

Palestinian and Kurdish nationalism: Understanding the ‘politics of the possible’

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ABSTRACT

This article compares the efforts of the Palestinians and the Kurds – the two largest stateless nations in the Middle East – to obtain recognition. While Kurdish movements are spread across four countries in the region – Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, with specificities dependent on the historical context and relations with the particular host state – in this article we focus on the Syrian Kurds as a contrast to the Palestinians. This is because these two communities arrive at different end-points in their national liberation projects despite sharing similar self-determination aims. These differences provide an opportunity to analyse and comment on the factors which impact on self-determination trajectories. The article examines the emancipatory potential of nationalism while simultaneously reflecting on the limitations imposed by regional dynamics and intra-group tensions. We compare the constraints faced by these two groups as non-state actors in a region shaped by the *realpolitik* of powerful states, recognizing that both of them – as transnational actors – in turn impact on these states as well.

INTRODUCTION

Kurds and the Palestinians are two of the world’s largest ‘nations without states’ (Guibernau, 2004). Dispersed throughout the Middle East, they both seek to rectify the post-First World War order imposed upon them, which left them without states. The origins of Kurdish and Palestinian national claims lie in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Although Kurdish and Palestinian demands for recognition as nations emerged at similar moments in time and faced similar challenges in a troubled region, they have reached different conclusions

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regarding their strategies for self-determination. While the Palestinians have largely opted for independent statehood in (part of) their historical national homeland, the major Kurdish groups in Syria and Turkey have moved away from separatist claims and aim increasingly for autonomy within the existing non-Kurdish states. Given their earlier common claims to independent statehood, how can we explain why Palestinians and Syrian Kurds now opt for different versions of national recognition? What determines non-state national groups' strategies when it comes to fulfilling the goal of self-determination? What opportunities and constraints are Kurds and Palestinians faced with at the local, regional, and international level? How do these affect the overarching strategic goals of these national movements?

In answering these questions, our central argument is that the ideologies and political trajectories of these two nations without states are shaped by what we term the 'politics of the possible'. The two national movements are thus compared through an analysis of their operationalization of self-determination within the external and internal limitations exerted upon them. The regional context in particular limits the ambitions of any national project, highlighting that these national movements are engaged in the politics of the possible. While the article is of contemporary relevance, it is informed by historical studies investigating developments both within the respective national movements and with regard to their foreign relations. Kurdish and Palestinian efforts at self-determination are not often paired as analytically comparative cases – despite the similarities between them and even their political engagement with each other.¹ Together, however, they represent two of the world's most significant 'nations without states' (Guibernau, 2004), with parallel chronologies and proximate, even overlapping geographies (Avineri, 2005; Brynen, 2019: 15–16; Maksoud, 1993). Our article thus fills a gap in the academic literature on non-state nationalist movements.

The Kurds are considered the world's largest stateless nation (Gunter, 2013: 161). There is a large variation in the estimated total Kurdish population due to their cross-border mobility, but 30 million is a reasonable estimate. The Kurdish population is predominantly divided between Turkey (15 million), Iraq (5 million), Iran (6.5 million), and Syria (2.2 million). The remainder live in areas of the former Soviet Union and in the diaspora, mainly in Western Europe (Gunter, 2013: 163). The Palestinians are estimated to number 13 million globally (Middle East Monitor, 2019), divided as follows: West Bank and East Jerusalem 3 million; Gaza 2 million; Israel 1.6 million; Jordan 2.2 million; Lebanon 0.5 million; and Syria 0.6 million, with the remainder spread around the world.² This dispersion of the two populations means they are both transnational actors engaging at multiple levels: local, national, regional, and international.

There are significant differences between the Palestinians and the Kurds. While our use of the terms Kurds and Palestinians to denote multifaceted movements is based on a simplification, we acknowledge the underlying complications involved and illustrate the intra-group complexities later in the article. While both the Kurds and the Palestinians are nations seeking self-determination, and both are dispersed across the Middle East, the core defining characteristic of their national identity differs. Their regional dispersal has specific and different historical roots, which affects how the two groups define themselves.

The core defining characteristic of the Palestinians is that the majority of them are refugees, and thus their demand for statehood is also a demand for return. The Palestinians – except those with Israeli and Jordanian citizenship – are almost per definition stateless. While 138 states have formally recognized Palestinian statehood (see below), such a recognition does not reflect the political reality in which the prospective Palestinian territories are under Israeli occupation. Not only is there no Palestinian state but, by and large, Palestinians do not have citizenship in any existing state either. In a sense, the chief expression of Palestinian space is the refugee camp (Brynen, 2019; Feldman, 2018). Ethno-linguistically, though, the Palestinians are Arabs living in Arab majority countries. They therefore do not have the same minority connotations in their states of residence as do the Kurds.

The Kurds, unlike the Palestinians, mostly reside in the territory where they demand autonomy and self-governance rather than full-fledged independence. (However, there are some

significant exceptions to this; concepts of Kurdish autonomy have developed within particular contexts that are further elaborated below.) This implies that the Kurds, over time, have negotiated claims to self-determination with the ruling powers within their respective states. Their claim is therefore not one of return, but rather of autonomy within the existing state in which they reside. With some exceptions, such as in Syria prior to the revolution/civil war, the Kurds have been citizens in the existing states with limited minority rights (McDowall, 2000; Yegen, 2009).

Another significant difference, which forms a core aspect of this article, is the nature of the national claims. While the Palestinians are state-seeking nationalists (Khalidi, 1997; Sayigh, 1999), the Kurds are divided on this issue. For example, Iraqi Kurds advocate for statehood within Iraq (as illustrated by the 2017 referendum), whereas Syrian and Turkish Kurds advocate for decentralized governance or autonomy (Leezenberg, 2016). The Kurds in Iran, despite having had a republic for a short period in 1946, have had a weaker movement for autonomy, with many against separatism of any kind (Kreyenbroek & Sperl, 1992: 17–19). Thus, while both Palestinians and Kurds are nationalists without a state, many Kurds advocate for autonomy without statehood while the Palestinians are determined to achieve statehood. We can further classify these two perspectives as refugee nationalism (the Palestinians) and minority nationalism (the Kurds): two sub-categories of nationalism amongst non-state nations. To clarify, while Palestinians in Palestine also seek statehood, the driving force for Palestinian national liberation was established in exile; hence the demand for return forms a core underpinning of the national demand.

As we will show, the Kurds have articulated a variety of national claims which often follow patterns according to the state in which they reside. To highlight this point, the article focuses on the example of the Syrian Kurds, and in particular, the dominant Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat; PYD). The diversity amongst the Kurdish national movements regarding modes of self-determination underscores the point that, unlike the Palestinians, Kurdish claims are affected by the practices of the host state rather than shaped by a Kurdish national coherence. We have selected the case that is most distinct from the Palestinian case to unravel the local, national, and international factors that affect self-determination choices. Although the Syrian Kurds face similar challenges to those of Kurds in the surrounding states, they are in a unique position due to the Syrian conflict. The precariousness of the national struggle faced by the Syrian Kurds illustrates that although they are encumbered by the same non-state predicament as the Palestinians, they have opted for a distinctly different strategic goal; that of federalism within the Syrian state.

By examining these two cases, then, we can see how it is not necessarily the ‘nation-without-a-state’ precondition (shared by Palestinians and Kurds) that shapes what a national group wants; rather – and equally – it is the dynamics on the ground and ideological developments within the group that determine the formation of their end-goal. This dynamic engagement is what we term the ‘politics of the possible’.³ We examine historical material and primary texts collected from the founding texts of the Syrian Kurdish movement and central Palestinian policy documents. In addition, the article provides a synthesizing comparative analysis of these cases, combining two strands of empirical literature – including that of the two authors – which build on archival research, interviews, and document analysis. While Kurdish and Palestinian ideas of self-determination may differ, both communities have been the victims of divide-and-rule policies within their respective countries of residence as well as at the regional level. Although this has primarily weakened their position, it has also created different dynamics which they have been able to leverage. These constraints and how they are leveraged form the cornerstones of this analysis, because they play a key role in Kurdish and Palestinian expressions of self-determination.

A significant similarity between these two national movements – which represents the core of this study – is that they are obliged to engage politically on multiple fronts, making their



demands for self-determination a transnational issue. For Kurds, this means that they must both engage with their host state and relate to the broader Kurdish regional position. The dominant party in northern Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), must not only relate to its position in Syria (*vis-à-vis* the government and the various opposition groups), but also to the demands of external state actors such as Turkey and Iraq and a non-state actor such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan; PKK) in Turkey. The Palestinians, meanwhile, must not only relate to Israel – as the occupying power standing in the way of the right of return and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state – but also, as refugees, to their various host states. In addition, both Kurds and Palestinians must relate to their own people (at the domestic level) and the dominant global powers (at the international level). Lastly, for nations without states there is also a distinction between the national level (which is the political context of the host state) and the domestic level (which is the intra-group context). For Palestinians in Lebanon, for instance, the national context consists of Lebanese politics, whilst the domestic context is the intra-Palestinian context. The national context for the Kurds in this case is the Syrian regime, while the domestic level consists of the various Kurdish groups competing for power.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The nation-building process – as described by political scientists and sociologists such as Karl Deutsch (Deutsch & Foltz, 1963), Charles Tilly (1975), or Barrington Moore (1966)⁴ – illustrated the shift from a pre-modern state to a modern state, integrating communities with local cultures into a state structure through education and political participation. Through this process, subjects of the state were transformed into citizens of the nation-state, and primary loyalties were transferred from the local to the national level. In our two cases, however, this transference of primary loyalties did not occur, due to a combination of factors. These include the failure of the state(s) to integrate local communities and ensure their political participation in the state, as well as massively disruptive events such as the imposition of the modern borders in the Middle East, the establishment of the state of Israel, and the mass expulsion of the Palestinians.

When the modern nation-states in the Middle East were formed after the First World War, both the Kurds and Palestinians were casualties of the Sykes-Picot borders. These laid the groundwork for the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres which dismembered the Ottoman Empire and established a Kurdish state within the borders of present-day Turkey. This treaty was never implemented, however (Gunter, 2013: 164). It was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne, establishing the boundaries of modern Turkey and negating Kurdish claims to independence. Nonetheless, for Turkey, the Treaty of Sèvres served as a reminder of the efforts of outside powers to divide the country, providing a narrative that was later mobilized by the state to securitize the Kurdish issue (Tank, 2005).

The Sykes-Picot agreement was also part of a series of agreements that created the British Mandate for Palestine, established at the San Remo conference in 1920 and confirmed by the League of Nations in 1922. The Mandate implied that the area would become an independent state in the future. However, the Balfour Declaration, which supported the establishment of a 'national home for the Jewish people' in Palestine, was incorporated into the Mandate's responsibilities (Barr, 2012: 56, 101).⁵ The Zionist Movement then proceeded to build a state-like structure as well as an army and to gain international support (Jensehaugen et al., 2012). This took place amidst heightened tensions with the Palestinians. Hence, although Palestinian national consciousness was on the rise (Khalidi, 1997), the Palestinians failed to build a robust parastate on a par with that of the Zionists.

In November 1947, the United Nation (UN) attempted to solve the conflict in Palestine, proposing that the territory be partitioned into an Arab state and a Jewish state. Shortly thereafter civil war broke out in Palestine. On 14 May 1948, Israel declared its independence, which was followed by an invasion by the surrounding Arab states. When the war was over, Israel controlled 77% of Palestine, and 750,000 Palestinian refugees had settled across the Arab world (Morris, 2004). The most significant host entities were Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza (under Egyptian occupation until 1967). Palestinian society was decimated, and it took almost two decades before Palestinians rallied around a national leadership in exile (Sayigh, 1992, 1999: 1–142). This war, known to Palestinians as the *Nakba* (Catastrophe), defines Palestinian national identity and political ambitions. Since then, in all its ideological hues, the central political goal has been the right of return to the Palestinian homeland (Sayigh, 1999).

While the establishment of the modern Iranian, Arab, and Turkish nation-states excluded the possibility of a Kurdish state, this did not signify the end of Kurdish national ambitions. In fact, there are at least three examples of successful bids at Kurdish independence or autonomy, and there have been numerous failed insurrections. Successful examples include the Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan in Iran (1946); the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq (1992–); and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES) known as Rojava in Syria (2012–). The Palestinians, for their part, declared the All-Palestine Government in Gaza (1948), established a state-within-a-state in Jordan (1968–70) and in Lebanon (1971–82), before formally declaring a state in exile in 1988, and finally a National Authority in Palestine in 1994. For both peoples, then, the regional order created in the aftermath of the two World Wars was one in which there was no independent state for them, but also one in which they have maintained the struggle for national self-determination despite the structures imposed on them. As time went on they would both persist in demanding national sovereignty, but their demands followed different political trajectories. One central factor influencing the direction of Palestinian and Kurdish demands for self-determination is the inner workings of the two national movements.

DIVERSITY WITHIN THE TWO MOVEMENTS

The structure of the Palestinian national movement is complex, but the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is its core organization. Founded in 1964, it was originally a tool in the hands of the Arabist movement under the leadership of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. By 1969, the Palestinian group Fatah, led by Yassir Arafat, had taken over the PLO, transforming it into an independent nationalist movement advocating for the liberation of Palestine. The PLO is not in itself a political party. It is a state-like entity – an umbrella organization composed of a variety of political parties and national interest groups such as labour organizations.

The various parties within the PLO often have separate military wings and regional benefactors. Fatah is the most important faction: since 1969, the leader of Fatah has also been the leader of the PLO; and since 1994, the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as well. Due to its preminent position and popular base amongst the Palestinian grassroots, Fatah has been able to manoeuvre in the Arab world more successfully than have other PLO groups, such as the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), or Saiqa (Brand, 1988: 626–627; Sayigh, 1999; Sela, 2014: 285, 309).

Further, the Palestinian national movement is also composed of groups outside the PLO, most notably the Islamist movements Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Founded in 1987, Hamas has been the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood – similar to the PLO in its state-building ambitions – whilst Islamic Jihad is primarily a militant group dependent on external finances from Iran (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010; Skare, 2021). Many of these groups, both

within and outside the PLO, have rejected the move towards accepting a reduced Palestinian state and recognition of the state of Israel. Despite this internal opposition from the rejectionists, the PLO mainstream has persisted in its gradual move towards accepting a geographically limited form of national independence. Unlike the Kurdish movement(s), the Palestinians have largely managed to establish and maintain one (trans)national movement which has organized the Palestinian diaspora as if it were a unitary national unit.

The four states that make up the divisions of a greater Kurdistan are northern Kurdistan (southeastern Turkey), southern Kurdistan (northern Iraq), western Kurdistan (northern Syria), and eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran) (Bengio, 2014). The Kurdish movement is divided amongst these states, and its demands for autonomy reflect the particularities of each sub-state culture. Within each country, there are also intra-Kurdish divisions. While this article focuses on the Syrian Kurds, the ties between the Syrian and Turkish Kurds makes it important to highlight the Turkish context as well.

Kurdish ideas of autonomy vary according to the local historical and cultural contexts from which they emerged. In the feudal system which existed in Turkey until the early twentieth century, Kurdish notables were the interlocutors of the Ottoman state and Kurdish political demands were articulated through them. Özoglu (2001: 383) argues that Kurdish nationalism grew in response to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the weakening of the position of Kurdish lineages. The mediation role between Kurdish leaders and the state became obsolete with the establishment of the modern nation-state (McDowall, 2000: 15).

The move from feudal structures to a modern nation-state meant that the link between the citizen and the state became much more direct as the state assumed a monopoly on power, collecting taxes and gaining legitimacy through the provision of services. However, in cases where the state was unable (or unwilling) to fulfil the social contract and neglected populations instead – as in the Kurdish areas of southeastern Turkey – this created an opening for rebels to establish an alternative order in a context of disorder (Duyvesteyn, 2017: 670). As illustrated by scholars of rebel governance, in similar contexts, rebel insurgents actively engage in the formation of a political order outside and against the state as ‘counter-state sovereigns’ (Mampilly, 2011). The kind of autonomy they seek depends on both internal and external factors. It can therefore be seen that the different ideas of autonomy have grown out of historical interactions with the state.

Turkey, with its 15 million Kurds, is the host state to the largest group of Kurds in the region, totalling 18% of the population and making them the country’s largest ethnic minority.⁶ Many of them have been assimilated, while others (mostly in Turkey’s southeastern region) see themselves as a minority population, despite the state’s refusal to use the term ‘minority’ (regarding it as a divisive concept). The most potent Kurdish opposition group is the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, is the ideological head of the dominant Kurdish movement in both Turkey and Syria. The PKK’s conflict with the Turkish state has resulted in the loss of 40,000 lives since 1984, diminishing the political space for expressions of Kurdish identity in Turkey until the early 2000s.

In Turkey and Syria, the PKK and its Syrian counterpart, the PYD, have abandoned the notion of statehood and advocate decentralized local governance – which they term ‘democratic autonomy’ or ‘democratic confederalism’, inspired by the work of American anarchist and libertarian socialist Murray Bookchin and adopted by PKK leader Öcalan (Tank, 2017: 420). This is a distinct idea of autonomy that arises from Öcalan’s reading of Bookchin and its application to Kurdish aspirations. The organic links between the PKK and what later became the PYD hark back to the 1990s when Öcalan was in Syria, leading the PKK’s operations in Turkey from the Bekaa valley (as well as bases in the Qandil mountains of Iraq) (van Wilgenburg, 2014).⁷ Following the partial withdrawal of the Syrian regime from northern Syria in 2012, the PKK supported the PYD militarily and politically in its bid for control. Politically, Öcalan’s ideas were put into practice in several regions of northern Syria, often referred to as Rojava.

The combined political strength of the PYD and its military force, the YPG/SDF, has made it the dominant political party in northern Syria, but not without challengers. The brutal suppression of the first major uprising of Syrian Kurds in 2004 at Qamishli emphasized the lengths to which the Syrian regime would go to suppress all forms of Kurdish political activity and constrain the ability of Kurdish political parties to organize. Kurdish political parties developed various strategies for interacting with the state – some choosing compromise and others directly challenging it – but their efforts were restricted by the illegality of their status under the Baath regime (Allsopp, 2014: 99). The weakness of Kurdish political representation in Syria strengthened alternative political forces such as the PKK/PYD, resulting in the current tensions between the PKK/PYD and Syrian Kurdish groups opposed to its role in the region.

One of the most important challengers to the PYD is the Kurdish National Council (KNC), founded in 2011 and composed of 11 Syrian Kurdish parties. The KNC has worked closely with the Syrian National Council (SNC), the main umbrella opposition group in exile, leading the PYD to accuse it of working with Turkey and the SNC to undermine the Rojava administration (Allsopp & van Wilgenburg, 2019: 97–98). However, although the KNC did work together with the SNC, ideological differences between the two made collaboration difficult. With some intra-group exceptions, the KNC adopted a federalist approach; for the SNC, however, while administrative decentralization is acceptable, autonomy is not (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012). Thus, despite their political rivalry, the KNC vision of autonomy is much closer to the non-state vision of the PYD.

Based on this presentation of the political organization within these two nations, a number of differences stand out. First, while there has been considerable in-fighting amongst the Palestinians, and different states in the region have invested in their favoured sub-groups, the Palestinians have largely managed to maintain one overarching national structure. Arguably, this continued to be true even when Hamas appeared on the stage in 1987, since Hamas always organized within the Palestinian community in its entirety and not according to the regional state divisions. The intra-group tensions within the Syrian Kurds are latent and unresolved, despite the present dominance of the PYD/PKK. Second, while both the Palestinians and the Kurds started their modern history by demanding national independence, the Palestinians have persisted in this demand whilst the Kurds have altered their strategic vision over time and now seek autonomy instead.

CHANGING FORMS OF NATIONALISM

The ideology of nationalism emerges from a particular political discourse and historical context. Ideology does not develop in a political vacuum but situates itself within or in opposition to existing hegemonic discourses. As Walker Connor (1972) argued, in reaction to Deutsch and Foltz's (1963) disregard for ethnic identity, the policies of assimilation that gave rise to the modern nation-state resulted in more cases of nation-destroying than nation-building. This is relevant to our study, where assimilation in the Kurdish case and ethnic cleansing in the Palestinian case have been nation-destroying policies. Connor's theory was that even though nations are often ethnically diverse, the belief in a common origin is a foundational myth necessary to understanding nationhood. Variations of this theory were promoted by Benedict Anderson (2006), Ernest Gellner (2009), and Eric Hobsbawm (2007), who argued for the 'mythic' aspects of the nation and what Anderson termed 'imagined communities'. Both Kurds and Palestinians, despite their intra-group diversity, are such 'imagined communities' which have actively built up their self-understanding as distinct nations.

At the same time, Kurdish and Palestinian nationalisms are situated within a geopolitical space, which creates particular opportunities but also places certain constraints on their ideological development. Self-determination for national groups such as the Palestinians and Kurds is

about the 'politics of the possible'. Kurdish and Palestinian nationalist ideologies have evolved over time in different directions, highlighting the fluidity of the national question. In the case of the Turkish and Syrian Kurdish movements, the idea of statehood was gradually replaced by demands for autonomy. From the perspective of the Turkish state, which sees Kurdish demands as an existential threat, there is an assumption that the PKK's ideology remains focused on the ultimate aim of Kurdish statehood. Analysing Öcalan's writings, particularly following his imprisonment in 1999, reveals a move from statism towards federalism and radical democracy. The most important ideological shift occurred in the late 1990s, when the nationalist project of independence was replaced by that of autonomy within Turkey (Leezenberg, 2016: 613).

The origins of the Turkish PKK's ideology are grounded in the hegemonic discourses of the Turkish Left in the 1960s and 1970s and Marxist perspectives on nationalism (Gunes & Zeydanlioğlu, 2014: 252). However, the Kurdish movement parted from the Turkish Left because the latter did not sufficiently address issues concerning the colonial control of Kurdish areas by the Turkish state through the feudal patronage system. This gave rise to non-state nationalist thinking, whereby the state was seen as a capitalist tool that needed to be abolished if Kurds were to gain their freedom. Öcalan and the PKK's ideologues therefore advocate radical non-statist democracy as a form of 'self-defence against national states'. This had an impact on members of the Syrian Kurdish PYD, who look to Öcalan's writings for ideological inspiration. This ideology formed the core of the Rojava experiment in northern Syria.

The PKK's ideology is also informed by the constraints on Kurdish self-determination within a strong state which projects a homogeneous state identity and (not least) the brutal tactics of Turkish state oppression of Kurdish aspirations since the 1970s. Likewise, the Syrian Kurdish PYD seeks federalism as an outcome of negotiations on the future status of Syria (Jongerden, 2019: 61–75). The non-state nationalism adopted by the PYD is inscribed in the Charter of the Social Contract, the founding document of self-rule in Rojava. From the outset, in Article 2, it illustrates a commitment to decentralized, grassroots democracy:

Authority resides with and emanates from the people of the Autonomous Regions. [...] The people constitute the sole source of legitimacy [for] all governing councils and public institutions, which are founded on democratic principles essential to a free society. (PYD, 2014)

However, as a vanguard movement, the PYD has also been accused of oppressing alternative political voices through arbitrary arrests and the detention of political opponents (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

In the Palestinian case, there has likewise been an evolution in the national objectives, but this has not led to the abandonment of the demand for independent statehood. Starting from the desire for statehood situated in the pan-Arab ideology of the 1950s–60s, Palestinian national demands then moved towards the independent objective of full national liberation of historical Palestine in the 1960s–70s, before gradually shifting towards a partial territorial liberation in the 1970s–90s (Sayigh, 1999). Historically, the concept of Palestinian nationalism has not been static but has developed according to the political circumstances in which the Palestinians have found themselves. In the period after the establishment of Israel, Palestinian society was dispersed across the region, and it took some time for it to find its footing. Under Nasser's leadership of the pan-Arab movement, Palestinian nationalism was immersed in that vision: the liberation of Palestine was part and parcel of pan-Arabism, and Palestinians put their faith in the Arab states to act on their behalf. Thus, while the liberation of Palestine was an independent goal, the Palestinian nation was considered part of the wider Arab nation. On the Palestinian side, this was fronted by the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM) (Chamberlin, 2012: 15–16).

The Arab states' defeat in the Six-Day War with Israel in 1967 destroyed Palestinian belief in pan-Arabism, enabling the particularistic Palestinian nationalism – or Palestinianism

(Sayigh, 1999: 9) – to come to the fore. This nationalist ideology was supported by Fatah – a group that had conducted attacks against Israel for several years. Their political vision and their independent militant activism were more in tune with the wishes of the Palestinian grassroots and they were catapulted to the centre stage of the Palestinian national movement (Sayigh, 1992). The Palestinian refugee camps were transformed into revolutionary arenas, producing thousands of volunteers for the national liberation struggle. This was a national re-imagination, as illustrated in the sub-title of Rosemary Sayigh's (2007) book about the Palestinians: 'From Peasants to Revolutionaries'.

By 1969, under Arafat's leadership, Fatah had taken over the PLO. From that point on, the goal became one of a Palestinian independent state liberated by the Palestinians themselves (Chamberlin, 2012: 70; Kimmerling & Migdal, 2003: 254; Sayigh, 1992: 263–264). Subsequent ideological debates hence took this for granted and focused on questions of size (all of Palestine/parts of Palestine) and means (armed liberation alone, armed liberation and diplomacy, or only diplomacy). The question of size tied into the question of what to do with Israel. In the vision that dominated the PLO from 1969 to the mid-1970s, Israel had no place in Palestine, since the ideological vision was to create one democratic state in *all* of Palestine. The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine led the way in formulating a more moderate policy. In 1971 it formulated a 'phased' programme aimed at establishing a 'national authority' (*sulta wataneyeh*) on any part of Palestine (Sayigh, 1999: 302). In June 1974, the PLO passed the Ten-Point Programme – the first indication that the organization was willing to aim for something less than the full liberation of Palestine. It opened up to diplomacy as a means to that end, in addition to armed struggle (Chamberlin, 2012: 237–238; Pearlman, 2008: 87–88; 2014: 81; PNC, 1974).

This was the start of a process in which the PLO's moderate leadership made international political overtures, indicating its willingness to negotiate about something less than full liberation (Cobban, 1984: 62; Mohamad, 2001: 59; Muslih, 1976: 134). Once the PLO opened the door to establishing a state in *parts* of Palestine, this implied the possible acceptance of Israel. The intensity of the shift increased in 1977 when US President Jimmy Carter called for a Palestinian 'homeland', and the PLO eyed an opportunity to engage with the United States (Jensehaugen, 2018). In March 1977 the Palestine National Council (PNC) passed a statement expanding on the Ten-Point Programme, replacing the phrase 'national authority' with 'national state' (*dawla wataneyeh*) (PNC, 1977). 'National authority' implied an interim step, while 'national state' suggests the two-state solution as an end-goal (Mohamad, 1998: 178).

There was no easy process from this to the 1988 declaration of independence and the 1993 recognition of Israel, but the core of the PLO had shifted to accepting the principle of dividing the national homeland. As already mentioned, various factions within and outside the PLO structure rejected this territorial compromise. The rejectionists from within the PLO are commonly referred to as the Rejectionist Front (Pearlman, 2008). As proposals for a two-state solution have become increasingly unviable, there have been growing demands for a one-state solution amongst Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories, but the PLO has not changed its position in any way (Middle East Monitor, 2021).

This overview shows how national ideology is not a static phenomenon, and the comparison between the Kurdish and Palestinian cases highlights what the possible ideological trajectories can look like and what influences them. For the Syrian (and Turkish) Kurds, the ideology shifted from statism to federalism, whilst for the Palestinians it was a shift from full territorial liberation under a pan-Arab umbrella to a territorial division under a particularistic Palestinian national leadership. Both trajectories reveal a compromising tendency, though with distinctly different outcomes: the Syrian and Turkish Kurds opted not to demand national independence, whilst the Palestinians compromised on the size of the independent entity they sought.



NEGOTIATING SELF-DETERMINATION AT SEVERAL LEVELS SIMULTANEOUSLY

A useful analytical framework for this comparative case is inspired by the Waltzian theory regarding different levels of analysis. Kenneth Waltz (1959) suggests three levels of analysis, each of which explains a root source of conflict: human nature, political regimes within states, and the state system. We borrow loosely from this framework, noting that local actors, nation-states, and the international system each contribute towards providing levers and constraints on self-determination goals. At each of these levels, Kurdish and Palestinian actors negotiate their political agendas. Significantly, these levels are interconnected and interdependent; hence political actors are constrained by the need to balance the demands of one level against another or to leverage one against another. In the following, we will map out the structural position of the Palestinians and the Kurds in their respective national, regional, and global political contexts, illustrating the interplay between these levels.

For the Palestinians, the primary roadblock is found at Waltz's second level – that of the state – which stands in the way of their twin goals of establishing an independent state in Palestine and securing the right of return for refugees. The state in question is Israel, which first secured control over 77% of Palestine in 1947–49, expelling 750,000 Palestinians, and then occupied the remaining parts of Palestine in 1967, with the flight of a further 300,000 Palestinians (Louis & Shlaim, 2012; Shlaim & Rogan, 2007). Although a small state, Israel is militarily a power of rank, with ever-increasing support from its superpower ally, the United States. This means that the Palestinians are extremely disadvantaged, despite the support various Palestinian factions receive from regional powers. The Palestinians are further encumbered by their dispersal across the region. This not only means that it is nigh on impossible to run a centralized movement, but also that the PLO, as an organization, is under conflicting pressure from its various host nations, who influence it from the inside by controlling individual groups within the movement.

With no state of their own, the Palestinians and Kurds develop policy in relation to their host states. As diasporas, they are both players and pawns in regional and national politics. Mapping out the legal status of Kurds and Palestinians in the key countries they live in reveals a complicated landscape. In Israel, the Palestinians are citizens with voting rights, although certain mechanisms make them second-class citizens. In the West Bank and Gaza, the Palestinians are divided between the refugee and the non-refugee population, although both reside in the legal patchwork between the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian Authority (PA). In the greater Jerusalem area, the Palestinians reside in a territory annexed by Israel, but only a minority of them are citizens. In Jordan, Palestinians both retain their refugee status and are citizens. In Syria, the Palestinians have refugee status and no citizenship but nonetheless have been largely integrated into society (Brand, 1988). In Lebanon, Palestinians have status simply as refugees and are isolated from Lebanese society, with the PLO running the refugee camps as if they were autonomous entities (Feldman, 2018).

For Palestinians, what we term 'host state weakness' in the Palestinian occupied territories has not occurred, because Israel's control has deepened. The establishment of the PA in 1994 came after negotiations between the PLO and Israel, and not due to Israeli weakness in the territory. While this was supposed to lead to independent statehood, it did not. However, host state weakness did occur in Jordan (1968–70) and in Lebanon (1971–82), allowing the PLO to create temporary bases for their national struggle in these two states.

Jordan was the first central host for the independent PLO – because it hosted one of the largest Palestinian populations, because it has one of the longest borders with Israel, but also because it was a relatively weak state and could not afford to stand against the radical Arab tide dominating the region in the 1950s and 1960s. By 1970 the PLO had built a state-within-a-state in Jordan. Syrian and Iraqi troops were also present in the kingdom to protect the Palestinians;

a situation that was untenable for the Jordanian monarchy. In September 1970, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) hijacked several international airliners and forced them to land in Jordan, and they attempted to assassinate King Hussein. This sparked the 'Black September' civil war, resulting in the expulsion of the PLO from the kingdom (Rubinovitz, 2010). In the Lebanese case, there had been a certain amount of Palestinian autonomy in enclaves since 1969, through the Nasser-sponsored Cairo agreement. With the expulsion of the PLO from Jordan in 1970, Lebanon became the PLO's main base. The PLO then became a central actor in the Lebanese civil war, which broke out in 1975. Enmeshed in a war which pitted them against various Lebanese factions as well as the Syrians and the Israelis, the PLO was able to keep a foothold in Lebanon until it was forced to evacuate in 1982 by the Israeli invasion of that year (Brynen, 2019).

The state level, in turn, impacts on intra-Palestinian politics, increasing the ideological conflicts within the movement (Pearlman, 2008). This corresponds loosely to Waltz's first level, which we interpret as actors within the movement. These internal divisions first appeared within the PLO – pitting Fatah against the PFLP in the 1970s – and later between the PLO and Hamas, starting in the late 1980s and intensifying in the 2000s. While this challenge to building a coherent national organization in a situation where powerful external actors support internal groups is similar to the Kurdish situation, in contrast to the Kurds, it has not altered the overarching goal of the Palestinian national movement, irrespective of the national context in which the Palestinians operate. What it has meant, however – and this is common for both the Kurds and the Palestinians – is that factionalization has raised the question of legitimate representation. In the Palestinian case, this is not simply about Hamas challenging the PLO's hegemony; it is also about how militant acts by groups within the movement have led to the delegitimization of the movement as a whole.

Similarly in the Kurdish case, the transborder nature of Kurdish politics and external state involvement has raised questions of legitimacy in northern Syria. Representation by the dominant Syrian Kurdish PYD in Rojava has been contested both within the Kurdish movement and by external actors, most notably Turkey. Kurds are the largest ethnic minority in Syria, with a population estimated to be 2.2 million (Gunter, 2014: 2). They have had a turbulent relationship with the Syrian state, which until 2011 followed a policy of assimilation that stripped Kurds of their citizenship rights through the 1962 law (Decree 93), removing their right to vote, own property, or work in government positions (Tank, 2017: 412). While Kurdish parties did exist under the Baath regime, they were illegal (Allsopp, 2014).

Tribes in Syria are regarded as a conduit for political power. Although tribal influence has diminished due to societal transformations, 60–70% of Syrians belong to a clan or tribe, making them a significant tool for actors external to the conflict who can mobilize tribal loyalties (Hussain, 2018). Relations between the Kurds and tribal leaders varied according to geography and were often dependent on the success of the divide-and-rule policies of regional governments – both nationally (within Kurdish groups), and regionally (supporting Kurdish groups in border states). This is exemplified by the establishment of the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Syria – an ad hoc coalition formed in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2011 as a challenge to the PYD/PKK, whose legitimacy relied on the patronage of Masud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq with support from Turkey. This split the Kurdish opposition in Syria, but the Syrian KNC was incohesive and unable to play a role on the ground; consequently, it was suppressed by the PYD, making the latter the dominant political force in the north (Baczko et al., 2018).

Palestinians and Kurds are spread across several countries in the Middle East and their self-determination ambitions are impacted by changes at the systemic level, making them vulnerable to regional shifts and tensions between host states. Historically – that is to say, during the period of the Cold War – the Palestinians were able to frame their nationhood demands more forcefully by allying themselves with the Soviet Union (Dannreuther, 1998: 48–113). Although



it was a turbulent relationship, having a superpower ally carried weight in international relations. Furthermore, following the process of decolonization in the mid-twentieth century, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) became stacked in the PLO's favour, given that it positioned itself globally as a national liberation movement (Chamberlin, 2012). This support within the UNGA gained momentum in 1975, when two resolutions were passed which recognized the Palestinians' right a) to self-determination and b) to national independence and sovereignty (Resolution 3236); and granted the PLO official UNGA observer status (Resolution 3237).⁸

In 2009 the UN track became a confirmed PLO strategy as the US-led peace process with Israel collapsed. Coupled with building state-like institutions on the ground, the idea was to move forward with the state-building project as a complementary track within international diplomacy (Vick, 2010). This approach reached its height in 2012 when Palestine became a 'non-member state' of the United Nations (Charbonneau & Nichols, 2012). There are two major flaws with this approach, however. First, while support in the UNGA carries limited political and moral weight, the real power in the UN lies with the Security Council. There, the United States has the power of veto and a systematic history of blocking resolutions critical of Israel or supportive of the Palestinians. Second, UN resolutions do not change facts on the ground. Declaring a state is not the same as having a state, even though 138 states have recognized that state. The logic of the move to the UN arena – but also its weakness – is the insistence that while independence cannot be gained locally, it can be recognized internationally.

For the Kurds, the systemic-level changes experienced following the Arab Uprisings in 2011 and subsequent civil war in Syria have given them the greatest opportunity to attain their dream of autonomy by leveraging their critical position in the war. In a gambit to gain their loyalty, on 7 April 2011 the Syrian regime – which had denied Kurds basic citizenship rights in the past – granted full citizenship to all Kurds holding *ajānib* (foreigner) status.⁹ While this move clearly benefitted the Kurds, it was also part of the Syrian regime's divide-and-rule policy.

Pervasive feelings of opposition and resistance to the central government in Syria – without any recourse to action under the Baath regime – provided fertile ground for the development of a Kurdish polity after 2011, when the power of the central state weakened. At the outset of the war, Kurdish groups preferred to remain on the sidelines, with relations between the PYD and the Syrian government fluctuating between hostility and pragmatic co-existence. Eventually, however, PYD forces (supported by the PKK across the border in Turkey) capitalized on the absence of centralized control in the northeast caused by the war and entered the conflict as a stabilizing force. Kurdish control of Rojava developed incrementally as the PYD sought to establish a political order independent of the state. A key moment that brought global attention to the Kurdish cause was their victory over the 'Islamic State' (IS) in Kobane in 2014. By taking over control of the areas heavily populated by Kurds in Syria such as Jarablus, Afrin, and Kobane, the PYD's goal was to establish a new political system formed around ethnicity but with a distinctive ideology that became its mobilizing force. Thus, for the Kurdish PYD, the Syrian civil war provided a context in which to operationalize the ideology of the movement.

Nonetheless, the transitory nature of regional power alliances throughout the Syrian civil war continues to pose a challenge for Syrian Kurdish attempts at achieving autonomy. In particular, the gradual withdrawal of the United States from the region under the Obama presidency, as well as the rise of Russia and its partnership with Turkey and Iran since 2015, have limited the ability of the Syrian Kurds to secure their early gains. At the same time, the rise of nationalist sentiment in Turkey and the state's securitization of the Kurdish issue has increased perceptions of the PYD (with its links to the PKK) as being a threat to Turkey's security (Tank, 2020). Without the umbrella of US protection, the Syrian Kurds have suffered three Turkish incursions, most recently 'Operation Peace Spring' in October 2019, aimed at weakening PYD control and removing them from areas directly across the border. At the time

of writing, the spectre of further Turkish incursions continues to pose a threat due to the Turkish government's desire to 'stabilize' areas in the north prior to its national elections, with the intention of repatriating the 3.7 million Syrian refugees who currently live in Turkey.

The foregoing analysis shows how (like the Palestinians) the Kurds in Syria have been able to leverage their regional ethnic networks, but also how the transnational character of their struggle has made them a target for Turkish intervention. The example of the Syrian Kurds illustrates how host state weakness can produce opportunities for seeking independence. It remains to be seen whether this autonomy can persist when the host state finally reasserts itself, or whether the Syrian regime's *de facto* acceptance of Kurdish autonomy has been nothing more than a temporary marriage of convenience.

There are two key similarities between the Palestinian and Kurdish cases discussed here. First, the opportunity to achieve *de facto* autonomy occurred because of host state weakness in Jordan and Lebanon (for the Palestinians) and in Syria (for the Kurds). Second, the assertion of Palestinian autonomy was made possible through the engagement of external regional actors. The main difference between the Kurdish and Palestinian examples, however, is that in the Palestinian case, autonomy in Jordan and Lebanon was never an actual Palestinian goal. Rather, it was a temporary mechanism for building a base that could serve as the launchpad for liberating the national homeland.

CONCLUSION

The politics of the possible is a reflection of the negotiation between what is ideologically desired and what is practically possible. As one Kurdish leader put it:

We know our dream, which is an independent state, but we also know the reality, and we will deal with it. We are landlocked and sentenced by our geography (Palani et al., 2020: 9)

The shift in the Kurdish position from state nationalism to confederalism, guided by ideological renewal, illustrates that Kurds understand the limitations imposed upon them from the outside in their reconceptualization of the nation-state idea. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to consider ideological reconceptualization as purely instrumental, since over time a new ideology can gather support and redefine the movement. However, this also has consequences for the transborder movement, because other Kurdish groups support the nation-state idea as an expression of self-determination. The Palestinian case differs in that there has been no shift in the form of their claims to statehood, making the Palestinians more ideologically unified in the national question. More recently, the one-state debate has partially challenged this, but it has not affected the political leadership, which remains steadfast in its position regarding the two-state solution.

Furthermore, the three levels we have presented do not have equal weight in the scales of the politics of possibility. The international level serves both to raise consciousness and as a form of soft power vis-à-vis the international community. While the state level may block the achievement of self-determination, autonomy as an ideal goal remains powerful at the systemic level. The Syrian Kurds, whose alliance with the United States in the fight against IS focused intense media interest on them, gained the sympathy of international public opinion. They believed that awareness of their sacrifices and commitment on the ground as well as their functioning system of governance in northern Syria would afford them some protection. Indeed, the US abandonment of the Syrian Kurds in 2019 was widely regarded as a 'betrayal'. As such, international public opinion has given them increased soft power and raised awareness of their plight, strengthening support for their aim of autonomy (Taşpınar, 2019).

However, popular support in the West does not equal secure autonomy in northern Syria, in the same way that being recognized in the UNGA does not end the Israeli occupation for the Palestinians. This has been a lesson learned the hard way. For both groups, the learning experience is that while the international level serves to raise awareness, in the *realpolitik* of the Middle East, it is the needs of powerful regional states that determine your fate.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ While not a focus of the present article, a good historical overview of the interactions between the two movements and the impact of the Palestinian Fedayeen movement on leftist Turkish-Kurdish students from the 1960s to the 1980s can be found in Akkaya (2015).
- ² These numbers are based on the CIA Factbook for the West Bank and Gaza; UNRWA and Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics data for Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon; and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics for Israel and the rest of the world.
- ³ Unless otherwise specified, when we refer to Kurds we are discussing the Syrian Kurds.
- ⁴ These texts form core developments in the study of nationalism, but we recognize that they are developed in a European context and are not perfectly transferable to a Middle East one. See Jung (2017).
- ⁵ League of Nations: 'Mandate for Palestine', 12 August 1922. Available at: [https://content.ecf.org/files/M00301%20-%20Text%20of%20the%20British%20Mandate%20for%20Palestine%20\(1922\).pdf](https://content.ecf.org/files/M00301%20-%20Text%20of%20the%20British%20Mandate%20for%20Palestine%20(1922).pdf) (accessed 21 November 2019).
- ⁶ Population figures vary due to policies of assimilation and cross-border movement. Nor is population data for ethnic minorities officially collected. Importantly, Kurds are not considered a minority within the Turkish state since minority status is only given to non-Muslim citizens following the historical Ottoman *millet* system. The figure here comes from the World Population Review site: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/turkey-population>.
- ⁷ In 1999, PKK leader Öcalan was ousted from Syria under Turkish military pressure. He was subsequently captured by Turkish forces and imprisoned on Imrali Island in Turkey.
- ⁸ United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3236 and 3237, 22 November 1974. Available at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/IP%20A%20RES%203236.pdf> (accessed 26 November 2019).
- ⁹ Despite being Syrian citizens and the country's largest ethnic minority, many Kurds were made 'stateless' and denied Syrian citizenship through the 1962 law (Decree 93) which defined 120,000 Kurds as *ajānib* (foreigners) (Gunter, 2014).

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