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‘The nature and uses of violence in the Kurdish conflict’

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The nature and uses of violence in the Kurdish conflict

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Turkey, Iran and Iraq, the three modern states among which the vast region known as Kurdistan is divided, have each had their protracted and violent Kurdish conflict. In all three cases the conflict has frequently been described as an ethnic conflict — and rightly so, in the sense that the Kurds' ethnic identity and political claims based on this identity were central to the conflict. It is, however, important to state at the outset that in none of these countries has the conflict had the form of a confrontation between Kurds and rival ethnic groups. Typically, the conflicts were between separatist political movements and central governments. In the course of these conflicts, the states have often used violence indiscriminately against Kurdish populations but there have not been — but for a few unimportant exceptions — clashes between groups of Turkish, Arab or Persian civilians and their Kurdish neighbours. The armed Kurdish movements have never targeted Turkish or Arab civilians as such; their leaders have proclaimed time and again that their quarrel is not with the Turkish (or Iraqi, or Iranian) people but with the repressive policies of the state. It is true that anti-Kurdish feeling has risen among nationalist Turks in Turkey and among sections of the Arab population in Iraq, but there have never been serious ethnic clashes setting Turks or Arabs against Kurds. (Fears that one day such violence might be triggered by terrorist actions in western Turkey, carried out by Kurdish activists, were not entirely groundless, however.)

Ethnic cleansing of and by Kurds

Such ethnic cleansing of Kurds as has taken place (notably in Iraq) was carried out not by civilian neighbours but by the military, in a premeditated demographic policy. Since 1970, when an agreement concluded between the Kurdish movement and the central government of Iraq stipulated that districts with a Kurdish population majority would be included in an autonomous Kurdish region, strategically important regions were systematically cleansed of their Kurdish inhabitants. The Kurds have not reciprocated by forcing Arabs to leave Kurdish-controlled districts.

The closest parallel in Kurdish history to the ethnic purges of ex-Yugoslavia is probably provided by the expulsion and massacre of the Armenians during and directly following the First World War. The deportation of Ottoman Armenians from the war zone in 1915 was planned by the Young Turk regime. These deportations were accompanied by mass killings, mostly carried out by irregulars, that appear to have been premeditated. At least some of the Kurds took part in the looting and killing of

Armenians — whereas other Kurds protected Armenians and saved many lives.¹ By the end of the World War, when the Ottoman Empire had lost, Armenians took revenge and attempted to expel the Muslims from the region where they hoped to establish, with American support, an independent Armenia.² Kurdish and Turkish chieftains and notables in this region established “defence committees” to oppose the Armenian claims, thereby launching what became in retrospect known as Turkey’s War of Independence. Kurds took active part in this war and in the ethnic purging of the Armenians — but they did this not yet as ethnic Kurds but as Muslim subjects of the sultan.

In the past decades, several other religious minorities have virtually disappeared from Kurdistan. Most members of the Jewish minority left after the establishment of the state of Israel, in their case without any significant pressure from their Kurdish neighbours.³ The Kurdistan Jews still constitute a distinct community in Israel, which cultivates positive memories of its region of origin.

The departure of most of the Syrian Christians (Süryani, Suryoye) of Mardin province in Turkish Kurdistan took place under less harmonious conditions. The opportunity of labour migration to Germany drew away many young men, thereby weakening the remaining community and making it more vulnerable to pressure from its neighbours. Kurdish and Arabic-speaking tribesmen forced Christian villagers to give up their agricultural land and houses. Women were abducted, material property stolen, men beaten up or killed, causing a rapid exodus from the region.⁴ In Iraqi Kurdistan, too, the Christian minorities (Assyrians and Chaldaeans) have recently been subject to similar violent pressures from certain Kurdish neighbours.

The Yezidi religious minority has suffered similar but perhaps even more severe forms of oppression than the Christian communities. Despised by Muslims as “Devil-worshippers” and not protected by any form of official recognition, they constituted the

¹ The prominent Kurdish historian, Kamal Mazhar Ahmad, devotes a chapter in his book on the First World War, *Kurdistan le salekanî sherrî yekemî çihanda* (Stockholm 1990 [first ed. 1975]), to the Armenian massacres and makes no attempt to exonerate the Kurds, though rightly noting that the Kurds have often been blamed for brutalities committed by others. The greatest Armenian expert on the period, Vahakn N. Dadrian, emphasises the role of the Young Turk’s secret service in organising the massacres (*The history of the Armenian genocide*, Providence and Oxford: Berghahn, 1995). On Turkish-Armenian relations see also the excellent article by Hamit Bozarslan, “Remarques sur l’histoire des relations kurdo-arméniennes”, *Journal of Kurdish Studies* 1 (1995 [1996]), 55-76.

² A. Rawlinson, *Adventures in the Near East 1918-1922*. London: Cape, 1923.

³ Moshe Gat, *The Jewish exodus from Iraq, 1948-1951*. London: Frank Cass, 1997; Joyce Blau, “Les relations entre les juifs et musulmans au Kurdistan”, *Les Annales de l’Autre Islam* no. 5 (1998), 199-224.

⁴ See my “The Christians of Eastern Turkey, the state and the local power structure”, *ICMC Migration News* no. 3-4 (1979), 40-46, reprinted in M. van Bruinessen, *Mullas, Sufis and heretics: the role of religion in Kurdish society*. Istanbul: Isis, 2000.

most vulnerable community. Adult men were forcibly circumcised, their unshaven moustaches — symbol of their religious identity — cut, their property destroyed and, inevitably, many of their women abducted, forcibly Islamised and married by Muslim neighbours. Yezidis persist in a few districts in Iraq and Syria where they are strong enough to defend themselves. In Turkey, the surviving Yezidi communities were by the 1970s already so weak that the only alternatives that they had were conversion to Islam or flight abroad.⁵

In none of the last three cases was there a deliberate policy of ethnic cleansing. Even the perpetrators of violent attacks on minorities do not appear to have nurtured ideas about a more homogeneous Kurdistan or a more purely Muslim land. There was little *collective* violence against these minorities, no pogroms, no deliberate group expulsions. The violence was of a more private nature — although it could only take place in a climate where neither the local Muslim population nor the local government considered this violence as a serious offence. The violence was a social phenomenon, however, in that its increasing occurrence, and the ultimate dwindling of the minorities, was directly related to the social and economic changes that accompanied the opening up of the region to trade and modern communications, and to increased geographical mobility. Nomads settled and needed land. Villagers moved to the district towns, where competition made minorities vulnerable. Especially among the minorities, the most able men left the region altogether to work in Istanbul or western Europe, which made the remaining communities ever less capable of defending themselves.

Better communications, increased mobility, and mass education also contributed to the emergence of a broadly based Kurdish ethno-national movement. The violence against members of minorities does not, however, appear to be directly related to the rising national aspirations of the Kurds. Kurdish nationalist parties and associations have never condoned violence against minorities, and only one insignificant party ever openly flaunted ideas of an ethnically pure Kurdistan.⁶ Another exception may have to be made for the violent Kurdish Islamist movement Hizbullah, which not only appears to have carried out assassinations of personalities considered as pro-PKK but also of prominent Christian personalities, in both cases in part for ideological reasons.⁷ The PKK, on the

⁵ Robin Schneider (ed.), *Die kurdischen Yezidi: Ein Volk auf dem Weg in den Untergang*. Göttingen: Gesellschaft für Bedrohte Völker, 1984; John S. Guest, *The Yezidis, a study in survival*. London: KPI, 1987; Johannes Düchting & Nuh Ates, *Stirbt der Engel Pfau? Geschichte, Religion und Zukunft der Yezidi-Kurden*. Frankfurt am Main: medico international & KOMKAR, 1992.

⁶ This was the (Iraqi Kurdish) party KAJYK, led by Cemal Nebez.

⁷ The Kurdish Hizbullah of the Batman-Diyarbakir region emerged in the early 1980s as a serious, and violent, rival to the secular PKK. One wing of the movement is accused of collaborating with Turkish police and intelligence in waging a “dirty war” against nationalist Kurds. An article in the February 2000 issue of the Assyrian journal *Renyo Hiro* (published in Switzerland and distributed throughout

other hand, has at least verbally come to the defence of the threatened minorities (and in a few cases “punished” Kurdish oppressors of the Christian minority). Perhaps in order to distance itself from the assimilationist policies of Kemalist Turkey, the PKK has at least verbally been a consistent advocate of an ethnically pluralistic Kurdistan and of minority rights.

Violence exercised by Kurdish political movements against other Kurds

When the Kurdish nationalist movement had recourse to violence, it did so — most clearly in the case of the PKK — against two distinct “enemies”: *the enemy without*, i.e. the state and its coercive apparatus, and *the enemy within*, i.e. fellow Kurds collaborating with the state and/or supporting rival organisations. From 1978, the year when the PKK was formally established, until 1984, when it initiated the guerrilla war proper, virtually all its violent actions were directed against other Kurds. Even after 1984, the “enemy within” remained high on the PKK's agenda, and violence against fellow Kurds was never less than that against military targets.

We find this tendency to mete out the most severe violence against members of one's own nation in many “liberation movements”. The enforcement of national unity and discipline (not to mention the imposition of the revolutionary party's authority over the nation) often takes precedence over the struggle against external enemies. The closest parallel to the PKK, in this respect, may be Algeria's National Liberation Front (FNL). This organisation, too, directed much of its energies during the liberation war against collaborators and rival organisations. More Algerians were killed by the FLN during this war than Frenchmen.⁸

Kurdish political organisations have directed politically motivated violence against various categories of Kurdish targets as a rational strategy. In some cases, violence was declared legitimate (within the perspective of Kurdish nationalism), in others it had to be denied or declared away. Most of the examples I give will concern the PKK, which has had recourse to violence more systematically than other Kurdish parties. Analytically, four categories may be distinguished (in practice, there may be an overlap between them).

a. Punishment of “collaborators”

The first category of “legitimate” targets consists of Kurdish “*collaborators*,” i.e. those co-operating with the military authorities or intelligence services of the dominant state.

western Europe) documents assaults on Christian personalities by armed bands it identifies as Hizbullah (“Konter-Hizbullah, der Feind des Assyryer-Suryoye-Volkes”, pp. 10-14).

⁸ Maria Crenshaw Hutchinson, *Revolutionary terrorism: The FLN in Algeria, 1954-1962*. Stanford: The Hoover Institution Press, 1978.

This violence (often called “exemplary punishment”) is usually intended as a deterrent and as armed propaganda. At moments when the Kurdish guerrilla movement was very weak, as happened for instance in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1979, hit-and-run actions against individual Kurdish “collaborators” or “traitors” were virtually the only activities carried out at its own initiative (as opposed to defensive armed actions against government offensives). Such actions served to show the population in general that the movement still existed, and were a warning to others that betrayal would be punished.

In Turkey, the PKK defined the category of “collaborators” more broadly, including all members of the traditional elite who denied or under-stated their Kurdish identities and who were co-opted into the Turkish political system. In its early tracts of the late 1970s, the party declared such “collaborators” guilty of class and national oppression and singled them out as appropriate targets of revolutionary violence. The first spectacular violent PKK action in 1979 was an assault on Mehmet Celal Bucak, a powerful tribal chieftain who was at the same time a member of parliament for the conservative Justice Party. The failed raid resulted in a long-lasting feud between the Bucak tribe and the PKK, which allied itself with a tribe, the Kirvar, that had long been in conflict with the Bucaks. Later, when the state armed Kurdish militias against the PKK, the Bucak tribe came to constitute the strongest of those militias.

b. Reprisals and warfare against pro-state militias

This brings us to the second category of targets of violence, the armed militias that were mobilised by the states once a guerrilla movement had started. In Iraq, the government initially recruited tribes that were hostile to those that had joined the uprising. Frequent hostilities had taken place between the district of Barzan, that was an early centre of the uprising, and the neighbouring Zibari, Bradost and Herki tribes well before the Kurdish armed rebellion of the 1960s began. In the following decades too, these militias (nicknamed *jash*, “donkey foal,” by the Kurdish nationalists) were typically recruited among tribesmen and they operated under the command of their own tribal chieftains. (There are a few cases of powerful militia commanders who were not clearly affiliated with a well-known tribe, but these are exceptions; moreover, their armed followings over the years began to act ever more as tribes in their own right.) In order to resist these tribal militias, whose numbers at most times exceeded those of the Kurdish guerrilla fighters, the Kurdish parties of Iraq saw themselves forced to ally themselves with other tribes.⁹ The effect was that at times of war the Kurdish conflict came to be dominated by the tribes and the more ideologically motivated urban intellectuals had to take a back seat. I shall return to this problem below.

In Turkish Kurdistan, too, the government recruited primarily tribesmen as “village

⁹ The process is described in some detail in: Martin van Bruinessen, “Les Kurds, États et tribus”, *Études kurdes, revue biannuelle de recherches* (Paris) no. 1 (février 2000), 9-31.

guards,” the anti-PKK militias established after 1985. Unlike the Iraqi Kurdish parties, however, the PKK had a strongly anti-tribal ideology and has attempted to avoid allying itself with some tribes against others. (It did not always succeed, and in certain areas some tribes are known as pro-PKK and others as anti-PKK, but the PKK never became dependent on the tribes as the Iraqi parties did.) The most notoriously brutal acts of violence by PKK guerrillas were raids on villages of these “village guards,” in which women and children were killed indiscriminately. The extreme brutality of this violence can be explained as a deliberate effort to hit the tribal group where it hurt most, namely in its honour, the ability of its men to protect their dependents.

c. Elimination of political rivals

The third category of targets of politically motivated violence consists of the supporters of rival organisations and of rivals within the same organisation. The attempt to establish a monopoly of military, political and ideological leadership are a very common phenomenon in liberation struggles,¹⁰ and there have been many such attempts, some more violent than others, in the case of the Kurds.

In the Iraqi Kurdish movement, infighting between urban nationalists with a modern education, based in the Sulaymani region on the one hand, and the charismatic warrior Barzani was present from the beginning. Both fought for control of the entire movement, but the conflict was fanned by ideological and cultural differences that were initially put forward as legitimisations and that came to lead a life of their own. In the 1960s, there were numerous armed clashes between both groups. Barzani, who had the stronger military force (i.e., was supported by the larger number of tribes), succeeded in drawing many of his opponents' followers into his own camp.

In Turkey, the PKK declared itself the sole legitimate representative of the Kurdish people and told other organisations to dissolve themselves or to disappear from Kurdistan. This led in 1979 to a prolonged armed conflict between the PKK and a rival organisation, KUK (“National Liberation of Kurdistan”) in the district of Mazıdağ (North Mardin), which much resembled a traditional tribal feud. In later years, the PKK has been engaged in armed confrontations with most of the other Kurdish organisations and virtually destroyed their presence on the ground. Moreover, the PKK has almost from the start, but especially since the early 1980s, been marked by a never-ending series of purges within the organisation, many of them bloody. (The PKK leadership has commonly declared its rivals to be “collaborators” or “traitors”, but the distinction with the targets of the first category is quite clear.) It is hard to say whether it was in spite of or precisely as a result of this violent attitude towards its rivals that the PKK attracted

¹⁰ On the efforts of the Algerian FLN to destroy rival organisations, see Hutchinson, *Revolutionary terrorism*. Another well-known case is the civil war between MPLA and UNITA in Angola during the anti-colonial liberation struggle. Examples are easily amplified.

many former members of rival organisation into its own ranks. In spite of its brutality, the method appears to have had an undeniable success in imposing unity of purpose on the Kurds.

d. Violence against neutral civilians

The final category frequently subjected to brutal violence, whose victimisation has been most difficult to legitimise, has been the neutral peasant population. There have been many cases in which violence was deliberately used against innocent villagers in order to force them to take sides in the conflict between the Kurdish movement and the state. Especially the PKK has deliberately used violence — both the violence that it exerted itself and the state repression that it deliberately invited — as a means of making the peasantry aware of its Kurdishness and of its inherently conflicting relations with a nation state based on another ethnic identity. In many districts, villages were visited by the guerrillas at night and by the military by day, both putting heavy pressure on them to co-operate. Both the PKK and the armed forces have forced unwilling villagers to leave the area and have destroyed their houses.¹¹

“Traditional” tribal violence and modern political violence

From the cases of intra-Kurdish violence mentioned, it is tempting to conclude that the present Kurdish conflict is to a large extent a continuation of “traditional” tribal violence in a wider arena. The states concerned have often adduced the conflict-ridden nature of Kurdish tribal society to explain the need for their heavy-handed efforts towards pacification and detribalisation.¹² But also observers sympathetic to the Kurds have often drawn attention to the “traditional” tribal conflicts that appear to prevent them from pursuing their common, “national” interests. In fact, in their papers for this conference both McDowall and Bozarslan refer to the persistence or resurgence of tribalism as a relevant factor in the particular forms of (intra-Kurdish) violence encountered in the Kurdish movement. Some reflections on tribalism and tribal violence in Kurdish society appear called for.¹³

¹¹ Gunnar Wiessner, “Nicht nur die PKK: soziale und politische Grundstrukturen des aktuellen Militärkonflikts in Ostanatolien. Ebenhausen: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 1996.

¹² Thus for instance the Dersim rebellion was attributed to the primitive and violent habits of the Dersim tribes, and the repression of the rebellion, in which more than 10% of the population were killed and following which many of the survivors were deported, was described as a civilising measure. See Martin van Bruinessen, “Genocide in Kurdistan? The suppression of the Dersim rebellion in Turkey (1937-38) and the chemical war against the Iraqi Kurds (1988)”, in: George J. Andreopoulos (ed), *Conceptual and historical dimensions of genocide*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994, pp. 141-170.

¹³ Cf. Van Bruinessen, “Les Kurdes, États, tribus”; M. van Bruinessen, *Agha, shaikh and state: the social and political structures of Kurdistan*. London: Zed Books, 1992, pp. 50-202.

Kurdish tribes are named social groups consisting of several hundred to several tens of thousands of families with a segmentary structure. Only a few tribes are nomadic; most are settled and have been so for a considerable time. Each tribe consists of a number of sub-groups (clans), which in turn consist of several smaller units, and so on. The members of these groups believe that they are closely related, and the lower-level sub-groups are in most cases real patrilineal descent groups. Even units that were initially formed as purely political alliances turn into descent groups in a few generations, because of a strong tendency towards endogamy, with a preference for marriage with the father's brother's daughter. Self-defence and mutual aid are important functions of the tribe and its segments. The segmentary structure of the tribe becomes most clearly visible in the case of a blood feud within the tribe, when closest relatives join forces against more distant relatives.¹⁴

The smaller tribal units tend to be egalitarian but the larger tribes show a distinct social hierarchy, with one or more leading families vying for control over the clans that together make up the tribe. In this competition, which may turn quite violent, rival chieftains of a tribe commonly conclude political alliances with significant outsiders, such as neighbouring tribes or officials of one of the relevant states. An ambitious social climber wishing to establish himself as a paramount chieftain will not shy from having his armed retinue raid villages of his own tribe in order to terrorise them into obedience.¹⁵ It is not uncommon to find within a single tribe one chieftain who cooperates closely with the state and a rival who is a "bandit", a rebel or a collaborator with a neighbour state. Similarly, the Kurdish movements often found "patriots" and "traitors" among the tribal elite; the rivals of a "patriot" had often little choice but becoming "traitors."

This means that by seeking tribal allies — which they often found necessary for military reasons — Kurdish political parties also imported pre-existing tribal conflicts into their relationships with the state (or with rival movements). The state did the same when it recruited tribal militias and thereby alienated most of the "traditional" rivals of the "loyal" chieftains. Before there was an organised Kurdish movement that acted as an ideological and military alternative to the state, rivals of chieftains allied with the state often ended up as rebels or bandits. The presence of a Kurdish movement presented a new type of possibilities, which had the effect of politicising tribal conflicts. Because of the Kurdish conflict, rival chieftains found far greater external resources (in terms of

¹⁴ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, shaikh and state*, pp. 64-80. There exists an extensive literature about segmentary organisation and blood feud in the Middle East, see e.g. Ernest Gellner, *Muslim society*. Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 36-41 and the discussion in Dale F. Eickelman, *The Middle East, an anthropological approach*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989 (2nd ed.), pp. 131-138.

¹⁵ See, for instance, the description of Hajo's rise to leadership of the powerful Hevêrkan tribe in the first decades of the 20th century, in Bruinessen, *Agha, shaikh and state*, pp. 101-105.

money and arms) available that they could use for their own purposes. The participation of tribes in the Kurdish political and military movements not only changed the nature of the Kurdish movement — the parties were typically established and initially led by urban educated men and women, who frowned upon tribal values — but also the nature of tribal conflicts, which became even more violent. As a result of the Kurdish conflict, tribalism has over the past decades become ever more pervasive in Iraqi Kurdistan, and a similar process is perceptible in Turkish Kurdistan.

Some of the most conspicuous violence in the Kurdish conflict appears to be directly related to the prominent role the tribes have come to play in it. Even the party that has been most explicitly opposed to tribalism and to the position of tribal chieftains, the PKK, has repeatedly been dragged into tribal feuds. Its most notorious acts of violence, the wholesale killing of women, children and old people in *korucu* (“village guard”) villages, may even appear as an apotheosis of tribal violence, attacking the tribe’s honour in its core. This type of violence gave the PKK a bad press,¹⁶ but it probably was a rational policy of dissuasion against tribal opponents, for whom the loss of honour was worse than loss of life. Although related to tribal values of honour and shame, such violence can hardly be called traditional. I am not aware of such killings of non-combatants in earlier tribal conflicts, and it is indeed widely believed among the Kurds that in tribal wars of the past women could freely bring their husbands and brothers food and ammunition because no one would harm them.

In discussing the role of the tribes in the Kurdish uprisings, a distinction should be made between those of the 1960s and later on the one hand and those of the 1920s and 1930s on the other. The latter were to a large extent the responses of previously largely self-ruling communities to the imposition of central control by would-be nation states. Tribes played an all-dominant role in them, but they were not just traditional rebellions, for there was a degree of planning and organisation by a nationalist-minded elite. In the uprisings since the 1960, however, political mobilisation and various forms of negotiation with the central state preceded the outbreak of violence. The Kurdish parties and associations that shaped the Kurdish movement all engaged in political propaganda and had agendas that involved the transformation of Kurdish society rather than efforts to keep it as it was. The violent phase in these movements was to a large extent defined by the attitudes of the governments concerned. Even where the initiative of armed confrontation has come from the Kurdish side (as in the case of the PKK in Turkey), the amount of violence carried out by the state has exceeded by far that of the Kurdish movement.

¹⁶ In fact, after the first massacre of a *korucu* village, which had obviously been carried out by a PKK guerrilla unit, several others occurred for which the PKK vehemently denied responsibility, attributing them to counter-insurgency forces.

The transition from political struggle to armed struggle

It has often been remarked (not least by Kurdish nationalist politicians themselves, but also by analysts, including Bozarslan in his paper for this seminar) that violence has been the principal means of expression of the Kurdish movement because other political, civic means of expression were not available to them (or because they lacked the appropriate skills). Although it is no doubt true that especially Turkey allows little space for legally expressing specifically Kurdish demands, I believe that this observation overstates the role of violence in the Kurdish question. The vast majority of the Kurdish elite has always preferred inserting itself in a system of patronage-based politics, allowing itself to be co-opted and downplaying its Kurdish identity. Even the major rebellions of 1925, 1929-30, 1937-38 were relatively marginal affairs in which only a fraction of the Kurdish elite (and their followers) participated.

With the growth of a broader stratum of well-educated Kurds by the middle of the twentieth century, informal and formal Kurdish associations emerged that did not directly challenge the state but while wishing to preserve their members' privileged positions at once cautiously re-asserted their ethnic or "national" identities. In Turkey, the movement's protagonists cautiously attempted to keep their discourse within the limits of what was acceptable, while making efforts to gradually expand those limits. In spite of frequent clamp-downs by the authorities, it was not until the late 1970s that the first violent expressions of Kurdish political aspirations erupted. In Iraqi Kurdistan, too, there were some twenty years between the emergence of (underground) modern political associations and the beginning of the armed struggle with which the major party was associated (in 1961). With the outbreak of violence, the leadership of the movement — or at least the initiative in many activities — shifted from the urban, educated elite to other social groups: tribal elements in the Iraqi Kurdish case, lower class village people in that of the PKK.

In his comparative study of ethnic violence in Northern Ireland, the Basque country and Quebec, the German political scientist Peter Waldmann makes the observation that the transition of an ethno-national movement to a phase of violent action is frequently correlated with a shift of the dominance within the movement to another social stratum.¹⁷ He sketches a situation of ethnic nationalism rooted in the middle stratum of the ethnic group, the majority of which tends to be accommodative towards the government, but which also includes a radical minority preaching justice and violence. If the minority succeeds in reaching out to lower strata (which are, in Waldmann's view, better capable of doing the actual fighting) the movement may enter a violent phase, in which the leadership is likely to be taken over by a new type of leader (for whom the revolutionary violence at the same time means social mobility).

¹⁷ Peter Waldmann, *Ethnischer Radikalismus: Ursachen und Folgen gewaltsamer Minderheitenkonflikte*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1989.

The rise of the PKK in Turkey appears to be a clear illustration of this thesis. The Kurdish movement in Turkey of the 1960s and the early 1970s was dominated by the educated urban middle class and elements of the tribal elite. Its demands were cultural and economic and it initially did not challenge the incorporation of northern Kurdistan in Turkey. Due to the state's fierce repression of this movement, many of its moderate leaders became more cautious and moved to the background, while a younger generation of students, many of them of more modest backgrounds and inclined to adopt more radical positions, took their place. A large number of rival organisations emerged, all of them gradually radicalising and dominated by young men. The PKK was initially relatively insignificant among them and only became known because it was the most violent. Its founders were young men of lower class background studying in Ankara in the mid-1970s. They combined the discourse of anti-colonialism and national liberation struggle with that of proletarian revolution, in which revolutionary violence had a central place. Moreover, unlike the other organisations, they recruited their followers especially among the poor youth of the villages and towns of Kurdistan. The PKK followers that were brought to court in the mass trials following the military coup d'état of 1980 clearly represented another, lower stratum than the defendants belonging to other organisations.¹⁸ It should be added, however, that apart from the mentioned exemplary attack on a prominent Kurdish "collaborator" and fights with rival organisations for hegemony over the Kurdish movement, much of the PKK's violence prior to 1984 was of a defensive nature. Again, Turkish state repression was instrumental in the transition to systematic anti-state violence. It was because Abdullah Öcalan fled from Turkey to Syria in 1979 that he came into contact with Palestinian circles and found facilities for guerrilla training in Lebanon.¹⁹

In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, where periods of armed conflict have alternated with periods of accommodation between the central government and the Kurdish movement, those periods have been characterised by the domination of different social forces within the movement. Before the guerrilla war, and at times of peace, when the government sought accommodation with the Kurdish movement, it was the civilian party leaders who played the key roles. As soon as armed conflict broke out, however, the tribes came

¹⁸ Cf. Martin van Bruinessen, "Between guerrilla war and political murder: The Workers' Party of Kurdistan", *MERIP Middle East Report* no. 153 (July-August 1988), 40-46. The party has published a number of books with brief biographies of its "martyrs" (members who were killed), which provide an insight in the social composition of its following. By the 1990s this appears to reflect a broader spectrum of Kurdish society than in the first years.

¹⁹ In one of last long interviews before his arrest in 1999, Öcalan gives an interesting account of these events that appears to confirm that the rise and later virtual hegemony of the PKK was a consequence of government repression: "Wenn du leben willst, dann lebe in Freiheit", in: Namo Aziz, *Kurdistan und die Probleme um Öcalan*. München: Gallas, 1999, pp. 137-196. Other Kurdish organisations have long suspected the Turkish intelligence services of an even more active role in the rise of the PKK.

to play a more prominent role in the political arena. Both the government and the Kurdish movement recruited tribes, who were believed to be the best fighters in a mountain guerrilla war. The split of the Kurdish movement into two rival parties (presently KDP and PUK), which often clashed with each other, made the leadership of both parties increasingly dependent on tribal support. The largest of the tribes that served as pro-government militias during the 1980s and thereby became rich and strong now hold the balance in the Kurdish-controlled northern part of Iraq, and both parties are highly dependent on their alliance with former militia tribes, making demilitarisation almost impossible.²⁰

The difficult transition from violent confrontation to non-violent political struggle

The Kurdish movements, in Iraq, Turkey and in Iran, have at most times been eager to negotiate with the central governments of their countries, even if under unfavourable conditions. With the exception of the PKK in the first decade of its existence, the Kurdish parties used violence as a means of bringing the government to the negotiating table, and were willing to stop fighting once the government showed a readiness to talk with them. Since the Kurdish parties had little more to offer to the governments than the promise to give up violence, however, they had to maintain a credible level of capacity for violence even during negotiations.

The transition is complicated by a number of factors. Both on the side of the government and among the Kurds there are groups that have a vested interest in continuing the war and that may lose power and income when a peaceful solution is achieved. Most of the upper and middle classes among the Kurds favour a negotiated solution; they are the ones who have most to lose in a prolonged violent confrontation, and they are loath to see leadership in society definitively pass to other classes. When the PKK began signalling, in the early 1990s, its readiness to give up the armed struggle in exchange for concessions by the government, the Kurdish middle class — businessmen, professionals, civil servants — responded enthusiastically, expecting that peace would bring prosperity and that in the political process towards peace they would automatically come to play a central role as representatives of the Kurdish people. Some guerrilla commanders understandably were less enthusiastic, and the first unilateral cease-fire declared by the PKK (in 1993) was deliberately broken when one of these

²⁰ The Swiss anthropologist, Andreas Wimmer, who visited Iraqi Kurdistan in the early 1990s, takes his analysis of the prominence of the tribes too far, however, when he describes the two major political parties, KDP and PUK, as confederacies of tribes (“Stämme für den Staat: tribale Politik und die kurdische Nationalbewegung im Irak”, *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 47 (1995), 95-113) and attributes a central role to the tribes in the process of state formation in northern Iraq (“Stammespolitik und die kurdische Nationalbewegung im Irak”, in: Carsten Borck et al. (ed.), *Ethnizität, Nationalismus, religion und Politik in Kurdistan*. Münster: Lit, 1997, pp. 11-43).

commanders attacked a convoy of unprepared soldiers.

On the government side, there are more factors preventing an easy transition. None of the governments concerned has been willing to consider the Kurdish question as a legitimate political question to be solved through political procedures. Kurdish political actors were only allowed to play a role in the political system when they kept their Kurdish identity a private and not a public matter. Kurdish parties and associations were not seen as actors to be integrated into the system but as enemies to be destroyed, politically if not physically.

Negotiations with the Kurds have been unthinkable in Turkey; both Iran and Iraq have at times entered negotiations with Kurdish leaders, but not, it appears, with the intention of making any concessions. Iranian Kurdish leader Ghassemlou and two of his associates were murdered by an Iranian hit squad even when they were sitting at the negotiating table with Iranian government representatives.²¹ Iraq's Ba`th regime has since the 1980s systematically used negotiations to incite one Kurdish party against the other (promising them concessions on condition that they could deliver all of Kurdistan, and offering each party support to vanquish its rival). The end of the Iran-Iraq war, during which large parts of Kurdistan had come under the control of the Kurdish parties, enabled Iraq to attempt its own final solution and destroy what it did not control, systematically killing at least 50,000 Kurdish villagers, and possibly double that number, in the process.²²

The struggle against the PKK has allowed the Turkish armed forces to acquire and retain an unprecedented control of the state, capable of overruling any democratically taken decision, and it is unlikely that they are willing to relinquish this control. The army has blocked all attempts to seek a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question. Kurdish nationalist circles of various political persuasions have often expressed their desire for a dialogue with the state; the search for a peaceful solution preceded the military weakening of the PKK.²³ Even now that the PKK no longer represents a credible military threat, the armed forces — and obediently following them, Turkey's leading politicians — continue to oppose concessions to Kurdish cultural and political demands. This attitude can in the long run hardly result in anything but a resumption of the violent struggle.

²¹ See the careful reconstruction of Ghassemlou's assassination in Vienna by French journalist Marc Kravetz in *Libération*, August 7, 1989.

²² Van Bruinessen, "Genocide in Kurdistan?"; Human Rights Watch/ Middle East, *Iraq's crime of genocide: The Anfal campaign against the Kurds*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

²³ See, for an overview of Kurdish attempts to engage in civilian politics, Martin van Bruinessen, "Die Türkei, Europa und die Kurden nach der Festnahme von Abdullah Öcalan", *INAMO, Informationsprojekt Naher und Mittlerer Osten*, Nummer 18 (Sommer 1999), 9-15.

Conclusion

Unlike many other ethnic conflicts, the Kurdish conflict has not been rooted in competition between ethnic communities or community leaders for the control of economic resources and political hegemony. In the three countries concerned, the conflict was born of the unwillingness of these would-be nation states to accommodate ethnic diversity and allow a political expression to a distinct Kurdish identity on the one hand, and the emergence of a large urbanised, educated middle class among the Kurds that demanded recognition of its ethnic identity on the other. When the conflict became violent, this educated urban elite to some extent lost control of the political dynamics to other segments of society — tribal elites in the case of Iraq, radicalised sections of the lower middle classes in that of Turkey. It has been the middle strata that have most strongly attempted to bring the conflict back into the political arena and use political procedures to represent Kurdish interests in the political and economic institutions of the states concerned, but their efforts have been rejected time and again by the state apparatus. Whether the Kurdish movement will be able to make a transition from armed struggle to political representation will depend more on the attitude adopted by the political elites of the states concerned (including the military) than on the internal dynamics of Kurdish society.