An Illusory Unity - الهوية المأزومة

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An Illusory Unity

Understanding the Construction of Kurdish Political Identity**

الهوية المجزأة

فهم بناء الهوية السياسية الكردية

Abstract: This article re-conceptualizes the notion of Kurdishness by distinguishing between two different political identities – "traditional" and "new" – within the Kurdish struggle. Each identity has crafted its own history, politics, social and cultural frameworks, and economic and diplomatic relations. I discuss the process of identity construction within both blocs, which has split political identity according to bipolar discourses and dichotomous labels: Good Kurds vs Bad Kurds, Old Kurds vs New Kurds, Submissive Kurds vs Subversive Kurds, Collaborator Kurds vs Terrorist Kurds, and, finally, Honourable Kurds vs Dishonourable Kurds. These form parts of a new divided Kurdish political identity based on the Kurds' own perspectives and self-identification, as well as their descriptions of one another, in the current political arena.

Keywords: Kurds; Kurdishness; Political Identity; Identity Construction; Self-identification.

ملخص: تحاول الدراسة إعادة صياغة مفهوم "الكردية" عبر التفريق بين هويتين سياسيتين مختلفتين: واحدة "تقليدية" وأخرى "جديدة". وتجادل بأنّ هاتين الهويتين أسستا كل واحدة منهما تاريخها وسياستها وأُطرها الاجتماعية والثقافية وعلاقاتها الدبلوماسية بطريقة خاصة بها. وتشرح الكيفية التي بُنيت بها هاتان الهويتان اللتان تشكلتا في خطابين متمايزين قائمين على عدة ثنائيات: الأكراد الجيدون مقابل الأكراد السيئين، الأكراد القدماء مقابل الأكراد الجدد، الأكراد الخانعون مقابل الأكراد المقاومين، الأكراد المتعاونون مقابل الأكراد الإرهابيين، الأكراد الشرفاء مقابل الأكراد الخونة. لكن تبيّن الدراسة أن كل هذه الثنائيات تشكل هوية سياسية كردية منقسمة جديدة ترتكز إلى تعريف الأكراد بذواتهم، بالإضافة إلى تصنيفهم لبعضهم البعض في خضم الوضع السياسي الراهن.

كلمات مفتاحية: الأكراد؛ الكردية؛ الهوية السياسية؛ بناء الهوية؛ التعريف بالذات.

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Introduction

It has often been argued that given the history, geography, and, most importantly, culture of the Kurdish region, Kurds have a more or less united identity and share the common elements of a cohesive nation.[1] However, political identity and social expression among the Kurds have almost always been fragmented[2] and troublesome.[3] The process of constructing a unified Kurdish political identity involves several complications, arguably rooted in the modern understanding of political identity as the distinctiveness of one group in relation to others.[4] The Kurds appear to have all the elements necessary to be recognized as a single nation. However, these elements lack a formal political organization and sovereign boundaries.[5] In other words, they lack a state as the most recognizable entity in the modern political arena, which poses not simply a practical problem, but a conceptual one as well.

The notions of Kurdishness and Kurdish political identity cannot be approached solely from within the modern understanding of political identity. Thus, I examine political identity construction by looking at the notion of Kurdishness from a different angle. More specifically, I analyse the Kurds' recent history and current status in the Middle East from the perspective of the Kurds themselves. That said, the Kurdish case has been regarded as problematic by external powers due to the threat it poses to the unity, stability, and integrity of the states in which the Kurds live. Thus, despite the variety of approaches that have been taken to deal with the Kurds' situation, Kurdish political identity has been treated by Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria as a monolithic entity for the past hundred years.

However, within the Kurdish political arena itself, Kurdish identity has been fraught with disunity given that Kurdish political actors themselves do not regard it as a unified entity. Instead, it has been approached in ways that are coloured by Kurds' dependency on the powers and resources of the states in which they reside. In the last three decades, and particularly since the emergence of the Kurdistan Workers Party (the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, or PKK),[6] the process of building political identity has manifested in two principal forms. This paper is examines Kurdish political identity based on the premise that there are now two distinct Kurdish political identities.

Kurdish Cultural and Political Identity

Due to oppression and statelessness, there are no precise statistics on the global Kurdish population, although it is estimated at around 40 million.[7] There are sizable Kurdish communities in various metropolises of the world, such as Istanbul, Tehran, Damascus, and Baghdad. A people of Asian origin, the Kurds live primarily in the area known as Kurdistan, which extends from the Loristan region of Iran to Kharpoot, where the two branches of the Euphrates converge. Kurdistan is bounded by Turkey, Armenia, and Georgia to the north, and by Turkey and the Mediterranean Sea to the west. It is flanked on the east by Iran, and on the south by Iraq and Syria. Notable topographical features include the valleys of Bitlis, Adham and Sherwan, and the

[1] Cecil J. Edmonds, "Kurdish Nationalism," *Journal of Contemporary History,* vol. 6, no. 1 (1971), pp. 87-107; John Hutchinson, *Modern Nationalism* (London: Fontana Press, 1994).

[2] Ofra Bengio (ed.), *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

[3] Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006).

[4] Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); and Smith, *Nationalism.*

[5] Marc Edelman, "Social Movements: Changing Paradigms and Forms of Politics," *Annual Review of Anthropology,* vol. 30 (2001), pp. 285-317.

[6] The PKK, which is listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the USA, and the EU, was founded as a party in 1978 by Abdullah Ocalan ('Apo') and his comrades in Turkey. When the group launched its armed struggle in 1984, it boasted a huge following throughout Kurdistan, particularly in Turkey and Syria. It is the largest, most widely influential Kurdish political party in the Middle East.

[7] David McDowall, *A Modern History of The Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

highlands of Zagra.[8] In a formal sense, of course, there is no Kurdistan. Rather, its map exists primarily in the hearts and minds of the Kurds themselves.

The cities of Diyarbakir in Turkey, Erbil in Iraq, Qamishli in Syria, and Sanandaj in Iran are viewed by Kurds as regional capitals.[9] While the Kurds have never claimed that those metropolises are Kurdish areas proper, their large Kurdish populations make them very important to the Kurdish struggle for influence and social and political identity. For instance, Istanbul is sometimes considered the largest Kurdish city rather than Diyarbakir or Erbil, since there are around four to five million Kurds living in Istanbul.[10] There are large Kurdish communities in countries of the former Soviet Union, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, among others, over two million in Europe and the USA, and more than a million in Germany.[11]

For a number of reasons, Kurdish nationalism and national identity have followed a different path than the one taken by nationalism as described by scholars elsewhere. According to the ethnic-symbolism theory put forward by Anthony Smith,[12] collective memories play a decisive role in nation formation, which is to be distinguished from state-making.[13] Arguably, states might be established without recourse to memory. Nations, by contrast, require shared memories to give their heterogeneous citizenry a source of pride and dignity, a shared home, and a common destiny.[14] Based on a close historical investigation of the Kurdish nationalist movement, one might argue that one of its problematic features has been the failure to maintain a collective memory. Indeed, fragmentation has been seen as decisive in shaping the process of building the Kurdish nation and national identity.[15]

Kurdish history up to the collapse of the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad (1946), with its various accomplishments and upheavals, is shared by the majority of Kurds. However, the elements of the universally shared Kurdish history or memory are best articulated by Edmonds,[16] who, five decades ago, summed up what he termed "the historical bases of Kurdish nationalist thinking" as follows:

> *The Kurds constitute a single nation which has occupied its present habitat for at least three thousand years. They have outlived the rise and fall of many imperial races: Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Mongols, and Turks. They have their own history, language and culture. Their country has been unjustly portioned. But they are the original owners, not strangers to be tolerated as minorities with limited concessions granted at the whim of the usurpers.*[17]

This statement mentions most of the constituent elements of the kind of "nation" referenced in ethno-symbolism:[18] ethnic ties (mythic or real), symbols, culture, territory, and above all, a political claim to "the right of self-rule", which Kedourie[19] and Gellner deem a pillar of nationalist conviction.[20] The statement quoted above might also apply to the Kurdish nationalist conviction which emerged at the close of the nineteenth century, predominantly among educated young Ottoman Kurds, and which was evident in

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[8] NajatiAbdullah,*KurdistanyaArmenistan:ShehidekanyaMilhurekan*[KurdistanorArmenia:MartyrsorTyrants](Sulaimanyah: JinPublishing,2009).

[9] McDowall.

[10] Diar Xerib, *Xwendneweyaki New Bo Mejooy Kurdistan* [A New Study of the History of Kurdistan] (Iraq: Shivan Print House, 2016), p. 68.

[11] Seevan Saeed, *Kurdish Politics in Turkey: From the PKK to the KCK* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 43.

[12] Anthony D. Smith, "Memory and Modernity: Reflections on Ernest Gellner's Theory of Nationalism," *Nations and Nationalism,* vol. 2, no. 3 (1996), pp. 371-388.

[13] Anthony D. Smith, "Culture, Community and Territory: The Politics of Ethnicity and Nationalism," *International Affairs,* vol. 72, no. 3 (1996), pp. 445-458.

[14] Smith, *Memory and Modernity*, p. 384.

[15] Bengio (ed.).

[16] Edmonds.

[17] Ibid, p. 88.

[18] Smith, *Nationalism*.

[19] Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism,* 4th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

[20] Gellner.

the language of the first Kurdish printed newspaper, *Kurdistan*, first published in Cairo in 1898.[21] However, it is arguable that the modern history of the Kurds, especially since 1946, breaks with Kurdish historical memory, especially among the Kurds of Iran and Iraq. This break might be traced in part to the efforts of individual states which have Kurdish populations, and partly to the nature of the modern Kurdish political parties which became active shortly after the collapse of Mahabad.[22] This argument may have more empirical evidence to support it in the particular case of Iraqi Kurdistan and the enduring internal divisions within the Iraqi Kurdish nationalist movement which erupted among leaders of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)[23] in 1960 and continued throughout 1970s and 1980s.[24]

Some scholars base the idea of a break, or gap, in the history of Kurdish national consciousness on the first (and only) attempt to establish an autonomous Kurdish quasi-state in 1946, which was fragile due to an already-existing social fragmentation (rural-tribal vs. urban-leftist).[25] It was this fragmentation that split the Kurdistani Democratic Party in Iraq, the enterprise's standard-bearer, which was established in the same context and became the most popular Kurdish party at that time.[26] However, this claim as regards the Kurdish cause should be based on empirical observation rather than simply taken for granted. As Abbas Vali observes, the dominant conviction within Kurdish nationalist historiography is both "primordialist" and "ethnicist".[27] For most Kurdish nationalists, Vali argues, "the Kurdish nation is a primordial entity rooted in the nature of every Kurd which defines the identity of the people and the community throughout history ".[28] As for the ethnic side of the discourse, Vali suggests that the "notions of Kurdish community and identity are both premised on common national origin, which is defined in terms of a uniform Kurdish ethnicity".[29]

A close examination of the discourse of identity that emerged in the northern part of Kurdistan in Turkey in the mid-1990s highlights a number of dramatic socio-economic and political transformations that have taken place since that time in Turkey's Kurdish national movement and its community.[30] While Kurdish identity had long been defined in largely ethnic terms, recent years have witnessed an upsurge in ethno-nationalist discourse in the northern part of Kurdistan, especially since 2005, at which time the Union of Kurdistan Communities (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, or the KCK) was established. Since then, concepts such as civil rights, democracy, nationalization, and coexistence have come to the fore along with popular ethnic nationalist terms such as "Kurdishness" (*Kursidh*, *Kurdayeti*).

Shifts in social structure and Kurdish political thought have produced a new situation with respect to questions of identity and belonging; while the nascent identity shares the same basic components as the dominant ethnic national identity, the latter is beginning to assimilate new social and intellectual elements.[31] In other words, the practices of the KCK have introduced a new Kurdish political identity that goes beyond the traditional, ethno-nationalist understanding of Kurdishness. Inspired by the steadfast struggle of the PKK, this "new" perspective on Kurdishness is being cautiously advanced by the KCK and the Kurdish

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[21] Martin Strohmeier, *Crucial Images in the Presentation of Kurdish National Identity* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), p. 26.

[22] McDowall.

[23] The KDP may be viewed as the origin of modern Kurdish nationalism in Iraq. It was founded by Hamza Abdullah, Ibrahim Ahmed, and their comrades and led by the legendary Mullah Mustafa Barzani, who stood up against Iraq numerous times until being forced to flee in 1975 following the signing of the Iran-Iraq Algiers Agreement.

[24] Saeed, *Kurdish Politics in Turkey*, p. 24.

[25] Liam Anderson & Gareth Stansfield, *The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy or Division* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 155-184.

[26] McDowall, p. 127.

[27] Abbas Vali, "Genealogies of the Kurds: Construction of Nation and National Identity in Kurdish Historical Writing," in: Abbas Vali (ed.), *Essays on the Origin of Kurdish Nationalism* (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2003), pp. 58-105.

[28] Ibid, p. 59.

[29] Ibid, p. 61.

[30] Zeynep Gambetti & Joost Jongerden, *The Kurdish Issue in Turkey: A Spatial Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[31] Saeed, *Kurdish Politics in Turkey.*

movement in Turkey. We thus have a newly forming political identity which has begun to compete with older, more traditional perspectives on Kurdishness.

Two Political Identities

As argued above, Kurdish political identity cannot be understood in light of mainstream social theories of nationalism. Rather, the notion of Kurdishness can best be conceptualized in terms of two distinct political identities, each of which has already built its own history, politics, social and cultural frameworks, and economic and diplomatic relations. Neither can be assimilated into the other, nor can they be combined to create a united Kurdish identity. Rather, each of them claims title to authentic Kurdish history and culture; at the same time, each of them lacks certain aspects of essential Kurdishness while displaying others.[32]

Neither the entire Kurdish community nor external parties and commentators have been satisfied with the process of constructing the Kurdish political identity. The dichotomies of Good Kurds vs Bad Kurds, Old Kurds vs New Kurds, Submissive Kurds vs Subversive Kurds, Collaborator Kurds vs Terrorist Kurds and Honourable Kurds vs Dishonourable Kurds reflect aspects of a new divided Kurdish political identity based on the Kurds' own perspectives and self-identifications, as well as their descriptions of one another.[33]

This divided perspective has impacted all aspects of Kurds' daily lives. As proponents of the two camps highlight their differences rather than their commonalities, the sense of disunity is becoming more visible and intense. It is difficult for a Kurd to be politically active without being labelled as belonging to one side or another. There are, in fact, some political actors who claim to belong to neither of the two blocs, but whose discourse and actions nevertheless reflect a loyalty to one or the other.[34] Despite the existence of scores of political parties and movements among the Kurds, the two main blocs are currently represented by the KDP (led by Masoud Barzani) and PKK (led by Abdullah Ocalan), whose vehement differences and rivalries are reflected in everything from their stated aims and objectives to their symbolic and practical approaches. Their disagreements touch on issues ranging from Kurdish independence and notions of the nation-state, democracy, and society to the nature of relations with local, regional, and international powers and the symbolic and stylistic differences between their military forces (Peshmerga and Guerrilla).[35]

Political discourse and strategies

For the purposes of this discussion, I will refer to the Barzani/KDP discourse as the "Traditional Kurds" and the Ocalan/PKK discourse as the "New Kurds"; terms borrowed from the literature of both blocs and their countless labels for each other's discourses. Based on a number of examples illustrating the two different understandings of Kurdishness and Kurdish political identity, I attempt in what follows to analyse a number of important events that embody further contrasts between these two discourses.

The main political discourse and identity of both blocs revolve around notions of nation and state, the central question being whether the Kurds ought to have a nation-state similar to other nations in the region and, if so, how to achieve this goal.[36] Given the prolonged oppression and deprivation to which the Kurds have been subjected both individually and collectively, the notion of the state has been a sensitive one. On one hand, almost every Kurd hopes to establish a Kurdish state similar to those of the Arabs, Persians, and Turks. Only rarely would one encounter a Kurdish person who rejects the dream of independence for the

[32] Seevan Saeed, *Wercherxani Bizawti Netewiy Kurd* [Transformation of the Kurdish National Movement] (Tehran: Xezelnus Print House, 2018).
[33] Abdullah Ocalan, *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (Cologne: International Initiative Edition & Mesopotamian Publishers, 2013).
[34] Saeed, *Wercherxani Bizawti Netewiy Kurd,* p. 249.
[35] See: Ocalan, *Liberating Life;* Bengio (ed.); Xerib.
[36] Saeed, *Kurdish Politics in Turkey.*

Kurds and Kurdistan. On the other hand, Kurds have always expressed ambivalence about whether they can trust the state and, therefore, whether it is worthy of their loyalty.[37] Some commentators argue that this ambivalence has become a chronic psychological state among the Kurds.[38]

Recent history demonstrates that most Kurds hope for a day when the Kurdish state will be a reality. However, we also have historical examples of Kurds collaborating with their enemies against their own people. One might even argue that nearly every Kurdish uprising and quest for freedom has failed due to some Kurdish groups' collaboration with the oppressor.[39] As such, the clash between the two discourses arises not only out of ideological perspectives on the concepts of nation and state but also out of internal conflicts and rivalries among the Kurds' various religious, sectarian, tribal, political, and social factions. The PKK's fiercely radical Marxist-Leninist stance is diametrically opposed to the tribal and feudal structure that has reigned in the expansive rural areas of North Kurdistan. However, this very structure is the staple of the KDP's traditional discourse and power in South Kurdistan. In fact, the KDP, which was formed within a tribal structure, has drawn its strength from this structure, and now practices conservative policies in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (the KRI).[40] These differing ideological stances towards the notion of feudalism and landownership in Kurdistan have contributed to divisions over the notions of nation and state, as well as the division of the Kurdish identity.

In keeping with this feudal social structure founded upon tribal organization, the leaders of the KDP have no plans to build a Kurdish nation-state in the modern political sense of the term. In fact, their discourse makes clear that they view it as an unfeasible idea. As Kurdish leader and former president of Iraq Jalal Talabani reiterated famously in 2009, "a Kurdish independent state is a poet's illusion,"[41] and the most Kurds could hope for was to cooperate with the world's major powers to secure some degree of self-rule in every part of Kurdistan.[42] Talabani thus insisted that it was not realistic for the Kurds to demand their own nation-state. Apart from the allegedly failed 2017 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, which I will examine below, the Traditional Kurds' political discourse has never embraced the ideal of independence or the struggle to win a nation-state for the Kurds. In fact, the KDP has consistently reassured the governments of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran that an independent Kurdistan was not part of its agenda.[43]

The other bloc, the "New Kurds" as represented by the PKK, began calling for a Kurdish nation-state in the late 1970s and 1980s. Despite the hardships and nearly insurmountable obstacles it faced, the PKK distanced itself from the Traditional Kurds by pursuing the dream of establishing an "Independent Kurdish Socialist Nation-State" in the manner of neighbouring states in the region.[44] However, as Ocalan began re-examining the notion of the nation-state, the PKK shifted its focus to a democratic confederacy as an alternative solution for the region and for the countries with sizable Kurdish communities rather than calling for a sovereign Kurdish nation-state. In other words, the PKK concluded that not only was it unrealistic to think of establishing a Kurdish nation-state similar to the Turkish entity, but that its establishment would not secure freedom and dignity for the Kurdish people.[45]

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37 Ocalan, *Liberating Life*.

38 Dilshad. H. Khdhir, "Dynamics of Kurdish Identity Formation in the Kurdistan Region: Iraq Between 1991 and 2014," Unpublished PhD thesis, the University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK, 2016.

39 Yasin Serdesti, *Jiyan u Têkoşni Siyasi Ahmad Tofiq 'Abdollah Ishaqi'; Lekolinewey mejoyi balgenameyi* [The Life and Political Struggle of Ahmad Tofiq, 'Abdollah Ishaqi: Analyzing a Historical Document] (Sulaymaniyah: Shivan Publications, 2017).

40 Xerib, p. 236.

41 Ausama Gulpi, "Dewleti Kurdi xewneki shaiyraneye," ["The Kurdish State is an Illusion of Poets"] 2011, accessed on 20/2/2020, at: https://bit.ly/3kTR0jk

42 See the interview with Mustafa Barzani by a French journalist: "Mulla Mustafa Barzani: Only Autonomy for South Kurdistan," YouTube, 30/12/2015, accessed on 12/4/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3vbc0mM

43 Ibid.

44 See: McDowall; Saeed, *Wercherxani Bizawti Netewiy Kurd*, p. 236; Xerib, p. 239.

45 Ocalan, *Liberating Life*.

This is an important point that deserves elaboration. And while our purpose here is not to detail Ocalan's ideas on the democratic confederation, the issue can be summed by saying that the notion of equality among the ethnic and religious groups that enjoy a certain degree of autonomy and social, cultural, and political rights within existing states (Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria), might lead to the idea of a cultural confederation without undermining existing national borders, provided that the powers that be in Ankara, Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus approach the Kurdish question in a positive manner. Ocalan's basic position is that the Kurds are incapable of winning the battle against these four powerful states. However, there needs to be a sense of brotherhood among the various cultural, religious, and ethnic groups residing in them. The New Kurds' rhetoric is an attempt to offer a solution to the Kurdish question by promoting freedom and equal rights for all ethnic minorities within existing structures rather than insisting on the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish state as they had done in the past.

The shift in the PKK's discourse away from an insistence on an independent, sovereign Kurdistani state to a quest for a free and democratic society in the countries in which Kurdistan is situated grew out of evolving ideological and practical perceptions on the part of Kurdish policy makers, who had begun to modify their understanding of the Kurds' situation and re-evaluate the feasibility of achieving their goals. During his imprisonment, Ocalan had the opportunity to rethink his movement's ideological stances, and he came to believe that "for the time being,"[46] the notion of an autonomous nation-state for the Kurds would have to be abandoned.[47] However, the PKK has never totally rejected the ideal of Kurdistan as a nation-state. The contemporary discourse and activities of the New Kurds as they relate, for example, to a democratic confederacy, make clear that building a sovereign national status for the Kurds remains on their agenda, but that they do not aspire to undermine the sovereignty of the states among which Kurdistan has been divided. Rather, Ocalan and other PKK officials have suggested an alternative to the nation-state, namely, a democratic nation or republic that is not based on ethnic superiority.[48]

As noted earlier, the Traditional Kurds have never contested the borders of the nation-states in which Kurdish populations are situated.[49] The only exception to this rule appears to be the independence referendum that was held for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq on 25 September 2017.[50] Barzani and his supporters announced that they wanted to be good neighbours to all four states surrounding the forthcoming Kurdish state, and they would not support the Kurdish struggle in their territories. In a speech he delivered after the failure of the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, Barzani called for the Iraqi government to restart dialogue with KRG, insisting that the Kurds did not intend to redefine existing borders.[51] Nevertheless, the Iraqi state attacked the Kurdish army (Peshmerga), the city of Kirkuk was retaken by the Iraqi government after being under Kurdish control for 14 years, and Barzani was forced to step down as president of the KRI.[52] Therefore, the case of the independence referendum held in Iraqi Kurdistan was not an exception to the stance taken historically by the traditional Kurds. Rather, it was a tactical step by Barzani and his allies

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[46] Abdullah Ocalan, *Prison Writings II: the PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century* (London: Trans Media Publishing, 2011), p. 10.

[47] It is interesting to note that, not only for the Kurdish people, but also for the PKK leadership, and especially for Ocalan himself, it was difficult to get beyond the notion of the nation-state. This was due to the fact that for a long time in the history of the Kurds, their dreams and hopes for the future were entirely bound up with the idea of having a state as other nations did, and this despite the balances of power that militated against such an eventuality. See: Ocalan, *Prison Writings II,* p. 49.

[48] Saeed, *Wercherxani Bizawti Netewiy Kurd,* p. 258.

[49] "Interview with Murat Karaylan," *Sterk TV*, 2019, accessed on 20/8/2019, at: https://bit.ly/37QJpLO

[50] Preliminary results showed approximately 92.73 percent of votes cast in favor of independence. Despite reporting that the independence referendum would be non-binding, the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) did characterize it as binding, and Iraq's federal government rejected the referendum as illegal. The referendum led to a military conflict with Iraq's federal government in which the KRG lost 20 percent of its territory and its main source of revenue, the Kirkuk oil fields.

[51] "Barzani Holds Press Conference Ahead of Referendum," *Russia Today English,* 2017, accessed on 12/10/2019, at: https://bit.ly/3jJGR4x

[52] "Is it the End for Kurdish Leader Masoud Barzani? – Inside Story," *Aljazeera*, 29/10/2017, accessed on 12/4/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3uPMPaN

in the KRI to extend their rule and avoid the consequences of measures being taken by the Iraqi federal government at the time to maintain control over Iraq's oil resources.[53]

Conclusion

This article has examined the fragmentation in the Kurdish community and the two main blocs – "Traditional Kurds" and "New Kurds"– that have shaped the structure of contemporary Kurdish political identity. Despite these blocs' mutual rivalry and name-calling, those who oppose Kurdish national freedom view the two groups as a monolith. And despite their countless points of contention, the states of Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran all agree on the need to combat the Kurds' desire to build an autonomous nation-state. These states commonly reserve the label of "good Kurds" for those who collaborate with them (primarily the KDP and its supporters), and that of "bad Kurds" for those who resist their authority (primarily the PKK and its adherents). At the strategical level, however, both blocs are seen as a threat to these four states' territorial integrity and national security.

Both blocs appear to advocate for a united Kurdish identity. This is particularly true of the PKK as representative of the New Kurds, which has often called for a revival of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) and the inclusion of all Kurdish political parties, social movements, and organizations.[54] Senior PKK leaders, including Ocalan himself, have often suggested that unless the Kurds revive the KNK, they will be unable to confront the new developments reshaping Middle Eastern politics.[55] In practice, however, leaders of both blocs and their stakeholders have allowed political, ideological, tribal, and even personal interests to widen the rift that divides them. The two main rival Kurdish blocs often highlight their differences and ignore their commonalities, attacking each other's political identities and pelting each other with accusations. For instance, the PKK claims that the Traditional Kurds submit to their enemies and collaborate with them in the service of their own political interests at the expense of the national interests of Kurdistan, while the KDP accuses the New Kurds of straying from authentic notions of Kurdishness and of using non-Kurdish symbolism and terminology in their struggle, as when they borrow the Latin American term "guerrilla" rather than "Peshmerga", coined by the Kurds during the era of the Mahabad Republic and Qazi Mohammad.[56]

At the theoretical level, the Kurdish question raises additional, highly complex issues regarding the conceptual connections between the notion of the nation-state in the political sense, and the nation-state in the cultural and ethnic sense. In practice, these understandings come up against the idea of the nation-state as an entity founded on the principles of citizenship and democracy, which is all but non-existent in the region. This conceptual and theoretical mix is further complicated by the fact that neighbouring states base their legitimacy not only on political affiliation but, in addition, on ethnic variables that speak to the issue of Kurdish ethnic identity. This phenomenon manifests itself clearly in the relationships between Arabness and Persianness, and between Persianness and Turkishness, relationships that have been distorted by a concept which, though it ceased to apply politically in the beginning of the last century, has maintained its mental and strategic force: namely, Ottomanism.

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[53] The federal government had begun withholding funding from the Kurdistan Regional Government in January 2014. In response, the KRG had made moves to export oil via the northern pipeline into Turkey, but the Iraqi government lobbied international governments to block the oil's export and sale. See: Seevan Saeed, "Partiya Boykote Bi Ser Ket," [The Party of Boycott Had Victory] *Yeni Özgür Politika*, accessed on 28/10/2019, at: https://bit.ly/3OdVuLK

[54] "Interview with Murat Karaylan."

[55] S. Huseyin, "Interview with Cemil Baiyk on Kurdish National Unity," *Roj News*, 2016, accessed on 20/7/2019, at: https://bit.ly/3EdDeNS

[56] Born in the Kurdish region of Iran in 1893, Qazi Muhammad was a Kurdish independence movement leader and the founder of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran. He later became president of the Republic of Mahabad, which lasted only from 1945 to 1946.

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