tribe expressed this solidarity at the ballot booths) and the boundaries between tribes were sharply demarcated.

Voting behaviour in the Kurdish-inhabited provinces was long largely independent of the parties' overt political programmes. It could happen that a chieftain switched to another party, bringing his allies and followers along and causing his rivals also to switch parties. Through their insertion into the Turkish political system, Kurdish tribal chieftains gained control of additional resources and could consolidate or strengthen their positions within their own tribal environment. Electoral politics reinvigorated tribal society, which proved to be highly compatible with formally modern politics.

Smuggling and tribalism

The carving up of the Ottoman Empire after World War I resulted in a number of new borders cutting through Kurdistan. The prices of many essential and luxury goods had always differed between regions; the emergence of new states, with different policies, resulted in steeper price differentials across the borders. Much of what had in the past been normal trade legally became smuggling — which if anything made it more profitable. Many Kurds earned comfortable incomes by smuggling tea, sugar or sheep across international borders.

As long as the borders were not guarded very effectively, all men who knew the region had equal opportunities, and smuggling may in fact have contributed to economic levelling or at least have allowed vertical social mobility. Once effective surveillance was in place, smuggling demanded special skills, which led to the concentration of this resource in fewer hands. Specialists who knew how to pass through a minefield without detonating any mines were in great demand (along the Syrian-Turkish border), and the shepherds who best knew the high mountains of the border regions took a large share of the illicit cross-border trade into their own hands. Most profitable, however, were profit-sharing arrangements with the border police and the local gendarmerie officers. It was only certain people who were in a position to even attempt to conclude such arrangements without being apprehended at once. Tribal chieftains were best placed to do so.

Civil servants, and especially law enforcement officers, who were appointed to posts in Kurdistan soon found out that they could not do their work without the co-operation of at least some persons who held a form of traditional authority. If they attempted to bypass these authorities in dealing with the local population, they usually failed to penetrate through the walls of silence that shielded local society from their view. Soon they would learn that they could achieve much more by relying on one or more of the local chieftains as their guides. Almost inevitably they were thereby drawn into the power game of tribal society with its perpetual conflicts and rivalries. A ‘reliable’ chieftain might help them arrest a smuggler or bandit (who in many cases happened to be a rival) and get other work done, thereby furthering his own interests and harming those of his enemies.

Mutually beneficial relationships developed between state officials and ‘traditional’ authorities, most of them tribal chieftains. In important respects, the officials became part of local tribal politics, many of them becoming actively involved. Under these conditions, many officials appeared to be corruptible, and the mutually beneficial co-operation easily developed beyond maintenance of the law. Tribal chieftains who had established profitable arrangements with the relevant officials came to monopolise an increasingly large share of smuggling. Thus they brought important economic resources under their control, strengthening their position within their tribes and enabling them to centralise their control over their tribes.

From around 1980 on, the smuggling trade developed rapidly. The traditionally smuggled goods — animals, tea, alcohol, electronic consumer goods — were supplemented with narcotics and political refugees, raising the risk but even more the profits to be made. The guerrilla war being waged by the PKK and the recruitment of ‘village guards’ by the state constituted further complications that led to the emergence of a new type of networks growing out of existing tribes. The functioning of these networks is, for obvious reasons, ordinarily hidden from view. From time to time, however, some of their activities have come to light. The most spectacular of the networks that were in part uncovered is the ‘gang of Yüksekova’ (*Yüksekova çetesi*), in which we find a *korucu* tribe, gendarmerie officers and a renegade former PKK guerrilla fighter engaged in a profitable enterprise that combined the conduct of counter-insurgency with heroin trade and the extortion of rival entrepreneurs in the region. (These rivals were moreover made to believe that it was the PKK that extorted them; the authorities later accused them of supporting the PKK on the basis of their payment of extortion money).[21]

Among the transnational networks smuggling base morphine and heroin, and more recently humans, from or through Turkey to Western Europe, a few Kurdish-based networks appear to dominate. One reason for their success is that they are almost impossible to infiltrate because they are based on tribal relations. A Kurdish smuggling ‘family’ may, like a Sicilian mafia family, include loyal members not related by blood, but the core consists of people from the same extended family, village or tribe, which guarantees trust and confidentiality. A shared dialect that is hard to understand for outsiders, and that therefore facilitates confidential communication even by cellular telephone, constitutes one of the additional advantages of tribal affiliation.

Conclusion

Kurdish tribes show up such a bewildering variety in size and forms of internal organisation that it may seem misleading to refer to all by the same term. They share an ideology of common descent, endogamy (parallel cousin marriage) and segmentary alliance and opposition. These principles do actually operate at the level of the smaller subtribes, but the political alliances and authority relations that integrate these subtribes into larger wholes are in clear contradiction with them. In larger tribes, we often find leading lineages that are at best distantly related to the commoner lineages that make up the bulk of the tribe, and their authority is often shored up by an armed retinue and/or by recognition by the state apparatus, which also implies ultimately violent sanctions.

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[21] Fragmentary revelations about the gang of Yüksekova appeared in the press in the course of 1997. For a preliminary overview, see Berberoğlu 1998: 143-171.

The size and complexity of composition of tribes, as well as the authority relations within them, appear to change in response to two crucial variables. The first of these is the form and degree of indirect rule that the relevant state or states allow the tribes (which is itself the outcome of a process of continuous negotiation between society and state); the other variable consists of the available economic and ecological resource base. Mountain pastures, arable land and subject peasant populations never were the only available resource bases; caravan routes constituted another one (several tribes, most famously the Hamawand, specialised in protecting or robbing caravans) and so did military service for the state. The establishment of modern, centralised states has not led to the dissolution of tribes, if only because they provided new resources that tribes could exploit. The new borders made smuggling an important source of income, and tribes appeared to be appropriate organisations to exploit it — because of their internal solidarity and the strong authority of the chieftain over his followers. Electoral politics became a major mechanism of redistribution on a national scale, and for obvious reasons tribal chieftains were attractive partners for political parties. Political patronage strengthened the tribes and reinforced the chieftains' positions within their tribes.

Modernising and centralising regimes (most consistently Kemalist Turkey and Pahlavi Iran) have attempted to detribalise Kurdish society by physically removing the chieftains from the tribes and sometimes deporting entire tribes. The successes of these measures appeared to be temporary only. When confronted with armed nationalist rebellion, both Iraq and Turkey established Kurdish militias to whom they delegated much power, thus reinvigorating some of the tribes and causing a resurgence of inter-tribal conflicts. Both in peace and in war, Kurdish tribes have shown great resilience, and it is probably true that tribes have played more prominent social and political roles in Kurdistan of the 1990s than they did a half century earlier. Tribal organisation has shown itself to have survival value in a number of distinctly modern situations.

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