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Kurdish Society and the Modern State: Ethnic Nationalism Versus Nation-building[1]

Two major national problems dominate the political scene of the contemporary Middle East. The first and most conspicuous is the Palestinian problem, the second the Kurdish question. The Palestinian problem has, during the past fifteen years, received much attention because it appeals to strong sentiments and has a strong symbolic value. It appears to exemplify the conflict between Islam and the West, between Arabs and Jews, between the Third World and American Imperialism, between the poor and the usurpers who drive them off their land. The Kurdish question is not so easy to define and understand. The Kurds, even more clearly than the Palestinians, are a distinct people, differing in language and culture from all their neighbours, but there has never been a Kurdish state, although for over a century Kurdish nationalists have attempted to create one.[2] Kurdistan, the traditional habitat of the Kurds, is now divided over four states: Turkey (where an estimated 7 to 12 million Kurds live), Iran (4 to 5 million), Iraq (3 to 4 million) and Syria (0.5 to 1 million).[3] Altogether, the Kurds thus number between 15 and 22 millions, i.e., more than the entire population of Iraq, and almost twice that of Syria. All four countries have their Kurdish problem; and the Kurds in all four countries feel that they have a problem with the state. But opinions differ widely as to what the real nature of the problem is, let alone how it should be solved.

Competing nationalisms appealing to the Kurds

The Kurds are often called a nation without a state; they are perhaps the largest people that has struggled in vain for statehood. To some observers, as well as to many Kurds, this is the essence of the Kurdish problem. Such a view appears to overlook the fact that for many centuries the Kurds have quite happily done without a state of their own. However, something important changed in the early twentieth century, as a result of the

[1] An earlier version of this paper appeared in Indonesian in the journal of the Indonesian Association of Political Scientists, *Jurnal Ilmu Politik* No. 7, 1990. The first part of the paper was also presented, in a slightly different form, at the international conference "The Kurds: Human Rights and Cultural Identity", organised by the Kurdish Institute of Paris with the Fondation France-Libertés Danielle Mitterand, in Paris, October 14-15, 1989.

[2]The first movement whose leader appeared to have explicit ideas on a separate Kurdish state took place in 1880. For the early history of Kurdish nationalism see Jwaideh 1960; Olson 1989.

[3] The official censuses of these countries do not mention the Kurds separately, and population estimates vary widely. For an account of the estimates given here, see van Bruinessen l978, 20-22.

impact of the European nationalisms. National aspirations became more widespread among the Kurds as well as among the other ethnic groups of the Middle East. More importantly, since the end of the First World War the political elites of those countries among which Kurdistan was divided have made concerted efforts to turn their countries into nation states. In each, there is one dominant ethnic group — Turks, Arabs or Persians — and the governments have carried out various policies aiming at the assimilation of the other ethnic groups to the dominant one, in order to forge "national unity". This has meant the suppression of other cultures and traditional ways of life, and their gradual replacement by a new "national" culture. The Kurds, being the largest or (in Iran) second largest of these other ethnic groups, have borne the brunt of these policies. The existence of a separate Kurdish identity, let alone a Kurdish national movement, is in all these states considered as a major threat — not just a security threat, but a threat to the state's self-defined identity.

Among these states, Turkey has always been the most radical in its attempts at "nation-building", and has most actively (and violently) attempted to destroy Kurdish national identity. The very name "Kurd" became, and long remained, taboo. Speaking of the Kurds as a nation is, to this day, considered as an act of subversion; and even among Turkey's intellectual elite it used to provoke highly emotional reactions. In Iran and Iraq, there was at least some tolerance of Kurdish culture, though there too assimilation was aimed at. In the Shah's Iran, Persian was the only language allowed in schools, in the law courts and in other official use. Publications in Kurdish were not permitted, and all Kurdish organisations and associations were banned. Iraq is the only country which allows the Kurds a certain cultural and even political autonomy. But at the same time, it considers itself as an integral pan of the wider Arab nation. Economically vital parts of Iraqi Kurdistan have been "Arabised" by deporting Kurds and replacing them with Arabs from southern Iraq. The intermarriage of Arab men with Kurdish women is highly encouraged (with monetary incentives) as another means of Arabisation of the country. And in the past years, a very radical transformation of the Kurdish countryside has been started, apparently aiming at the complete elimination of the traditional Kurdish village, one of the mainstays of Kurdish culture.

Kurdish nationalism has developed to a large extent in reaction to political and cultural domination by Turks, Persians and Arabs and to these attempts at assimilation. Before the twentieth century, only a minor part of the tribal and intellectual elite among the Kurds thought (and wrote) at times about the Kurds as if they were a distinct group with common interests. For the most part, however, the Kurds as a people were not a focus of solidarity feelings; people felt loyalty only to their families and to their tribes or villages, to Islam or more commonly to a particular religious leader. Although all were aware of being different in many respects from their neighbours, the Kurds were (and are) certainly not a culturally homogeneous group. They speak dialects that are not always mutually understandable, and important groups even speak languages different

from Kurdish proper. Nor do they all adhere to the same religion: most are Sunni Muslims but some are also followers of other religions and sects. Judging by objective criteria, one would be inclined consider the Kurds as a conglomerate of different ethnic groups rather than as a single one.[4] What unites them is not any set of objective, economic, political or cultural characteristics, but only the awareness among many of them that they constitute one people. This awareness is a result of a series of historical developments, the most important of which was the rise of Kurdish nationalism. To the extent that the Kurds feel one and have an awareness of a common destiny, they are a nation. But for each individual Kurd, the Kurdish nation is not the only entity with which (s)he feels (s)he shares a common destiny. Besides those who have been assimilated to a dominant nation by force, there are also Kurds who have quite willingly chosen to identify themselves primarily as citizens of their state or as followers of a particular religion or sect.

Relations between the Kurds and the state before the modern age

From the sixteenth until the early twentieth century, Kurdistan was divided among the two great Middle Eastern states, the Ottoman and the Persian Empires. Both were multi-ethnic states, in which there was no clearly dominant ethnic group. There was certainly discrimination among different categories of citizens, but it was based on religion and education, not on ethnicity as such. Kurds could and did pursue political careers without shedding their Kurdish identity. This was especially so in the Sunni Ottoman Empire, since most of the Kurds were also Sunnis, but in Shii Iran, too, there were Kurds who rose to high positions. Kurdistan itself was also a multi-ethnic mosaic, peopled by Kurdish pastoral nomadic tribes as well as Kurdish speaking peasants; by Jewish and Christian communities of many tongues and denominations, who were peasants, craftsmen or merchants; by Arabic and Turkish speaking minorities of various origins; by nomadic and sedentary gypsies, and by various other small Muslim minorities.

Kurdistan is an area of high and vast mountain chains, difficult to penetrate. Geographical conditions have made it into a buffer zone between the two empires. To both it was a peripheral area, over which they had no great desire to exert direct control. Instead, they left local Kurdish rulers in control of large areas, in exchange for token obedience, very modest taxes, and military loyalty in case of war. Only a few districts of key economic or strategic importance were placed under centrally appointed governors commanding regular army troops. In the rest of Kurdistan, a small number of Kurdish aristocratic families held sway, as the rulers of autonomous principalities. The courts of

[4] The cultural variety among the Kurds is discussed in some detail elsewhere: van Bruinessen 1978 (Ch 1) and 1992; for linguistic variety see Kreyenbroek 1991.

some of these principalities mirrored, though on a more modest scale, the splendour of the Ottoman and Persian courts, and were centres where the arts and sciences flourished. The Kurdish literary tradition was first fostered at these courts in the late l6th and l7th centuries. Each principality consisted of a number of large tribes or tribal confederacies, which formed the backbone of its military might. In order to maintain his position the ruler had to balance these tribes against each other while all the same time keeping tribal feuds in check. This tribal military elite was superimposed upon a settled society of farmers, dependent peasants, serfs and various classes of townsmen.

The recognition of a Kurdish ruler by the central state gave him essential support against potential rivals. It therefore often happened that rivals or disaffected family members allied themselves with the neighbouring empire. Inter-Kurdish rivalries thus often became interlocked with conflicts between the two empires. In many battles between the Ottomans and Persians, there were Kurds taking part on both sides, at times even sections of the same tribe. They were fighting out their own conflicts, which happened to coincide with the larger one, or, having fled to the neighbouring empire, they had no choice but to fight on its behalf or be expelled. This is a pattern that has recurred in Kurdish history up until the present day.

Movements of administrative reform in the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries[5] led to the gradual reduction of the Kurdish principalities and the concomitant expansion of a centralised bureaucracy into the Kurdish districts. By the mid-nineteenth century, the last principalities had been abolished by military force. Kurdish society thus came in more direct contact with the state — and not only with the Ottoman and Persian states. Two other empires, the Russian and the British, began to make their presence felt in Kurdistan, by means of consuls, merchants, explorers, and missionaries. Russian armies in fact occupied parts of Kurdistan during the Russo-Turkish wars of 1828-9 and 1877-78. There had been French and Italian Catholic missionaries working among the Christian minorities of Kurdistan as early as the mid-seventeenth century, but in the course of the nineteenth century the numbers of missions — British, American, German and Swedish — rapidly increased. Their presence changed the balance of power between Muslims and Christians in the region, for the missionaries, through their embassies in Istanbul, could and did put pressure on the central government on behalf of the local Christians. There was much resentment among the Kurdish elite (the princely families and the chieftains of large tribes) because of increasing interference with their traditional perks. It was widely believed, and correctly so, that the administrative reforms restricting the autonomy of the Kurdish regions were inspired or even imposed upon the Empire by the Western powers.

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5 General studies on reform in the Ottoman Empire: Davison 1963, Lewis 1961, Shaw & Shaw 1977. For the part that later became Iraq, see Longrigg 1925, esp. 298-321. On the effects of the reforms on Kurdish society, see van Bruinessen 1978: 220-233.

Relapse towards indirect rule: Kurdish irregular police forces

The immediate result of the abolition of the Kurdish principalities was anarchy and chaos. Unlike the Kurdish rulers before them, the new administrators could not hold the tribes in check. Numerous feuds erupted, tribesmen raided settled villages, theft and robbery increased. In order to be able to police the region, some of the administrators concluded alliances of convenience with at least some of the tribal chieftains, thereby forcing these chieftains' rivals into the role of rebels and bandits and condoning their allies' oppression of the settled population. Under the reactionary Sultan Abdulhamid II, who ruled during the last quarter of the l9th century and strongly resisted European pressures for reform, this was made into an official policy. Rather than strengthening his reform-minded bureaucracy and army, he had Kurdish tribes armed and made into militia forces, the so-called *Hamidiye* (after the sultan's name), to police the eastern provinces. The Hamidiye have earned a bad reputation because of their apparent involvement in massacres of Armenian villagers in 1895. However, their treatment of fellow Kurds was often just as harsh and cruel. By endorsing selected chieftains, the sultan gave them a licence to expand their powers at the expense of their less favoured rivals, and to squeeze whatever they could out of the population.[6]

This too is a recurrent pattern in the history of Kurdistan (and of similar peripheral areas elsewhere). Even when the state could not exert direct influence over Kurdistan, its choice to back up certain chieftains rather than others greatly affected the local balance of power, and in many cases resulted in severe oppression of the local population at the hands of the selected chieftains and their thugs. The formation of the Hamidiye has, deliberately or not, been imitated by later governments. The British, during their occupation of and mandate over Iraq, gave certain chieftains administrative powers and made their armed retinues into a sort of local police. The result was that on more than one occasion important sections of the population suffered physical oppression and extortion against which there was no appeal. It also forced other traditional leaders, who happened to be in conflict with the favoured chieftains, into the role of rebels against the state.[7] Most recently, Turkey has founded and armed a similar type of Kurdish militia, the "village guards" (*köy koruculari*), to combat the guerrilla fighters of the radical separatist Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK). Again, there are

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6 On the Hamidiye and other policies of Sultan Abdulhamid II: Duguid 1973; van Bruinessen 1978: 233-9. Detailed accounts of these and later Armenian massacres in Walker 1980.

7 The British Political Officer, C.J. Edmonds, who spent many years working in Kurdistan, mentions several striking example in his memoirs (1957).

many reports of these "village guards" being used as local strongmen's thugs, coercing the villagers into obedience or terrorising rivals and their dependants.[8]

Tribalism and the modern state

The violence surfacing in these cases is in a way an aspect of traditional society, closely related to its *tribal* character but it is exacerbated precisely by the state's intervention. Rather than detribalising and modernising Kurdish society, which have been the government's stated aims for most of the twentieth century, the state has, in at least some cases, only strengthened the worst aspects of tribal society. There is little reason to see here evil intent on the part of the states concerned; in Iraq the Kurdish movement itself has not been much more successful in diminishing tribalism itself during the last thirty years. It has often provoked similar undesired consequences by enlisting tribal support. Conflicts and feuds are endemic in tribal society every tribal chieftain has his rivals and enemies. Once a particular chieftain had joined the Kurdish movement, it was almost inconceivable for his important rivals to do so too. They had the choice of remaining neutral or opposing the movement. Often the government did not even leave them that choice. Similarly, for each tribe co-operating with the central government, there were rivals who allied themselves with the Kurdish movement — not out of political conviction but because of tribal conflicts. Many of the urbanised Kurdish politicians and intellectuals abhor tribalism and tribal politics, but the Kurdish movement has so far not been able to do without the tribes. The really tribal Kurds may be a minority now, but in the past at times when guerrilla warfare was being waged the hardy tribesmen, who knew the mountains best, always played a crucial role, and they have left an indelible mark on the movement.

Speaking of *"tribes"* and *"tribalism",* as I do here, might easily give a wrong impression of Kurdish society. Romantic images of the Kurds as nomadic shepherds are largely mistaken. Although in the past there were many more full nomads than now, they probably never made up even as much as half of Kurdish society. Many of the large nomadic tribes have been forced to settle since the 1920s because the new borders between Turkey and its southern neighbours cut through their traditional migration routes. They gradually settled near either the warm winter pastures in the Mesopotamian plain or the lush mountain pastures of Turkish Kurdistan. After the rebellions of the 1920s and 1930s in Turkish Kurdistan, many tribesmen were deported to western Turkey. In Iran, Reza Shah carried out a policy of forced settlement of nomadic tribes and sent many chieftains into distant exile. There are still a few fully nomadic tribes, but these represent only a small proportion of the total Kurdish population. It is more

[8] On the Workers' Party of Kurdistan and its war with the village guards, see van Bruinessen 1988.

common now for the tribes to combine shepherding with some farming, and to live in a village, although in summer many follow their flocks to the mountain pastures, where they still live in tents. And there are also tribes that hardly practice any shepherding at all but have become full-time farmers, or even townspeople. This does not mean that all Kurds belong to some tribe or other; there have always been many who do not. The largest group of those non-tribal Kurds were peasants, often subordinated to a tribe or a rich land-owning family. Many of the Kurdish families, that have for generations lived in towns or cities, have also gradually lost their tribal ties.

It is not nomadism or shepherding that distinguishes the tribes from the non-tribal Kurds, but rather the strong group loyalties between the members of a tribe. A tribe is like a very large family (some tribes comprise thousands of households), demanding from its members the same loyalties and offering them the same type of protection and security. Most tribes claim to be descended from a common ancestor, which though it may not be literally true certainly strengthens the members' sense of solidarity. Each tribe is also associated with a specific territory, where in theory only members of the tribe and their dependants are allowed to own land. Tribal solidarity is expressed in strict obedience to the tribal chieftain. The almost unquestioning loyalty of tribesmen to the chieftain is perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of tribalism, at once its strength and its weakness. In most situations, tribesmen will listen to their chieftain first, and follow him in any decision. Whether they do the bidding of the government or take part in a rising against it, depends almost entirely on the chieftain. Even members of the tribe who have left their tribal area and moved to a town, remain tied by the obligation of loyalty and obedience to their chieftain.

Central government officials in Kurdish districts have therefore often found themselves obliged to appease the chieftains if they wished to get anything done at all. Thereby they have strengthened the powers of these chieftains over the rest of the population, and contributed to the social and economic polarisation of Kurdish society. Many chieftains for instance have succeeded in registering land that was previously held in common by the tribe as their own private property. Or they have simply taken land and other property away from those who were less well-connected, and had themselves recognised as the legitimate owners. Certain chiefly families succeeded in extending their authority over much larger populations than their own tribe, due not only to the force of their own armed men but also to their clever co-operation with government officials. In several parts of Kurdistan, the interests of the military and the civilian bureaucracy have become so interwoven with those of the chieftains, that the bureaucracy almost seems to have become part of the tribal organisation.

Of the countries with a significant Kurdish population, Turkey is the only one that has a proper parliamentary system with general elections; each province elects a certain number of representatives. In the Kurdish provinces, the contending parties simply have

to put forward candidates with strong tribal backing, if they wish to stand any chance of winning. Chieftains thus have become affiliated with political parties, although hardly affected by their ideologies. Where there have been two rival chieftains, one would join the rightwing, the other the left-wing party; in a subsequent election year, the affiliations might well be reversed. The election campaigns have reflected local tribal rivalries rather than national-level issues. Tribal conflicts always increase towards election time, for the stakes are generally quite high. Taking part in state-level politics gives a chieftain the opportunity to do much for his followers: he can have influence on the distribution of government spending in the region, and offer various other forms of patronage: contracts, licences, education, jobs.[9]

Consequently, contact with modern political institutions such as the state bureaucracy and political parties has not abolished tribal structure but rather has modified and perhaps even strengthened it. We may even say that to some extent, the bureaucracy and the parties have become tribalised in their way of operating in Kurdistan. This is regrettable not only to the central government's proponents of "modernisation" and integration, but to most educated Kurds as well. The most radical Kurdish nationalists see this as a typical "colonial" phenomenon, and accuse the tribal elite of being collaborators enabling the continued "colonial exploitation" of Kurdistan by the Turkish, Arab and Persian bourgeoisies. Although this is an extremely simplistic view, it cannot be denied that there are similarities with the situation that existed in Europe's Asian and African colonies.

Population movement and its impact on ethnic awareness

Among the most drastic social changes brought about by the economic and political developments of this century is the large-scale migration of Kurds away from Kurdistan. The first to leave were either the very poor or members of the elite, the former seeking employment, the latter in search of education or political careers. By the turn of the century, most of the porters in Istanbul were Kurds, and there were many more Kurds working in other lower-class jobs. The same was probably true of Tehran and Baghdad. Moreover, in these cities there were members of the traditional Kurdish elite who had acquired positions in the military or civilian bureaucracy, and younger members of aristocratic families studying at the first colleges.

In the 1920s and 1930s, numerous Kurds were deported to western Turkey or central and eastern Iran, by the modernising regimes of these states.[10] In Iraq, large-scale

9 On political patronage in Turkey in general, see Sayarı 1977; on the situation especially in its Kurdish provinces: Kudat 1975.

deportations started in the 1960s and have continued until now. However, the largest volume of population movement is probably labour migration. The mechanisation of agriculture, although coming late to Kurdistan, caused much open and hidden unemployment in the villages. People started moving elsewhere in search of employment. In Turkey they migrated to the cotton plantations of the Mediterranean and Aegean coasts, to the large cities of the west, and soon also abroad, to western Europe or Libya; in Iran to Tehran, of course, which in the 1970s had a booming construction sector, or to the oil fields in the south or in neighbouring Kuwait; in Iraq to Baghdad and other cities, where the oil boom created much employment. The numbers of these "economic migrants" were reinforced by tens of thousands of students seeking education at the universities in the major cities, and later by many internal refugees. The Kurdish war in Iraq (1961-70, 1974-5, and again since 1976), the Gulf War, violent political conflicts in Turkey during the 1970s, heavy military repression and a low-scale guerrilla war since 1984, have forced many Kurds to leave their villages for reasons of safety and security. Most of them also went to the large cities. As a result of all these population movements, a very large number of Kurds now live outside Kurdistan, although most still have relatives there and, if possible, regularly go back. There are no reliable statistics, but by a rough estimate at least a quarter to a third of all Kurds now live outside Kurdistan proper. Vast districts of Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, Damascus, Baghdad and Tehran are now virtually Kurdish. This obviously has important consequences for the political relations in these countries as well as for the nature of the Kurdish movement.

During the past half century, the Kurds of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria — and not only those who migrated to the cities — have very clearly become more integrated into the economic, political, social and cultural life of these countries, although not always on equal terms with the dominant ethnic groups. Compulsory education, military service, and the mass media, to a large extent state-controlled, have exposed them to the same influences as the other citizens of these states. The available infrastructure gives the Kurds of Turkey, for instance, much better links with western Turkey than with the Kurds in neighbouring countries. Due to the very different political, economic and cultural climates in these countries, the Kurds there developed different tastes and attitudes. Iraqi Kurds are Iraqi as much as they are Kurds, and they differ in various respects (and are aware of differing) from the Kurds of Turkey or Iran. To this we may add the effects of forced assimilation, which in Turkey until the 1960s seemed rather successful. One might even wonder whether the Kurds are now one nation or rather three — also given the fact that the political history of the Kurds of Turkey, Iran and Iraq until recently showed little mutual interdependence.

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[10] On the deportations in Turkey: Beşikçi 1972, Vanly 1971, Rambout 1947; on those in Iran: Salzman 1971.

The dominant school of thought of the 1950s and 1960s believed that increased communications, economic integration and especially the mass migration from the countryside to the big cities would make the populations of Third World states more homogeneous and turn them into new nations.[11] According to that line of thought, it was expected that the Kurds would gradually lose their distinctive Kurdishness. Now this is precisely what did not happen, neither to the Kurds nor to many other non-dominant ethnic groups. Although the Kurds continued to be further integrated into the economies of the countries where they lived, the increased contacts with other ethnic groups made them more aware of their own separate ethnic identity. As a reaction against the discrimination that many suffered at school or in finding jobs (Kurds used to be considered as backward, stupid, and uncultured, while in Turkey there was also much discrimination for political reasons), many began to search for things in Kurdish history and culture that they could take pride in. Kurdish cultural associations were founded precisely in the big cities, and cultural journals were published there rather than in Kurdistan itself. Even children of parents who had been successfully assimilated discovered their Kurdish roots and started learning Kurdish again. It is largely due to the migration to big cities outside Kurdistan, that Kurdish national awareness and pride in Kurdish culture have become mass phenomena.

Early Kurdish rebellions

Until the 1960s, the Kurdish national movement had remained quite limited in scope. At times when the central governments seemed weak, or during general political crises, there had been Kurdish rebellions, but these were usually short-lived. The first large Kurdish national rebellion took place in the border region of the Ottoman and Persian Empires in 1880, after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the war with Russia. It was led by a religious leader, Shaikh Ubaidullah, aided by tribal chieftains. The common Kurds took part not out of nationalist feeling but out of loyalty and obedience to the shaikh and their tribal chieftains. More or less similar rebellions took place in the following decades. In Iraq, Shaikh Mahmud Barzinji proclaimed himself "King of Kurdistan" in 1922, and rebelled against the British who then occupied the country. In Iran, around 1920 the tribal chieftain Simko brought a large area under his control and remained a political threat to the central government until he was assassinated in 1929. In Turkey, Shaikh Sa`id led a large rebellion in 1925 against Atatürk's policies of secularisation and discrimination against the Kurds. After this rebellion was put down with much bloodshed, two large rebellions in other parts of Kurdistan followed: in 1929-

[11] One of the earliest scholars to criticise this theoretical paradigm of "nation-building" was Walker Connor. His 1972 article gives a useful summary, and a passionate criticism, of the views of the "modernisation" school on the withering away of sub-state ethnicity.

30 around Mount Ararat, and in 1937 in Dersim.[12] There were numerous smaller rebellions of purely local dimensions. In all cases, except perhaps that of the Ararat rebellion, the leadership belonged to the traditional Kurdish elite, and participation followed the traditional pattern of all tribal rebellions.

Only in the Shaikh Sa`id and Ararat revolts had political parties played a minor role in preparations for the rebellion. The Kurdish political parties or organisations of that period only had a few urban intellectuats and military men as members, and still tacked a mass following. Lack of organisation was one important reason why the revolts could be suppressed with relative ease.

A somewhat different rebellion took place in Iran immediately after the Second World War. During the war, the Soviet Union and Great Britain had occupied large parts of Iran (in the north and south, respectively); most of Kurdistan fell within the neutral zone in between. The central government was much weakened, and could not exert effective control there. After the war, the Soviet armies withdrew across the border, but they left an independent republic of Azerbaijan with a strongly pro-communist government behind in north-western Iran. The Kurds of the area around Mahabad followed the example of Azerbaijan, and also established an independent Republic, which existed for almost a full year, in 1946. The president of this Kurdish republic was a respected Muslim divine, Qazi Muhammad; the chief of its army a Kurd from Iraq who later became the most famous Kurdish national leader, Mulla Mustafa Barzani. A political party with members among the urban intellectuals, merchants and ulama, as well as among the tribal elite, the *Democratic Party of Kurdistan* (KDP), formed the backbone of the state. By the end of 1946, the central government of Iran had regained sufficient military strength to suppress this separatist Kurdish movement.[13] The government carried out severe reprisals, and for the next three decades Kurdish national aspirations remained more effectively suppressed than in the neighbouring countries. Both the KDP and Barzani, however, were destined to play important roles in the years to come, at first in Iraq, and then later in Iran as well.

The Iraqi Kurdish movement, 1958-1980

It was in Iraq that Kurdish nationalism first became a mass movement. The Kurds in fact enjoyed more rights here than in the neighbouring countries, and the level of education

[12] On Shaikh Mahmud's rebellion: Edmonds 1957 (passim), Rambout 1947 (Chapter III), Jwaideh 1960 (Chapters X, XI); on Simko: van Bruinessen 1983; on Shaikh Sa`id: van Bruinessen 1978 (Chapter V); Olson 1989. All these and many other Kurdish rebellions are also discussed in: Jwaideh 1960; Arfa 1966, and Kutschera 1979.

[13] On the Mahabad Republic, see Eagleton 1963.

and economic welfare was on the average higher. A populist-leftist military coup d'état in 1958 toppled the royal government that the British had installed. The new leader, colonel Abdul Karim Qassem, promised real democracy, substantial land-reform measures, and national rights for the Kurds. He invited Barzani (who had lived in exile in the Soviet Union since the fall of the Mahabad Republic) back to Iraq, and legalised the *Kurdistan Democratic Party,* which had until then been a small underground organisation. The KDP had been founded by urban intellectuals as the successor to the party of the same name in Mahabad, Iran. Qassem's promises caused great expectations among the Kurds, and contributed to a rising Kurdish nationalism. When the expectations were frustrated, Barzani took to the mountains with his men and began a guerrilla war (1961). The war lasted, with interruptions, until 1970, and the Kurds became ever stronger. Several governments in Baghdad fell, at least in part because of the Kurdish war, until in 1968 Hasan al-Bakr and his relative Saddam Hussein came to power. This government made serious concessions to the Kurds, and in 1970 concluded an agreement promising them substantial autonomy. During a decade of fighting, Barzani had much strengthened the Kurdish movement and consolidated his control over it. During the first years, there was a clear rivalry between himself as the representative of the tribes, and the politicians of the KDP who represented the urban Kurds. Barzani proved himself the cleverer politician, expelled his most serious rivals from the party, and appointed a board that was loyal to him. His major rivals, Ibrahim Ahmad and Jalal Talabani, though claiming to be the real KDP, were effectively isolated, and ended up in a precarious position between the government and Barzani. When they actively fought against Barzani (in 1966), they were considered by many Kurds to be traitors. After the 1970 agreement, they had no choice but to reconcile themselves with Barzani and accept his leadership. In later years, however, Jalal Talabani would re-emerge on the political scene as an independent Kurdish leader. Until today, there is a Barzani and a Talabani wing of the Kurdish movement in Iraq, which still represents the two different social bases: the traditional and tribal versus the modern urban.[14]

In the course of the 1960s, Barzani had established relations with the Shah of Iran, and received gradually increasing amounts of economic and military support. The Shah had an interest in weakening the Iraqi government, and he found the Kurds a useful tool for putting pressure on it. The events of the following years strengthened the mutual dependence of the Shah and the Iraqi Kurds. In 1971, the British withdrew their last troops from the Gulf area, and the Shah tried to fill up the power vacuum, occupying a few islands in the Strait of Hormuz. In the same year, Iraq nationalised the Iraqi Petroleum Company (which was then still owned by British, Dutch, French and

[14] On this first Kurdish war (1961-70) and the internal conflicts, see Vanly 1970, Kutschera 1979, Pelletiere 1984 (all sympathetic to the Kurds), Jawad 1981, and Ghareeb 1981 (closer to the government point of view).

American capital). Western countries answered with an economic boycott of Iraq, which then sought closer economic and political ties with the Soviet Union. In 1972, Iraq and the Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Friendship. It is no accident that in that same year Barzani was invited to Tehran and there met the American Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, who promised him substantial military aid.[15]

The 1970 agreement promised autonomy for the entire region where the majority of the population was Kurdish, to go into effect within four years. This region would therefore include the important oil producing districts of Kirkuk and Khaniqin, together representing about half of Iraq's known oil reserves. The government did not wish to leave them under Kurdish control, and therefore attempts were made to "Arabise" these districts before the autonomy would be implemented in 1974. Kurds were deported from Kirkuk and Arabs from elsewhere were settled in their place. In various other ways, too, it became clear that the government was unwilling to give the Kurds what it had promised in 1970.

In 1974, the government finally declared autonomy for an area much smaller than what the Kurds claimed to be administered by a Kurdish administration that had been handpicked by Baghdad. Barzani, after the American promise of aid, felt he did not have to settle for a compromise and rejected the autonomous institutions installed by the government. He already controlled large parts of northern Iraq and set up his own government there, entirely independent of Baghdad (but depending on Tehran). Tens of thousands of Kurds left the big cities and joined Barzani in the north. The Kurdish guerrilla army, strengthened with CIA-supplied arms, and later aided by Iranian artillery, Israeli military instructors, and British ballistics experts, kept the Iraqi army at bay and protected a large "liberated area" in the mountains. For a year, Barzani ruled over his mountain "kingdom" as a vassal state of Iran. It was the closest the Kurds had ever been to having a state of their own. The war caused much destruction. At least fifty thousand villagers had to leave their villages because of the fighting and took refuge at first in the mountains and then later in refugee camps inside Iran.

In March 1975, at the OPEC conference in Algiers, the Shah concluded an agreement with the Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein. Iraq made important concessions to Iran with regard to an old border dispute, and in exchange the Shah stopped giving support to the Kurds. Barzani's movement had become so dependent on Iran that it collapsed within days. Another fifty, perhaps even as many as a hundred thousand Iraqi Kurds fled to Iran; the remainder surrendered to the Iraqi government. In order to prevent new guerrilla activity from across the border, the Iraqi government created an empty zone 10 to 15 kilometres wide all along the border. All villages within this zone were destroyed, and their inhabitants placed in camps or in new strategic villages that were easily

[15] This meeting and the following clandestine CIA aid to the Kurds remained a well-kept secret until a congressional committee investigated clandestine CIA operations and its report was leaked to the press. See Pike Commission 1977.

controlled by the military. Some villagers resisted and were aided by students; they took to the mountains again and started small-scale guerrilla activities (1976). Meanwhile, Kurdish political leaders abroad established new organisations to. replace Barzani's KDP and provide leadership for the new struggle. In Iran, Barzani's sons and some former allies formed a "Provisional Command" for a new KDP, in Syria Jalal Talabani set up his *Patriotic Union of Kurdistan* (PUK). By the end of 1977, both had a few bases in the border zones. Until the revolution in Iran, however, their guerrilla activities remained on a very low level, and they enjoyed rather limited popular support. The population was tired of war, afraid of the Iraqi government's brutal reprisals, but also in part co-opted by the real economic improvements the government brought about. Due to the oil boom, the government disposed of unprecedented amounts of money, and it embarked upon ambitious development projects in Kurdistan and caused a rapid rise in the average family's income.[16]

The Iranian revolution and the Kurds

With the advent of the Iranian revolution, Iran once again became a major factor in Iraqi Kurdish politics. Since the Mahabad Republic (1946), there had been little open Kurdish political activity in Iran. The *Kurdistan Democratic Party* (now called *KDP-Iran*, to distinguish it from the Iraqi Kurdish party) had been forced to lead an underground existence; its leaders were in jail or lived abroad in exile. In the year of the revolution, political prisoners were freed, others returned from foreign exile. In February 1979, the Iranian Imperial Army finally deserted the Shah; the police and gendarmerie left their posts, and commanders of army bases in Kurdistan surrendered control to the local people, which in many cases meant to representatives of the KDP-Iran. For a half year, there was no central government authority in Kurdistan, and various Kurdish organisations competed for control of the situation. All of them demanded some form of autonomy for Kurdistan, a demand which appeared to have strong popular support. In Tehran, on the other hand, none of the factions competing for power was willing to give in to the Kurdish demands. There were several rounds of negotiation but these bore no results, because both in Tehran and among the Kurds there were too many competing power centres. If one group made a concession, it was likely to be labelled a traitor by the others. A collision seemed inevitable. It came in August 1979, when Khomeini himself sent the army in to Kurdistan to subdue the Kurds by force. This was the beginning of a long guerrilla war. In the course of the fighting, two Kurdish organisations consolidated themselves, while the others withered away. The largest and

[16] For a glimpse of the radical transformation of Iraqi Kurdistan in those years (including the deportations) see Dziegel 1981. The author is a Polish anthropologist, who worked in one of the agricultural development projects in Kurdistan.

most successful was the social-democratic KDP-Iran, which found its strongest support in the Mahabad region; the other was the marxist *Komala,* based in and around Sanandaj.

The Army and Revolutionary Guards *(Pasdaran)* were initially not very successful in fighting a guerrilla war against the Kurds. The government then invoked the support of the Iraqi Kurds (Barzani's sons and their "Provisional Command"). There were still thousands of experienced guerrilla fighters and tens of thousands of other Iraqi Kurds living as refugees in Iran. There had already been several clashes between the Barzani faction and young sympathisers of both the Komala and the KDP-Iran. The younger Iranian Kurds especially resented the Barzanis' earlier co-operation with the Shah, and they accused them of having killed Iranian Kurdish revolutionaries in the late 1960s. The Barzanis needed Iranian support, and believed moreover that the KDP-Iran and the Komala were collaborating with Iraq, so they joined forces with the Army and Pasdaran against the Iranian Kurds.

Iraq, which felt threatened by the Iranian revolution, attempted to influence the situation among the Iranian Kurds. It gave financial support and arms to various organisations active in Kurdistan, but found only a few small groups willing to obey its orders. The KDP-Iran and Komala were more careful than the Iraqi KDP; they gratefully accepted the military and logistic support given by Baghdad but preserved their independence. When the Iraqi army invaded Iran in September 1980, these organisations refused to co-ordinate their actions with it. The KDP-Iran even offered Tehran a truce so that the army could concentrate its actions on the Iraqi front. The truce was not accepted, and the Iranian Army and Pasdaran, at times aided by the Barzanis, continued their actions against the Kurds during the war. In 1983, the KDP-Iran was expelled from its last remaining strongholds inside Iran; since then, its guerrilla fighters have been operating from base camps inside Iraq, in the empty zone along the border.

The Kurds and the Gulf War

In Iraqi Kurdistan, guerrilla activities against the central government gained a new impetus after the beginning of the Gulf War. With the Iraqi Army occupied at the front, the PUK and the "Provisional Command" (later renamed KDP again) succeeded in bringing large parts of mountainous northern Iraq under their control again. Until 1986, there were many armed clashes between these two organisations (and a few smaller parties). The KDP was firmly allied with Iran, and the PUK therefore established closer relations with the KDP-Iran. Through the last named party, the PUK opened negotiations with Baghdad, but at the same time also with Tehran — a delicate balancing act. In 1983 and 1984, Iran opened two new fronts against Iraq, both in Kurdistan. The KDP took active part in the operations of the Iranian Army. Finally in

1986 Tehran also arranged peace between the KDP and PUK, who from then on co-ordinated their military operations against the Iraqi Army. This obviously weakened the position of the KDP-Iran, which desperately needed its bases in Iraqi Kurdistan. But the PUK maintained its friendly attitude, giving the Iranian Kurds various forms of help, while the Barzanis' KDP also stopped hostilities towards the KDP-Iran.[17]

For a while it looked as if Iran, with strong Kurdish support, might win the war, and the state of Iraq fall apart, with perhaps a semi-independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq as a result. Turkey seemed poised to intervene and prevent any such occurrence. In the spring of 1988 the tide turned and Iraq regained the initiative. In March, Kurdish peshmergas helped the Iranian army advance into Iraq and capture, among other territories, the strategic Kurdish town of Halabja. That town was then bombarded with poison gas, resulting in the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians.[18] Iraq followed this up with a series of attacks on Iranian positions and not only halted the Iranian offensive but forced its enemy to accept a cease-fire and enter into peace negotiations.

The Kurds were left alone again. The Iraqi army immediately launched an offensive against the remaining Kurdish guerrillas. Hundreds of villages were destroyed and their population resettled in other parts of the country. In August, valleys held by the KDP were bombed with chemical weapons. Unknown numbers died, around seventy thousand people fled in panic across the Turkish border. Areas under the control of the PUK were apparently also bombed with poison gas, but these are too far from the Turkish border. Little is known as yet of the people who fled into Iran. These attacks thoroughly demoralised the Iraqi Kurds; it appears that very few guerrilla fighters still remain in the mountains.

After the ceasefire between Iran and Iraq, the Iranian Kurds also set their hopes on negotiations with the central government. With Rafsanjani firmly in control, it seemed that a settlement was possible. In July 1989, the secretary-general of the KDP-Iran, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, was invited to negotiations with the Iranians in Vienna. As he was sitting at the negotiating table, he and the other two Kurdish envoys were assassinated.[19] This murder left the KDP-Iran in disarray, for Ghassemlou was an

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[17] For a more detailed treatment of the complicated situation in Kurdistan during the Gulf War, see Entessar 1984, van Bruinessen 1986 and 1988(b).

[18] The Halabja massacre became a symbol for the horrors of the Gulf War. It was generally accepted that it was Iraq (which had after all, just lost Halabja) that carried out the poison gas attacks, but two years later the Pentagon completed a study that concluded that both sides had used chemical weapons in the battle, and that many of the Kurdish victims died because of Iranian not Iraqi poison gas (*Washington Post*, 3 May 1990; *International Herald Tribune,* 4 May 1990). The central argument of this report seems to be that cyanide, of which many victims allegedly died, was not used by Iraq in this war but only by Iran.

[19] The precise circumstances of the murder remain unclear, because the Iranian negotiators left the country without being property interrogated by the police. A careful journalistic reconstruction, by Marc Kravetz, was published in the Paris newspaper *Libération*, August 7, 1989.

irreplaceable leader. Earlier that year, a top leader of the Komala was also assassinated, in Cyprus, apparently by an Iranian hit man.

Turkey and its Kurds

In Turkey, the situation of the Kurds is quite different from that in Iraq and Iran, and the Kurdish movement there has developed along quite different lines. After the great Kurdish rebellions of the 1920s and 1930s, which were brutally repressed, numerous Kurds were deported from the Kurdish provinces to other parts of Turkey, and. the government did all it could to make them assimilate into the Turkish majority. It was decreed that the Kurds were Turks and they were forced to give up their traditional culture. Their language was forbidden, Kurdish folklore was banned, Kurdish villages were given Turkish names, people with distinctly Kurdish names had to change them and assume Turkish family names. Calling oneself a Kurd was considered an act of subversion. The Kurdish provinces were the most backward of the country, and until recently there was little effort to develop them, so that the Kurds felt that their region was deliberately kept underdeveloped.[20] Because of this underdevelopment, large numbers migrated from Kurdistan to western Turkey in search of work and education, and this paradoxically contributed to the resurgence of a Kurdish movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

The new Kurdish movement, in which educated Kurds in the big cities played a major role, put forward very modest demands: economic development for Eastern Turkey (the name Kurdistan was not used, because that would be too subversive) and recognition of the existence of the Kurdish people. No one spoke about autonomy yet, as did the Kurds in the neighbouring countries. This urban Kurdish movement was closely allied to the Turkish left, and many of its activists were members of the Workers' Party of Turkey (TIP). In Turkey's Kurdish provinces the movement did not yet have much influence; in those provinces, it was the example of Barzani's movement in Iraq that had a greater impact and strengthened an awareness of Kurdish identity. Repression by the government divided the movement and led to its gradual radicalisation. By the late 1970s, there were a large number of Kurdish parties and organisations, all of them illegal, which were very active both in the cities and in the Kurdish provinces. Nationalism became very widespread; and the demands voiced became more radical; some organisations began talking about an independent Kurdistan.[21] The growth of this

[20] According to almost all indicators of economic development, the Kurdish provinces lagged far behind the other parts of the country. See Jafar 1976.

[21] On the history of the Kurdish movement in the 1960s and 1970s, a survey of the parties and their activities, see: Kendal in Chaliand 1980, van Bruinessen 1984, and Heinrich 1989.

Kurdish movement was one of the reasons which led to a military coup d'état in 1980 and large-scale military operations in Kurdistan. Many Kurdish activists were killed, many others fled abroad, tens of thousands were arrested. The army began a campaign to stamp out Kurdish nationalism and to destroy the Kurdish identity.[22]

The rise of the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK) in Turkey

Virtually all Kurdish organisations were destroyed; only the most radical and undemocratic survived. *The Workers' Party of Kurdistan* (PKK) had emerged in the late 1970s as a very secretive and authoritarian party with a radical ideology and violent policies. It considers Kurdistan as a colony of the Turkish bourgeoisie and declared a war of liberation. While in most other organisations the traditional Kurdish elite played leading parts, most of the PKK's activists are from the lowest strata of society. Much of their violence has been directed against Kurdish landlords and tribal chieftains, whom they consider to be collaborators with the "colonial" power. After the military coup, the PKK reorganised itself abroad (in Lebanon and Syria, especially), and in 1984 it initiated a guerrilla struggle inside Turkey. From base camps in northern Iraq, western Iran and perhaps Syria, PKK guerrillas attacked military targets and "collaborators". They were spectacularly successful; a force of four hundred guerrillas (later increasing to several thousands) kept tens of thousands of soldiers and "village guards" occupied. The government tried to put pressure on Syria (which supports the PKK for its own reasons).[23] The Army even invaded Iraq in 1983 and later carried out several bombing raids over Iraq and Iran in order to destroy the PKK's base camps, but all in vain. Each time the Army claimed it had wiped out the PKK, it was soon surprised by a new raid.[24]

The Turkish press reported extensively on the PKK's violent activities, especially after a number of attacks in which it killed women and children. Such incidents long prevented the PKK from gaining much sympathy. Gradually, however, disapproval gave way to a grudging admiration. By the end of the 1980s, the PKK enjoyed widespread popularity, as ever more people had become convinced that only the PKK could stand up to the Turkish army. There is little doubt that it has been the PKK that has forced the Turkish public and the Turkish authorities to admit that Turkey has a "Kurdish

[22] On the military's policies towards the Kurds since 1980, see Laber & Whitman 1988.

[23] Syria has several long-standing conflicts with Turkey. It claims the Turkish province of Hatay (the former *sanjaq* of Alexandrette, partly inhabited by Arabs), which in fact belonged to Syria until 1938 and was ceded to Turkey by the French. More important is the conflict over the water of the Euphrates, on which most of Syria's agriculture depends. Turkey is going to divert much water from this river for an ambitious large irrigation project, which Syria feels is a vital threat to its own agriculture.

[24] On the PKK, its ideology and activities, see van Bruinessen 1988(a) and Heinrich 1988.

problem". They have been forced to admit that there are Kurds in Turkey, and that a way has to be found to redress the wrongs done to them. It is probably only a matter of time before the Turkish government will grant certain basic rights to the Kurds. Turkey's wish to join the European common market is another factor that will force it to review its Kurdish policies: Turkey can only become a member if it grants its citizens more democratic freedoms. The government has already done much to improve the economic conditions of the Kurdish provinces. Sooner or later, it will also recognise the Kurds as a separate ethnic group and grant them certain cultural rights. It remains to be seen, however, whether such recognition when it does come, will not come too late and will be enough to satisfy the Kurds.

Prospects

The political developments of the past decade have strengthened contacts between the Kurds of Turkey, Iran and Iraq; there is now a stronger awareness of belonging together than there was in the past. The wish for a separate state, uniting the various parts of Kurdistan, has also become stronger again. But most Kurdish politicians are quite aware that without strong foreign support such an independent state is impossible. And they know that neither the USA nor the USSR have an interest in such a redrawing of the map of the Middle East. In the past both superpowers have played the Kurdish card as a means of weakening unfriendly regimes (the US supported Barzani in Iraq, the Soviet Union gave some half-hearted support to the Mahabad republic, and later, indirectly, to Kurdish organisations in Turkey), but they will probably not allow complete separation. There is only one foreign power that has an interest in the establishment of an independent Kurdistan. That is Israel, which perceives Iraq as its most dangerous enemy in the long run, and will do anything to weaken it. Barzani in the past accepted Israeli aid, but the present Kurdish leaders seem unwilling to ally themselves with Israel, because popular sentiment among the Kurds, as among Muslims elsewhere, is strongly anti-Israel.

Even more limited forms of independence, such as a small Kurdish state carved out of Iraq atone, will be difficult to achieve because too many powers are opposed to it. During the mid 1980s it seemed, for a while, that the Gulf War might result in the separation of Iraqi Kurdistan from the rest of the country. Turkey, which still has an old claim to this northern part of Iraq, with its rich oil sources and its partly Turkish population,[25] then gave clear signals that it would not tolerate such a eventuality. In

[25] Most of the population of northern Iraq (the former Ottoman province of Mosul) are Kurds, but there is a large Turkish (Turkoman) minority. The status of this region (whether it was to be part of Turkey, part of Iraq, or independent) remained undecided until 1926, when the region was definitively joined to Iraq. Turkish nationalist circles have not yet resigned themselves to the loss of this region.

1983, the Turkish army for the first time invaded northern Iraq; in 1986 there was a public debate in Turkey about military plans for the occupation of the region in the case of a breakdown of the Iraqi front. Because of the great strategic importance of Turkey for the US, it was expected that in such an event the Americans would feel obliged to become involved too.

Consequently, apart from the PKK, all important Kurdish organisations aim at cultural rights and political autonomy within the borders of the existing states. Militarily, they are in a much weaker position than at the height of the Gulf War. On the other hand, the central governments need peace and will have to reach some understanding with their Kurdish population. But it will take a tong time before relations of mutual trust are restored, after the use of chemical weapons by Iraq and the murder of Kurdish negotiators by Iran. It may well be that Turkey, which has never officially recognised the existence of the Kurds, will nevertheless be the first to reach an acceptable solution of its Kurdish problem.

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