Kurdish Space: Between Unity and Diversity

An Interview with Hamit Bozarslan[1]

Abstract

The regional context prior to 2010 was marked by the radicalization of Kurdish space on two fronts. Firstly, relations between its various components and the governments of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria grew more radical. Secondly, the cross-border dimension of Kurdish space also grew more radical, giving rise to multiple interactions between various political actors. In June–July 2012, the situation in the region took a violent turn. The core of Kurdish space—a term preferable to Kurdistan because it better captures the ramifications and complexity of the Kurdish issue in the Middle East—now consists of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is recognized as a federated state and has the potential to form the nucleus of a future Kurdish state. Clearly, this entity gives Kurds as much cause for hope as it gives the states they live in cause for worry. In effect, it is a powerful symbol that accounts for the radicalization of the entire Kurdish space.

Hérodote: What is the current geopolitical situation in the Kurdish space?

Hamit Bozarslan: The regional context prior to 2010 was marked by the radicalization of Kurdish space on two fronts.[2] Firstly, relations between its various components and the governments of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria grew more radical. Secondly, the cross-border dimension of Kurdish space also became more radical, giving rise to multiple interactions between various political actors. In June–July 2012, the regional situation took a violent turn. Here, violence refers to a principle of action that, while not necessarily able to alter the status quo on a macro level, no

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1. Director of Studies at EHESS, interviewed on December 7, 2012.
2. Turkey has the highest Kurdish population at 14–15 million, representing one fifth of the country's total population and covering 30% of its territory. Iran has a Kurdish population of some 10 million, while Iraq has some 5 million and Syria 2 million.

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actor—whether state or non-state—can relinquish. As a result, Kurdish actors must operate in a context that is militarized and highly uncertain and spans a large area from Mali to Afghanistan. Although many reference points changed in the region in 2011 and 2012, in some respects, the Middle East of today mirrors that of the 1980s and 1990s, which witnessed three wars, frequent shifts in alliances by state and non-state actors, and the emergence of the Kurdish question.

The core of the Kurdish space—a term preferable to Kurdistan because it better captures the ramifications and complexity of the Kurdish issue in the Middle East—is now composed of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is recognized as a federated state and has the potential to form the nucleus of a future Kurdish state. Clearly, this entity gives Kurds as much cause for hope as it gives the states they live in cause for worry. It is a powerful symbolic marker that can account for the radicalization of the entire Kurdish space. Iraq's current prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, who supports the Syrian and Iranian governments, is strongly opposed to Kurdish political leaders within Iraq making policy independently, particularly with regard to the exploitation of oil resources. Tensions mounted between the armed forces of Baghdad and those of federated Kurdistan, which has a 100,000-strong army. However, other armed forces, comprised of Turkish or Iranian Kurds, also operate in these two countries as well as from the rear bases they possess in Iraqi Kurdistan. While a truce was reached between the exiled forces of Iranian Kurds of the PJAK[3] and Tehran, we should not assume that the prospect of armed conflict has fully receded.

Throughout the 2000s, the Turkish, Iranian, and Iraqi governments formed a security alliance that saw all three countries adopt a repressive policy toward the PKK[4] or its regional allies, such as the PJAK in Iran and the PYD[5] in Syria. In Iraqi Kurdistan, by contrast, they had a narrower margin of action. Although many internal conflicts occurred between the Kurdish organizations of various countries in the 1980s and even the 1990s, a regional Kurdish political structure now exists in which the federated Kurdish government plays the role of *primus inter pares*. Of course, the various Kurdish groups cannot ignore each other and as a result, relations between them have been formalized. Iraqi Kurds played an important role in negotiating the truce between the PJAK and Tehran and acted as mediators between the National Kurdish Council and the PYD in Syria.

Clearly, significant differences exist within Kurdish society due to the existence of borders between states, which are often heavily militarized, and attempts by states to force Kurdish integration through education, military recruitment, and

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3. *Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê* (Free Life in Kurdistan Party).
4. *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (Kurdistan Workers' Party).
5. *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (Democratic Union Party).

policy decisions. The influence of tribes must also be examined if we are to under-stand the divisions that have marked the history of this society. However, as a result of rural exodus hastened by the destruction of thousands of Kurdish villages in Iraq and Turkey, urban populations have experienced growth and renewal, and tribal influence has been on the wane for the last two decades.

Similarly, Syrian Kurds have also become much more urbanized. Tribal conflicts do not account for the division between the National Kurdish Council, which is par-tially composed of the middle class, and the PYD, which identifies with the symbols of the armed struggle of the PKK and whose military forces are primarily composed of young people. Nonetheless, relations between the two forces are now peaceful, with both being viewed as legitimate actors by the Kurdish population, a shift that may stem from mediations by Iraqi Kurds. It is also widely known that the authori-ties in Erbil and more generally the entire Kurdish political class of Iraq wish to see the PKK turn away from armed resistance and focus its efforts on an exclusively political struggle.

All actors are involved in a dual strategy. On the one hand, they are undergoing a process of Kurdistanization. On the other, each group pursues its own goals inside the borders of the national territory where it is located. Thus two processes are unfold-ing simultaneously: one of dense interactions, a source of legitimacy for Kurdish demands no one can overlook, the other a process of re-Iraqization, Turkishization, or Iranianization. In my view, most reject the prospect of secession, the exception being some Iraqi Kurds, who were upset when Baghdad failed to respect the clauses on the exploitation of oil resources in the 2005 Constitution. What most Kurdish parties are seeking is political, administrative, and cultural autonomy.

Hérodote: What are the driving forces behind Kurdish unity? Can we speak of a Kurdish nation?

H.B.: Kurds share a common history. For example, what happened in Turkey was integrated into Iraqi Kurdish history. They share a common pantheon as well as a map of Kurdistan. Iraqi Kurdistan is viewed as being shared by all, and for this reason, everyone wants to have a say in its affairs. From a symbolic perspec-tive, national unity has been achieved, but not from a material perspective since the national territory is not unified. This accounts for the constant back-and-forth between fragmentation and unification. Kurdish discourse is identical across all the countries involved, the national discourse is highly homogenous, and Kurds share a common national narrative. Each process of radicalization has two sides: on the one hand, each occurs within the borders of a state, while on the other, each invar-iably crosses these borders via numerous symbolic as well as material interactions, thereby implicating the entire Kurdish space. Although for the last two decades, the

media and social networks have also been powerful factors for unity, traditional communication remains important, with thousands of people crossing the Turkish-Iraqi border daily, which creates a feeling of belonging to a shared community, which is also a trade community since borders, whether crossed legally or illegally, always foster exchanges and therefore greater wealth. Some have even referred to the "Turkish colonization" of the Kurdish economy within Iraq since the yearly trade volume totals $3 billion. However, this "colonization" can be attributed to Turkish Kurds despite the fact that products are often labeled in Turkish.

Since the late 2000s, Iraqi Kurdistan has been mutating into a rentier society. It lost its agricultural self-sufficiency, and the widespread destruction of villages in the 1980s devastated the agricultural economy, with farmers fleeing to cities and remaining there. With oil income, consumption is increasing, and only a few intellectuals and political leaders warn of the dangers of transitioning to such a society, seconded in this by international organizations such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank.

Hérodote: Do the different dialects impede the feeling of national unity?

H.B.: No, or only very little. There are three dialects: Kurmanji, Sorani, spoken in a portion of Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan, and Zazai, spoken in Turkey. The degree of intercommunication is high between the first two but is lower with the third. The first two are often mixed on radio and television in Iraqi Kurdistan, with commentators switching between the two in order to reach everyone. This occurs for practical reasons, not as a result of a political decision. In fact, all parties realize that language is an incendiary topic and that any attempt to impose one of the dialects would face stiff opposition. Yet creating a new language by combining ingredients from all of the dialects is not a viable solution because the result would be an artificial language. Self-identification as members of a common nation is what unites Kurdish people. Enforcing one dialect over another or creating a kind of "newspeak" would only divide them. As regards the written language, during much of the twentieth century, Kurdish was written using three alphabets: Arabic in Iraq and Iran; Latin in Turkey and Syria, and Cyrillic in the former USSR (now no longer in use).

Hérodote: What are your thoughts on the tensions between Ankara and Baghdad regarding Iraqi Kurdistan?

H.B.: One recent event that illustrates the tension between Ankara and Baghdad was Iraq's refusal in December 2012 to let the plane carrying the Turkish Minister of Energy, Taner Yildiz, land in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. The plane, which was not granted clearance to land in Erbil, had to change course and land instead in Kayseri (in Central Turkey). Taner had been planning to attend an international

conference on oil and gas and to meet with Kurdish leaders. The Anatolia press agency reported that the Iraqi government claimed that its decision was made for technical reasons. Clearly, this incident is related to the Turkish government's refusal to extradite Tariq al-Hashimi, Iraq's Sunni vice president, who was sentenced to death *in absentia*, as well as to the Syrian issue. We should also keep in mind that for a dozen or so years, a status quo existed between Damascus, Tehran, and Ankara regarding the control of the Kurdish space. Today, the situation has changed and become violent, representing what Frédéric Gros calls "the end of discontinuities,"[6] in other words the end of boundaries between concepts such as "home front" and "foreign front," "peacetime" and "wartime," and "security-related" and "military." If broadened, the concept of a state of violence can be defined as a highly tense or uncertain situation in which no actor can entirely avoid force or tensions, which are in principle regulated in the sense that they do not have the capacity to spark a chain of events none of the actors could control. In such a situation, states already unable to control their own territory and even less their border areas lose their traditional monopoly over the instruments of violence, which then become accessible to non-state actors such as Hezbollah or the PKK.

With the foreign policy of Ahmet Davutoglu (the well-known "no enemy" doctrine), Turkey tried to end violent relations and to set itself up as the hegemonic actor in its former imperial space. However, as crises unfolded, this policy of regional conflicts turned into a policy of confessionalization such that there are reasons to fear that the new regional map will be based more on religious lines than on political ones. While Ankara supported the Syrian opposition and even armed it, in Turkey's eyes, it remained an Arab Sunni opposition. However, Erdogan's government failed to see that this support would invariably implicate various other actors, including Kurds. In fact, Turkey's support for the Sunni Arabs of Syria automatically implicated the Kurds, especially since Bashar al-Assad's regime no longer controls a large portion of its national territory and has been forced to retreat to Damascus and the Alawite enclave.

The Syrian conflict broke out following a decade of close relations between Turkey and the al-Assad regime, whom Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan called his "younger brother." In addition, as the 2004 riots and large-scale celebrations on *newroz* (the Kurdish New Year) illustrate, the Syrian Kurdish movement, which is heavily influenced by developments in Iraqi Kurdistan, also grew significantly more radical over this period. Starting in the summer of 2012, Bashar al-Assad's regime was forced to back down and withdraw from Kurdish villages. Syrian Kurds received support from Iraqi Kurds, who called for the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, while

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6. Frédéric Gros. 2006. *États de violence: Essai sur la fin de la guerre*. Paris: Gallimard.

their prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, supported him. This stance is one of the factors behind the threats Baghdad made against Iraqi Kurdistan and its aborted yet lethal attempts to establish a military presence in the Kurdish province of Kirkuk, which is controlled by Kurdish forces despite not being part of the federated state. As a result, since the start of the Syrian conflict but especially since the summer of 2012, we have witnessed a tense situation that, although it has not led to open war, requires the constant use of instruments of pressure and coercion.

At first, the Syrian revolt had the same goals as the other Arab revolts. It sought to oust an authoritarian, militarized, oppressive regime that had been in power for decades. However, since July 2011, the conflict has grown more militarized and religious. This is primarily due to the strategies followed by Bashar al-Assad, who from the start used coercion against the Alawite community in order to secure its allegiance, scare tactics against the Christians and the Kurds to ensure their neutrality, and the deployment of massive force against the Sunnis in order to force them to submit. In the summer of 2011, the first brigade of a free army was formed and named after the first Umayyad caliph, Mu'awiyya, which suggests that the armed opposition was thinking along religious lines and that this paved the way for *jihad*. As a result, the fall of the regime will not ensure stability, and the coming years are likely to prove extremely violent. Without necessarily being split into several states, Syria is likely to experience strong internal divisions. This is already underway in Syria's Kurdish space, which is now controlled by 30,000 Kurdish soldiers. In fact, this space can remain outside of the control of Sunni Arabs only by relying on a survival economy.

After hesitating for several months, Turkey also took a religious view of the conflict. The vast majority of Alewis[7] in Turkey, whose positions tend to align with what we could call the "democratic left," do not support Bashar al-Assad's regime. However, the more the Turkish government, which already stresses the Sunni nature of the Turkish nation, interprets this conflict in religious terms, the greater the risk of the Alewi movement in Turkey growing more radical and confessionalized. In fact, this trend toward confessionalization is highly likely given that the left's forces are weak and that from now on, Alewi activism is likely to be confined to local and community organizations.

Erdogan's focus on Turkishness and Sunni Islam also caused a rift with the Kurdish movement. Although until 2009 the AKP had recognized the Kurds, the reaffirmation of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis[8] and its emphasis on a Sunni Turkish

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7. Alewis are Shia Muslims close to the Alawites.

8. The "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" (*Türk-Islam sentezi*) was established in the 1970s by rightist intellectuals seeking to counter the spread of socialism while still formally respecting the

identity sent the clear message that recognition had a cost: that is, the Kurds had to consent to serving a Sunni Turkish nation. However, unlike what Erdogan hoped, recognition only radicalized the Kurds since they were now a recognized and legitimate group with rights of their own. Obviously, after decades of politicization and radicalization, the now recognized Kurds would not accept stepping back into the shadows and serving a Sunni Turkish nation.

Conservative segments of society endorse the AKP, viewing it as a safeguard against years of fragility due to rural exodus but also as a tool for social and economic improvement. Its hegemony stems from two factors: the rehabilitation of the Ottoman past and a reinterpretation of Kemalism that fosters nationalism and does away with secularism, and its emphasis on economic prosperity. After earning the endorsement of neoliberals and large portions of the provincial middle and upper-middle class, the AKP also managed to convince the lower classes that poverty is not a political issue but simply a question of charity. Lastly, the party had other assets that helped it gain political hegemony, including the support it received from intellectuals on the left when it clamped down on the army, its support for EU membership, and its openness to Kurds, all of which accounts for why many Kurds supported it initially. Although a tiny minority, this democratic left represents in a sense the conscience of Turkey, and the repression it now faces may eventually weaken the AKP.

Currently, the Kurdish movement is hesitating between two options: one military, the other political. The movement comprises several political generations: those of 1968 and 1978 (that is, people born between 1948 and 1958 who became activists between 1968 and 1978), and those ones of 1988, 1998, and even 2008, the latter group having been heavily influenced by the guerrilla tactics of the PKK and the frequent mobilizations in Kurdistan over the last few decades. Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, remains a key figure of the movement thanks to his appeal to young people.

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principles of Kemalism. This unofficial ideology aimed to make harmony between Sunnite Islam and Turkishness a foundation of Turkish national culture. It defined the Turkish spirit as essentially Muslim and saw the Muslim religion as forming a national obstacle to communism and the class struggle. It portrayed the Ottoman Empire as a golden age while neglecting the Central Asian roots promoted in Kemalism. This ideology was used by the military junta following the September 1980 coup as well as in the 1982 Constitution, which made classes in religious culture and morality mandatory in primary and secondary schools. However, it excluded both the Kurds and the Alewis. One of the principal advocates of the synthesis was Turgut Özal, Turkey's Prime Minister from 1983 to 1989 and President from 1989 to 1993. This was one of the root causes of Turkish society being polarized between secularists and Islamists. Today, the AKP endorses some aspects of this synthesis but in a more understated way. See: https://sites.google.com/site/.../turquie-et.../synthese-turcoislamique

However, his guardianship role as "the Kurdish sun" does not necessarily mean that young people born well after the PKK's founding in 1978 or the start of guerrilla warfare in 1984 read or ponder his books. In their eyes, he symbolizes a struggle. The more marginalized he becomes (he is imprisoned on an island), the more of a sacred figurehead he becomes, and despite changes in its nature, the PKK remains a leading actor. As for the legal Kurdish party, the Democratic Society Party (DTP),[9] it serves the purpose of political representation since it holds seats in Parliament. These two forces are neither separable nor interchangeable. Although each has its own purpose and role, they are united around a common goal, namely the recognition of a Kurdish identity. In this struggle, what is legal and what is illegal is often unclear, which is why the legal party supports PKK combatants while at the same time its leaders avoid compromising the legal activities of the Kurdish party. For a long time, the PKK viewed negatively or even directly opposed any move it saw as not aligned with the purity of the cause, including, for example, Kurdish rock bands, which were viewed as a symbol of degeneracy. However, this is no longer the case, with theater groups, writers' associations, and women's associations now emerging in Kurdish society. Today, a high level of interaction exists between these new actors, with whom the PKK is not involved yet which it cannot reject. These new expressions of Kurdish identity, which are highly radical in their own ways, take a different path from that of a political struggle understood as partisan engagement. In addition, some discuss de-politicization since these activities have the advantage of being supported by non-Kurds interested in Kurdish artistic output, and exchanges are now frequent. Like many other radical movements throughout the world, the Kurdish movement is experiencing the delayed effects of the disappearance of the international revolutionary left of the 1970s and 1980s. Today, people listen to international standard setters such as the EU, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, as well as environmental organizations. Of course, armed resistance has not been fully abandoned in Turkey, Iran, and now Syria. Yet no Kurdish actor can make a legitimate claim without referring to the defense of public freedoms, the environment, even women's rights.

However, it is clear that Kurdish politics are founded on the defense of the Kurdish cause, which is today expressed through calls for cultural and administrative autonomy, much as in moves toward regional autonomy in Spain, in fact. For the last ten years, more Kurds have been feeling exclusively Kurdish and no longer Turkish. The disappearance of the Turkish left, which in the past served as a bridge between the two groups, fostered this separatist sentiment. Today, Kurds and Turks no longer read the same political or sociological books and no longer share the

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9. Partiya Civaka Demokratîk (PCD).

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same writers in the same language since Turkish authors such as Orhan Pamuk are being translated into Kurdish, as is foreign or academic literature. There is a push to promote Kurdish culture, and significant efforts are underway to achieve this. The language question has thus become more critical in the affirmation of culture than it was a decade ago, and this is true of Syria also.

Another significant change has occurred with regard to the role of the well-known *aghas*, or Kurdish tribal chiefs. In the past, some clearly sided with the Turkish government because they benefitted from doing so. By offering the support of their tribes, they were able to protect their power and wealth. However, not all took the same position. In particular, we should not forget that many tribes sided with the nationalist struggle as a result of rivalries with other tribes, a tradition of resistance, or simply being divided by borders. The same applies to brotherhoods of sheikhs. However, in the 2000s, the most important factor is that the tribal factor and in particular tribal identity have weakened as a result of urbanization. As people move away from rural society, a portion of the collective memory vanishes, and sheikhs no longer have the means to control populations. In Kurdistan, urban areas now serve as hubs for political, cultural, or social action, and this is also altering the modes of action available to Kurdish actors. While guerilla tactics as a form of resistance or a way of achieving political authority have not entirely disappeared, they have less influence over the production of the Kurdish political space, which is now characterized by urban styles of socialization and mobilization. Although villages and mountains remain integral parts of the collective imagination, the city, with all of its contradictions, constraints, and opportunities, is where new generations will decide the future.