Martin van Bruinessen,

‘The Kurdish Question: Whose Question, Whose Answers? The Kurdish Movement Seen by the Kurds and by their Neighbors’

Wadie Jwaideh Memorial Lecture in Arabic and Islamic Studies, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures & Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies Program, Indiana University, Bloomington, 19 November 2004.

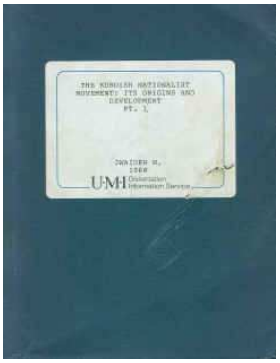
The Kurdish Question: Whose Question, Whose Answers?

The Kurdish Movement Seen by the Kurds and by their Neighbors

Martin van Bruinessen

The invitation to deliver the Wadie Jwaideh memorial lecture, here in Bloomington, where so many of you have your own dear memories of Professor Jwaideh as a teacher, a colleague, and a friend, is a great honor to me. Unlike most of you, I never met Professor Jwaideh in person; yet, I consider him in some way my teacher, a vital link in my own *silsila* — the reason for which will soon become clear. Wadie Jwaideh's major feat of scholarship, his *magnum opus* on the history of Kurdish nationalism, has long remained a hidden treasure because he declined publishing it — I suspect due to a combination of perfectionism and modesty — so that it only was available in a University Microfilm version. It is probably due to the fact that his widow, Mrs. Alice Jwaideh, has decided to see this important book through the press for posthumous publication that I am standing here today. I had some involvement with the publication of a Turkish translation of Wadie Jwaideh's study a few years ago (in 1999), and Mrs Jwaideh somehow found me and we began corresponding. Through her letters, the man whose work I had always admired but of whom I knew nothing gradually became an acquaintance and I began to understand how intimately connected biography and subject matter were. 'Uncle Wadie,' as some of you called him, became a man of flesh and blood, and I came to regret even more never having met him.

Let me begin with the Jwaideh that I have known for a long time, consisting of two thick volumes in the dark blue University Microfilm format.[1] This is the pre-Bloomington Jwaideh; the thesis was submitted to Syracuse University in 1960. Because it was never published I suspect few of you are familiar with it.



[1] Wadie Jwaideh, "The Kurdish nationalist movement: its origins and development", Ph.D. thesis, Syracuse University, Graduate School, 1960.

Among specialists of the Kurds, however, it has come to be recognized as one of the few essential studies on Kurdish history. I still remember the strong impression it made on me when I first encountered it. That must have been in 1976 or 1977. I had recently completed two years of anthropological fieldwork in various parts of Kurdistan, including a stay in the Kurdish 'liberated areas' of Northern Iraq during the final months of Mulla Mustafa Barzani's uprising and a period in Syria, where I had met with the last surviving participants of Kurdish rebellions in Turkey in the 1920s and 1930s. I also had done some work in Turkish newspaper archives and the British public records office on these early rebellions. When I chanced upon Jwaideh's study, I discovered to my surprise that it not only was insightful on these rebellions but also helped me to make sense of developments in the 1970s. Although it is a historical study, Jwaideh's analysis showed that he must have known the region very well and must have known many individual Kurdish personalities.

That the contemporary relevance of Jwaideh's work had not diminished by the turn of the century is shown by the fact that the recent Turkish translation was banned almost upon appearance.[2] In a situation where many other books on the Kurds, including some more overtly political ones, were and remained freely available, this can only be considered as a mark of distinction, based on the recognition of some dangerous quality. It was no the subject matter as such that caused the ban but rather, I imagine, the way in which Jwaideh framed what was usually called the Kurdish 'issue' or 'question'. Reflection on the ban of Jwaideh's book in Turkey provided me with the subject for this memorial lecture: the various ways in which the Kurds' neighbors, and especially the scholarly inclined among them, have defined the Kurdish 'issue'. Jwaideh looked at the Kurds and their history from the perspective of an Iraqi, whose own identity necessitated some engagement with the Kurds. So did the other authors about whom I shall be speaking.

One thing that must have bothered the Turkish prosecutor and that may have contributed to the attention that the book drew from a relatively large and educated readership in Turkey was that Jwaideh showed convincingly how strong and how deep the historical roots of contemporary Kurdish movements were, and how old their grievances and demands. The various Kurdish uprisings of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were not simply isolated incidents caused by economic decline or political dissatisfaction. In his conclusion,

[2] Wadie Jwaideh, *Kürt milliyetçiliğin tarihi: kökeni ve gelişimi*, Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1999. The publisher successfully challenged the ban in court, however, and reprinted the book. By 2008 it had gone through is fifth printing.

Jwaideh cautioned the reader that, whatever the economic and social causes of discontent, "it must be kept in mind that *nationalism, which lies at the root of the Kurdish question, is largely political and psychological in nature*."

The nationalist ferment that had come to the surface in Iraq following the military takeover of 1958 had to be taken seriously precisely because it was rooted in a historical process of considerable depth, of which its actors were very much aware. Although the study ends in 1959, the developments of the following decade appear almost inevitable to the careful reader of Jwaideh's study.

It is not just chronologically that Jwaideh's study stands at a turning point; it also represents a transition in scholarship on the Kurds not unlike that from colonial to postcolonial scholarship in other parts of the world. While in England for his research in the mid-1950s, Jwaideh still met the grand old men of the earlier phase of Kurdish studies, Vladimir Minorsky and Cecil J. Edmonds. Both had been trained as Orientalists and had become acquainted with the Kurds when serving their governments, Imperial Russia in the case of Minorsky, the British administration of Iraq in that of Edmonds. Both had become great friends of the Kurds (though not necessarily of Kurdish nationalists: Shaykh Mahmud of Sulaymaniya had been one of Edmonds' headaches), and both published extensively and sympathetically on them. Minorsky's long and erudite articles on 'Kurdistan' and 'Kurds' in the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* constitute the most competent summary of Orientalist knowledge of their subject. Edmonds laid down his observations and experiences as a political officer in Iraqi Kurdistan between 1920 and 1925 in his *Kurds, Turks and Arabs*, which provides painstakingly detailed notes on social and political conditions, personalities and local practices in the districts where he served.[3] Both authors showed an especially great interest in the various heterodox religious communities that they had encountered while serving in Kurdistan, notably the Ahl-i Haqq and the Yezidis, perhaps at the expense of mainstream Islam and of the major political issues faced by the Kurds as a people.[4]

Jwaideh's view of the Kurds

Wadie Jwaideh's relationship with the Kurds was a different one, and so was his approach to his subject. He was born in Basra in South Iraq to an Arabic-speaking Christian (Chaldaean) family and later moved to Baghdad where he studied at the university and obtained his Licentiate in Law in 1942. During the war years that followed, he served in the Ministry of the Interior as Inspector of Supplies for the Northern Provinces. It was in this position that he

[3] Cecil J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs. Politics, travel and research in north-eastern Iraq, 1919-1925*, London: Oxford University Press, 1957.

[4] See for instance: Vladimir F. Minorsky, "Notes sur la secte des Ahlé Haqq", *Revue du monde musulman* 40-41, 1920, 19-97 and 44-45, 1921, 205-302; idem, "The Gûrân", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 11, 1943, 75-103; C.J. Edmonds, *A pilgrimage to Lalish*, London: The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1967 [on the Yezidis]; idem, "The beliefs and practices of the Ahl-i Haqq of Iraq", *Iran* 7, 1969, 89-106.

traveled extensively in Iraqi Kurdistan and came to know personally numerous Kurdish personalities. The direct personal acquaintance with the land and its people must have been of great use in his later historical research, and the shrewd insight in Kurdish society and politics that is apparent throughout this book no doubt owes much to this experience. Jwaideh identified himself strongly as an Iraqi Arab but was also acutely aware of belonging to a (religious) minority and as such occasionally facing discrimination. This no doubt contributed to his appreciation of the position of the Kurds in the states in which they live and of their relations with their various neighbors. Whereas earlier authors writing on Kurdish nationalism tended to analyze it from the viewpoint of the administration or the dominant groups in the state, Jwaideh made a deliberate effort to present the Kurdish viewpoint. His is one of the more sympathetic studies of the subject and one of the most judicious in its understanding of what moves the Kurds. It was the first serious study that focused on Kurdish nationalism as a movement in its own right and not just a reaction to the process of modernization and administrative reform.

British policy makers and administrators had the habit of speaking of 'questions': there had been 'the Eastern Question' (concerning Greek aspirations for independence from Ottoman rule), 'the Armenian Question', and the Kurds were the next to become a 'question.' Speaking of 'the Kurdish question' suggested that somehow the existence of the Kurds caused a certain type of problems that needed to be resolved. A long series of studies on the Kurds have the word 'question' or 'problem' in their titles; Jwaideh, significantly, speaks of Kurdish nationalism without defining this as a problem. He occasionally uses the terms 'Kurdish question' or 'Kurdish problem,' but it is mostly when he is reviewing other authors writing about the Kurds, most of whom fail or refuse to recognize the nature of this 'question.' Here are some fragments of his discussion, in the conclusion of the thesis:

"There is no doubt that the Kurdish question is one of the most vexed and dangerous problems confronting the Middle East today. It has … increasingly engaged the attention of interested governments as well as students of Middle Eastern affairs." He then summarizes the insights of some of these interested parties:

— Malcolm Burr, a British scholar, views the problem as essentially one *of the adjustment of a people with a mountain culture to the conditions of the modern world*. [and insist that] *some way must be found of settling the Kurds and absorbing them into the modern economy*.

— Morgan Phillips Price, a journalist and Labor MP, sees the Kurdish problem as '*primarily a social and economic one*,' which is part of '*the whole nomad problem*' of the Middle East. "Punitive expeditions are not a solution. Poverty of the tribes is the problem."

— H.M. Burton, a former political officer, insists that "*forcible detribalization of the Kurds is wrong, a peaceful scheme of settling them must be found.*"

— Colonel W.G. Elphinston proposes "a sort of *passport and customs union among the countries with Kurdish populations*" as the solution.

All of these authors define the Kurdish problem as a social and economic question, against which Jwaideh asserts that "*it must be kept in mind that nationalism, which lies at the root of the Kurdish question, is largely political and psychological in nature*."[5]

These quotations from British authors that Jwaideh criticizes can easily be supplemented by similar quotations from authors in Turkey, Iran or Iraq. Many of the Kurds' neighbors, of a wide range of political persuasions, have attempted to define the matter of Kurdish nationalism out of existence, either by completely denying it or by reducing it to more basic underlying factors, such as, precisely, tribalism, feudalism or social banditry, which ultimately will have to disappear with the advent of modernization. Kurdish nationalism has not uncommonly been seen as a form of false consciousness, and their more developed neighbors have often felt the urge to educate the Kurds towards a proper understanding of their question and help them fighting backwardness, exploitation by reactionary religious and tribal leaders, and manipulation by foreign powers, ….

Jwaideh does not appear to perceive Kurdish nationalism as a 'question', a threat to Iraq or to the Arab world, but as a natural and understandable phenomenon, tragic because as a movement it arrived late in history and perhaps at the wrong place in the world. Turks, Persians and Arabs had preceded the Kurds, and the regimes of the states that incorporated parts of Kurdistan after the First World War had embarked upon programs of nation building. The Kurds had become citizens, though never fully equal, of Turkey, Iran, Iraq or Syria, and any effort on their part to establish a nation state of their own would necessarily bring them up against more numerous Turks, Persians and Arabs and the armies of modernizing states. This gave rise to frustration and anger at perceived injustice and inequality, causing Kurdish nationalism to become, at the time of Jwaideh's writing, "increasingly radical and uncompromising." Torn between dreams and pragmatism, Kurdish politicians have had to navigate a course between the struggle for full independence and accommodation with central governments. The radicalization that Jwaideh refers to was very noticeable in Iraq after the 1958 coup, and the demands of ordinary Kurdish people were probably more radical than those then voiced by the political leaders. Even though the odds were against them, increasingly many ordinary Kurds just wanted to be in control of their own destiny. Jwaideh, more candidly than most Kurdish politicians, states the odds and the ambitions: '*Separated by unsurpassable mountain barriers, divided by linguistic and sectarian differences, rent by narrow tribal loyalties, and split up by international frontiers, they now yearn to be what other more fortunate peoples are – a nation state*.'

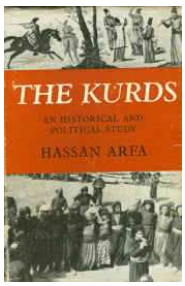
The developments of the past forty-five years have borne out Jwaideh's assessments. Mass literacy and mass education, increased mobility and the communications revolution have drawn ever-larger numbers to the nationalist movement. Kurdish nationalism has become a force with which the governments of the region have to reckon, not only internally but also increasingly in the international arena. The tribal, linguistic and religious divisions to which Jwaideh refers have not been overcome, however; some have even spawned distinct identity movements within the larger Kurdish movement, such as those of the Yezidis, the Alevis or

[5] Jwaideh, "Kurdish nationalist movement", pp. 851-4.

the Zaza-speakers, among whom some leaders even claimed the status of being a separate nation. Among the Iraqi Kurds, regional identities have remained strong and the major political parties have distinct regional bases. To a lesser extent this was also true of Iranian Kurdistan during the brief period that overt party activity was possible there. Urbanization and the settlement of nomadic tribes have resulted in a certain degree of detribalization, but tribalism was boosted by the government policies, most systematic in Iraq and Turkey, of recruiting tribal militias to fight the Kurdish nationalist movement. The borders between the Iranian, Iraqi, Turkish and Syrian parts of Kurdistan have if anything become more significant, even though it may have become easier to cross them. In each of these countries the Kurds have engaged with the state and with other political forces. Their distinct political cultures and socio-economic and cultural policies have given the Kurdish movement in each of them a distinct character.

An Iranian view

Another neighbor who had close dealings with the Kurds and wrote a useful study of the early phases of the Kurdish movement was the Iranian general Hassan Arfa, who had personally taken part in the suppression of Kurdish tribal uprisings in the 1920s.[6] Arfa was a loyal servant of the Peacock throne, but as an Azerbaijani he was sensitive to the tensions between ethnic identity and citizenship. He rejected Azerbaijani as well as Kurdish separatism but understood the sentiments behind it and wrote sympathetically on the Kurds at the time that the first modern armed Kurdish nationalist uprising was in progress in Iraq.



> "Although the Kurds have always lived under two – or, as at present, three Powers – by their speech, customs and costume, as well as by their own consciousness of being Kurds and thus different from [their non-Kurdish neighbors], *they have always formed an entity* and for the same reasons they *consider themselves now entitled to be counted as a nation* even if in the past this conception was alien to them."[7]

[6] Hassan Arfa, *The Kurds. An historical and political study*, London: Oxford University Press, 1966. Arfa describes his campaigns against Kurdish tribes in his autobiography: Hassan Arfa, *Under five shahs*, London: John Murray, 1964.

[7] Arfa, *The Kurds*, p. 155.

There are, however, practical reasons why the Kurds' understandable desire for self-government cannot be realized, the Cold War being one of the most important:

> "The tribal chiefs and the traditionally-minded Kurds realize that in the present conditions the attainment of complete independence is impossible, as the three states on which the Kurds depend would certainly unite to prevent it by force. *The political union of all Kurds, therefore, presupposes the complete disruption of the existing order of things in the Middle East*, and this could be brought about only by the intrusion of Soviet Russia and the disintegration of Turkey, Iran and the Arab states."[8]

Arfa assures the reader that most Kurds would object more to communist rule than to their present domination by the existing states. Only some intellectuals, Arfa believes — he mentions specifically Ibrahim Ahmad, the left-leaning former secretary-general of the Iraqi KDP, and the Kurds' representative in Europe, Parez Vanly — will be happy to bring about a sort of Kurdish Soviet state, even if this only includes a small part of the Kurdish lands.[9] Arfa did not consider these intellectuals as a serious factor. He saw, moreover, several other practical difficulties preventing the Kurds from achieving their hoped-for united nation. The geography of the region caused great difficulties of communication; most of the fertile valleys were situated on the outer edges of Kurdistan and were partly inhabited by non-Kurds; the economically important oilfields were also found in regions with mixed population. And, perhaps most importantly, the governments and peoples of Turkey, Iran and Iraq were vehemently opposed to Kurdish 'separatism.' He sums up the attitudes of these three Powers in the following words:

> "The Turks say: 'you are Turks not Kurds; there are no Kurds in Turkey.' (….) *They do not allow that there is any Kurdish question in Turkey*.
>
> The Iranians accept the Kurds as such but they say that, as the Kurds belong to a group of the Iranian race they form the Kurdish branch of that race and are therefore part of Iran, and in any case Iran is a multiracial empire based on history, tradition and a common fealty to the Shahinshah. *So for Iranians too, no Kurdish question exists*.
>
> The Iraqis say: 'you are Kurds we are Arabs, but together we are Iraqis. Iraq is a part of the Arab nation, but as you are not Arabs we agree to granting you autonomy on our terms, on condition that you continue to be part of Iraq, without the right or the power of secession.'"[10]

[8] Arfa, *The Kurds*, p. 156.

[9] Ibrahim Ahmad was Barzani's chief rival for leadership of the Kurdish movement in Iraq. By 1964 Barzani, who controlled the stronger guerrilla forces, succeeded in bringing the KDP's central committee under his control and getting rid of Ahmad and his political allies. (The latter remained a separate group, which later gave rise to the PUK, led by Ahmad's son-in-law Jalal Talabani.) Parvez Vanly, later better known as Ismet Chériff Vanly, studied in Switzerland at the time and acted as Barzani's European representative.

[10] Arfa, *The Kurds*, p. 159-60.

Arfa notes that most of the Kurds have adapted themselves to the realities of the countries in which they live and are willing to compromise, but he predicts that increased access to education and the declining influence of tribal chiefs and landowners, with a corresponding increase of that of what he calls 'a sophisticated and leftist-inclined intelligentsia' will strengthen the demand of self-determination. The Kurds living abroad are out of touch with the practical realities of the region and tend to dream of nothing less than a united and fully independent Kurdish state — which may, Arfa seems to suggest, in the long run create great problems for the states concerned. He concludes his book with the prophetic warning that "*even if the existence of a Kurdish question is denied, the Kurdish problem remains.*"[11]

The struggle of the Iraqi Kurds resulted in a peace settlement with the central government, under which they were granted a significant degree of autonomy. Nine years of armed confrontation had also had a significant effect on the Kurds' national awareness. The settlement did not end the conflict but constituted the prelude to a new phase, which saw a major new insurrection, supported openly by Iran and covertly by the USA and Israel (1974-75); a collapse of that insurrection when the Shah and the Iraqi regime reached an agreement, followed by a mass exodus; the resumption of low-intensity guerrilla warfare (1976-80), participation in the Iraq-Iran war and ultimately genocide (1988). And even then, the Kurdish 'problem' did not go away. Whatever the definition and perception of this 'problem.'

Views from Baghdad

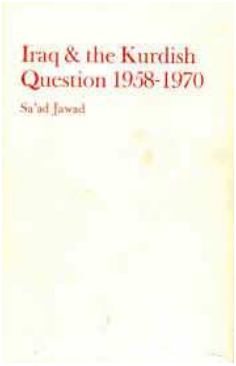
Sa`ad Jawad, who wrote on the Kurdish movement of the 1960s in Iraq more than a decade after Hassan Arfa, brings a more specifically Iraqi perspective to the analysis of this 'question.'[12] Jawad was born in Baghdad, had studied in the United Kingdom and was back in Baghdad teaching at the university there when his book was published. He cautiously avoids adopting strong views and opinions himself and gives no hint as to his own ethnic background (Kurdish or Arab) but rather reports on the views of Kurdish and especially Arab nationalist politicians. He quotes the interesting complaint of a former secretary-general of the Ba`th party, who had negotiated with Kurdish representatives in 1963, that "except for Talabani the Kurdish leadership *never wanted to discuss the Kurdish question in terms of Iraqi politics, always treating it as a purely Kurdish one*."[13] However, Jawad continues, "there was general agreement within the Ba`th leadership *that the problem existed and required some sort of*

[11] Arfa, *The Kurds*, p. 160.

[12] Sa`ad Jawad, *Iraq and the Kurdish question, 1958-1970*, London: Ithaca Press, 1981; idem, "Recent developments in the Kurdish issue", in: T. Niblock (ed.), *Iraq: the contemporary state*, London: Croom Helm, 1982, pp. 47-61.

[13] The political orientation of Jalal Talabani, Ibrahim Ahmad's son-in-law and the second in command in this wing of the Kurdish movement, was strongly influenced by Nasser's left nationalist discourse and tended to analyse the situation of the Kurds in the light of global political development. He was very fluent in Arabic, and he easily found common ground for negotiations with his Arab peers.

solution." Judging, however, that the Kurds exaggerated their own importance, they deliberately began to ignore them.[14]



The heart of the problem, in the Ba`thist perception, was the very existence of the Kurds as a non-assimilatable, non-Arab community. Arab nationalists, as Jawad observed, saw all of Iraq as part of the Arab nation, whose northern frontier they defined as the border with Turkey. Only the parts of Kurdistan in Turkey and Iran were considered as Kurdish land, those in Iraq were seen as Arab land occupied by the Kurdish 'minority.' Egypt's Nasser, who tended to be more sympathetic to the Kurds than many Arab nationalists in Iraq, once told Ibrahim Ahmad that he "had no objection to the Iranian and Turkish Kurds having independence, but thought that no such right should be accorded to the Iraqi Kurds."[15] Ultimately, the Kurds succeeded in having their recognition raised from the level of a 'minority' to that of a 'nationality,' and the Kurdish problem became enshrined in the Iraqi Constitution, which declares Iraq a country of two nationalities, Arabs and Kurds, but simultaneously maintains it is integrally part of the Arab nation.[16]

In a study that appeared in the same year as Jawad's but also covered the crucial years 1970 to 1975, the originally Lebanese scholar Edmund Ghareeb emphasized especially one dimension of the problem that was to become the Ba`thists' primary preoccupation: foreign involvement in the Kurds' struggle.[17] Ghareeb reports that Iraqi politicians, at least since Nuri al-Sa`id, repeatedly voiced concern that foreign powers might "exploit the Kurdish problem for their own interests," and that it was such considerations that persuaded the Ba`th party from 1968 onwards to seek accommodation with the Kurds rather than repress the uprising. Party documents of 1969 still speak of Kurdish nationalism as a progressive force of liberation, which is part of the global struggle against all forms of oppression and a natural ally of Arab nationalism. Soon after the peace agreement, however, Barzani obtained promises of covert

[14] Jawad, *Iraq and the Kurdish question*, p. 111.

[15] Jawad, *Iraq and the Kurdish question*, p. 279 (after an interview with Ahmad). Similar views of Arab nationalists are reported on pp. 119-20, 227-28.

[16] Text of the interim Constitution, as amended in 1973 and 1974, in: Majid Khadduri, *Socialist Iraq: a study in Iraqi politics since 1968*, Washington: Middle East Institute, 1978, pp. 183-98. Article 5 reads: "(a) Iraq is part of the Arab Nation. (b) The People of Iraq is formed of two principal nationalities, the Arab nationality and the Kurdish nationality. This Constitution shall recognize the national rights of the Kurdish People and the legitimate rights of all minorities within the unity of Iraq."

[17] Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish question in Iraq*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981.

US support, the Mossad was training his intelligence service, and Iranian arms were flowing into northern Iraq. This happened at a time when Iraq was nationalizing its oil and moving closer to the Soviet Union, with which it concluded a treaty of friendship. The Kurdish conflict in Iraq became a sideshow in the Cold War. Only a few prominent Kurds decided not to be part of it and deserted Barzani. Ghareeb presents a picture of an anti-imperialist and revolutionary regime in Baghdad with a basically benign attitude towards the Kurds, and an 'entrenched' Kurdish leadership whose desire for self-expression, however justified, was easily exploited by foreign interests bent on destabilizing the Ba`th regime. The Kurds themselves have a different narrative, but many agree in retrospect that the high degree of foreign involvement seen in 1972-1975 had not been in the Kurds' best interest.

The Kurds' man in Europe

A Kurdish narrative of the events leading up to the war of 1974-75 is given by Ismet Chériff Vanly, the Europe-based intellectual mentioned by Arfa. His contribution to an edited volume that became the best-known Kurdish self-representation gives a less benevolent reading of Ba`thist policies and provides details of Arabization measures, massive deportations, and economic discrimination against the Kurds. At the same time, Vanly is highly critical of Barzani's extreme reliance on the Shah and on American support, as well as of the decision to take refuge in Iran when foreign support was suddenly withdrawn in March 1975, which amounted to 'the liquidation of the revolution by its own leadership.'[18]

Vanly, who in Arfa's view was out of touch with the realities of Kurdistan, was in fact in regular communication with Kurdish nationalist politicians in Iraq, Syria and Turkey. He hailed from Syria and was Arabic-educated, learning some Kurdish at an advanced age only, but his commitment to the Kurdish cause was total. He published extensively on political aspects of the Kurdish question — including an academic study that he submitted as a dissertation to the University of Lausanne in 1970.[19] In the dissertation, Vanly describes the

[18] Ismet Cheriff Vanly, "Le Kurdistan d'Irak", in: G. Chaliand (ed.), *Les Kurdes et le Kurdistan*, Paris: Maspero, 1978, pp. 225-305. An English translation of this volume, *A people without a country: the Kurds and Kurdistan*, was published by Zed Books in London in 1980.

[19] Ismet Cheriff Vanly, *Le Kurdistan irakien: entité nationale. Étude de la révolution de 1961*, Neuchâtel: Editions de la Baconnière, 1970. His other publications concerned all parts of Kurdistan; some of the more

ongoing ‘revolution’ of the Kurdish bourgeoisie, peasantry and workers under the leadership of ‘general’ Barzani and the revolutionary council and the KDP. He had been, and continued to be, the European spokesperson for that movement, but by no means an uncritical supporter, for he believed that the political struggle carried on by this movement rested on incorrect suppositions and that its stated objective — autonomy for the Kurds within Iraq — was misguided. In Vanly’s view, about which he did munch words, such compromises were self-defeating. Even if the context would be a democratized Iraq, the Kurdish question would not be solved. A pan-Kurdish, independent state, Vanly claimed, is the only real solution.

The solution implies a different definition of the question: the Kurds are a nation, divided by historical accident and then dominated by neighboring peoples and their governments. Vanly untiringly made efforts to persuade politicians to adopt this view. Kurdish leaders in Iran and Iraq, whatever their innermost views on the subject, always rejected this as unrealistic. In Turkey, several radical Kurdish groups, among which the PKK, came to embrace varieties of this view and to proclaim the anti-colonial struggle of national liberation against all occupying states and their Kurdish collaborators.[20] In practice, the PKK soon found out that it could not oppose four states simultaneously and concentrated its efforts on Turkey, while cultivating relations with the intelligence services of its neighbors.

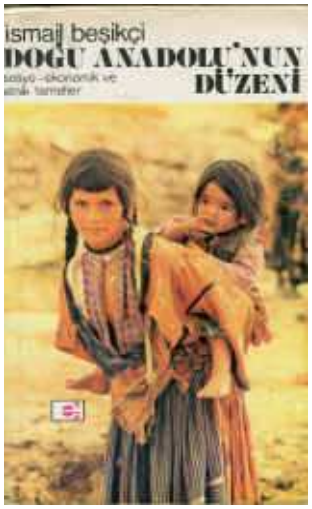
From modernization to self-determination in Turkey

Turkey experienced its second military coup (since the establishment of the Republic) in 1971. The generals intervened to save the country from the gradually radicalizing labor movement, the largely conservative Islamic resurgence, left and right student radicalism, and the emerging Kurdish movement. Parties were banned; numerous activists but also journalists

substantial are: Ismet Chériff Vanly, *Die nationale Frage Türkisch-Kurdistans: eine Übersicht mit historischem Hintergrund*, Frankfurt am Main: Komkar, 1980; idem, "The Kurds in Syria and Lebanon" and "The Kurds in the Soviet Union", in: P.G. Kreyenbroek and S. Sperl (eds.), *The Kurds: a contemporary overview*, London / New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 143-170 and 193-218.

[20] Martin van Bruinessen, "The Kurds in Turkey", *MERIP Reports* no. 121, 1984, 6-12; idem, "Between guerrilla war and political murder: the Workers' Party of Kurdistan", *MERIP Middle East report* no. 153, 1988, 40-46, both reprinted in van Bruinessen, *Kurdish ethno-nationalism versus nation-building states. Collected articles*, Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2000.

and writers arrested and put on trial. One trial that made a deep impression on me (and that may have been the decisive influence that later made me choose Kurdistan as my first area of academic specialization) concerned a Turkish sociologist, who was sentenced to 13 years imprisonment for an academic study he had published. This was Ismail Beşikçi, and the offending book was innocuously titled '*The social organization of East Anatolia.*'[21]



The book and its title look innocent; the Kurds are not even mentioned, and the common euphemism of 'East Anatolia' is used instead of the then still unmentionable 'Kurdistan.' It is an empirically rich study of the political economy of Turkish Kurdistan, an attempt to understand the transformation of a partly tribal, partly feudal society under the impact of state policies and capitalist market forces and to explain the emergence of Kurdish nationalism in this context. As such, it was a contribution to an ongoing debate on political and economic development in which bureaucratic technocrats, academics and the left opposition in Turkey were engaged. Beşikçi's offense was that he wrote on phenomena that had been abolished by decree, Kurdish ethnicity and Kurdish nationalism, and that adding insult to injury he did so with undeniable sympathy.

Beşikçi was born in the province of Çorum in western Turkey, a province that is predominantly Turkish but has also some Kurdish and Circassian (Çerkes) villages. In such mixed regions, it was quite common to refer to villages and individuals by ethnic labels, even while at the same time interiorizing the official discourse of Turkey's ethnic homogeneity. Beşikçi must have grown up with an awareness of diversity, but he claims he first became conscious of the Kurds' separate identity during a study tour to Elazığ, and even more so when he did his military service in Bitlis and Hakkari. Beşikçi completed his higher education at one of the country's elite institutions, the Faculty of Political Science at Ankara University. This is where the country's social engineers (as well as diplomats) are trained; especially in the 1960s the intellectual climate here was strongly positivist and development-oriented. Many of the teaching staff and students felt they had the moral duty to elevate the country's rural population socially and economically.

[21] Ismail Beşikçi, *Doğu Anadolu'nun düzeni. Sosyo-ekonomik ve etnik temeller* [literally: *The order of East Anatolia: socio-economic and ethnic foundations*], Istanbul: e yayınları, 1969.

Beşikçi's earliest studies very much reflected the general attitude of Turkish engaged social science of those years. The problems of 'the East,' (the euphemism consistently used for the Kurdish-inhabited provinces) were perceived as problems of social and economic backwardness: tribalism, a pervasive influence of popular Sufism, and archaic relations of production, all of which were believed to fade away with modernization from above. His field research made him discover the importance of ethnic identity and the demand of recognition, which became major themes of his work. While on the one hand he completed some articles on the modernization of nomadic tribes, in which ethnicity is hardly mentioned,[22] in *The social organization of East Anatolia* he asserted that the problems of the region could not be understood without taking account of the ethnic factor and the state's policies of suppressing Kurdish identity. In his writings of the 1970s and 1980s, Beşikçi was to focus more and more on a critical analysis of state policies vis-à-vis the Kurds.[23]

The years of Beşikçi's research were, like the second half of the 1960s elsewhere, a period of intense political debate and mobilization. There had been sporadic Kurdish uprisings in the past but those had been localized and dominated by tribes. This time Kurdish nationalism was emerging as a modern social movement, with two distinct wings. The military and political successes of the Kurdish struggle in Iraq could not but make a great impression on the Turkish Kurds. In 1965, a sister party to Barzani's KDP was established in Turkey; its founding members belonged to the educated tribal elite, and its platform was nationalist, initially without a further social agenda. Another, socialist-inspired, wing of the Kurdish movement emerged in the ranks of the Workers' Party of Turkey and the left student movement. Here, the debate was on how to describe Kurdish society in Marxist terms and how to determine the correct revolutionary strategy. Was Kurdish society feudal? Was a transition to capitalism taking place, a transition to socialism possible? Did a Kurdish proletariat exist? What were the causes of the region's backwardness?

A series of Kurdish protest meetings took place in Ankara and Istanbul during the years 1967 and 1968, where such issues were publicly debated. The complaints and demands put forward at these meetings (analyzed by Beşikçi) were of two kinds: economic development and recognition. The former demand could count on support from progressive Turks. The backwardness of 'the East' was attributed not only to geographical factors and the uneven development inherent in capitalist economies, but also to the deliberate withholding of infrastructural investments by previous governments. The second demand was more controversial: the Kurds demanded the recognition of themselves as a distinct people with a distinct language and culture, and they demanded the right to maintain and develop that

[22] İsmail Beşikçi, "Göçebe aşiretlerde yenileşme" ("Renewal among nomadic tribes"), "Doğu Anadolu'da göçebe Kürtler" ("Nomadic Kurds in East Anatolia"), "Göçebelerde modernleşme ve üç hipotez" ("Modernization among nomads: three hypotheses"), in the bi-weekly journal *Forum*, 15 September — 15 October 1967.

[23] Beşikçi's life and works are analyzed more extensively in: Martin van Bruinessen, "Ismail Beşikçi: Turkish sociologist, critic of Kemalism, and kurdologist", *The Journal of Kurdish Studies*, vol. 5 (2003-2004), 19-34. Also available online: < http://www.let.uu.nl/~martin.vanbruinessen/personal/publications/ismail_besikci.htm>.

culture. (In the 1970s, the demand for recognition furthermore came to imply the demand of the right to self-determination.)

After the 1971 coup, the first semi-legal Kurdish associations, DDKO ('Revolutionary Cultural Associations of the East'), which had organized the protest meetings of 1967-68, were banned and their leaders put on trial. Their defense pleas were densely footnoted essays on Kurdish history and linguistics, demonstrating that Kurdish is a distinct, Iranian language and that the existence of people called Kurds is well documented for many centuries. These defense pleas were published by sympathizers in European exile under a telling title: "Listen you fascist prosecutor! Kurds exist in this world!"[24]

Defining the Kurdish question in Turkey: between denial and recognition

More so than in the neighboring countries, the very concept of a Kurdish question is highly contested in Turkey. The positions that the major relevant actors have adopted on this issue are so far apart that a proper debate between them has hardly been possible. The official position that all 'so-called Kurds' are Turks and that therefore there cannot be a Kurdish question has been significantly eroded, but many in the army and the bureaucracy as well as many journalists and other opinion leaders still adhere to one or other variety of this thesis. The Kurds' demand for recognition, that became louder and more radical during the 1970s, was answered with a barrage of books purporting to prove that the tribes of Eastern Turkey were essentially Turkish in race, history and culture. Purges of lecturers following the military coup of 1980 ensured that dissident voices on the Kurdish question were not heard in academic circles and opened the way for the appointment of ultra-nationalist ideologists who 'scientifically' proved the non-existence of the Kurds.[25] The sheer volume of these writings and the aggressiveness with which this view was marketed shows that in spite of denial, there was the conviction that Turkey faced a serious Kurdish problem. Rather than attributing the roots of this problem to the non-existing Kurds, however, the representatives of this type of

[24] *Sen Faşist savcı iyi dinle! Dünyada Kürt vardır. DDKO'nun savunması*, Uppsala: BAHOZ, 1973.

[25] The semi-official Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü (Institute for Research on Turkish Culture) published dozens of such books during the early 1980s, and so did several publishing houses close to Turkey's ultranationalist movement. M. Abdülhalûk Çay and Yaşar Kalafat, both affiliated with this movement, are the most prominent authors of this type of literature who were appointed to university positions.

argument attributed it to the machinations of external enemies. I shall return to this particular spin below.

Among those who recognize that there is a Kurdish question in Turkey, three types of arguments are made about the nature of the question:

a. *it is an economic question*

b. *it is a cultural question*

c. *it is a political question*

(Most people, of course, consider it as a problem with economic and cultural as well as political aspects but for the sake of analysis I shall keep these separate. Historically, the demands of the Kurdish movement moved from the economic and cultural to the political.)

On the nature of the *economic* aspects of the question there is a broad range of agreement between Kurds and non-Kurds. The former may be more inclined to stress the effect of policies deliberately withholding development and the latter the effects of traditional social structure in inhibiting modernization. For Kurds, however, the economic problems are closely linked to other aspects of the question. Many Turkish leftists and Kemalists are inclined to reduce the Kurdish question to matters of regional underdevelopment and pre-capitalist social formations. Ethnicity is not denied but declared irrelevant; the solution is exclusively sought in economic measures.

The arguments of Kurdish nationalists and their opponents about *culture* are very different in kind. For the former, the denial of cultural rights (such as the use of Kurdish in the media and in education) constitutes the core of the problem. To the latter, Kurdish culture itself is the problem, and a civilizing mission is needed to change its backward social practices. Through Turkish official culture, everyone has access to the universal values of the Enlightenment; the recognition of Kurdish culture, in their view, is fraught with the danger of a relapse into the dark ages. These opposite culturalist views remind me very much of the debates between the defenders of multiculturalism and of the Enlightenment and 'Leitkultur' in European countries today.

The arguments about the *political* nature of the conflict are so diverse that a debate between their proponents cannot even be imagined. Many in Turkey say that the Kurdish question was imposed on Turkey by foreign enemies striving to weaken or destroy it. Some authors go to the extent of claiming that the Kurds were *invented* for this purpose. The abortive Treaty of Sèvres (1920), according to which Turkey should have ceded two thirds of its present territory to Greece, Italy, France, Britain and an independent Armenia and in which the possibility of a Kurdish state was explicitly mentioned, still looms large in the imagination of Turkish military and political leaders.

In this frame of mind, the Kurds are under permanent suspicion of being the willing tools of foreign powers that seek to dominate Turkey. The external enemies in this representation changed with shifts in the global political constellation, but the Kurds were consistently cast in the role of puppets. A typical example of this argument is made in a book by pro-Turkish author Mahmut Rışvanoğlu, *The tribes of the East and imperialism*. It is one of the more sophisticated works of the type purporting to show that the Kurds are of authentic Turkish origin. In an analysis somewhat resembling critiques of Orientalism, the author attempts to show that Kurdish identity is a construct of Orientalist scholarship in the service of Russian and British imperial interests. The Kurdish uprisings in the late Ottoman Empire and in Turkey were fomented by Russian and British agents. The Russian scholars Minorsky and Nikitine settled after the Revolution in Britain and France, where they served these countries' interests in inciting the Kurds.[26]

[26] Mahmut Rışvanoğlu, *Doğu aşiretleri ve emperyalizm*, Istanbul: Türk Kültür Yayını, 1975.

More recently, the Kurds have been analyzed as tools of the Soviet Union, of Greece, of the USA, of the European Union and of Israel. There are frequent references to Israel and 'Jewish circles' in this type of literature, which freely borrows from the rich stock of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.[27]

Kurdistan as a colony, and the anti-colonial struggle

The Kurdish movement in Turkey — if one may generalize about a diverse movement within which many ideological divisions occurred —shifted the emphasis of its discourse during the 1970s from economic and cultural demands to the political one of national self-determination. Most of the parties came to adhere to the thesis that Kurdistan was a colony of (the ruling classes of) Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria and began to look towards the anti-colonial liberation struggles in Asia and Africa as models. Ismail Beşikçi, who in his long years in prison increasingly identified himself with the Kurdish struggle, later wrote an elaborate statement of the 'colonial thesis' that was accepted as authoritative by many Kurdish activists: *Kurdistan, a colony of many states.*[28]

Of the various Kurdish parties in Turkey, the most radical in its analysis and corresponding strategy was the PKK, which was the first to openly strive for the full independence of a

[27] Turan Yavuz, *ABD'nin Kürt kartı* [*The USA's Kurdish card*], Istanbul: Milliyet Yayınları, 1993; Harun Yahya, *İsrail'in Kürt kartı: İsrail'in Ortadoğu stratejisi ve "Kürt devleti" senaryoları* [*Israel's Kurdish card: Israel's Middle Eastern strategies and the scenarios for a 'Kurdish state'*], Istanbul: Vural Yayıncılık, 1997.

[28] İsmail Beşikçi, *Devletlerarası sömürge Kürdistan*, Istanbul: Alan, 1990 [reprinted, after it was banned in Turkey, by a PKK-affiliated publishing house in Bonn, Weşanên Rewşen, 1990].

united Kurdistan and a social revolution against its ruling classes. It declared the tribal and land-holding elites to be collaborators of the colonial oppressor and directed its first armed actions (as many other anti-colonial movements did) against these 'collaborators.' Especially in the first years of its existence, the PKK indulged in a cult of violence, in which one is inclined to recognize the influence of Frantz Fanon, the ideologist of the Algerian revolution (although he is not quoted directly). The PKK's extremely violent mode of operation antagonized many Kurds, but its military successes in the second half of the 1980s and the early 1990s won over many former opponents. Many of its critics recognized that it was the PKK that placed the Kurdish question prominently on the Turkish agenda.

This also forced the Turkish left to rethink the Kurdish question and it own increasing marginalization. The PKK had emerged from the Turkish left, and it was the only political movement of that ancestry that had acquired a genuine mass following. Several icons of the left, such party leaders and thinkers as Doğu Perinçek, Yalçın Küçük and Ertuğrul Kürkçü, sought a dialogue with the PKK, visited its leader Öcalan in Lebanon, and attempted to offer a master narrative in which the Kurdish struggle was part of a larger political struggle — rather unsuccessfully, for the PKK began to believe that its struggle was itself an example for the rest of the world. Their awareness of the importance of the Kurdish question for Turkey's future is expressed well in the catchy title of Perinçek's collection of short essays on the Kurds, *The Turkish question*.[29] Perinçek was later to revert to a Turkish nationalist standpoint, but in the early 1990s he commented that the real separatist in Turkey was the Turkish state itself, which treated it Kurdish subjects differently from the rest and had allowed the rule of law to lapse in the Kurdish provinces. The Kurdish question was a problem for all Turks, created to a large extent by Turks.

Unity and diversity

As Barzani's guerrilla struggle had done in Iraq in the 1960s, the even bloodier struggle waged by the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s made many Kurds more aware of their Kurdish identity and led to a broad mobilization of nationalist sentiment. At the same time, however,

[29] Doğu Perinçek, *Türk sorunu: emekçiler açısından belgelerle Kürt sorunu* [*The Turkish question: The Kurdish question documented from a workers' point of view*], Istanbul: Kaynak, 1993.

this mobilization made people more aware of cultural diversity. As Jwaideh had observed, linguistic and sectarian differences, narrow tribal loyalties as well as international boundaries stood in the way of national unity. People who adhered to minority religions or sects such as Yezidism, Ahl-i Haqq and Alevism, or who spoke dialects of Zaza or Gurani instead of Kurdish proper could identify themselves as Kurds — and many actually did so and became active in the Kurdish movement — but they could also opt for narrower identities or prefer assimilating to the dominant Turkish, Arabic or Persian cultures. In the 1980s, identity movements of Zaza speakers and of Alevis in Turkey and in the European diaspora drew parts of those communities of ambiguous identity away from Kurdish ethnicity. Kurdish nationalist suspected the state of creating and manipulating these identity movements. In Iraqi Kurdistan, a division into two sub-regions, controlled by the KDP and the PUK respectively, and more or less coinciding with the two major dialect groups, consolidated during the 1990s.[30]

The international boundaries cutting through Kurdistan have also contributed to increasing distance between the Kurds of different countries, especially with the advent of mass education and of television, which made them take part in different communities of discourse. In the 1970s, Iraq evacuated a broad corridor along the Iranian and Turkish borders of all inhabitants, preventing or at least significantly limiting the movement of people and goods across the border. Syria had in the early 1960s embarked on a similar project to physically separate its Kurds from their northern neighbors. The Kurds of any one country do tend to consider those of the other countries as 'different' and hard to understand. The PKK, which had planned to overcome all sub-cultural divisions and unite Kurds from all of Kurdistan in a common struggle did find some supporters among Iraqi and Iranian Kurds but focused exclusively on Turkey once the armed struggle had begun. This was, however, less due to division of the Kurds than to the fact that the PKK needed the support of Syria, and occasionally Iraq and Iran as well.

With all this diversity among the Kurds, one might be tempted to ask what would make them a single people. The division among the Kurds is an undeniable fact but it is easily overstated. There are common memories and symbols of Kurdish identity that have an emotional appeal to Kurdish people across all religious and linguistic divisions. The most powerful symbol and the most dramatic shared memory were bestowed upon them by Saddam Hussein and his cousin, 'Chemical' Ali Hassan al-Majid. Halabja, the town bombarded with poison gas on 16 March 1988, has become perhaps the most powerful symbol of Kurdish identity, of Kurdish suffering, and the determination to prevent such events from ever happening again. Strongly emotive visual images of victims and the moving lament for Halabja by the singer Şivan keep the memory of this event vivid in the minds of Kurds everywhere. The fate of Halabja, to many Kurds, changed the definition of the Kurdish question and the way they related to Kurdish identity.

[30] Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish paths to nation", in: Faleh A. Jabar (ed.), *Ethnicity in the Middle East: the case of the Kurds*. London: Saqi Books, forthcoming.

Conclusion

Today, as at the time when Wadie Jwaideh was completing his history of Kurdish nationalism, Iraq is passing through dramatic changes. The old regime has been brought down, but the contours of the new political order that will emerge are as yet elusive. The Iraqi Kurds are in a stronger position than ever; they have for the past thirteen years administered a large part of the Kurdish region, they have the strongest military units of the country, and they are relatively united since the end of the fratricidal war of the mid-1990s. And yet, Jwaideh's comments of 45 years ago sound strangely relevant again:

> "Today the Kurds occupy an extremely important region in the heart of the Middle East. They constitute the most important single national minority in that area, forming a substantial proportion of the populations of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Despite the failure of numerous Kurdish rebellions over the past thirty years in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, Kurdish nationalism continues to be a source of deep concern to the governments of these countries. Aroused by the success of the surrounding nationalisms – Turkish, Persian, and Arab – and goaded into desperation by its own failure, Kurdish nationalism has in recent years become increasingly radical and uncompromising. For these reasons, the Kurds have come to play an increasingly significant role in Middle Eastern affairs. *Their behavior is one of the important factors in the future stability and security* not only of the Kurdish-inhabited countries but of the entire Middle East. Thus *it is important to know the Kurds and to understand their aims, their political orientation, and the course they are likely to pursue*."[31]

One can only agree with this assessment, and add that it is even more true today than when Jwaideh wrote these lines.

[31] Jwaideh, "Kurdish nationalist movement", pp. iii-iv.