CHAPTER 1

Turkey, Kemalism, and the "Deep State"*

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Introduction

A strong case can be made that ever since the Sheikh Said rebellion was crushed in 1925,[1] the Kurdish question in Turkey has been one of the main factors preventing it from becoming a complete democracy. Instead, the Kurds have been viewed as threatening the very foundational rationale for Turkey's existence as a unitary state in which ethnicity is supposedly an irrelevant criterion in the public and political spheres.[2] As a result, Turkey has largely opted for "securitization"[3] rather than democratization to deal with the problem. In other words, the Kurdish question has impeded the development of democracy in Turkey itself. Accordingly, a democratic resolution of the Kurdish problem could open the door to the full development of democracy in Turkey and would go a long way toward making Turkey eligible for admission into the European Union (EU).

The Kemalist Republic of Turkey was established out of the ashes of defeat in World War I by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923 based on the concept of an exclusive Turkish national identity that, among such other factors as secularism and statism, proved hostile to any expression of Kurdish identity.[4] Since it would be a contradiction in terms to maintain such a situation in a true republic, an arcane or Deep State (*Derin Devlet*) developed alongside or parallel to the official State to enforce the ultimate principles of the Kemalist Republic. This Deep State became "an omnipotent force

with tentacle-like hands reaching everywhere . . . a state within the legitimate state."[5] The colorful but enigmatic phrase Deep State referred to how this secret "other" state had penetrated deeply into the political, security, and economic structures of the official State, which as the *Baba Devlet* (Daddy State) claimed a special reverence from the people instead of being their mere servant.

Today, however, Turkey is seeking to join the EU, a candidacy supported by a large majority of its population and an initiative that promises to help solve Turkey's long-standing Kurdish problem.[6] Clearly, a Republic of Turkey that is truly a pluralistic democracy cannot be constituted along the lines of the Copenhagen Criteria[7] necessary for Turkey to join the EU until the Deep State is dismantled. The process, however, will prove tortuous at best.[8] For example, recent Turkish reforms to meet EU-mandated criteria sometimes appear to be merely paper concessions. Others argued that the ultimate problem was more to do with the inherent ethnic Turkish inability to accept the fact that Turkey should be considered a multiethnic state in which the Kurds have similar constitutional rights as co-stakeholders with the Turks. Moreover, during 2011 and 2012, many leading intellectuals were rounded up for alleged affiliations with the *Koma Civaken Kurdistan* (KCK) or Kurdistan Communities Union, which is said to be the urban arm of the *Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan* (PKK),[9] whose proposals for democratic autonomy seem to suggest an alternative government. Many of those arrested were also affiliated with the pro-Kurdish *Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi* (BDP) or Peace and Democracy Party.

Those arrested included a well-known publisher, Ragip Zarakolu, who has been a key figure in human rights advocacy in Turkey for decades and has suffered from political repression under successive governments for his efforts. Zarakolu was in ill health, so there was the fear that imprisonment would threaten his life. In April 2012, he was suddenly released from prison. Also among those arrested was Busra Ersanli, a political scientist whose original work on early Turkish nationalism continues to be consulted by scholars throughout the world.

Even more recently, Leyla Zana, a famous female Kurdish leader and BDP member of parliament, was once again sentenced to prison on May 24, 2012, for "spreading propaganda" on behalf of the PKK. The charges concerned nine speeches she had made over the years during which she had argued for recognition of the Kurdish identity, called Öcalan a Kurdish leader, and urged the reopening of peace negotiations between Turkey and the PKK. Previously in 1994, Zana had been stripped of her membership in parliament and imprisoned for ten years on similar charges. Such Turkish

actions reminded one of what the French used to say about the Bourbons: "They learned nothing and they forgot nothing."

What Is the Deep State?

Many observers dismiss the idea of the Deep State as simply a conspiracy theory.[10] However, Turkish citizens (both ethnic Turks and Kurds alike) seem particularly susceptible to such theories. For them, nothing is as it seems. There is always some deeper, usually more cynical explanation for what is occurring. Only the naïve fail to understand this.

Nevertheless, historical evidence indicates that even in the days of the Ottoman Empire (Turkey's predecessor), covert organizations existed to defend state security. In an awkward attempt to illustrate the Ottomans' benevolent attitude toward rebellious Kurds during the nineteenth century, for example, Metin Heper writes about how "Kor Ahmed Pasha of Revanduz . . . surrendered on conditions of honourable treatment . . . [and how] the Ottoman government kept its word and sent him and his family and tribesmen to no other place than Istanbul."[11] Heper neglects to tell his readers, however, that during his return from Istanbul Kor Ahmed Pasha (also known as *Mire Kor* or the blind *mir* because of an eye affliction) simply disappeared, probably treacherously executed on the orders of the Sultan. Moreover, many would argue that the fate of the Armenians during World War I was largely the result of confidential government orders to turn loose a secret killing organization known as the *Teskilat-i Mahsusa* (Special Organization).[12]

More recently, who can doubt that there is more to be known about the motives that drove Mehmet Ali Ağca, supposedly a right-wing Turkish nationalist possibly working for the Soviet Union, to attempt to assassinate Pope John Paul II on May 13, 1981, or to murder Abdi İpekçi, the chief editor of the liberal daily *Milliyet*, in 1979 and then escape from prison and make the attempt on the pope?[13] More recently, what mysterious court decision temporarily freed Ağca in January 2006 before a public outcry led to his return to prison? As one recent analysis concluded: "Somebody with omnipresent tentacle-like hands that can extend to anywhere—from judiciary to army or security forces or any other institution—within the state makes a plan to kill a journalist, or to kill young students whose ideas they deem to be a threat to the state and that same somebody skillfully protects its bloody pawns from justice."[14] When the author of this chapter visited Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK),[15] in March 1998 Öcalan spoke often of the "hidden games" all sides in the Kurdish struggle were playing.[16]

Although it usually would be judicious to avoid accepting conspiracy theories, one must also remember that even paranoids have enemies.

A useful recent definition found the Deep State to be "made up of elements from the military, security and judicial establishments wedded to a fiercely nationalist, statist ideology who, if need be, are ready to block or even oust a government that does not share their vision."[17] Military and security elements determined to preserve the Kemalist vision of a Turkish nationalist and secular state are the key elements of the Deep State. To some extent, all of these ingredients have long been institutionalized in the *Milli Guvenlik Kurulu* (MGK) or National Security Council. The official job of the MGK was, and still is, to advise the elected government on matters of internal and external security. Until the recent EU reforms mandated by Turkey's EU candidacy and the enormous AKP electoral victory over determined military opposition in July 2007 gave civilian authorities more control,[18] the MGK also often served as the ultimate source of authority in Turkey.

Before these recent reforms the MGK was clearly under the control of the military. It consisted of ten members: the president and the prime minister of the Republic of Turkey, the chief of the general staff and the four military service chiefs, and the defense, foreign affairs, and interior ministers. The modern Republic of Turkey, of course, was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, whose power originally stemmed from his position in the military. Thus, from the beginning, the military played a very important and, it should be noted, very popular role in the defense and, therefore, the politics of Turkey. One could probably date the beginning of the military's preeminent political role and the solidifying of the Deep State to the Kurdish uprising of 1925 and the emergency rule powers that were invoked as a result. Both the Kurdish revolt and liberal democratic elements in the new Turkish Republic were squashed in this period. Following the military coup of May 1960, the new constitution, which went into effect in 1961, provided a constitutional role for the military for the first time by establishing the MGK. Over the years, the MGK has gradually extended its power over governmental policy, at times replacing the civilian government as the ultimate center of power over issues of national security. After the "coup by memorandum" in March 1971, for example, the MGK was given the power to give binding, unsolicited advice to the cabinet. After the military coup of September 1980, for a while all power was concentrated in the MGK, chaired by the chief of staff, General Kenan Evren, who later became president from 1982 to 1989. Although the MGK greatly reduced the rampant terrorism in Turkey at that time, a major price was paid in terms of human rights for all Turkish citizens, not just those who happened to be ethnic Kurds.

During the 1990s, the MGK began to exercise virtually total authority over security matters dealing with the Kurdish problem. In his role as chief of staff, General Doğan Güreş held a particularly strong influence over the elected Turkish government headed by Prime Minister Tansu Çiller to the extent that the phrase "as good as thirty men" was reportedly used to describe her.[19] The "postmodern coup" in June 1997 that toppled Turkey's first Islamist government was sanctioned by an MGK edict issued a few months earlier.

One important way the MGK exercised its control behind the scenes was through issuing a rather lengthy, and until recently top-secret, National Security Policy Document (MGSB) once every four years and updated every two years.[20] The MGSB defined and ranked Turkey's priorities in domestic and international security and outlined the national strategy to be followed. The precise content of the document was revealed only to the top generals and highest-ranking state administrators. Thus, some referred to the MGSB as "the 'state's secret constitution' or the 'red book' on the basis of which the State is run." In other words, "the real responsibility of running the State is not upon the Cabinet, but actually lies elsewhere [in]... the military [and] other dubious and secret formations involving people either directly from within the institutions of the state or those who are very close to this establishment... defined as 'the Deep State'."

The MGSB, approved on October 24, 2005, by an MGK expanded to include more civilian members, was issued only after a dispute between the Turkish military and the new civilian officials of the ruling moderate Islamic AKP had been settled. This disagreement reportedly dealt with Islamic fundamentalism, especially over women wearing the *turban* or the Islamic headscarf as well as the usage of military force versus diplomacy in foreign policy. Separatist terror (the PKK) and radical Islam (Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda and Hizbullah) were ranked as the top terrorist threats. Other specific issues included water, minorities, and extreme leftist movements. The issue of Greece extending its territorial waters to 12 miles around Greek islands in the Aegean Sea and thus largely shutting it off to Turkey was still referred to as a *casus belli*. An article from the MGSB issued in 1997 concerning the threat of extreme right-wing groups attempting to turn Turkish nationalism into racism and the ultranationalist mafia attempting to exploit the situation was dropped in the most recent MGSB. Also deleted, as domestic security concerns, were national education, science, technology, and public administration. In foreign matters, statements on northern Iraq and the Iraqi Kurdish parties as well as Syria were also eliminated from the latest document.

In addition to the MGSB, an MGK Secretariat General bylaw also held great importance in the past, but has now been discontinued due to the

EU reforms. This MGK bylaw supposedly had recently defined the Turkish public as "a threat to itself" and spoke of "psychological military operations" against the public to protect the country from that threat. The fact that the contents of these MGK documents recently have been publicized indicates that they are no longer as important due to the recent formal reforms required by Turkey's EU candidacy and other AKP initiatives.

In addition to the MGK, other Turkish state security organs that helped institutionalize the Deep State include the *Milli Istihbarat Teskilati* (MIT) or National Intelligence Organization, the *Devlet Guvenlik Mahkemesi* (DGM) or State Security Courts, and the shadowy *Jandarma Istihbarat ve Terorle Mucadele* (JITEM)[21] or the Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counter Terrorist Service. Officially established in 1965, the MIT combines the functions of internal and external intelligence services. Although in theory reporting to the prime minister, until the recent reforms, the MIT in practice remained close to the military. Over the years, the MIT has been accused of using extreme rightists to infiltrate and destroy extreme leftist and Kurdish groups. For example, it appears that it was involved in the notorious Susurluk scandal that, among other actions, illegally used criminals to try to destroy the PKK. Indeed, criminals carrying out various illegal activities including drug smuggling, murders, and assassinations are also elements of the Deep State. JITEM, for example, reportedly became involved in such extralegal activities as arms and drug smuggling during the war against the PKK.[22] Avni Ozgurel, a journalist well known for his supposed insider knowledge of the Deep State, has argued that "if the PKK conflict granted you unlimited access to confidential funds of the State . . . and if the Southeast had become a heaven for revenues from the drug trade that would mean that there would certainly be balances supported by all this dirty money."[23]

In 2007–2008, six letters totaling 287 pages were forwarded by anonymous authors to the MIT. They revealed illegal actions of groups within the Turkish military and events from the state's past concerning coups, unsolved tragedies, massacres, and assassinations.[24] Specific groups—all within the military's General Staff—included the Special Warfare Department (OHD), Tactical Mobilization Group (STK), Special Forces Command (OKK), and Wartime Search and Rescue Unit (MAK). Recently these letters were forwarded to the Coup and Memorandum Investigation Commission of the Turkish parliament for scrutiny. They illustrated that in addition to its official duty fighting against the PKK, the MAK was also involved in a large number of killings in eastern and southeastern Anatolia, including such provocations as the massacre of 11 pro-government village guards during 1996 in Sirnak's Guclukonak district. The letters to the MIT also contained

data about the activities of the OKK, which is said to have prepared an action plan containing 26 articles to undermine the democratically elected government.

In addition, the letters claimed that the STK was behind a number of assassinations that destabilized the state in the past, including an armed attack on the Council of State in 2006, and the murder of the Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink in 2007 (see below), as well as of three Christian missionaries in Malatya in 2007. The STK branch in Trabzon was responsible for the Dink assassination as well as that of Father Andrea Santoro, a Catholic priest, in order to arouse the nationalist feelings of the people living in the Black Sea region. Furthermore, the STK branch in Hatay sought to stoke conflict and instability among Turkey's Turkish, Armenian, and Syriac communities so that the military would have an excuse to launch a coup. Finally in Malatya, the STK tried to turn some religious groups into terrorist organizations. The STK was also said to have buried military equipment in various places around the country.[25]

Each one of the 18 State Security Courts (DGMs) consisted of two civilian judges, one military judge, and two prosecutors. These courts had legal jurisdiction over civilian cases involving the Anti-Terrorist Law of 1991. This law contained the notorious Article 8 covering membership in illegal organizations and the propagation of ideas banned by law as damaging the indivisible unity of the state. The State Security Courts played a leading role in trying to stifle violent and nonviolent Kurdish activists and in so doing provided a veneer of legality to the state's campaign against Kurdish nationalist demands. Thus, these courts closed down newspapers and narrowly interpreted the right of free speech. Nurset Demiral, the former head of the Ankara State Security Court, became both the symbol and reality of the problem these courts presented to democratic freedoms. For example, Demiral demanded the death penalty for Leyla Zana and the other pro-Kurdish Democracy Party (DEP) members of parliament who were accused of supporting the PKK. In June 1999, a partial reform removed the military judge from the DGMs. Then as part of a package of constitutional reforms instituted in June 2004, these Courts were formally abolished. Their place was taken by Heavy Penal Courts authorized to hear only cases involving crime and terrorism. In practice, these new Courts mainly try cases involving political prisoners.

During the late 1970s, Alparslan Türkeş' notorious *Ulkucus* (Idealists) or Gray Wolves played a leading role in the sectarian violence that raged throughout Turkey. Observers commented on how many members of the gendarmerie's counter-guerrilla special teams or *Ozel Tim* seemed to be associated with Türkeş' party. Their attire served to identify them. The

three-crescent flag of the Ottoman Empire, a symbol of ultra-Turkish nationalism, decorated the barrels of their guns. Pictures of gray wolves, another ultranationalist symbol, were etched on their muzzles. An additional touch was their mustache, which ran down from the corner of their lips. Seemingly contradictory, the Deep State also apparently used extremist Islamic groups in these violent campaigns.[26]

Origins of the Deep State

During the early years of the Cold War, the United States apparently established secret resistance groups within a number of its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies that were intended to fight back against any Soviet occupation. Called Gladio (Latin for sword), stay-behind organizations, or Special War Department,[27] they were small paramilitary units that would supposedly employ guerrilla tactics behind the lines against a Soviet occupation. Working through the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Pentagon, such units were apparently formed in Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, West Germany, and Turkey. The United States continued to fund these organizations into the 1970s.

In Turkey, the secret force worked out of the Joint US Military Aid Team headquarters. It was first known as the Tactical Mobilization Group and, following the military "coup by memorandum" in 1971, the counter-guerrilla force or Special Warfare Bureau (*ozel tim* [special team]). When the leftist, but nationalist Bülent Ecevit was prime minister in 1974, Chief of Staff General Semih Sancar asked Ecevit for credits from a secret emergency fund. When Ecevit inquired about the nature of this organization he had never heard about, he was told that the United States was terminating its funding and that he should not look too closely at the situation. "There are a certain number of volunteer patriots whose names are kept secret and are engaged for life in this special department. They have hidden arms caches in various parts of the country."[28]

It was apparently around the time that the United States ceased its financing of the Gladio organization in the mid-1970s that it began to be used increasingly against perceived domestic leftist opposition to the Turkish government. Uğur Mumcu, the famous leftist journalist whose assassination in 1993 still remains unsolved, wrote how, when he was arrested after the coup in 1971, his torturers told him: "We are the counter guerrilla. Even the president of the republic cannot touch us."[29] A report by the Turkish Parliament's Commission for the Investigation of the Uğur Mumcu assassination suggested that the Deep State might have killed him because of his work on the possible MIT–PKK connection he supposedly was working

on at the time of his untimely death and then tried to blame it on Iranian-backed Islamists.[30]

During Turkey's domestic, leftist–rightist violence of the 1970s,[31] Türkeş' ultra-rightist Gray Wolves operated with the encouragement and even protection of the *ozel tim* or special forces. Some speculate that the Gladio or stay-behind organization was behind the notorious 1977 May Day massacre at Taksim Square in Istanbul, when snipers on surrounding rooftops suddenly began firing into a crowd of some 200,000 protesters supporting the radical leftist labor organization Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (DISK).

From the mid-1980s on, the counter-guerrillas were apparently given a new target, the PKK. During the early 1990s, a series of mysterious killings of civilian Kurdish leaders by apparently right-wing government-hit squads began. Depending on how one counts, at least 1,000 and probably a lot more died. Not a single one of the slayings of Kurdish leaders or sympathizers resulted in an arrest: "Many of the individual killings still go unexplained amid local claims that certain officials prefer not to pursue such cases."[32] Prominent victims included Musa Anter, 74, one of the most famous Kurdish intellectuals and authors of the twentieth century, and Mehmet Sincar, an ethnic Kurdish member of the Turkish parliament. Also murdered, it should be noted, however, was Major Ahmet Cem Ersever, a leading Turkish nationalist and supposedly a former JITEM or gendarmerie intelligence officer who was an expert on PKK activities. "Executions without verdict" was an expression often used to explain what was occurring.

At the time many argued that the killings were being perpetrated by groups associated with the Islamic Hizbullah (Party of God) and secretly encouraged by the state to protect the unity of the Muslim Turkish state the PKK was threatening to divide.[33] A Turkish parliamentary committee established in 1993 to investigate these murders even concluded: "The state is spawning criminal gangs. The village guards—pro-government Kurds armed by the government to battle the PKK—are involved in many murky events. . . . It must be said that the Gendarmerie Intelligence Organisation (JITEM) is too."[34] For a long time, the government refused to admit that such an organization as Hizbullah even existed. Early in 2000, however, the police began to discover gruesomely tortured bodies buried at hideouts used by the organization.[35]

Susurluk

Although thousands of people are killed each year on Turkey's highways, a fatal car accident near the Turkish city of Susurluk on November 3, 1996,

proved unique because of its victims:[36] (1) Huseyin Kocadag, the director of the Istanbul Police Academy and former deputy director of the National Security Police in Istanbul, who had been driving the speeding Mercedes when it crashed into a truck that had pulled out onto the highway; (2) Abdullah Çatlı, a notorious international criminal "on the lam" and wanted for multiple murders, drug trafficking, and prison escape; (3) Gonca Us, a gangster's "moll"; and (4) the accident's lone survivor, Sedat Bucak, a member of parliament and the leader of a pro-government Kurdish tribe, who headed a 2,000-strong militia which was deputized as village guards and received more than $1 million a month to battle Kurdish separatists. The obvious question was what was so unlikely an association doing together in the same car? Clearly, Susurluk revealed striking insights into the Deep State and the connections it fostered between the Turkish government's intelligence community and internationally organized criminal activity involving political assassinations, drug trafficking, and political corruption at the highest levels.

What is more, the car's trunk contained a veritable arsenal of five large caliber revolvers, two submachine guns, two silencers, and an abundant quantity of ammunition, as well as a case stuffed with bank notes. Investigators also found on Çatlı's body a police chief's identity card in the name of Mehmet Ozbay, and a green passport reserved for senior civil servants exempted from visa requirements. Clearly, Çatlı had been receiving official protection despite being officially sentenced to death in absentia for this role in the massacre of seven leftists in Bahcelievler, Ankara in 1978. During this unstable period of leftist–rightist violence in Turkey, Çatlı had been a member of Alparslan Türkeş' extreme nationalist National Action Party and its violent Idealists (*Ulkucus*) militia (see above). In addition, the Turkish police were supposedly seeking Çatlı for his role in the high-profile murder of the widely known leftist Turkish journalist Abdi İpekçi in 1979 (a crime for which the Pope's would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Ağca, was later sentenced) and for organizing Agca's prison escape and the flight to Europe that led to his attempt on the Pope's life (see above). Catli was also wanted by Interpol for drug trafficking and having escaped from a Swiss prison.

Mehmet Ağar, the Turkish minister of the interior and earlier minister of justice, at first tried to explain Susurluk away by claiming that the police chief, Kocadag, had probably "arrested" Çatlı and was bringing him into custody. After it became clear that all four occupants of the car had been staying at the same hotel together the previous three nights—where "coincidentally" Ağar himself had also been staying—Ağar was forced to resign. In the days that immediately followed, Ağar virtually admitted his

involvement in an illegal, secret organization when he declared: "We have undertook a thousand operations, but they cannot be explained. Their result was the security of the people. Whatever I did, I did for the nation."[37] Both he and Bucak, the crash's lone survivor, who was conveniently suffering from partial amnesia in regards to the accident, then claimed parliamentary immunity.

Turkish President Suleyman Demirel seemed to signal the desire of most of the nation's officials to cover up Susurluk's ultimate meaning when he declared that "the incident should be viewed within its limits. . . . Take it as far as it goes . . . but do not make a sweeping judgment for Turkey."[38] Tansu Çiller (the former prime minister from June 1993 to March 1996 and serving as the deputy prime minister when the Susurluk crash occurred) was already up to her neck in accusations about scandals revolving around her and her husband's finances. Çiller signaled even greater official reluctance to pursue Susurluk when she publicly praised the deceased Çatlı by saying: "those who fire shots for the state are, for us, as respectable as those who get shot for it."[39] More forthrightly, Alparslan Türkeş—known by his extreme right-wing followers as the *Basbug* (chief of chieftains or fuhrer) and a former deputy prime minister in the 1970s—admitted knowing that Çatlı and the other men traveling in the doomed car had been working with Turkey's intelligence services: "On the basis of my state experience, I admit that Çatlı has been used by the state in the framework of a secret service working for the good of the state."[40] Türkeş' comments constituted a good partial definition of the Deep State itself.

On November 12, 1996, the four main parties in the Turkish parliament established a special nine-man commission to investigate the circumstances surrounding Susurluk. Mehmet Elkatmis, a member of the senior governing Refah (Islamist) Party, was elected as its chairman. Early in April 1997, the commission produced a stunted and deeply compromised report that failed to identify any important names.[41] Although it conceded that crimes may have been committed by the state, the report rejected allegations that the state had established the criminal organizations, and dealt with only some of Çatlı's activities. Nothing was said about the web of other gangs that had spread across the country; nor was there mention of any crimes committed in the war against the PKK in the southeast or anything about alleged links to gangs in the senior military command. In presenting the report, Elkatmis specifically declared that his commission had been denied access to many government documents on the grounds that they contained state or commercial secrets. The commission also failed to obtain any useful information from Mehmet Ağar or Sedat Bucak who continued to claim parliamentary immunity.

In January 1998, Kutlu Savas, the chairman of the prime ministerial investigative committee, handed over the final draft of his report on Susurluk to Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz. Savas had been working on it as a special prosecutor since shortly after the parliamentary committee investigating the situation had been dissolved in April 1997, and had interviewed the heads of a number of departments in the ministry of the interior as well as the intelligence and security services.

The Savas Report reiterated earlier findings that the special teams had been established with the original duty of fighting the PKK.[42] In time, however, certain individuals working in various organs of the state had formed gangs within the state and, along with figures in organized crime, begun to kill businessmen, such as Behcet Canturk and Savas Buldan, suspected of financing the PKK in 1994. These gangs also diverged from their official duties and began to work for their own personal profit, sharing the spoils of drug trafficking and black market operations.

New revelations concerned gangs taking over state banks to finance illegal operations and reap windfall profits. Eyes turned toward former Prime Minister Tansu Çiller and her husband as being among those who might have directed this foray into criminal banking. In addition, Ilhan Akuzum and Abdulkadir Ates, two former ministers of tourism, were accused of issuing illegal casino licenses. The Savas Report also concluded that arguments over control of illegal activities became so intense that various security organizations even began to kill each other's agents. The death toll from this interservice rivalry reached 15, several of whom were senior officers.

In addition, $50 million had been taken from the prime ministerial slush fund to fight the PKK, but much of it was unaccounted for. The Report also charged that a certain Mahmut Yildirim—code named "Yesil" (Green) and an extreme nationalist right-winger—had been one of the main figures used by the MIT in covert operations, and the man who had attacked Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz himself in a hotel lobby in Budapest in November 1996 for wanting to investigate Susurluk in the first place.

Savas suggested that in the future all security personnel involved in illegal activities be dismissed and the activities of Mehmet Eymür, the former head of counterterrorist operations, be investigated. The special prosecutor further recommended that all the operations of the MIT and the department of security be placed under tighter control, and that the competition between the latter two be ended. Finally, he argued for a tough campaign against drug trafficking and recommended that the Istanbul judicial administration be reorganized. In his television address to the nation concerning the Savas Report, Prime Minister Yilmaz added that immunities should be

lifted to permit the prosecution of politicians and public employees and a repentance law enacted to help expose the guilty.

The military, however, was not implicated in any of these matters. Instead, "Yesil," Çatlı, Ağar, Bucak, and the Çillers were blamed for most of them, to the extent that many began to believe that "Yesil" was merely notional,[43] while the remaining five would become convenient scapegoats for others in the military and government who would remain free. Despite his earlier calls for revealing all information regarding Susurluk, Prime Minister Yilmaz now argued that, in the interests of the nation, certain sections of the Savas Report would have to remain secret. These included information about the repression that had followed the military coup of 1980, assassinations of suspected pro-PKK businessmen in the 1990s, and Turkey's role in the failed military coup against Azerbaijan's President Heydar Aliyev in 1995.[44]

Although Çiller and Ağar afterwards resigned, no one ever received any punitive sentence. Indeed, Ağar was subsequently reelected to parliament as the leader of the True Path Party (DYP), while Çiller's corruption files were covered up by the government's decision in 1998. She continued on in politics until her overwhelming electoral defeat at the hands of the AKP in November 2002 led to her retirement. Essentially, Susurluk's perpetrators, escaped justice, and it seems very unlikely that the affair will ever be brought to a satisfactory conclusion. Considering the likelihood that so many higher officials were actually involved, and that the judiciary was so heavily influenced by political forces, this is not surprising. As Husmettin Cindoruk, the leader of one of the smaller parties in Yilmaz's coalition government at that time observed: "the state itself is Susurluk."[45] Thus, the Susurluk affair remains one of the best-documented examples of the existence of the Deep State in Turkey. The "Kurdish threat" in particular served to justify the Deep State's existence, and the Deep State's corrosive effects on democracy in Turkey appear self-evident.

Semdinli

On November 9, 2005, the small city of Semdinli in the extreme southeastern Turkish province of Hakkâri became another excellent example of the Deep State when the Umit (Hope) bookstore owned by Seferi Yilmaz, a former PKK member who had served a 15-year term in prison, was bombed.[46] The explosion killed Zahir Korkmaz, a patron of the bookstore, and wounded his brother Metin Korkmaz. Although the bombing was staged to make it appear the work of the PKK exacting revenge for Seferi Yilmaz having left

the organization, it instead appears to have been the result of a botched provocation by the Deep State.

Bystanders who had witnessed the attack pursued the bombers and surrounded their car, which turned out to be registered to a gendarmerie unit bearing civilian plates. Two non-commissioned officers of a paramilitary anti-terror intelligence squad (Ali Kaya and Ozcan Ildeniz) and a former Kurdish PKK member turned government informer (Veysel Ates) were arrested, but not before one of them had opened fire, killing one bystander and wounding others. The investigating prosecutor found hand grenades, rifles, materials that could be used to make or defuse bombs, a blueprint of the bookstore, a list of 105 other potential targets, and additional evidence.

All three members of the anti-terror squad were arrested and held for trial. Turkish Land Forces Commander General Yasar Büyükanıt, scheduled to become the new chief of staff in August 2006, strongly rejected any official connections by stating he knew one of the suspects and then praised him as a "good guy."[47] Büyükanıt's ludicrous comment appeared to be a warning that the official State should not pursue the matter any further.

Angry citizens protesting what had happened, however, began rioting in several cities throughout the southeast and later in Istanbul itself. Although reform-minded Prime Minster Recep Tayyip Erdoğan promised to get to the bottom of the matter quickly, he soon backed down before military criticism. It was clear that "dark and illegitimate forces with access to legitimate state power were clearly at work again" and that what had occurred "is no conspiracy theory in Turkey."[48] Indeed, the Semdinli bombing was only one of several other unexplained bombing incidents—apparently perpetrated by *cetes* or gangs that many believed were linked to the Turkish military—that had plagued the southeast Kurdish areas of Turkey during the fall of 2005.

When the Van public prosecutor Ferhat Sarikaya sought to indict Büyükanıt for setting up an illegal force to create unrest among the Kurds that would undermine Turkey's application to join the EU as well as trying to influence the courts by praising one of the Non-commissioned officers (NCOs) charged in the Semdinli bombing, the Supreme Board of Prosecutors and Judges (HSYK) sacked him on the grounds of "breach of authority" and the "inclusion of irrelevant claims in the indictment in contravention of the Law on Trial."[49] The government also removed Sabri Uzun, the chief of the Intelligence Department of the General Directorate of Security, who had sought to support Sarikaya. Uzun had told the parliamentary committee investigating Semdinli that it was an insider affair, arguing that there was "no use locking the doors when the thief is indoors."[50] This, of course, implied that the suspected culprits were really in the higher ranks of the

military. Seeking to curry favor with the military, Deniz Baykal, the leader of the main opposition Republican Peoples Party (CHP), declared that there was a "coup attempt against the military."[51]

In July 2006, the Van Third High Criminal Court sentenced Ali Kaya and Ozcan Ildeniz to 39 years and 5 months in prison. The court also concluded that the two had not acted alone, but must have been following the directives of an organization and carried out their actions with the support of and contributions from the heads of this organization. The court recommended, therefore, that a further investigation should be opened.[52] Following the lead of EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Commission Co-chair Joost Lagendijik's "Turkey Report," the European Commission also asked that the Semdinli "hierarchy" (i.e., those leading the convicted officers) be identified.[53] However, no further action was taken. The rapid conviction of the two bombers suggested a deep-state cover-up.

Given all the theoretical reforms that had occurred as part of Turkey's EU candidacy, Semdinli was a great disappointment and called into question whether Turkey was ready to pursue EU membership. Thus, the official State's ability to solve the Semdinli case might have proved that Turkey could control its Deep State and was fit for EU membership. Indeed, the EU Commission's representative to Turkey, Hans Jorg Kretschmer, said as much when he declared that "shedding light on the Hakkâri [Semdinli] events is a test case for Turkey."[54] Instead, concluded one respected source: the "government *prosecuted the prosecutor* and sacked an intelligence officer whose findings supported the prosecutor; and in doing so dismissing a historic chance to shed light on covert and behind-the-scenes operations which for many decades have been the biggest obstacle for the truly democratic Turkey of tomorrow."[55]

For its part, the Parliamentary commission investigating the Semdinli affair concluded that the accusations against the military were "legal fantasy" and that "our commission has come up with no evidence pointing to such an illegal set up within the gendarmerie."[56] Instead, the commission's report even irrelevantly warned that the Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani was trying to gain influence in the region and that he could be more dangerous than the PKK itself. The report also exonerated the ruling AKP government from any blame.

In an interview on NTV television shortly after the Semdinli bombing, Suleyman Demirel, the former president (1993–2000) and several times prime minister of Turkey, declared that "there are two states. There is the state and there is the deep state. . . . When a small difficulty occurs, the civilian state steps back and the deep state becomes the generator [of decisions]."[57] Several months earlier, Demirel, who had been removed as prime minister

twice in the past by military coups, had replied to the query "What do you mean by 'deep state'?" that it was the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK).[58] The general who had headed the coup that removed Demirel the second time and succeeded him as president from 1982 to 1989, Kenan Evren, agreed: "Demirel tells the truth. When the state is weakened we take it over. We are the deep state."[59] Bülent Ecevit, another frequent former prime minister, also concurred with these sentiments.[60]

Hrant Dink's Assassination

On January 19, 2007, Hrant Dink, a prominent Armenian-Turkish spokesman for official Turkish recognition of the Armenian massacres in 1915, was assassinated outside the Istanbul office of the bilingual newspaper he edited. Eventually, Ogun Samast, 17, was sentenced to prison for the murder along with Yasin Hayal, a militant Turkish ultranationalist, for instigating the deed. However, the Turkish Heavy Penal Court acquitted 18 other defendants on charges that they were part of a larger conspiracy by an illegal network behind the assassination.

This failure to get to the bottom of the murder has led the surviving Dink family to issue an open letter to the Turkish public and international audience declaring that "since the slaying…the system in Turkey—with its judiciary, security forces, military and civilian bureaucracy, and political institutions—has all but mocked us." The open letter went on to charge that "while pretending to pursue justice, the criminal alliance called the state re-committed the murder day by day," concluding that "this alliance is the very crime syndicate that planned the murder and then covered it up.…No effective investigation was conducted at any stage of this case. The biggest insult, however, came from the court when it ruled that no organization was involved in the murder."[61] Although senior members of the ruling AKP government including Turkish president Abdullah Gül expressed disappointment at the ruling and prosecutors filed an appeal, Dink's case seemed to many yet another example of the Deep State's continuity and the lack of a genuine commitment to curtail it.[62]

Ergenekon

During 2013, the continuing Ergenekon[63] trials of ultranationalist and retired military officers charged with planning violent campaigns to destabilize the AKP government in Turkey continued.[64] Indeed, the massive indictment of 2,455 pages described an incredible plot connecting some 86 military, mafia, ultranationalists, lawyers, and academic figures supposedly

attempting to weaken the state's administration and justify an illegal intervention against the official AKP government. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself was said to be on the alleged hit list, while former president and now more than 90 years old Kenan Evren was briefly placed in the docket. Further arrests of active and retired military officers occurred in February 2010 as a result of the related *Balyoz* (Sledgehammer) Operation. Although critics accused the AKP of simply trying to take revenge on its Kemalist opponents with all these charges, there can be no doubt that the Ergenekon trials represented a powerful blow against elements of the original Deep State. How far this process would go, whether it signified the end of the Deep State, and would further democratization of the state result, remained to be seen.

Indeed, the Ergenekon case has led some observers to claim that the original Deep State has been replaced by a "new civil-Islamist . . . deep state."[65] The harsh sentences handed down by the court—including the life sentence against former chief of the general staff General Ilker Basbug for supposedly leading the conspiracy—were especially revealing and possibly constituted evidence of this situation. As Nuray Mert's opinion column in the August 12, 2013 issue of the Turkish daily *Hurriyet* put it: "The 'deep state' is dead! Long live the new deep state!"

Conclusion

The Deep State is *not* a specific organization with a specific leader, both of which can be identified. Rather, it is a *mentality* concerning what Kemalist Turkey should be, namely strongly nationalist, statist, secular, and right-wing; not Islamist, multiethnic, reformist, and/or a member of the EU. Members of the military and intelligence branches of the Turkish government in particular, but also those from any other agencies of the government such as the cabinet, parliament, judiciary, bureaucracy, etc., or for that matter outside the government such as business interests, and even religious figures or criminals—anyone who would be motivated by the vision of an ultranationalist state and the need to protect it even at the cost of violating the technical laws of the official State can become a member of the Deep State for particular purposes. Indeed, sometimes someone who might be motivated mostly by pure financial gain such as criminals can become a member. Then when the purpose is completed, that person simply returns to working for the official State or whatever other organization he previously served. Or one could simultaneously "serve" the Deep State for a particular purpose, while at the same time work for the official State in other more mundane capacities.

In this sense of being a subjective, psychological mentality rather than an objective organization that can be specifically identified, the Deep State is even deeper than many have thought because it is in the minds of people. Thus, the only way to dismantle the Deep State would be to convince or reeducate its "members" that Turkey is not the object of some imperialist conspiracy plot to control and even dismember it, that the vision of a genuinely pluralistic democratic Turkey for all its citizens is legitimate and should be defended and promoted according to the laws of the official State. When such a pluralistic democratic mentality genuinely pervades the official Turkish State, the Deep State will have been weakened, the Kurdish problem will more likely have to be solved, and Turkey will become a fit candidate for membership in the EU. This is proving a difficult task, but, as analyzed above, progress toward achieving these goals has been irresistibly set in motion.

Notes

* Portions of this chapter are adapted from Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending*, chapter 6, published in 2011 by Palgrave Macmillan and are reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

1. See Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880–1925* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1989). I published an earlier version of this paper as "Deep State: The Arcane Parallel State in Turkey," *Orient* 47.3 (2006), pp. 334–348.
2. On this point and its consequences, see Asa Lundgren, *The Unwelcome Neighbour: Turkey's Kurdish Policy* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007).
3. For further analysis of this situation, see Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Michael M. Gunter, "The Connection between Turkey's Intelligence Community and Organized Crime," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 11 (Summer 1998), pp. 119–141.
4. On the development of the modern Republic of Turkey, see Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 2nd edn. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Erik Zurcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 2nd edn. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997).
5. "Government and Opposition United over the Semdinli Affair," *Briefing* (Ankara), November 28, 2005, p. 2.
6. For background, see the proceedings of the ninth annual international conference of the EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC), "The Kurdish Question in Turkey: Time to Renew the Dialogue and Resume Direct Negotiations," December 5–6, 2012, European Parliament, Brussels, Belgium. For some of these proceedings, see http://www.mesop.de

CHAPTER 3

Kurds, Persian Nationalism, and Shi'i Rule: Surviving Dominant Nationhood in Iran

Gareth Stansfield

Introduction

By the end of 2013, Iran was being cautiously embraced by Western powers, if not by Arab Gulf states and Israel, due to the progress made by the new Iranian President Rouhani—referred to by some excitable observers as perhaps being the "Iranian Gorbachev," such was the rapidity with which developments occurred concerning the Iranian nuclear program in the aftermath of his surprise election victory in June 2013.[1] However, within Iran, significant segments of the population had little cause to share in the optimism of the international community. Indeed, for those opposed to the regime—whether in its more moderate incarnation or otherwise—and particularly for those peoples who were not as deeply tied to the Persian-dominated national project that has underpinned the narrative of the Iranian state since the 1920s, the heavy hand of the regime was being felt as restrictively as ever before.

Since Rouhani took office in August, up until the end of 2013, Iran has reportedly executed more than 200 people, with a significant number of these being Kurdish activists. At first, these executions were viewed by human rights monitors as being illustrative either of Rouhani, while being a new moderate face, still being cut from the same cloth as his peers in the political elite, or of the judiciary and security apparatus of the state needing

to show all potential threats that the status quo very much remained intact, whomever happened to be president.[2]

The executions up until the end of October were conducted with alarming regularity, which was to only increase following the killing of 14 Iranian soldiers by the Baluchi insurgent organization *Jaish ul-Adl* (Army of Justice)—which claims to fight against the persecution of the Sunni Baluch in Iran—near Saravan on Iran's southeastern border with Pakistan, on October 25.[3] The wrath of the regime was keenly felt not only in Baluchistan but across the entirety of the country. The government embarked upon a wave of executions across the state, carrying out death sentences on individuals who were, more often than not, usually of Baluchi or Kurdish origin. The day after the attack, 16 Baluchi men were executed in the southeastern city of Zahedan.[4] In what can only then be described as a macabre and equitable distribution of executions designed to deter not only the recalcitrant Baluchis, but any grouping, from challenging the status quo, the period from the end of October saw executions become commonplace across the country, with the Kurdistan province being second only to Baluchistan province in terms of the numbers killed. Three Kurdish political prisoners were executed in the Kurdish-dominated city of Saqqez, in Kurdistan province, with three others scheduled for execution thereafter.

This chapter focuses upon the situation of the Kurdish population of Iran, with a particular focus upon the dialectical relationship between a Persian-dominated Iranian nationalist project, with its origins in the early twentieth century, and the transformation of Kurdish tribal agendas into a broader nationalist movement.[5] In so doing, I find common cause with the Iranian Kurdish academician Abbas Vali, who forcefully contends that "Kurdish nationalism in Iran is a modern phenomenon, an outcome of the socio-economic and cultural dislocations caused by the blighted and perverse modernity that followed the advent of Pahlavi absolutism after the First World War."[6]

Vali's position is developed in subsequent paragraphs of this chapter, but the notion of the Kurds of Iran reacting to events around them is one that has some traction today. For the Kurds of Iran, who number nearly 7 million and constitute approximately 10 percent of the total population,[7] the events of the Arab Spring, the success of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the beginnings of a peace process in Turkey between the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (the Justice and Development Party, or AKP) government and the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK), and even the tentative establishment of a Kurdish autonomous region in war-torn Syria by the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (the (Kurdish) Democratic Union

Party, or PYD) must be tantalizing examples of what Kurds in other parts of divided Kurdistan can achieve, while also emphasizing their own relative impotence to improve their collective situation in the Islamic Republic. But could the situation, in what the Kurds refer to as *Rojhelat* (eastern, or Iranian Kurdistan), be susceptible to change as Iran itself haltingly moves into a new round of engagements with the international community?

Of course, the developments of 2013 that have seen progress made in discussing the Iranian nuclear program may unravel for any number of reasons; yet, they may also strengthen and mature, bringing to the fore the possibility of changes occurring that see limited liberalization and democratization.[8] If this were to happen, and it is admittedly highly speculative at this moment in time, then issues of ethnicity and identity would likely become very prominent in political discourses. Equally, if these events were not to happen, then it would seem to be reasonable to assert that the current Baluchi insurgency, Kurdish demonstrations, *Partiya Jiyana Azada Kurdistanê* (The Free Life Party of Kurdistan—otherwise referred to as PJAK) mobilization, and interethnic disharmony, such as between Kurds and Azeris in Mahabad, would continue and grow. Either way, the ethnic dimension of Iranian politics should be considered an issue of significant importance for the leadership of the Islamic Republic and for those members of the international community keen to see Iran make some form of transition away from authoritarianism. Presciently applying the lessons Gorbachev and the West had to learn when opening up the Soviet Union, the Reuters journalist Brenda Shaffer noted that "it quickly became clear that the Soviet Union was not only composed of Russians . . . [and] it became clear that what the West had considered to be 'Yugoslavians' or 'Czechoslovakians' were, in fact, many different ethnic groups." She concludes by warning that "[t]he rising ethnic activity in Iran will likely lead to increased demands for policy responses from the United States and Europe. These governments should be prepared. It is best not to wait until people are marching in public squares to understand their aspirations."[9]

Yet issues concerning ethnicity and identity have had little prominence in the contemporary debate concerning the democratization of Iran and the normalizing of its relations with the international community. Indeed, while there exists a sizeable and very sophisticated literature on the subjects of Iranian nationalism, twentieth-century political development, and democratization, it is a rare occurrence to find in this literature any overt focus on the role played by ethnicity and communalism in any of these facets of Iran's development.[10] This is not to say that research on the status and situation of the Kurds in Iran is nonexistent—there is a highly focused,

if limited, literature that tends to address some very tightly defined aspects of the subject matter.[11] However, what seem to be missing are materials that overtly bridge the intellectual gap between the political development (in a broad sense) of Iran on the one hand and the particularities of Kurdish existence in Iran on the other. It is this bridge that this chapter attempts to build and it does so with a view firmly set in the modern era, following the emergence of a Persian-dominated nationalist project. The chapter then charts the interaction of a narrative of Persian-dominated nationalism through the monarchical period through to the rule of the Shi'i religious establishment of the Islamic Republic as expressed by the doctrine of the *vilayet-e faqih* (realm of the jurisprudent) on the one hand, and the tortured, often reactive, emergence of Kurdish national identity with its associated political mobilizations on the other.

The Emergence of Dominant Nationhood in Iran

How long has there been a "Kurdish issue" in Iran? It is a pertinent question to pose, as a common understanding of the nature of the Iranian state, and "Iran" as a concept, would suggest that they are not comparable to their neighbors to the West—namely Iraq, Syria, and also Turkey. This line of argumentation focuses upon the fact that "Iran" has enjoyed a long history as a multiethnic entity, with various incarnations of the Iranian state/empire being roughly coterminous with present-day borders (although the Persian Empire of antiquity was vastly bigger). Adherents of this view would then postulate that within the borders of what is then presented almost as a "natural" or "organic" political order, compared to the artificial constructs imposed on the Arab world after World War I, peoples of differing identities have managed to coexist under a shared Iranian national project that was, until the twentieth century at least, seen to be more of a cultural, civic, concept rather than one dominated by a particular nationhood.[12]

This transition from what Nader Entessar refers to as the "long established cultural construct" of Iranian nationalism to a "land-based, territorially focused, and Persianized concept of nationhood" began in the nineteenth century.[13] Both the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran pursued policies of extensive modernization, in response to, and emulating, the advancements made by Western and Russian powers. Central to these policies of modernization was the centralization of administrative authority—bringing the country under one, unified, administrative order that would therefore serve to facilitate increased efficiencies in the agricultural sector through the reform of land ownership and promote the development of industry and the expansion of economic activities.[14]

For those peoples with a semi-nomadic way of life, and those who were located in the provincial areas, the changes were transformational. For the regions in the west of Iran—bordering Ottoman territories—a system of semi-independent Kurdish emirates had enjoyed significant amounts of autonomy, with varying degrees of success, and the principal form of social organization was tribal.[15] Both of these structures would be targeted by the reforming zeal of the Qajars, with the last of the powerful Kurdish princes, of Ardelan, being stripped of his powers in 1865.[16] But if the overt structures of Kurdish independent life were weakened, the memories of them would prove more durable with their *memes* surviving as powerful constructs underpinning both the behavior (with reference to tribalism) and aspirations (with reference to the autonomy of the emirates) into the twentieth century.[17]

The abilities of the Qajar reformists to build a central government capable of enforcing their writ across the entirety of the country were sorely taxed, however, with feudalism and tribalism proving to be durable features especially in the more inaccessible areas of the periphery. In Kurdistan in particular, a de facto arrangement was in existence, with the central government recognizing local tribal leadership over areas deemed to be within the sphere of influence of a particular tribal grouping, and outside the capacities of the central government to control.[18] A situation was thus emerging in Iran of rising tribal sentiment that was increasingly colored with an ethnic consciousness in the periphery, and centralizing tendencies in the core that had become dominated by an increasingly exclusivist Persianized narrative of Iranian nationhood. At least in these formative moments of state modernization, even up until the events of the mid-twentieth century and what was the consolidation of a Kurdish nationalist project as evidenced by the establishment of the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in 1946, the issues were mainly in the domain of center–periphery relations, rather than contested nationhood, with Ali Ansari suggesting that:

> [t]his [core-periphery relations] was at heart a problem of governance and the establishment of a harmonious balance between the growing power of the center and the rights of the periphery. This dialectical relationship had to be properly balanced as otherwise the tendency would be for the center to reinforce its power by encouraging the fragmentation of the periphery.[19]

For many Kurdish elites at the turn of the century, the reforms of 1906, otherwise known as the Constitutional Revolution, failed to achieve this balance. Seen as a great victory for the urban intelligentsia who were keen to promote Iran as a secular, democratic state modeled upon those of Western

Europe, the revolution failed to establish a democratic political system encompassing all of Iran and was opposed by the agrarian-based and tribally organized Kurds who were, as Denise Natali notes, "more interested in protecting tribal, religious, and landowning interests . . . than in manifesting Kurdish nationalism."[20] This mixture of core–periphery (im)balance, tribal legacies, and slowly emergent nationalism among the Kurds continued to ferment in the years before and after World War I. With Iran being a theater of Great Power contestation, with the British and Russians advancing in the north and south of country and dividing the country into spheres of influence, the consolidation of tribal autonomy in the Kurdish-dominated parts of the country proceeded apace as the capacity of the central state to exercise its dominion over these regions weakened.[21]

Engagement with the West proved to be a profoundly powerful and double-edged experience for those Iranian nationalists keen to modernize the state. On the one hand, they had admired the achievements of Western powers, to the point of trying to emulate their practices and achieve their levels of development and modernism; on the other hand, however, they had seen Iran subordinated by these very same powers and even had their territory unceremoniously carved up. A reaction to the meddling of Western powers was therefore an upsurge in this new form of Iranian nationalism, closely identified with what was, by now, a national project dominated by Persianism, controlling an increasingly effective and capable machinery of state. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet tellingly notes that "[t]he Iranian homeland, though still formally the birthplace of Armenians, Kurds, and Baluchis, as well as Farsis [Persians] and others, increasingly came to represent the *vatan* [country] of Shi'a Persians through the persistent efforts of the state to extirpate competing cultures."[22] Taking advantage of this febrile environment was Reza Shah who emerged as Minister of War in 1921 and was then elevated to being King, with his coronation as the first shah of the Pahlavi dynasty taking place in 1926.[23]

Under Reza Shah, the balance between the center and periphery, and the accommodation of locally powerful tribal elites existed no more. Instead, he initiated a series of military expeditions into the provinces of the country in an attempt to impose the central government's writ in what had become regions that existed beyond the purview of Tehran. Reza Shah's policy would not only enforce upon the entirety of Iran a new model of nationalism, it would accelerate among the Kurds their own processes of cohesive national identity formation, as a response, or reaction, to the threats posed to them by the powerful centralizing forces now being deployed by the new Shah.[24] Ethnic conflict in Iran, or more accurately conflict between the Persian-dominated state and its non-Persian opponents, intensified in the 1920s,

with the Kurdish tribal leader Ismail Agha Simko exemplifying the Kurds' innate inability to acquiesce to the new dominant nationhood, while also displaying the strains of their own transition from disparate tribal interest groups to a more unified Kurdish nationalist agenda.

A Theory of Kurdish Political Development in the Twentieth Century

A theoretical framework that has considerable explanatory value for explaining the nature of Kurdish political development in the twentieth century is one that builds upon notions of pathological homogenization of peoples as a means of state building, combined with the politicization of ethnicity by state builders and the consolidation of "dominant ethnies."[25] These are two overlapping theoretical approaches that have much to offer to the study of Middle East states and their peoples and require more focused effort than a chapter can accommodate. However, the theoretical framework presented here combines an understanding of what Heather Rae refers to as "pathological homogenization of peoples," by which she means "the methods state-builders have used to define the state as a normative order and to cultivate identification through targeting those designated as outsiders for discriminatory and often violent treatment," with a theory that explains the rise of a "dominant ethnicity" within states, presented most notably by Andreas Wimmer. Together, these theories constitute a framework for understanding the Kurdish situation in Iran of how elites in the most powerful ethnic group of a "new" state (such as post-Qajar Iran) take over, or inherit, the state apparatus at the end of empire, with subordinated groups remaining on the margins. The nation-building project then proceeds with the assimilation of these groups—minorities—thus realizing the vision of a unified, mono-ethnic, citizenry.[26] Heather Rae considers these "strategies of pathological homogenization," in terms of "attempts to legally exclude minority groups from citizenship rights, to strategies of forced conversion or assimilation, expulsion, or extermination."[27]

To provide some empirical color and texture to how these theories may apply to the case of the Kurds, my framework presents Kurdish identity formation (or "Kurdism") in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire in particular, and the Qajar Empire to a lesser degree as a process of self/group awareness in the face of modernizing dynamics.[28] This stage presented the building blocks of later nationalist movements, without yet being nationalist—in terms of the politicization of these identities—and with them existing within a set of wider sociopolitical and political economy milieus dominated by more traditional modes of organization, usually grouped

together under a broadly and ambiguously defined "tribal" moniker. Then, centralizing administrative strategies implemented by elites imbued with western notions of the Westphalian state, industrialized economies, and state-controlled nationalist projects (whether by accident or design) sought to reconstruct the state, or new states, in a prescriptive manner that was ostensibly ethnicity/communal-group blind, but in practice heavily exclusionist. This imposition of a "dominant nationhood" would then see the state have little, if any, "space" within it—whether ideological, intellectual, economic, social, political or, at its logical extreme, territorial—that could accommodate the aspirations and activities of those who could not subscribe to, nor could be forced to assimilate under, the new realities. Repressing the activities of minorities who refused to subscribe to the new state's principles would in turn require varying degrees of authoritarianism from the center.

These new realities of state created a disharmonious counterpoint—one of reactivity from those not covered by the narrative of the "dominant nation," and one that would see these peoples whose identities had been disenfranchised in the new state respond, often in a chaotic, unplanned, and disjointed fashion, at least in the first instance, by the nurturing of their own nationalist project. These projects would, however, have several points of genesis that would then converge into more cohesive movements in processes that would span decades and would see as many setbacks as advances. Two key points of genesis that can be identified from the case of the Kurds, along with a range of other peoples in the Middle East and elsewhere, are the traditional structures of tribalism on the one hand, with the reaction of once-powerful tribal elites to the new realities of the ethnically defined centralized state being a key element, and the emergence of new associations of interest defined by a mixture of egalitarianism and nationalism on the other, with the motivations of what would become a combination of nonfeudal/tribal, nationalist, and leftist groupings being as much about combating the forces of traditional (i.e., the tribal landlords) as it was promoting their people's right to self-determination.[29]

This framework, with permutations, could be applied to the history of the political development of the Kurds in both Iran and Iraq. Both situations now have distinctly "modern" myths of nationhood, with leaders from the earlier decades of the twentieth century who, in contemporary discourse, are now viewed as founding nationalist figures in the narratives of these two communities of Kurds. Both of these figures—Mulla Mustafa Barzani in Iraq and Ismail Agha (Simko) in Iran—existed and operated at the temporal and ideological watershed of Kurdish political development, as the often-imperceptible transition occurred between the Kurdish nationalist movement being less than the sum of its tribal parts, to moving toward

being greater than the sum, and even moving beyond the tribal frameworks. Mulla Mustafa Barzani's role in the development of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq is well documented and, deservedly so, is also covered in chapters in this volume in considerable detail. For the purposes of illustrating the salient moments and individuals involved in the emergence of Kurdish nationalism in Iran, Simko remains a mercurial figure—caught between the worlds of tribalism and wider nationalism, or perhaps exploiting them both.

Ismail Agha Simko: From Tribal Leader to Nationalist Hero

Ismail Agha, otherwise known as "Simko," rose to be the leader of the large Shakak tribal confederacy in Iran in the 1920s.[30] With a reputation as a "daring warrior and bold raider,"[31] and having personally suffered at the hands of the Persian authorities, Simko had positioned himself carefully in the unstable environment of early-twentieth-century Iran, gaining himself a position of prominence and notoriety.[32] In the period immediately before World War I, Simko built alliances of convenience with both pro-Ottoman forces and the Russians, continually consolidating his position in the tribal confederacy and also exposing him to broader Kurdish nationalist currents. It is this interaction of the two that positions Simko as an individual leader who could exploit, or be exploited by, the currents of tribal advancement and nationalist consolidation, with van Bruinessen again noting that, by 1913, "[n]ationalist and private ambitions went together in him [Simko] and cannot be separated."[33] By the end of the war, with the Ottoman Empire defeated and the Iranian government weak and dysfunctional, Simko and the Shakak confederacy stood out as being the principal power holders in Kurdistan and Western Azerbaijan. Replete with weapons captured from the Russians, including artillery pieces, Simko had de facto control over his core tribal territory, with the government of Iran simply unable to contain the expansion of his domains beyond the traditional realms of the Shakak confederacy.

At what point did broader conceptions of "the Kurdish nation" begin to color Simko's thoughts, rather than the more parochial concerns of promoting his tribe? Or, perhaps the reality is more nuanced and complex, with Simko viewing nationalism as a vehicle of advancement for his tribe—a notion that has also been discussed in reference to the interaction of the Barzani tribe with Kurdish nationalism in Iraq.[34] These questions could give rise to a range of opinions, but, whatever his motivations, Simko began to prepare for the establishment of an independent entity from 1919 onwards. Bringing together other prominent Kurdish tribal leaders in a plan to engage

in an insurrection against the Iranian state, Simko and his collaborators also reached out to the British Civil Commissioner in Iraq, A. T. Wilson, for support for his plan to establish an independent Kurdish state.[35] Even though they received no response, the fact that they were operating in such a way gives credence to the notion that Simko, in mind at least, if not in practice, had made the transition to embracing a nationalist agenda.

From mid-1919 onwards, Simko's forces pried huge areas of northeastern Iran away from the control of Tehran, with him then placing loyalists in key positions, including governorships, and levying taxes on those towns and villages in his domain. By 1921, Simko controlled the area west of Lake Urmiyeh, south to the cities of Baneh and Sardasht, and even into parts of northwestern Iraq. In addition to this territorial expanse, Simko was also, by now, acting as the first among equals among the Kurds' tribal leaders, with him securing the loyalty of many of the most powerful tribes of Iran and Iraq. Upon capturing Mahabad in October 1921, Simko made the city his capital and, by July 22, his territory had reached its greatest extent, reaching Sain Qaleh in the east and Saqqez in the south.

In keeping with the analytical framework presented earlier, Farideh Koohi-Kamali reinforces the view that the emergence of Kurdish nationalist agendas could be correlated closely with the actions of the "dominant nation," by now led by Reza Shah, noting that "[i]n Iran, Kurdish aspirations for independence, economic progress, and cultural expression began to develop as a consequence of the political and economic processes of changing the lifestyle of tribes and nomads implemented by the central government of Reza Shah."[36] It seems, therefore, that Simko was riding a wave of opportunities. He did so by harnessing the capabilities presented by tribal cooperation and exploiting the fertile ground provided among the broader Kurdish population—tribal and nontribal alike—by the policies of Reza Shah himself.

With his links now developing impressively outside Iran, with the Kurdish tribes of Turkey and Iraq, Simko had brought the Kurds to the threshold of being able to exercise their rights of self-determination, at least in terms of securing autonomy (as the Iranian government had proved itself unable to contain his aspirations and his forces) and maybe in terms of winning independence, if his fortune had continued. However, this was not to be. While, on paper, Simko's successes suggest that he and his Kurdish followers had made the transition from tribal one-upmanship to collaborating for the greater national good, the mechanisms and structures that underpinned Simko's rebellion, and the aggrandizement of territory and resources, were wholly tribal—and thus what appeared as an edifice of Kurdish national unity was in fact riven with age-old tribal cleavages that could be cracked

open, if pressure were applied. Reza Khan—who would become Reza Shah in 1926—was the figure who would apply this pressure, and he would do so by applying the lessons of western modernization to his government and his military, and using newly instilled discipline and order in his national army to bring Simko's insurrection to an end. By August 1922, Simko's forces had been defeated, forcing him to escape into exile to Iraq via Turkey. Over the next four years, he would attempt to recapture the successes of previous years, but to no avail, with him again being forced to flee to Iraq. By 1929, the Iranian government, angered by Simko's rebellious nature and, in all likelihood, fearful of the example he gave to Kurds and other non-Persians of a nationalist orientation, succeeded in luring him to Ushnuviyeh by offering him the governorship of the city. The offer was in fact a trap, and the rebellious leader of the agitating Kurds was assassinated while en route by Iranian forces.[37]

The Rise of Kurdish Intellectualism

Reza Shah's policies of centralization and modernization continued unabated, and the homogenization of the Iranian state around a Persian-dominated narrative had succeeded in cowing the rebellious Kurds. However, the ability of the center to maintain order in the peripheries would again diminish due to the commencement of World War II. Once again caught between the agendas of warring European powers, Iran would find itself being subjected to differing influences that would again give Kurdish political actors the territorial space and opportunity to reassert the right to self-determination. With Reza Shah's abdication in 1941 brought about by his perceived sympathies for the Axis powers and the occupation of Iran by Soviet forces, the peripheries of the country, and especially the Kurdish-populated areas of the west and northwest, experienced a power vacuum into which those forces best placed to project their political, military, and economic power would emerge. This time, however, it was not the tribal forces of the "first" point of genesis of the Kurdish nationalist movement, mentioned earlier, that would seize the moment; instead, it would be the urban, nonfeudal, forces of the left and the intelligentsia that would emerge, taking the Kurds not only to the threshold of independence, but, all too fleetingly, to independence itself.

By the beginning of World War II, Reza Shah's policies of centralization and the promotion of a strategy of dominant nationhood within Iran had two noticeable effects of relevance to understanding the relationship between the Kurds and the state. The first of these was the disestablishment of the great tribal confederacies that had caused so much trouble for Reza Shah

and his predecessors. With Simko no more, and other tribal leaders removed from the scene, the Kurdish communities of Iran had become largely sedentarized.[38] As such, they were also more familiar with, and accessible by, political and intellectual forces in the expanding urban environments. The second noticeable effect was with regard to these intellectual forces in the cities and towns. As happened in Turkey, at the end of the Ottoman Empire, a Kurdish intellectual life became more apparent in the towns of Iran, populated by figures educated in the ways of the modernized state, more often than not with some degree of tribal pedigree, and fully exposed to the very concepts of nationalism that they had been reacting against.[39] This intellectual movement in Iran would be the spring from which the Kurds not only from Iran would drink as they formed their nationalist agendas. Events that would happen, ideas that would form, and ideologues that would emerge in Iran, primarily in the city of Mahabad —long held as a center of culture and intellectualism in Kurdistan—would also then be formative elements in the development of the Kurdish nationalist movement of Iraq, to a great extent, and in Syria and Turkey to a lesser degree.

Qazi Mohammed and the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad

With Reza Shah no more, the heavy weight of state authority weakened across the country, and especially in the once-troublesome peripheral areas such as Kurdistan. Throughout World War II, various challenges took place against central Iranian authority, such as in Urmiyeh in 1942, which saw Persian forces forced out of the city, only to return following mediation led by Kurdish leaders from Mahabad, including Qazi Mohammed. Long seen, according to Koohi-Kamali, as "the core of the Kurdish movement for independence," Mahabad had been effectively under the control of Qazi Mohammed and his brother, Sadr-i Qazi, since the Soviet occupation of the city in 1941.[40] For several years, therefore, Qazi Mohammed and Mahabad had been synonymous with Kurdish autonomy, Kurdish nationalism, and de facto Kurdish independence.[41]

Mahabad, in the early 1940s, therefore enjoyed the physical freedoms that would allow its intellectual groupings and nascent political organizations to explore notions of nationalism that would facilitate broader and more coherent Kurdish nationalist thinking. In this setting, the very first organization to form, which would prove to be the most influential in the establishment of the Mahabad Republic, was the *Komalay Jiyanaway Kurd/Kurdistan* (the Society for the Revival of the Kurds/Kurdistan).[42] Known by its abbreviated form "JK," the society was founded in 1942 by 18 intellectuals and was, from the outset, overtly nationalist in its rhetoric and symbolism, with a flag

of three colors—red at the top symbolizing the bloody past of the Kurds; white in the middle indicating the good nature of the Kurdish people; and green at the bottom, symbolizing the fertility of Kurdistan. With a sun at its center, the flag alone was a clear manifestation of Kurdish nationalist sentiment—to a degree not seen before but that would be replicated many times in the future.[43] Alongside the symbol-laden flag, JK also published a journal called *Nishtiman* (Motherland). If the title was not an obvious enough indicator of Kurdish nationalist thought, then the declaration in the first issue of the aim of JK being the creation of a greater Kurdistan left no room for doubt.[44] JK quickly spread throughout Kurdistan's urban environs, and its members also reached out to ensure the cooperation, at least, of the remaining tribes. Qazi Mohammed, however, was never a member of committee, but instead enjoyed a close, guiding, relationship with its members.

By 1945, the Kurdish movement in Iran had grown beyond the capabilities of the largely underground JK, and, possibly under pressure from the Soviet occupiers, was disbanded in November in a meeting led by Qazi Mohammed himself in the newly opened Cultural Relations Centre opened in September by the Soviets in Mahabad. In its place, the meeting agreed to change the name of JK and for it to then operate as a political party in the open. This new party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), saw Qazi Mohammed remain in his role of figurehead and mentor, in effect dominating the political scene.[45]

By the beginning of 1946, nationalist sentiment in Mahabad had reached new highs and, on January 22, crowds gathered in Chwar-Chara Square (Four Lanterns Square) to hear Qazi Mohammed proclaim the founding of the Republic of Kurdistan of which he would be president. Within days, ministers were appointed who were taken mainly from the old JK organization, with key tribal leaders who commanded the bulk of the military forces available to the Republic, including Mulla Mustafa Barzani, being critical in what was seen as an interim period before the formation of a National Assembly.[46] However, while the internal situation of the Republic was, on the whole, positive, with attempts made to build an army, reform education, and to manage the economy effectively, the Republic still existed in a dangerously unstable wider regional and international setting. Caught in disputes with the Soviet-supported nascent Azerbaijan government based in Tabriz, and still being reliant upon the engagement of Iran for economic survival, it was only a matter of time before Iranian control was reestablished over Kurdistan. This time frame was dictated by realities external to Iran. With the end of World War II and beginnings of the Cold War between East and West, the Soviet-supported Kurdish Republic found itself caught in the political moves that would rebalance the international system. The

United States and United Kingdom, keen to see the Soviets leave Iranian territory, lobbied so forcefully for this to happen that several observers consider the US pressure on the Soviet Union to evacuate Iran as constituting, in the words of James Clark, a "stepping stone, though a major one, leading down the road towards the full unfolding of the cold war that came with the announcement of the Truman Doctrine in 1947."[47] The instrumentalism of the Soviet position was readily apparent, however, with them then abandoning their Kurdish and Azeri creations and shifting their efforts to rebuild relations with Iran in the economic sphere.

With the political landscape clearly changing, Kurdish cohesion began to weaken. Some Kurdish tribes sought bilateral reconciliations with the Iranian government, leaving the Republic without any meaningful military defense against Tehran. On December 17, nearly a year after the declaration of the Republic, the Iranian army entered Mahabad, ending the first experience the Kurds had of self-rule. Qazi Mohammed, along with some 29 other leaders, were arrested, with Qazi, his brother Sadr-i Qazi, and his cousin Seif-i Qazi being hanged on March 31, 1947 after a drawn-out process that emphasized Tehran's uncertainty when dealing with Kurdistan in general and Qazi Mohammed in particular, in the same Chwar Chara Square that had, not too long before, witnessed the establishment of the Republic.

Even though the Republic had a short lifespan and its leaders were executed or exiled by Iranian forces when the guardianship provided by the Soviet Union had been removed, it had succeeded in several noteworthy ways. Perhaps most impressively, the Republic and its leaders had shown that Kurdish self-rule, within the setting of an Iranian state, could work effectively and Kurds could administer their own affairs. Contrary to what had happened in the territory of the Azerbaijan government, which succumb to authoritarian governance, the Kurdish Republic proved to be free, forward looking, responsible, and with every indication of being democratic in the future. For the Kurds of Iran, and elsewhere, the "myth" of Mahabad understandably became a powerful motif in the narrative of the Kurdish nation, and of the suffering of the Kurds at the hands of the "dominant nations." But, while the symbolic aspects of Mahabad were profound, the warning provided by Mahabad was perhaps even more salient—that, ultimately, the Kurds could not rely on their non-Persian neighbors, or the international community, for support when anomalous situations, caused by World War II in this case, became normalized. Abbas Vali articulates this point as perhaps only a Kurd from Iran can:

> To the Kurds . . . the collapse of the Republic offers more than just a historical lesson. For them it is not only an event that has taken place in

> the past, but also one that is living in the present, animating not only memories but also the discourses and practices that shape the present. Through this event they think about their past, encounter their present and imagine their future.[48]

This lesson, perhaps, is one that continues to weigh heavy on the minds of today's assembly of Kurdish leaders as they once again operate at the threshold of autonomy and secession.

Fictionalization and the Marginalization of the Kurds of Iran

The period following the collapse of Mahabad until the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 proved to be difficult and divisive. With the KDP organizationally devastated and its leaders exiled (mainly to Iraq), the remnants of the KDP operated covertly, trying not to attract the attentions of the increasingly oppressive state security organizations of the Iranian government. But these difficulties were compounded by what would become a dynamic of Kurdish political life across the region, from Syria to Iran—factionalism and internal disputes. Perhaps the tribal origins of Kurdish life had created a tendency toward fissiparous behavior, or maybe the removal of the inspirational Qazi Mohammed had proved impossible to rectify. Whatever the reason, by the 1960s, the divisions that had opened up within the ranks of the KDP had become so serious that the party could no longer maintain its cohesion as a unified entity, with a Revolutionary Committee forming in 1967, under Ahmad Tofiq, only to be wiped out by the Iranian military a few years later.[49] The Iranian Kurds also now had to contend with the fact that center of gravity, the focal point, of the Kurdish national movement had moved away from Mahabad and Iran and was now firmly based in Iraq, around Qazi Mohammed's one-time military leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani. With his own need to build and maintain a strong relationship with Iran, in order to support the Kurds' struggle in Iraq with the military and Ba'thist governments of the day, Mulla Mustafa banned Iranian KDP operations against the Iranian government. With the Iranian KDP then being feted by Baghdad, to be used against Tehran, the scene was set for not only division among the Kurds, but internecine conflict in the future.[50]

Back in Iran, opposition to the Pahlavi monarchy was growing throughout the 1970s, with the Iranian KDP working as part of the opposition and organizing extensive public demonstrations. However, the Iranian KDP was still disorganized, weak, and lacking the capabilities to carve out a formative role as the Islamic Revolution unfolded. While initially welcoming of the change of regime—as they had suffered greatly at the hands of the

monarchy—the Kurds would soon find that living in the Islamic Republic brought with it all of the pressures of the Persian-dominant nationhood state, along with the new tribulations of existing under a regime that forcefully imposed across the country its additional narrative of political, Shi'i, Islam.

Subjects of the Islamic Republic

In a pattern that been replicated several times since the early twentieth century, administrative authority had once again been assumed by the local powers in Kurdistan in the confused months preceding and following the fall of the Shah. During this time, the Iranian KDP of Dr. Abdul Rahman Qasimlu had once again secured a degree of hegemony in Kurdistan, keeping the region largely protected from the quick imposition of new government offices of the Islamic Republic that had been rolled out across the rest of the country. For the Kurds, hoping that the new government would simply recognize their rights and allow them to exist as an autonomous entity in the new Republic, the situation was not to last. At first, the government was simply not strong enough to reassert their authority in the Kurdish-dominated regions. During this early period, the Kurdish leaders even engaged with the new regime, with Qasimlu being elected to the Assembly of Experts in August 1979—the day before Ayatollah Khomeini declared a *jihad* against the Kurds, as a means of reinvigorating Iranian military forces following the Revolution. Unlike in 1946, however, the Kurdish forces were able to withstand the Iranian army's attack, inflicting upon them heavy casualties and forcing Khomeini into offering a negotiated settlement of the Kurdish problem. A committee was established among the several Kurdish parties that now existed that drafted a proposal of 26 articles to act as the basis for a negotiation with the Iranian government that, in effect, formulated the establishment of an autonomous region for the Kurds. However, Khomeini was merely playing for time. Negotiations did not take place and no solution was found, but the Kurds certainly benefited from the opportunity to close their ranks, reorganize their parties, and to strengthen their social bases. The only problem was that Iran was also using the time very effectively by reorganizing, reequipping, and reinvigorating its military forces.

The trigger for the government to finally curtail the Kurds was provided by the elections of March 14, 1980. Unsurprisingly, the Kurdish cities returned almost wholly Kurdish representatives to the parliament. Equally unsurprisingly, the Iranian government declared the results from the Kurdish-populated regions to be void. Throughout that summer, clashes regularly broke out between mobilizing Kurdish militias and increasingly

capable government forces, with the government's attacks intensifying following Iraq's invasion of Iran in September. Aware of the Iranian KDP's approaches to Baghdad in the past, Tehran in effect treated the Kurdish regions as part of the warzone, subjecting the people of these areas to the full force of the now capable, determined, Iranian army. By 1983, the Iranian KDP leadership had been pushed out of Iran and into bases in Iraq, with the leaderships of the Iraqi KDP and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) conversely finding safe haven in Iranian territory. With these two Kurdish groupings of Iraq and Iran—that were both heirs to the legacy of Qazi Mohammed—now being the proxies of Tehran and Baghdad respectively, conflict between them, in the mountainous border area, only served to factionalize and weaken the Kurdish cause further. If this were not debilitating enough, the Iranian Kurds also showed their inability to maintain any semblance of internal unity, with the Iranian KDP coming into conflict with the Marxist *Komala* organization in 1984, and with the KDP itself splitting into two in 1988.[51] The end of the Iran–Iraq War itself provided no respite for the Kurds either. With the existential threat posed by Saddam's Iraq now removed, Tehran could now, once again, turn its attention to reinforcing the regime and targeting those who continued to challenge the hegemony of the Islamic Republic. On July 13, 1989 the leader of the KDP, Dr. Abdul Rahman Qasimlu, was assassinated in Vienna by agents of the Iranian government, with his successor, Dr. Sadiq Sharafkandi, sharing the same fate in Berlin in September 1992.

Between the Reformists and the Hard-Liners

By the 1990s, Iran was firmly under the control of the clerics of the religious establishment, while the Iranian Kurdish political parties were still factionalized. The Iranian KDP (KDPI) appointed Mustafa Hejri following the assassination of Sharafkandi; yet, he was ultimately unable to find common ground with the increasingly weakened *Komala*, led by Abdulla Mohtadi, and the KDPI saw internal division, with a faction led by Abdullah Hassanzadeh splitting off in December 2006. Fractiousness was not only the bane of the KDPI, however. *Komala* too has experienced spectacular division among its ranks. Having split itself from the Iranian Communist Party (ICP) in 2000, Abdulla Mohtadi reorganized the "original" *Komala*, on a broadly leftist-nationalist platform. Further cleavages then occurred, with the Kurdistan Organization of the ICP-*Komalah* forming under the leadership of Ibrahim Alizadeh, the Organization of Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan led by Omar Ilkhanizadeh, and the *Komalay Shorshgeri Zahmatkeshani Kurdistani Eran—Rewti Yekgrtnewe* (Revolutionary Organization of Toilers of Iranian

Kurdistan—Reunification Faction) of Abdulla Konaposhi, all illustrating through their confusing range of names the fissiparous, fragmented, and weakened nature of the Kurdish political parties in Iran.[52]

Even though lacking cohesion, the Islamic Republic still targeted members of Kurdish political factions, with Kurdish sources suggesting that some 200 Iranian Kurdish figures were assassinated in Iraqi Kurdistan alone in the early 1990s; the middle of the decade saw changes take hold in Iran that would once again provide opportunities for the Kurds to express their right to self-determination.[53] The election of Muhammad Khatami as president of Iran in 1997 illustrated the changes that had been taking place in Iran in the 18 years following the Islamic Revolution. As an openly moderate figure, relatively speaking, Khatami's policies opened up cultural and political space in a way that many Kurds could not remember in their own lifetimes. Khatami's language—although not reflected upon greatly in literature that focuses on "Iran" in general—was redolent with an understanding of the challenges posed by the multiethnic state and the pursuance of dominant nationhood, regularly noting from the beginning of his presidency the notion of inclusiveness, or an "Iran for all Iranians."[54] Further inspired by the limited successes of the Iraqi Kurds over the border, who had managed to maintain their autonomy and self-government in Iraq since 1991, and the escalation of PKK activities in Turkey, the Kurds of Iran promoted unprecedented cultural activities, including the publishing of journals, the organizing of literary and cultural societies, and the engaging in political and social debates at all levels of Iranian society.[55] Critically, these new discourses and dialectics were very much different to the style of rhetoric and argumentation of the established KDPI and *Komala*, suggesting that the grassroots of the Kurdish movement in Iran had quite different intellectual views and outlooks than the leadership of these parties, still based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.[56] But Khatami's support base was weak and, with absolute power not residing in the office of the president but in the network of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamanei, the mid-ranking cleric-turned president proved unable to implement the reforms that would have seen further internal democratization, the promotion of civil society organizations, and press and media freedoms, in anything other than a limited way.[57]

For the Kurds, Khatami's defeat at the hands of conservative forces would have serious implications. Having embraced the reform program, Kurds were now subjected to arbitrary arrest, even with Khatami in office, and Khatami supporters were singled out for special attention. In a crackdown of pro-Khatami Kurdish officials, the Governor of Kurdistan, Abdullah Ramezanzadeh, was summoned to the Special Court for Public Officials in April 2001 and charged with the "dissemination of lies" by the Guardian

Council (*Shura-e Negahban-e Qanun-e Assassi*) —an office selected by the Supreme Leader, Parliament, and the Judiciary, which has authority greater than that of the president.[58]

The recapturing of the Presidency by the hard-liners in 2005, by Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, would return the Kurdish position in Iran to once again being subjected to what Heather Rae has defined, in theoretical terms, as "[the] strategies of pathological homogenization [of peoples] and state formation."[59] In other words, Kurdistan witnessed the return of the heavy imposition of Persian-dominant nationhood that was given extra weight by the increasingly sectarian (Shi'i-Sunni) agenda now being adopted by the Islamic Republic. With sectarian cleavages becoming a more apparent aspect of the regional political landscape, across the Middle East, following the invasion of Iraq and the beginnings of sectarian struggle there in 2004, Iran had become, by 2005, sensitized not only to the struggles in places such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain, but also closer to home.[60] In a worrying congruence of ethnicity and sect, Iran's minority populations of Kurds, Baluchis, and a small percentage of the Arab community are largely of Sunni orientation and hence "double minorities," therefore giving Iran's "pathological homogenization" strategies, including the widespread arrest and execution of Kurds, pursued with great energy by President Ahmadinejad, even greater importance.[61]

It should not be surprising, then, that the mid-2000s saw the emergence of a new militancy in Iranian Kurdistan, a militancy that ironically had its origins in the "cultural" approach to promoting Kurdistan's cause that had emerged in the Khatami era. During this time, some Kurdish activists viewed the approach of their counterparts as being inadequate, and ultimately playing according to the rules of the political game dictated to them by Tehran. For these figures, the model to emulate was one that would fight force with force, and that would be the PKK of Turkey. Having fought a successful, widespread, and publicized campaign against the technologically advanced and capable Turkish military in the 1990s, the PKK was viewed by many young Kurds as being the flag bearers of Kurdish nationalism, particularly as the Kurdish leadership in Iraq had become increasingly unwilling to support the Kurds of Iran if it meant destabilizing their own relationship with Tehran. Following a decision to change the structure of the PKK in the early 2000s, to reflect the origins of the guerrilla forces, the Iranian contingent was organized into the PJAK.[62] With its close links to the highly effective and well-organized PKK, PJAK proved to be a dangerous enemy for the Iranian security services. During 2005 alone, it has been speculated that some 120 members of the Iranian security services were killed by PJAK operations, with PJAK operations being commonplace over

subsequent years. Since August 2011, the Iranian security forces intensified their offenses against PJAK strongholds, with the PJAK headquarters in Janosan being captured with heavy losses on both sides in September. Since then, the situation has been one of a status quo of skirmishing and retaliations.

It is in this setting that the tragic events that now occur in Iranian Kurdistan, which were used to open this chapter, now unfold with alarming regularity. Recent reports suggest that the Kurdish region of Iran now exists under heightened security measures and suffers from the imposition of arbitrary justice for crimes as limited as individuals expressing themselves against the regime.[63] Even under President Rouhani, the drumbeat of oppression, arrest, and executions has remained persistent, suggesting that Rouhani, just like his moderate predecessor Khatami, is unable to rein in the devastating realities that strategies that enshrine dominant, Persianized, nationhood create.

Conclusion

Being a people existing in the geographical periphery of the country, identifying with a Kurdish rather than Persian ethnicity, and largely adhering to Sunnism rather than Shi'ism in their religious association, the Kurds of Iran have found themselves marginalized, suppressed, and oppressed to varying degrees since the consolidation of the early Iranian state and the rise of a Persianized nationalist project that was pursued with vigor by Reza Shah and subsequent elites. Yet the Kurds showed themselves capable, as evidenced by the activities of Simko and Qazi Mohammed, to show unity (whether enforced or voluntary) and to challenge the model of dominant nationhood by emphasizing their own ethnic and communal distinctiveness. Tragically for the Kurds, circumstances conspired against them—whether of their own making, or of the Iranian government's, or of the wider international community—rendering down their brief moments of success to chaos and defeat.

It would be logical to assume that episodes of Kurdish restlessness contribute to the building of a cumulative orthodoxy in Tehran regarding Kurdish aspirations and the threat that Kurdish nationalism could pose to the status quo of Iran, if circumstances changed and opportunities arose that would see the Kurds prosecute their cause more sustainably than in the past. For central government authorities in Teheran, the lesson of Simko, Mahabad, the Revolution and the Iran–Iraq war might be that any lessening of central authoritarian controls spawns unrest of the sort that may undermine the status quo of the state (of Persian-dominant nationhood, of the

Islamic Republic, and of the political interests that have become entrenched particularly since 1979) or even, at a very unlikely extreme, the territorial integrity of the country. If this is the case, the situation risks enduring as a particularly destructive catch-22: authoritarianism from the Persian-dominated center heightens Kurdish disaffection, creating unrest, which, in turn, reinforces central authorities' perceived need for authoritarian control of the state's peripheries, which exacerbates peripheral dissatisfaction. This is a simple, negative, symbiotic relationship to explain, but an extremely difficult one to resolve in the current circumstances.

Writing a chapter reflecting on the political development of Iran from the perspective of the situation of the Kurds exposes how critical the ethnic question has been in Iran's journey over the last century. Yet it is striking that knowledge of the situation of the Kurds of Iran is extremely limited indeed. It is equally surprising that academics, with a few notable exceptions, who engage in the study of Iran or the study of the Kurds, are more often than not blind to the status of the Kurds in that state. This is a peculiar state of affairs for several reasons. Most significantly, perhaps, is the fact that Iran is multiethnic par excellence and, at a certain level, revels in the acclaim such a status generates in the post-modern world. Yet the Islamic Republic shows that being a multiethnic *country* is one thing; being a multiethnic *state*—tightly defined—is quite another. Also apparent is the fact that the modern Kurdish nationalist movement, whether in the vibrant and successful Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the tense and changeable Kurdish-dominated southeast Anatolia of Turkey, or the increasingly crystallizing Kurdish region of Syria, had its ideological roots firmly in the Kurdish territories of Iran. Long recognized as an intellectual center of Kurdish culture, intellectualism, and Kurdism, *Rojhelat* has given the Kurdish nationalist movement a considerable legacy of national foundations; yet, it seems that this spiritual home of Kurdish nationalism is now, at a time when "Kurdistan" may indeed be challenging the tortured state system established in the aftermath of World War I,[64] subdued—with Kurdish self-determination aspirations firmly held in abeyance by the overwhelming weight of the Persian-dominant nationhood that stands to remain without equal in Iran.

Notes

1. See, for example, Jochen Bittner, "Is Rouhani an Iranian Gorbachev," *The New York Times*, December 5, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/06/opinion/bittner-is-rouhani-an-iranian-gorbachev.html?hpw&rref=opinion&_r=0, accessed on December 9, 2013.

2. See Alexandra Hudson, "Iranian Kurd Leader Says West Shouldn't Be Fooled by Rouhani," *Reuters*, November 1, 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/01/us-iran-kurds-idUSBRE9A00TE20131101, accessed on December 9, 2013; Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, "Iranian Government Official Dismayed at Rise in Executions," *ICHRI Press Release*, November 6, 2013, http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/11/executions-kurdistan/, accessed on December 9, 2013; and Umar Farooq, "The Battle for Sistan-Baluchistan," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2013, http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2013/12/05/the-battle-for-sistan-baluchistan/, accessed on December 9, 2013.
3. Farooq, 2013; Monish Gulati, "Balochistan: The New Regional Tinderbox? Analysis," *Eurasia Review: News and Analysis*, November 13, 2013, http://www.eurasiareview.com/13112013-balochistan-new-regional-tinderbox-analysis/, accessed on December 9, 2013.
4. Agence France Presse (AFP), "Iran Hangs 16 in Reprisal for Pakistan Border Killings," October 26, 2013, published in in New Straits Times, http://www.nst.com.my/world/iran-hangs-16-in-reprisal-for-pakistan-border-killings-1.427139, accessed on December 9, 2013.
5. Ali Ansari argues convincingly that the origins of a modernist tendency and the rise of a Persian-associated form of Iranian nationalism had roots that reached back into the nineteenth century. See Ali Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 40–41.
6. Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 1–2.
7. According to the 2006 census of Iran, the Kurdish-inhabited provinces are populated as follows: West Azerbaijan: 2,873,459; Kermanshah: 1,879,385; Kurdistan: 1,440,156; and Ilam: 545,787, making a total of 6,738,787 people. Source presented at http://www.statoids.com/ulr.html, accessed on December 12, 2013. Also see Central Intelligence Agency, "Iran," in *The World Fact Book*, 2013, http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/, accessed on December 12, 2013.
8. For an initial presentation of the possible trajectories Iran may take in future scenarios, see the Saban Center at the Brookings Institute conference proceedings, *The United States and the Middle East: Avoiding Miscalculation and Preparing for Conflict* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institute, September 11, 2013).
9. Brenda Shaffer, "Iran: More than Persia," *The Great Debate: Reuters*, December 16, 2013, http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2013/12/16/iran-more-than-persia/, accessed on December 19, 2013.
10. Some of the most insightful books in these areas include Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London: Routledge, 1995); Ali Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change*, 2nd edn. (London: Chatham House, 2006); Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic* (London: Hurst, 2007);

Fakhreddin Azimi, *The Quest for Democracy in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Ali Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

11. See, for instance, Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Tribes and the State of Iran: The Case of Simko's Revolt," in Richard Tapper (ed.) *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 364–400; Farideh Koohi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran: Pastoral Nationalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005); David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Kerim Yildiz and Tanyel Taysi, *The Kurds in Iran: The Past, Present and Future* (London: Pluto Press, 2007); Charles MacDonald and Carole O'Leary (eds.) *Kurdish Identity: Human Rights and Political Status* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007); Hashem Ahmadzadeh and Gareth Stansfield, "The Political, Cultural, and Military Re-Awakening of the Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Iran," *Middle East Journal* 64 (Winter 2010), pp. 11–27; Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011); Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
12. See Nader Entessar, "Competing National Identities: The Kurdish Conundrum in Iran," in McDonald and O'Leary (eds.), 2007, pp. 188–201, 189.
13. Entessar, 2007.
14. See Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 12.
15. See Hakan Özuğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Loyalties, Competing Identities, and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2004); Sabah Ghalib, *The Emergence of Kurdism with Special Reference to the Three Kurdish Emirates within the Ottoman Empire*, Unpublished PhD dissertation (University of Exeter: Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, 2011).
16. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 39.
17. The term "meme" was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who used the term (which is a play on the word "gene") to describe a unit of cultural transmission. For a full account of the term, see Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).
18. Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 12.
19. Ansari, 2002, p. 120.
20. Natali, 2005, p. 119.
21. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 40; Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010 p. 12.
22. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804–1946* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 5, quoted in Entessar, 2007, p. 189.
23. Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 12; Entessar, 2007.

24. See Abbas Vali, "The Making of Kurdish Identity in Iran," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 4 (Fall 1995), pp. 1–22; Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 1–24; Abbas Vali, "The Kurds and Their 'Others': Fragmented Identity and Fragmented Politics," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 18.2 (1998), pp. 82–95.
25. For the definition and discussion of "ethnies," see Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).
26. Andreas Wimmer, "Dominant Ethnicity and Dominant Nationhood," in Eric Kaufmann (ed.) *Rethinking Ethnicity: Majority Groups and Dominant Minorities* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 40–58, 45. For an extended presentation of the concept of dominant nationhood, see Andreas Wimmer, *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
27. Heather Rae, *State Identities and the Homogenisation of Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 5.
28. See Özuğlu, 2004.
29. It is admittedly misleading to refer to these leftist, nontribal associations, as "new" because, as Martin van Bruinessen notes, "[i]t should not be assumed that at any period in the past all Kurds were 'tribal'. There have always been large numbers of Kurdish 'non-tribal' cultivators (variously called kurmanj, guran, rayat, misken), with no autonomous social organization beyond shallow lineages." The "new" aspect referred to in my analysis above refers to the politicization of these nontribally aligned clusters and their articulation of non-feudal positions, nationalist narratives, and leftist discourses. See Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Tribes and the State of Iran: The Case of Simko's Revolt," in Richard Tapper (ed.) *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 374.
30. For a detailed account of Simko, the Shakak confederacy, and "Simko's revolt," see Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Tribes and the State of Iran: The Case of Simko's Revolt," in Richard Tapper (ed.), 1983, pp. 364–400.
31. Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Tribes and the State of Iran: The Case of Simko's Revolt," in Richard Tapper (ed.), 1983.
32. Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Tribes and the State of Iran: The Case of Simko's Revolt," in Richard Tapper (ed.), 1983. Simko, in earlier years, had witnessed the murder of his older brother, Jafar Agha, by Persian forces, who cut his body into pieces and hung them from the gates of army garrisons. See Farideh Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 82.
33. Farideh Koohi-Kamali, 2003, pp. 383–384.
34. See Romano, 2006, pp. 188–192.
35. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 386.
36. Farideh Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 66.
37. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, pp. 388–389.
38. Koohi-Kamili, 2003, p. 90.

39. Özuğlu, 2004.
40. Koohi-Kamili, 2003, p. 94.
41. For a comprehensive, empirically rich, account of the events that surrounded the emergence of the Kurdish Republic centered on Mahabad, see William Eagleton, *The Kurdish Republic of 1946* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963). For a fascinating eye-witness account written by an American military attaché to Tehran, see Archie Roosevelt, "The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad," *Middle East Journal* 1 (July 1947), pp. 247–269.
42. See Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 14; Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 100; and Vali, 2011, pp. 20–24.
43. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 100. The flag of Mahabad is now used across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and is a regular feature of most Kurdish national movements across the region.
44. Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 14.
45. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 104.
46. Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 109.
47. James Clark, "Oil, The Cold War, and The Crisis in Azerbaijan of March 1946," *Oriente Moderno*, Nuova Serie 23 (3, 2004), pp. 557–574, 557. Also see Mark Lytle, *The Origins of the Iranian–American Alliance, 1941–1953* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1987).
48. Vali, 2011, p. 137.
49. Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, pp. 15–16.
50. See Martin van Bruinessen, "The Kurds between Iran and Iraq," *Middle East Report* 141 (July–August 1986), pp. 14–27.
51. This chapter does not address in great detail the chronology of political events vis-à-vis the Kurds and Iran occurred in 1980s as they tended to be more of an internal ordering of Kurdish affairs, within a context of limited political space that was the norm in this period. Writings that cover this period in more detail include Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Politics in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), Chapter 2 and Romano, 2006, Chapter 7.
52. See Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 23.
53. For details of Iran's targeting of Iranian Kurds based in Iraqi Kurdistan, see Jalil Gadani, *Penja Sal Khabat* [*Fifty Years of Struggle*], Vol. 2. Raniya (Kurdistan Region of Iraq) (Hiwa Press, 2004), pp. 273–277, quoted in Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 21.
54. Nader Entessar, 2010, p. 56.
55. There is a significant literature on the emergence and development of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which endured a difficult and violent 1990s before consolidating into a stable and increasingly influential federal region of Iraq in the period following the removal of the Ba'th government in March 2003. For works specifically on the development of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, see Michael Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergency Democracy* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003);

Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Golf War Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010); and Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner, 2012).

56. Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, pp. 21–22.
57. For a detailed account of the Khatami period, see Ali Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change*, 2nd edn. (London: Chatham House, 2006).
58. Entessar, 2010, p. 56.
59. Rae, 2002, p. 14.
60. See Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013) and Frederic Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
61. Of particular tragic note is the fate of Kurdish activist Shivaneh Qaderi, who was shot by Iranian security forces on July 11, 2005. He was then reportedly dragged through the streets tied behind a jeep. Photos of his mutilated body ignited demonstrations in Kurdish cities of Iran, which saw the Iranian government crackdown further by closing Kurdish journals and arresting prominent and known activists across the country.
62. Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 25.
63. See Danish Refugee Council, *Iranian Kurds: On Conditions for Iranian Kurdish Parties in Iran and KRI, Activities in the Kurdish Area of Iran, Conditions in Border Area and Situation of Returnees from KRI to Iran: 30 May to 9 June 2013* (Copenhagen: Udlændingestyrelsen (Danish Immigration Service), 2013).
64. See Gareth Stansfield, "The Unravelling of the Post-First World War State System? The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Transformation of the Middle East," *International Affairs* 89 (March 2013), pp. 259–282.

CHAPTER 4

The Syrian-Kurdish Movements: Obstacles Rather Than Driving Forces for Democratization

Eva Savelsberg

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the question of to what extent the Syrian Kurds or their different movements functioned as an obstacle to the democratization of the Syrian state. Did their activities hinder the development of more democratic structures in Syria? Did their (nationalist) requests initiate repressions from Arab nationalist groups or the central authority that otherwise would not have come into existence and that had repercussions for other parts of the country? Have the different Kurdish actors been at all interested in a democratization of Syria—or did they rather focus on the Kurdish issue? If so, did they at least manage to create democratic political and social structures in their own sphere of influence?

I will argue that, first of all, the Kurdish question in Syria has not been central enough and Kurdish stakeholders have not exercised sufficient influence to effectively hinder democratic developments had they arisen. Nor were the Syrian Kurds powerful enough to initiate democratic developments in the country on their own. Compared to states such as Turkey or Iraq, the number of Kurds in Syria is not only comparably low—an estimated 2 million, within a total population of around 20 million[1]—but at the same time, Syrian-Kurdish party leaders and activists have mostly not been very

interested in Syria as a whole. They rather tried to secure specific "Kurdish" rights from those in power—be it Bashar al-Assad or the French High Commissioner. Moreover, too often they have not even been interested in the Kurdish parts of Syria, but followed the agenda of Kurdish parties from Turkey or Iraq.

Secondly, the Syrian-Kurdish parties and activists were also not successful in creating more participatory structures in their own sphere of influence. Their political parties are in many ways a mirror picture of the Baʿth party, and the current Kurdish administration in the northeast of the country, to which many observers mistakenly refer to as "liberated areas," reproduces the authoritarianism of the Baʿth system—under a Kurdish nationalist cover. Developments in the Kurdish areas thus will not have positive effects on other parts of Syria, but will rather strengthen anti-democratic structures and help to hinder the fall of the regime. Moreover, they will not serve to check and balance the rise of Islamist groups—at least thus far the dominating Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) and its militia rather provoked Islamist attacks on the Kurdish territories.

To illustrate these assumptions, I will analyze three different historical occasions of Kurdish mass protest in Syria: the Kurdish-Christian autonomous movement in the Jazirah between 1936 and 1939, under the French Mandate; the al-Qamishli uprising of 2004; and the Syrian revolution starting in 2011.

The Kurds-Christian Autonomous Movement under French Mandate

For the Ottoman Empire, World War I ended on October 31, 1918. With the signing of the Armistice of Mudros a day earlier, the government was forced to accept occupation by Allied troops. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between Great Britain and France had already established the spheres of influence of these two Great Powers. At the Conference of San Remo in the spring of 1920, the boundaries between French and British territories were finalized, with France receiving the mandate for Syria and Lebanon.

The attitude of the Kurds living in Syrian territory toward the mandate power varied from region to region. The first segment of the Kurdish population to come into contact with the French were the Kurds from ʿAfrin—a region that had been taken over with relative ease in 1919. The Kurdish population of Damascus likewise proved loyal to the French. The leading Kurdish families, al-Yusiv and Shamdin, were critical of Arab nationalism, which threatened their ethnic and clan-based networks. In contrast, the

Kurdish tribes in the Jarabulus region and in the Jazirah cooperated in part with the French and in part with Mustafa Kemal's Turkish troops.[2]

After 1920, Kurdish tribes fled progressively from the Turkish army to the mandated territory. The use of this escape route was intensified particularly after the defeat of the Shaikh-Said Rebellion (1925) in Turkey and the deportation of Kurdish tribes from the border region of eastern Turkey. With French support, many of these tribes settled in the Jazirah. The agricultural development of this fertile region took place during the military occupation of northern Syria in the decade from 1920 to 1930. The development required extensive settlement of the region, including the founding of new trade centers: as of 1919, the traditional marketplaces of the region were on Turkish territory. The cities of al-Hasakah and al-Qamishli, which developed into the commercial centers of the region, were newly founded by the French military administration. By 1932, the majority of the Kurdish population had settled in the Upper Jazirah.[3]

The members of the first Kurdish national association, which had been established under Ottoman rule, fled along with tribal leaders, aghas, and shaykhs to the territory under French Mandate. Among them were members of the Bedir-Khan family. In 1927, this nationalistic Kurdish elite founded the organization Khoybun ("be oneself") in Lebanon.[4] Khoybun's support for the anti-Kemalist Ararat Uprising, which continued until its defeat (1930), was both diplomatic and military. On the diplomatic level, its members attempted to convince one of the Great Powers to support the Kurdish struggle. On the military level, their efforts in August 1930 to assist the partisans on Ararat by mounting a second front remained unsuccessful.

As a result, Khoybun turned its attention to promoting cultural activities, focusing on the development of the Kurdish language and the revival of Kurdish literature. With French support, several newspapers were published, and in 1941, a Kurdish-speaking radio program went on air.[5]

One of the difficulties France faced during its mandate was the growing influence of Syrian nationalists, who demanded that France grant Syria its independence. Meanwhile, the French governments of this period wanted, to varying degrees, to preserve their influence in the region. During the "great revolt" (1925) against the mandate power, France recruited countless minorities—Kurds, Circassians, and Armenians—in order to quell the rebellion. In addition, minorities were accepted into the regional army, Les Troupes Spéciales du Levant.[6]

In the spring of 1924, the mandate power received a series of petitions in which Kurdish activists demanded forms of administrative autonomy for the Kurdish-settled regions of the mandated territory. They pointed to the

Druze and ʿAlawi regions, as well as to the Sanjak of Alexandretta, all of which had been granted a certain degree of autonomy. In April 1924, for instance, Mustafa Shahin appealed to the mandate power in the name of all Kurdish Berazi tribes living between Jarabulus and Nusaybin, suggesting the creation of a Kurdish state. It was to include, among others, the Kurds of the Jazirah and Jabal-al-Akrad. Such a state could serve as a buffer against Turkey and curtail Arab nationalist ambitions.[7]

The character of the petitions to the mandate power changed when Kurdish intellectuals from Turkey established themselves in Syrian mandated territory. After 1928, petitions related to Khoybun not only contained general demands for autonomy, but also calls for the introduction of Kurdish as the language of instruction in Kurdish regions, the establishment of Kurdish as the second official national language, and the administration of Kurdish regions by local Kurdish officials.[8]

Only a few years later evidence of yet another change to the petitions became apparent, both in terms of content and of authors. After 1932, and especially between 1936 and 1939, a Kurdish-Christian autonomy movement emerged in the Jazirah. Its goal was an autonomous status for the Jazirah. The decision to restrict demands to this region can be traced back to the French official Pierre Terrier. Terrier was stationed in the Jazirah from 1924 to 1927 and, by order of the High Commissioner, subsequently responsible for all issues pertaining to Kurdish–French relations in Syria. Terrier, recognizing the central role that Kurdish refugees could play in both the development of the Jazirah and the border dispute with Turkey, established close ties with their tribal leaders. In view of the geographic fragmentation of the Kurdish areas into three separate regions, he saw the creation of an autonomous province that includes all three regions as unattainable and thus advised the Kurdish leaders to focus on the Jazirah.[9]

The core demands of the movement were an autonomous status comparable to that of the ʿAlawi and Druze or the Sanjak of Alexandretta, the protection of French troops, and the appointment of a French governor accountable to the League of Nations. Cultural and administrative demands, such as the advancement of the Kurdish language in schools and the hiring of Kurdish officials, were also crucial.[10] The autonomists pursued these goals by signing petitions and sending them to the French government and the League of Nations, by organizing public protests, by closing the bazaar, and by developing identity markers as for example a flag for the Jazirah.

On the Kurdish side, the autonomy movement was led by Hajo Agha of Haverkan, who had gathered a significant section of the Jazirah Kurdish tribes behind him. Others joined the Syrian nationalists, who had assembled

a coalition of landowners and urban notables in the National Bloc. The Syrian-Catholic patriarchal vicar, Bishop Hanna Hebbé, and the mayor of al-Qamishli, Michel Dôme, were the dominant figures on the Christian side. The majority of the Arab tribes in the Jazirah were torn between both camps. This is evident, for instance, in the example of the Shammar. While Daham al-Hadi was promoted to local leader of the National Bloc, other tribal leaders sided with the autonomists.[11]

It is no coincidence that the autonomy movement came alive in 1936. Three years earlier, the negotiations between France and Syria for a gradual implementation of Syrian independence had come to a halt. The successful general strike by Syrian nationalists in April 1936 led to their resumption.[12] The French–Syrian Treaty was signed in the same year. Its terms allowed the National Bloc, which had also won the parliamentary elections of 1936, to dominate Syrian politics until 1939. During this period, the National Bloc sought to consolidate the Arab character of the country and pursued an aggressive policy toward the autonomists. Only when pressured by France did the National Bloc recognize the autonomists' electoral victory in the Jazirah. The governor, appointed by the Syrian government in al-Hasakah in early 1937, was given the explicit task of strengthening the Sunni Arab population by encouraging farmers from Aleppo, Homs, and Hamah to settle in the region. In addition, officials who argued for the autonomy of the Jazirah were dismissed and replaced with others who took a positive stance toward Damascus.[13]

Against this background little provocation was needed for the situation to escalate. When Syrian police tried to arrest a leader of the independence movement on July 5, 1937, they were met with gunshots. Several days of armed conflict between rebels and the Syrian police followed, and the bazaars of the major cities of the Jazirah were closed. Ultimately, the governor appointed by Damascus and numerous high officials, as well as a large portion of the police force, took to their heels and fled. The autonomists established an alternative local administration in the Jazirah.[14] French officers of the Services Spéciaux supported the so-called Revolt of 1937. After the signing of the French–Syrian Treaty they feared a loss of influence in Syria. However, the Syrian nationalist faction soon took revenge by attacking the Christians of ʿAmuda in August 1937.[15] Prior to the attack, they had carried out a pan-Islamic campaign among the Kurds of the Jazirah. Accordingly, Kurdish tribes were also involved in the attack on the Christian quarter of ʿAmuda, which was quelled by the French Air Force. In the aftermath, the participation of Kurdish tribes in the attack led to tension within the Kurdish–Christian alliance. Representatives of the mandate power made it

clear to the Christian leaders of the autonomy movement that they would only survive in Syria if they made peace with the Arab-Muslim majority.[16]

In 1939, the rise of the National Bloc came to an end, at least for the time being. On December 31, 1938, the Syrian parliament rejected the French–Syrian Treaty negotiated in 1936, as it included additional agreements that, among other things, provided for the strengthening of minority rights.[17] The government in Damascus resigned in February of 1939. At the beginning of July, the Syrian Parliament was dismissed, the Syrian Constitution suspended, and the Jazirah placed under the immediate control of the French.[18]

With the beginning of World War II, Turkey, which had already declared itself an opponent of any sort of Kurdish autonomy, became an increasingly important coalition partner for the Allies. Furthermore, the British had gained in influence. In contrast to the French, they were in favor of Syrian independence. At the beginning of June 1941, Great Britain, along with Free France, occupied Syria and Lebanon, where as a result of the Vichy government's ascent to power, a representative of this regime had been appointed High Commissioner. The invasion was accompanied by an explanation, in the course of which de Gaulle promised Syria and Lebanon independence.[19] While France remained responsible for the administration of Syria, Great Britain took responsibility for the military protection of the region. In the Syrian parliamentary elections of July 1943, the Syrian nationalists and the National Bloc once again emerged victorious.[20] The new government insisted that the French immediately relinquish their authority[21]—a demand the mandate power was not prepared to meet. In May 1945, an Arab revolt broke out against the French. Great Britain eventually intervened on the side of Syria. As a result of these events, France withdrew from Syria entirely in the spring of 1946.[22] The country became politically independent, but neither an independent status for the Jazirah nor minority rights had been secured.

The Kurdish-Christian autonomous movement—even though never asking for separation from Syria—had rather concentrated on its otherness with regard to the Arab majority and on gaining specific rights for the Kurdish-Christian population than on influencing the development of the country as a whole. Moreover, most Kurdish autonomists felt much closer to their "brothers" in eastern Turkey than to the new central authority in distant Damascus.[23] In this regard, developments in the 1930s are very similar to developments in 2004 or since 2011, as will be shown below. However, at the time, when Arab nationalism was the dominant ideology, the chance to enforce minority rights was minimal.

After discussing the time of the French Mandate, I will now jump to the year 2004, which is obviously a large leap in time. However, this leap in time is justified. First of all, within Syrian independence and the turn of the millennium, no Kurdish mass protest took place. With the foundation of the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Partiya Yekîtî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê, Yekîtî) in 1992, Kurdish requests became more visible and a mobilization of the Kurdish arena started—albeit to a very limited scale and without consequences for the overall situation in Syria.[24] At the same time, the suppression of the Kurds during this period of time—for example, the expatriation and dispossession of about 120,000 Kurds in al-Hassakah province in 1962 and the implementation of an Arab belt along the Iraqi and Turkish borders in the 1970s—did not influence the level of authoritarianism generally applied in Syria, but rather stood out as symptom of that authoritarianism. The persecution of the Kurds centered on a comparably small ethnic group in a comparably small and remote part of the country, hardly affecting Syria's political system as a whole.

The "al-Qamishli Uprising" of 2004

Violent demonstrations in the northern Syrian-Kurdish enclaves and the Kurdish areas of Aleppo and Damascus marked the eruption of Kurdish anti-establishment protests on the Syrian political scene in March 2004. Most media sources reported that on March 12, 2004 during a football match between the local team and Dayr az-Zaur in the town of al-Qamishli, insults between the fans of the two sides escalated into a riot that spilled out into the streets. Other sources reported that the riot was started by the provocations of the fans from Dayr az-Zaur, a town traditionally associated with the Sunni Arab tribes who sympathized with the Iraqi regime. Riding around the town in a bus, the fans of that team allegedly chanted slogans insulting the Iraqi Kurdish leaders, Barzani and Talabani, while flaunting portraits of Saddam Hussein. When fans of the local team responded with chants praising President George Bush ("We will sacrifice our lives for Bush"), the battle between the "Dayri," armed with knives, stones, and sticks, and the Kurdish supporters, erupted inside the stadium, which turned out to be to a disadvantage for the latter.[25]

The governor of al-Hasakah, Salim Kabul, gave the order to the security forces to open fire, resulting in six dead, all Kurds, three of whom were children. This sparked rioting throughout al-Qamishli where residents burned grain warehouses and destroyed scores of public buses and private vehicles.[26] The same evening, Kurdish students from the University of Damascus

attempted to approach the United Nations (UN) building as a sign of protest against the inaction of the UN in defense of the Kurds. Later that night, some Kurdish parties decided to assemble a group, by means of placards and communication by portable phones, to protest against the actions of the security forces, capitalizing on the funerals planned for the victims.[27]

The next day, the Kurdish political parties' expectations for a turnout were greatly surpassed. Thousands of people joined the procession accompanying the coffins to the cemetery of Qudurbag, in the traditional Kurdish quarter of the town. That day, Christians, and Arabs of al-Qamishli, although less numerous than Kurdish protestors, also took part in the protests. Security forces, supported by armed militias from Arab tribes, countered this demonstration by again firing into the crowd, triggering violence that culminated in the destruction of statues of Hafez al-Assad. Rumors of a real massacre quickly circulated and thousands of people demonstrated in the main Kurdish towns, and in Arab cities with a strong concentration of Kurds, like Hamah, ar-Raqqah, Aleppo, and Damascus. Soon, however, protesters in al-Qamishli brandished Kurdish flags and chanted Kurdish slogans. Consequently, Christians and local Arabs withdrew from the protest movement, which then became entirely Kurdish.

The reaction of the security forces between March 12 and 25 was surprising in its brutality. By late March, the final count was 43 dead (seven were Arabs), hundreds wounded, around 2,500 arrests, and more than 40 Kurdish students dismissed from Syrian universities. Before the protests, the Syrian government had been unaware of the Kurdish capacity for action and was surprised by the scale of dissent. The visibility of the "Kurdish problem" in Syria was heightened by worldwide media coverage.

In several ways, the al-Qamishli revolt (*serhildan*) is different from earlier protests in the Kurdish areas of Syria. First of all, for the first time thousands of Kurds openly defied the Baʿthist regime by mobilizations and various repertoires of collective action such as marches, commemorations, cultural festivals, and demonstrations. For the first time in the history of contemporary Syria, the protest movement touched all Kurdish territories, thus reinforcing the symbolic unity of the Syrian-Kurdish arena—"Syrian Kurdistan."

However, young men, mostly from lower social classes,[28] were the driving force behind the unrest of 2004, not the Kurdish political parties. As early as March 14, 2004, a coalition formed by these parties had called for an end to the protests and rallies and three days of mourning for those who had been killed. Additionally, they agreed to cancel the celebrations for the Newroz Festival on March 21 in order to prevent further protests. Instead of public celebrations, solidarity with the "martyrs" of al-Qamishli was to be

symbolized by wearing black badges and hanging black flags on houses. The PYD was the only party to break from this consensus and hold an official celebration.[29]

Secondly, after 2004 the Kurdish parties have been approached by other Syrian opposition groups. Abroad, the National Salvation Front (NSF), established in early 2006, and the Reform party of Syria, led by Farid Ghadri and based in the United States, were said to be on the verge of offering a "democratic" solution to the Kurdish problem in Syria. Inside the country, intellectuals, human rights activists, and the secular opposition established connections with Kurdish organizations.

However, these new contacts did not result in any longer lasting, trusting cooperation between the Kurdish and the Arab opposition. Instead, in the aftermath of the al-Qamishli revolt, Syrian-Kurdish parties sought a new balance with the regime or, in other words, a new accommodation between the regime and the Kurdish movement in Syria. The Syrian regime would be more likely to allow a flexible approach with respect to public expressions of Kurdish identity (language, music, cultural festivals, and publications), while the Kurdish movement would not embrace the goal of overturning the government of Bashar al-Assad.

Thus, the "al-Qamishli uprising" illustrates strikingly that anti-regime protests in the Kurdish regions did not have the power to initiate anti-regime protests in other parts of the country, or rather among non-Kurdish segments of the population. For the people in Homs or Hamah, protests in the Kurdish regions—if they were noticed at all—were rather perceived as "separatist threat" than as a protest against an authoritarian regime one could possibly join. At the same time, the Kurdish political parties were not able to include the non-Kurdish population of the majority Kurdish regions in the protests. Moreover, they early decided to rather contain the protest than to try to broaden it. One may interpret this as the realistic assessment that they were too weak to negotiate meaningful concessions through exercising pressure—or as the naive assumption that the regime would grant them certain (ethnic) rights—as the re-naturalization of those Kurds stripped of their citizenship in the 1960s—if they would cooperate with them and not become openly disloyal.

As will be shown below, we will find this same reservation among Kurdish party leaders when analyzing their participation in the Syrian revolution.

The Kurdish Factor in the Syrian Revolution

When the 2011 uprising started, many observers believed that the Syrian Kurds would play a major role in the overturning of the regime. However,

as during the al-Qamishli uprising in 2004, it was not the political parties, but predominantly young people who supported the protests in the spring of 2011. Only the Kurdish Future Movement in Syria (Şepêla Pêşrojê ya Kurdî li Sûriyê) publicly positioned itself on the side of the protestors from the very beginning of the revolution.[30] A split subsequently arose between the Future Movement and the other Kurdish Parties: The Future Movement is the only party aside from the PYD, the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK),[31] that is not a part of the Kurdish National Council.

There is no sound evidence of organizational ties between the young people who were active in 2004 and those who began organizing demonstrations in spring 2011. In fact, local coordinating committees in the Arab parts of the country were the model for the development of similar groups in the Kurdish regions.[32] Initially these Kurdish committees discussed and shared the weekly demonstration slogans with their Arab allies.[33] At the end of March 2012, however, Kurdish activists began using their own slogans—slogans that often made reference to specific Kurdish issues and had not previously been accepted as general slogans.[34] Aside from the question of providing for specific Kurdish issues in the slogans, the use of religious mottos also became a point of contention.[35] In addition to the difficulties with the Arab opposition, the Kurdish parties played a significant role in the "Kurdification" of the protest discourse, as was also reflected in the progressive disappearance of the Syrian independence flag of 1948—the symbol of the Syrian revolution—at demonstrations in cities like al-Qamishli. From the beginning, most party representatives were not really interested in the protests and distanced themselves from the Arab opposition, especially from the part that advocated for an overthrow of the regime. For example, party members were critical that "the Arabs" had abandoned the Kurds in their fight against the Syrian regime in 2004, and thus they saw no reason to support an "Arab revolution" now. Initially local coordinating committees and youth groups were very attractive to young people, but over the past three years, their influence has gradually diminished. One reason for this is that it is difficult to continually develop activities given the scarcity of resources, limited support from the outside, and scant organizational skills. Another aspect seems to be even more important, as the activist ʿAbdussalam ʿUthman explains in an interview:

> The coordinating groups were initially very popular. After a while their popularity decreased. The people saw that the coordinating groups were behaving more and more like our parties. At the moment they are very weak; they cannot change society.[36]

Indeed, many of the early youth groups have disbanded; others have split or have merged together only to split again shortly thereafter. Currently, most youth groups have close ties to one of the Kurdish parties and/or are members of the Kurdish National Council.[37]

The Kurdish National Council, a federation of most Kurdish political parties (see above), was founded in October 2011 with the goals of profiting from the popularity of the youth groups, unifying the Kurdish political parties programmatically,[38] and more effectively representing Kurdish demands. Thus far, none of these goals have been realized.

Although the Kurdish National Council has managed to co-opt the youth groups, this has not led to an increase in popularity or legitimacy, but only to the suppression of potential rivals.

Programmatically, the Kurdish National Council has hardly anything new to offer. Ideas for the political future of the Kurds in a Syria post-al-Assad are nothing more than buzzwords. With regard to a solution to the Kurdish issue, the Kurdish National Council's first declaration on October 26, 2011 stated:

> The conference was of the opinion that the Kurdish people are an original component of Syria. They are living on their historic, ancestral land and represent a crucial part of the national fabric of peoples in Syria. This makes both the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish people as an essential part of the Syrian people and as the second largest ethnicity necessary, a just and democratic solution to the Kurdish question that secures the people's right to self-determination within a still-existing Syrian nation-state. Further the conference was of the opinion that a solution to the Kurdish question represents, on the one hand, the beginning of true democracy and, on the other hand, a test for the Syrian opposition, which is striving for a better future for Syria on the basis of the principle that Syria belongs to all Syrians.[39]

In April 2012, the Kurdish National Council formulated a new political program that differs from the original program in that it no longer explicitly calls for the right of self-determination for the Kurds and for political decentralization. Isma'il Hami, secretary of the Yekîtî and member of the Kurdish National Council, emphasized in a press release that the demand for self-determination nevertheless remains a part of the program. According to Hami, this demand is echoed in the call to seek the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish people and its national identity, as well as the call for the recognition of the Kurdish language as an official language and the recognition

of the legitimate national rights of the Kurdish people in accordance with international norms and conventions.[40] Finally, in December 2012, Faisal Yusuf, then chairman of the Kurdish National Council, summarized the Kurdish demands as follows:

> Our requirements are the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish people and its identity as well as the guarantee of its legitimate national rights in accordance with international norms and conventions. In addition, in accordance with its share of the total population of Syria, the Kurds should have approximately a fifteen percent share of representation in the Coalition [for more on this body, see below] and its committees. All discriminatory practices and decrees affecting the Kurds must be repealed, the victims must be compensated, and the status quo ante must be reinstated. Moreover, Syria should officially be called the Republic of Syria, not the Syrian Arab Republic. Furthermore, we demand that the Coalition commit itself to supporting all national armed groups, not only the Free Syrian Army.[41]

With regard to its stance toward the Syrian revolution and an overthrow of the regime, initially there were two factions in the Kurdish National Council on these issues. One wanted to support the revolution more clearly. The most important representatives of this faction were the Yekîtî, both factions of the Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria (Partiya Azadî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê, Azadî), and ʿAbdulhakim Bashar's Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (el-Parti) [Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (el-Parti)]. These parties, which were united in the Kurdish Democratic Political Union—Syria (Yekîtiya Siyasî ya Demokrata Kurd—Sûriyê), founded on December 15, 2012,[42] had close ties to Massoud Barzani's Iraqi-Kurdish Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The KDP-Iraq supports—if sometimes cautiously—the Syrian revolution. The second faction consists primarily of ʿAbdulhamid Hajji Darwish's Kurdish Progressive Party in Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Pêşverû ya Kurdî li Sûriyê) and Muhiyuddin Shaykh Ali's Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria (Yekîtî) [Partiya Yekîtî ya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (Yekîtî)]. The Progressive Party maintains close ties to Jalal Talabani's Iraqi-Kurdish Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which has been hesitant about the Syrian revolution thus far. For its part, the Democratic Yekîtî, which is largely strong in ʿAfrin, traditionally has good relations with the PYD and its mother party, the PKK. This faction generally rejected closer cooperation with those parts of the Syrian opposition that clearly advocate an overthrow of the regime.

This discord contributed significantly to the fact that the Kurdish National Council has never been a member of the Syrian National Council, and it first decided in September 2013 to join what at this time is the most important oppositional union, the National Coalition, founded on November 11, 2012. This decision was motivated by the consideration that at that time a possible US military strike would have given the Syrian opposition and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) specifically the upper hand. In this case, it would have been a mistake not to be part of the opposition.

However, as the military strike was not carried out, the Kurdish National Council's enthusiasm to work with the Syrian opposition declined. In the peace negotiations in Geneva in January and February 2014, the Kurdish National Council as well as the PYD requested to be represented with an independent Kurdish delegation, as a "third party" in addition to the National Coalition and the Syrian government—even though the Kurdish National Council was a member of the National Coalition. As the request was turned down, a representative of the Kurdish National Council participated in the Geneva conference as part of the opposition, whereas the PYD was excluded.

At the same time, loyalities or rather coalitions seem to be in transition. The Yekîtî, previously one of the few pro-revolution parties, left the alliance with the el-Parti of Abdulhakim Bashar and the two Azadîs.[43] Whilst the aforementioned parties, pressured by Iraqi-Kurdish president Massoud Barzani and his Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iraq, dissolved and merged in the beginning of April 2014 to become the Kurdistan Democratic Party–Syria (Partiya Demokrata Kurdistan–Sûriye), the Yekîtî did not join them. It is currently siding with Jalal Talabani's PUK. Allegedly, the Yekîtî was dissatisfied with the preferential relationship the el-Parti enjoyed with the KDP-Iraq, in particular regarding financial support, and therefore changed alliances.

Besides the youth groups and the Kurdish National Council, the third and most important actor in the Kurdish regions is currently the PYD, founded in 2003. After the deportation of PKK-leader Abdullah Öcalan from Syria in October 1998,[44] numerous high-ranking PKK cadres were successively extradited to Turkey and PKK supporters in Syria were arrested and detained long term. The PYD was established in order to further bind PKK members and sympathizers living in Syria to the party. At the same time, the party's refounding was intended to help evade state repression. The latter was hardly successful: Until the beginning of the protests in 2011, the PYD was not only the party with the most people in Syrian prisons, its members were also, as a rule, sentenced to longer prison terms

than the members of other parties and were systematically subjected to torture. Since then, the balance of power has shifted in favor of the PYD, and the PYD/PKK has once again entered a strategic alliance with the Syrian government. The Iraqi president and chairman of the PUK allegedly played a key role in initiating contact between the Syrian government, the PKK, and, as a third partner, the Iranian government.[45] During Saddam Hussein's rule, Talabani spent many years in asylum in Damascus—his good relations with the al-Assad family stem from this time. There are also no reservations regarding the Iranian government and the PKK: During the intra-Kurdish civil war in the mid-1990s in Iraq, both supported the PUK against its (then) political opponent, Massoud Barzani's KDP. Against this background, Talabani was able to negotiate the following deal: In September 2011, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, PJAK), the Iranian arm of the PKK, ended its armed fight against Iran. This was not only in the interest of Iran, but also in the interest of the PUK, as armed attacks by the PJAK regularly led to Iranian retaliation on PUK-controlled Iraqi territory. At about the same time, the PYD in Syria was reinvigorated. According to information from various activists, as many as 200 PKK militiamen from Turkey and Iraq as well as weapons of Iranian origin were smuggled into Syria at that time. Thus armed, the PYD began to prevent the Kurdish population from effectively participating in the revolution. The Syrian government clearly profited from this arrangement as its own security forces did not need to take action against the Kurdish population. It could thus avert a situation in which massive violence would prompt the Kurdish political parties to abandon their wait-and-see approach to the Syrian revolution. At the same time, the government could focus its powers on the main centers of uprising. In addition, any weakening of the Syrian revolution is also in the interest of Iran: The fall of the Baʿth regime and the potential for (extremist) Sunnis in Syria to seize power would mean the loss of an important regional ally for Iran and would impede direct access to Hizbullah in Lebanon.

The PYD and its militia, the People's Defense Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), currently exercise state-like power in Syria's Kurdish regions. The Syrian regime has ceded the administration of several cities and villages to the PYD. These cities were taken over by the PYD without notable armed conflicts, a fact that points to agreements—whether official or unofficial—between the PYD/PKK and the Syrian regime.[46] In April 2014, the PYD fully controlled most towns in the province of al-Hasakah with the exception of al-Qamishli and al-Hasakah, the two largest and strategically most important cities. The towns of ʿAfrin and ʿAyn al-ʿArab (Kobanî) were also completely under PYD control. Surrounding villages

were partly controlled by the PYD and partly by Islamists groups, in particular around ʿAyn al-ʿArab. In mixed cities like al-Qamshli, government structures exist parallel to PYD-structures, whereas in cities with a large Kurdish majority, government structres have completely dissolved.

On the one hand, the PYD's initial financial position as a branch of the PKK is already considerably better than that of all other Syrian-Kurdish parties; on the other hand, the PYD knows how to economically use its control over vast parts of Syria's Kurdish regions: Customs duties and protection money, for example, for the military protection of the oil fields in Rumailan,[47] guarantee high revenues for the PYD. These revenues are a significant reason why controlling the Syrian-Kurdish regions is attractive for the PYD or rather the PKK. Another reason is that the border region to Turkey can be used not only as a refuge, but also as a place for recruiting and training new fighters. For the Syrian regime, the cooperation with the PYD is also beneficial: Like his father, Bashar al-Assad utilizes the PKK to put pressure on Turkey. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which deeply upset the Syrian regime when it positioned itself on the side of the Syrian opposition, can neither politically nor militarily afford to let the PKK/PYD permanently establish itself in Syria's Kurdish regions. At the same time, it is not in the AKP's interest to resolve the conflict militarily. A Turkish invasion of Syria would allow the PKK and its Kurdish critics to close ranks and would also seriously disrupt the peace process that has just begun in Turkey. Since the FSA began operating in the Kurdish regions, the transfer of control to the PYD offers the Syrian government another advantage: Instead of government troops, the PYD provides the armed response to the FSA there. Ultimately, the Syrian regime may also willingly cede control to the PYD because it assumes that this control will be comparatively easy to regain, should the government survive the protests and the civil war. When PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was deported from Syria in 1998 and the PKK lost its bases in Syria and in Lebanon, the PKK responded with neither protests nor (armed) attacks against the Syrian government.

The strength of the PYD compared to all of the other parties in Syria's Kurdish regions is due to the fact that it has a core of militarily well-trained cadres and commands enough resources to get potential sympathizers to commit to it for the long term. The number of armed PYD members is estimated to be 10,000–20,000.[48] Other Kurdish parties, for example, the Yekîtî or the Azadî, have only several dozen fighters.[49] They are not in a position to prevent the PYD with its YPG militiamen from kidnapping, interrogating, torturing, and even killing activists as well as members of the parties of the Kurdish National Council at will.[50]

On June 27, 2013, the largest PYD attack to date took place in ʿAmuda: When demonstrators demanded the release of activists kidnapped by the YPG[51], threw stones at YPG vehicles, and berated the YPG as "Shabbihah" (a militia loyal to the regime), YPG fighters began firing into the crowd. At least eight people were killed, including an eight-year-old child who was run over by a YPG vehicle. YPG fighters erected checkpoints in the city and carried out raids; several dozen people were abducted. Moreover, the YPG closed off the city and prevented doctors from al-Qamishli from treating the injured in ʿAmuda. A curfew was also imposed. Aras Ahmad Bango, an armed guard for the Yekîtî party office, was killed by a gunshot to the head on the roof of the party office. YPG fighters then stormed the party office and brought all those present—between 50 and 70 people, mostly party supporters—under its control. All of the office equipment were destroyed. In addition, the party office of Mustafa Jʿuma's Azadî and the hunger strikers' tent[52] in the center of ʿAmuda were burned down. In order to prevent the funeral marches for those killed from turning into mass demonstrations against the PYD, the relatives of the deceased were forced to bury them with only the immediate family present.[53] For the first time since the beginning of the protests in the Kurdish regions in the spring of 2011, there were no dissident demonstrations in ʿAmuda on the Friday after the attacks. With the exception of al-Qamishli, the youth movements also cancelled their protests in other Kurdish cities. Officially, this was to protect social peace and prevent intra-Kurdish bloodshed, but in fact, it was out of fear.

The attack in ʿAmuda not only put an end to the cautious attempts to denounce PYD politics at demonstrations and protest against them with a hunger strike, but the PYD was also able to end the political activities of others for several months. Only since November 2013, isolated protests supported by a limited number of activists take place again.[54] Remaining criticism was silenced by the PYD's allegation that they were the only power to check and balance Islamists in the Kurdish areas. However, in skirmishes between the YPG and Islamist units such as the Jabhat an-Nusrah, it is not always clear what can be traced back to attacks by the Islamists and what was provoked by the YPG. For example, in mid-June 2013, the YPG drove the Jabhat an-Nusrah out of Raʿs al-ʿAyn, after its chairman Salih Muslim Muhammad had claimed in late March 2013 that they were no longer present there.[55] There is much to suggest that the fighting did not flare up again because of pressing problems, but rather because the YPG had intentionally chosen this moment to distract people from the conflicts in ʿAmuda and win back sympathy from the Kurdish population by fighting against the Islamists. Moreover, at the end of December 2013 units of the YPG, the National Defense Army (a regime militia) and the Syrian Army started a

joint offensive against Islamist units near Tall Hamis (40 kilometers south of al-Qamishli) and Tall Brak (30 kilometers west of Tall Hamis). Both cities are situated outside the Kurdish areas that the PYD is pretending to protect against Islamists. In the end, the YPG had to withdraw after major losses.[56] It is reasonable to argue that such "offensives" rather provoke counterattacks by Islamists than to weaken them and that the reason behind the YPG joining the offensive was loyalty toward the regime rather than responsibility for the safety of the Kurds.

PYD propaganda describes its rule as "democratic self-governing collective self-administration from below," based on the organization of the people into civil institutions.[57] However, the "social contract" the PYD refers to when asked to explain this concept has never been officially published.[58] Comparably nebulous is the question of who participated in the establishment of a local administration in the Jazirah, ʿAfrin and ʿAyn al-ʿArab on November 12, 2013.[59] No comprehensive list of signatories has ever been published. Moreover, those participants known are either affiliated with the PYD—such as the PYD's women's organization Yekîtîya Star—or are entirely unknown—such as the Liberal Kurdish Union (Yekîtiya Lîberalî ya Kurdistanî), the Kurdish Democratic Peace Party in Syria (Partiya Aştî ya Demokrata Kurdî li Sûriyê) or the Communist Kurdistanian Party (Partiya Komonîst ya Kurdistanî). Neither are the Kurdish National Council or any of its senior political parties such as the Yekîtî or ʿAbdulhakim Bashar's el-Parti participating in these local administrations. This lack of transparency and accountability was not exceptional, as the PYD alone promoted the declaration of a local administration, followed by the appointment of three governments in the "cantons" of the Jazirah, Kobanî and ʿAfrin on January 21, 27 and 29, 2014.

It is obvious, thus, that the policies of mediation and containment advanced by the Iraqi-Kurdish president and chairman of the KDP, Massoud Barzani, against the PYD have failed. In summer 2012, Barzani invited the Kurdish National Council and the People's Council of Western Kurdistan to Erbil multiple times for mediation sessions. In July 2012, the Supreme Kurdish Committee (Desteya Bilind a Kurd) was formed, with both sides assigned 50 percent representation.[60] However, this Committee has never been functioning. As analyzed above, a joint administration only exists on paper and there is little to suggest that this will change.

In the beginning of the revolution, thus, Kurdish youth has played a relevant role in the setting of an agenda in which "democracy" and "dignity" became keywords. Soon, however, traditional political parties and powers like the Kurdish National Council and the PYD/PKK became again dominant. While the Kurdish National Council has successfully assimilated

and marginalized the majority of the youth groups, the PYD and its militia, the YPG, dominate all other Kurdish parties. Both have been acting as obstacles, not as driving forces for democratization. Five decades of Baʿthist rule in Syria as well as the fact that most of the Kurdish political parties depend on Kurdish parties in Iraq and Turkey—financially as well as ideologically—have severely undermined their significance as an alternative to the existing political system and their capacity to offer concrete solutions to their people.

The Kurds as a Motor of Democratization?

Having analyzed three occasions when the Syrian Kurds participated in public mass protest, one has to admit that the Kurdish opposition is not—and has never been—in a position to initiate a "democratization" of Syria. Moreover, analyzing the current political situation, there is no evidence that this state of affairs may change in the near future: The PYD, on the one hand, limits itself to pure power politics dressed up as Kurdish nationalism. Their politics are a telling example for what Vincent Geisser calls the "authoritarianism of the dominated."[61] As argued in a forthcoming article with Jordi Tejel, we should analyze authoritarianism as a "relationship" between different actors, including the "subordinated," rather than as a given, an instrument in the hands of governments. The Kurdish National Council as well as its individual parties, on the other hand, have no means to successfully compete with the PYD and therefore most of the time try to deny that the relationship between them and the PYD is profoundly imbalanced and highly problematic. Moreover, they dramatically failed to develop ideas for the future of the Kurdish population in Syria beyond buzzwords like "federalism" and "democracy."

However, federalism does not necessarily mean participation or representation and federal systems can be as undemocratic as central ones. If federalism solely means that power is shifted from an authoritarian president in the center to authoritarian governors in the provinces, nothing is won. At the same time, also in many nonfederal states a certain measure of self-administration is or can be granted to provinces and municipalities, for example through a decentralized administration and the designation of specific areas with final decision-making authority. Thus regional or municipal authorities can, for example, have a certain measure of autonomy in questions of city and regional planning, economic investments, and in the area of education. In addition, they can be granted authority to supervise security personnel (police, intelligence service, border personnel) at the municipal

or regional level. In light of this, it would be necessary to develop a concept of administrative decentralization and self-government, including electoral procedures, that could be established in the Kurdish region but—and this is important—also in all other Syrian provinces. Such a concept needs, above all, to be based on two principals: a) political decisions of all kinds should be taken on the lowest administrative level possible and b) institutions should be structured from the bottom-up, which means for example replacing nomination from above by election from below. If the Kurdish parties were willing and capable of developing—together with the Syrian opposition—such concepts for all of Syria, they might gain meaningful decision making competences for the provinces and regions where Kurds are the majority without risking being labeled as separatist. Parallel to such advancements they could develop a concept of self-administration or self-government within the Syrian state in order to also enjoy certain rights not covered by a general decentralization—e. g. language rights.[62] Such initiatives would not stop the PYD's/PKK's authoritarian approach—an approach that may well be ultimately asking for a military answer. However, they would actively support a meaningful democratization of Syria, and thus a development the Kurdish population would also benefit from. Moreover, the Syrian Kurds would finally be more than puppets of the KDP and PUK, or victims of the PYD/PKK respectively.

To hope, on the other hand, that the Kurds could play a leading role in securing minority rights in Syria and, starting from this point, support the development of a more democratic regime, is misleading—not only due to the circumstances on the ground, but also for theoretical considerations. Minority rights are usually granted if a state has already achieved a certain democratic standard—which is obviously not the case in Syria. Moreover, neither the Kurds in Syria nor those in Turkey or Iraq define themselves as minorities, but rather as second *staatsvolk*.

However, and as this chapter has shown, it is currently unrealistic to think that the Kurds will play any meaningful role in democratizing Syria—or even their own society.

Notes

1. The figure of 2 million is extrapolated from information provided by the French mandate power in January 1943 and reflects the general population growth in Syria.
2. Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 11–12.

CHAPTER 8

The Ebb and Flow of Armed Conflict in Turkey: An Elusive Peace

Güneş Murat Tezcür

Introduction

This chapter offers an empirically rich analysis of violence, reform, and negotiations characterizing the Kurdish question in Turkey during the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) rule. It is organized as three sections. The first section offers an analysis of violence on the basis of a new events dataset. A military stalemate has ensued between the two centralized and disciplined political entities with opposing ideological visions. The *Kurdistan Workers' Party* (PKK) pursues a classical "war of attrition" with the goal of achieving substantial concessions from the Turkish state. In response, the Turkish state pursued a mixed strategy of concessions and punishments to erode public support for the insurgency. While both sides try to maximize their power consistent with a realist perspective, the dynamics of electoral competition and public opinion complicates their strategies. The following section discusses the electoral dynamics, the negotiation attempts, and the reforms of the AKP. It demonstrates that there is a strong negative correlation between the scope and intensity of violence and the continuation of negotiations. However, the negotiations are not effective in bridging the gap between the demands of the insurgents and the expectations of the Turkish state. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the literature on negotiated settlements to civil wars to identify the challenges to the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question in Turkey. It suggests that a fragmented political

environment facilitating power sharing may be the most sustainable road to an enduring peace and furthering of Turkish democracy.

The Anatomy of the Armed Conflict

The armed conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, which started with the insurgent attacks in August 1984, has been one of the longest civil wars in the post-World War II period. Among the 31 armed conflicts listed as active in 2012 by the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, only two conflicts (the conflict between the Sudanese government and the Sudanese Revolutionary Army (SRF) and the conflict between the Colombian government and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC)) have longer history.[1] Factors identified as making rebellions feasible also contribute to the viability of the PKK as a military force.[2] The Kurdish insurgents have sanctuaries across the border in the Iraqi Kurdistan; have access to significant funds from the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe; recruit heavily among economically underdeveloped Kurdish communities not only in Turkey but also in Iran and Syria; and operate freely in the mountainous region forming the Turkish–Iraqi border and penetrating deep into eastern Turkey. The insurgency has survived significant losses and the capture of the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999 to reppear as a potent fighting force after 2004. Its armed struggle has irrevocably led to the formation of a strong ethnic consciousness among millions of Kurds and generated high levels of ethnonationalist mobilization. Yet, the PKK failed to establish "liberated zones" free from the Turkish state's control. Furthermore, its willingness and ability to wage a costly protracted popular war against the Turkish state has significantly waned since the early 1990s.

Despite its longevity, there is no authoritative source about fatality statistics. This is true especially for the 1984–1999 years when the clashes were most intense. One of the earliest works on the conflict mentions that the conflict claimed the lives of more than 5,100 people from 1984 to 1992.[3] A Human Rights Watch report published in 1995 notes, "[o]f the 13,000 civilians and soldiers estimated to have been killed between 1984 and 1994, half died in the past two years."[4] Kirişçi and Winrow (1997) relying on statistics provided by the Turkish state note that a total 20,181 people were killed as a result of the clashes. More than half of these fatalities were PKK militants.[5] Similarly, David McDowall writes, "by 1996, the estimated number of deaths was 20,000. By 1999, they were thought to exceed 35,000."[6] This figure is broadly consistent with the number provided by then President Süleyman Demirel in late 1999. According to him, a total of 36,445 (25,139 PKK militants, 5,882 security forces, and 5,424 civilians) were killed in

the 15-year fighting.[7] Yet, a former general directing counterinsurgency campaigns against the PKK gives significantly lower numbers for the same period. He writes that a total of 29,102 people were killed in the violent conflict between 1984 and 1999. As many as 18,951 of them were PKK militants.[8] Cemal (2003) cites the numbers provided by the Emergency Rule General Governorate and writes that 23,473 PKK militants, 5,040 security forces, and 4,444 civilians lost their lives from July 19, 1987 to May 31, 2001.[9] A more recent report provided by a Turkish newspaper based on numbers provided by the Turkish Armed Forces General Staff, Gendarmerie General Command, and Directorate General of Police gives a yearly and categorical (militants, security forces, and civilians) breakdown of the casualities between August 1984 and March 2009. According to this report, a total of 41,828 people died as a result of the armed conflict. A great majority of these deaths were identified as PKK militants (29,704). In the 1984–1999 period, the fatality rate was 38,871 (27,657 militants, 5,824 security forces, and 5,390 civilians).[10] In contrast, the PKK statistics published in various issues of *Serxwebun* magazine show significantly lower militant but higher security forces deaths.

As these examples clearly demonstrate, there are considerable discrepancies even between statistics provided by the Turkish state. Hence, it is unfortunate that many scholars and pundits uncritically rely on these statistics. For political reasons, both sides tend to grossly inflate the casualty figures of other sides and somehow deflate their own losses. Moreover, the official figures provided by the Turkish state are likely to classify many civilian deaths as militant deaths given the nature of the counterinsurgency campaigns not distinguishing between armed militants and unarmed sympathizers, especially in the first half of the 1990s.

Three general observations about the intensity and lethality of the conflict are warranted given these caveats. First, the conflict is highly professionalized in the sense that a great majority of the deaths were armed combatants. With some exceptions, both sides mostly avoid large-scale civilian massacres that characterized civil wars in many other contexts such as Peru,[11] Algeria,[12] and Sri Lanka.[13] Next, the intensity of the conflict remains medium compared to similar armed conflicts elsewhere. On the one hand, the level of casualties is significantly higher than ethno-nationalist conflicts in Western European countries such as the Basque insurgency in Spain and the IRA insurgency in North Ireland. For instance, the *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA) attacks in the Basque Country resulted in the deaths of 287 people from June 1968 through December 1980.[14] While the conflict in Northern Ireland was more lethal, it killed less than 4,000 people between 1968 and 1999.[15] On the other hand, the armed conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK

claimed significantly fewer lives than the ethnic civil wars in Sri Lanka from 1983 to 2009, Chechnya in the 1990s, Iraq after the US invasion of 2003, and in Syria after the Arab uprisings of 2011. Finally, violence was most intense from 1992 to 1999 when death rate per year was above 1,000, the threshold used by the Correlates of War (COW) Project to classify an armed conflict as a civil war. Violence in the first decade of the twenty-first century remained limited compared to the 1990s. This decline occurred primarily because while the insurgents preserved their fighting capacity, their willingness and ability to wage a more extensive and intensive war became significantly more limited in the post-1999 period.

With the help of a new dataset, it is possible to develop a more precise understanding of the dynamics of the conflict in the second period of war, from 1999 to 2012. The Kurdish Insurgency Violent Events (KIVE) v.1 dataset provides comprehensive and reliable information about the nature, intensity, and temporal and geographical characteristics of the conflict. The KIVE dataset covers all insurgency related events with fatalities that took within the boundaries of Turkey from 2000 to 2012. It provides precise information about the date, location, type of event (i.e., insurgent attack against an outpost, military operation targeting an insurgent sanctuary, etc.), and the number of deaths (categories of soldiers, police, village guards, militants, and civilians). It is based on both Turkish daily newspapers (in particular, *Hürriyet* and *Zaman* that usually provide the most detailed coverage) and pro-insurgency news sources (e.g., Firat News Agency-ANF, and the website of the PKK's armed forces, HPG). As a general rule of thumb, the former provides more reliable information about the security and civilian fatalities while the latter is more accurate about the militant deaths. Moreover, the reporting of the war has been much improved since 2000. In the 1990s, many deaths were poorly recorded and journalists were barred from the conflict zones.

Figure 8.1 shows the intensity of clashes between the Turkish security forces and the PKK insurgents on a monthly basis between 2002 and 2012. Several patterns are worth noting. First, the clashes have a very seasonal characteristic reflecting the rural nature of the armed conflict typical of guerrilla warfare. The clashes are generally most intense in late summer and early fall months before the PKK militants withdraw to their winter camps. Next, there is a strong negative correlation between the armed clashes and political negotiations. The intensity of clashes steadily increased from 2002 to 2008 before significantly declining in 2009 when the AKP government initiated negotiations with the PKK leadership. However, with the failure of the 2009 negotiations, the armed conflict gained a new momentum in 2011 and 2012 and reached levels unprecedented since 1999. As negotiations

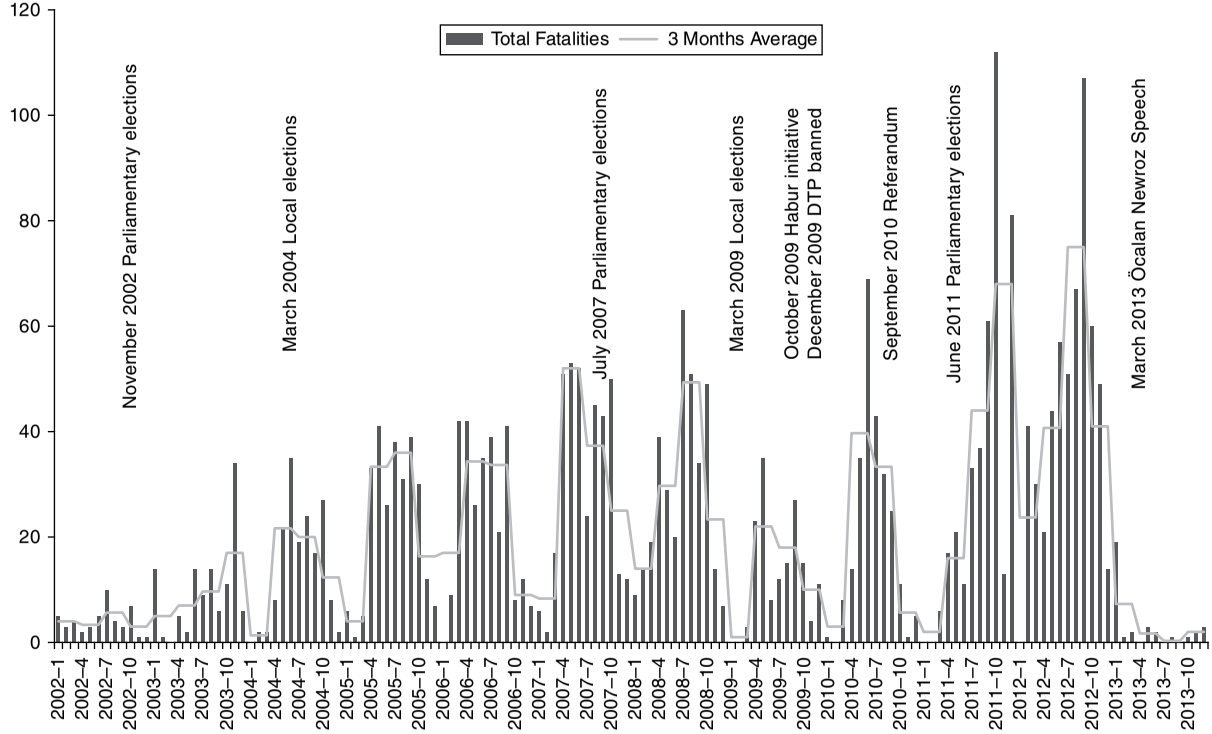

Figure 8.1 Total fatalities (security forces, militants, and civilians) related to the Kurdish insurgency that took place within the boundaries of Turkey. Casualties as a result of cross-border operations are not included.

Source: Kurdish Insurgency Violent Events (KIVE) dataset v.1.

were reinitiated in late 2012, violence was mostly absent throughout 2013. Overall, the warring parties, both the Turkish state and the Kurdish insurgents, seem to have high levels of cohesion and organizational unity. An important implication is that "spoiler problems" besetting peace process elsewhere is not a major concern in this case.[16] Finally, the PKK primarily wages a war of attrition that aims to obtain significant concessions from the Turkish state. According to Kydd and Walter (2006: 51), "in an attrition strategy, terrorists seek to persuade the enemy that the terrorists are strong enough to impose considerable costs if the enemy continues a particular policy."[17] The PKK does not qualify to be a terrorist organization according to their definition that associates terrorism with "the use of violence against civilians by nonstate actors to attain political goals" (52) as it primarily targets security forces. The PKK violence gives the message that the insurgents have the resolve and capacity to inflict harm as long as the Turkish state does not make significant concessions to their political demands. The PKK violence, which remains mostly restrained (i.e., typically avoiding indiscriminate attacks) and politically calculated, in the post-1999 period has been a tool to renegotiate the terms of Turkish democracy, since other avenues for effective Kurdish nationalist political representation have not been readily available. At the same time, the continuation of violence has significant human and economic costs, and precludes the ability of the Kurdish nationalists to form powerful political alliances with the Turkish political actors. As argued at the end of this chapter, the greater Kurdish political representation in the parliament and access to the executive power in coalition governments would both bring a permanent end to the violence and contribute to Turkish democracy by alleviating ethnic discrimination.

Political Reforms, Negotiations, and Violence

It can be argued that democratization would result in a decline in political violence for two reasons. Democratization would both generate more avenues for nonviolent political participation and reduce categorical inequalities disfavoring societal groups such as ethnic minorities. From this perspective, the PKK decision to reignite armed struggle in 2004 is completely unanticipated. After all, the European Union (EU)-induced reform process was resulting in gradual but significant changes in Turkey's constitutional and legal order. As shown in Table 8.1, a series of reform packages starting in 2001 brought limited but still historical improvements in the status of Kurdish language in Turkey.[18] The AKP sought international and domestic legitimacy vis-à-vis the military by enthusiastically embracing a pro-EU agenda shortly after coming to power. Even if these reforms were far from

meeting the demands of the Kurdish nationalists, the PKK's decision to retake up arms during the reform era is actually puzzling. The PKK's return to armed struggle was primarily a function of the insurgent leadership's fear of losing control over its constituency.[19]

Two developments generated concern within the insurgent leadership that the PKK was losing its hold over its ethnic constituency.[20] First, the victory of the AKP in the 2004 local elections and its strong support in the Kurdish populated areas was a significant blow to the PKK's claim to be the exclusive representative of the Kurdish people in Turkey. The PKK-affiliated *Demokratik Halk Partisi* (DEHAP) that fielded candidates under the banner of the *Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti* (SHP) won the municipality of only four Kurdish provincial centers—Batman, Diyarbakır, Hakkâri, and Şırnak. This was a significant loss compared to that of 1999 when the DEHAP's predecessor *Halkın Demokrasi Partisi* (HADEP) won the municipial elections in Ağrı, Diyarbakır, Batman, Hakkâri, Mardin, and Van. In 2004, the AKP won the municipial elections in the predominantly Kurdish provinces of Ağrı, Bingöl, Bitlis, Muş, Siirt, and Van. A candidate from the fringe Islamist party, *Saadet Partisi* (SP), became the mayor of Mardin before switching to the AKP. The electoral losses signified that the Kurdish nationalists' attempts to regenerate themselves as a nonviolent viable force were not being successful. In contrast, the AKP portraying itself as a reformist force challenging the military-dominated political status quo and delivering economic growth was gaining ground among the Kurds. A large number of pious Kurds found the AKP's Islamic identity as an appealing factor ameliorating the exclusionary aspects of the hegemonic Turkish nationalism.[21] Given this electoral context, the PKK's decision to retake up arms is consistent with the argument that under certain conditions democratization can actually bring more ethnic violence.[22]

The PKK aimed to show that it can make parts of the country ungovernable by using violence as a strategic asset. It can be objected that PKK violence would actually undermine its popular support as many Kurds would become worse off as a result of the deteriorating security conditions in the region. After all, the armed clashes between the security forces and the insurgents adversely affect economic development, hinder public services, and result in harassments in everyday life. In this regard, who is blamed for violence becomes the critical question. As recent research on counterinsurgency programs argues (e.g., Sambanis et al. 2012;[23] Lyall et al. 2013[24]), social distance between the combatants and civilians in a civil war greatly affects how the civilians respond to the attempts by the combatants to gain their support. As the PKK recruited tens of thousands fighters from many Kurdish families in Turkey over the last three decades, it could count on

their almost unconditional support. As violence has crystallized ethnic identities, the PKK has emerged as a group fighting for their rights in the eyes of many Kurds. Also, the governmental policies criminalizing large numbers of people on terrorism charges have fuelled popular grievances and contributed to the image of the PKK as a force fighting for legitimate goals. Furthermore, and as shown above, it has mostly avoided attacks that would harm civilians (e.g., bomb attacks in urban areas).[25] Consequently, it has not received the lion share of the blame for the continuing violence as evidenced by the increasing gains of the Kurdish nationalists in the 2009 local and 2011 elections.

The second factor generating anxiety among the PKK leadership by 2004 was the consolidation of the Kurdish self-governance in Iraq following the US invasion of Iraq. The rising prestige of Massoud Barzani who achieved Kurdish self-rule in Iraq was a direct challenge to Öcalan's self-portrayal as the leader of the Kurdish people. The Kurdish self-governance in Iraq did not only hinder the PKK's ability to develop a popular base among the Iraqi Kurds but also showed the limits of its struggle in the absence of strong external backers. The Iraqi Kurds' alliance with the United States was the main reason for their ability to achieve sustainable autonomy for the first time in modern history. Lacking a strong external patron, the PKK decided that a strategy of attribution based on sporadic guerrilla attacks against the Turkish security forces would be the most effective way to achieve concessions from the Turkish state.

The PKK's return to violence complicated the AKP's strategic calculations. As the EU–Turkey relations entered into era of stagnation and deterioration after the accession negotiations, the AKP's Kurdish reforms came to a temporary end by 2005. Furthermore, as emphatically argued by Baskın Oran, the implementation of the reforms was made harder as a result of bureaucratic resistance. In the face of increasing PKK activity, the AKP initiated another period of reforms by 2009.[26]

As shown in Table 8.1, the AKP's Kurdish reforms can be perceived as taking place in three stages: (1) the EU-induced reform process losing steam by 2005, (2) the reforms between 2009 and 2011, and (3) the reforms of 2013. Three factors explain the AKP's Kurdish overtures after the 2007 parliamentary elections. Primarily, the AKP government faced an existential threat from the military and high judiciary until the 2010 constitutional amendments that eliminated the high judiciary as a bastion of anti-AKP sentiments. The AKP's image as an anti-military force boosted its appeal among the Kurds who were victimized during the military-led counterinsurgency campaigns in the 1990s. Meanwhile, the AKP also built a strategic alliance with liberals instrumental in shaping the public discussions and the

Table 8.1 Legal and administrative reforms liberalizing Kurdish identity and language in Turkey in the post-1999 period

Reform	*Date*
Constitutional amendment restricting freedom of expression in "languages prohibited by the law"	October 2001
Allowing broadcasting in Kurdish	March 2002
Allowing private courses in Kurdish	August 2002
Abolishing prohibition on Kurdish personal names	June 2003
Public TV station broadcasting in Kurdish	January 2009
Allowing electoral campaigning in Kurdish	March 2010 and September 2013
Establishment of Kurdish language and literature programs at university level	January 2011
Allowing elected Kurdish language courses at the fifth grade	September 2012
Allowing limited defense in Kurdish at courts	January 2013
Allowing Kurdish language education in private schools	September 2013
Abolishing "Oath of Allegiance" (to the Turkish Nation) recited by primary school students	September 2013
Allowing q, w, and x in computer keyboards	September 2013
Allowing village names revert back to their originals	September 2013

Gülen movement whose financial power and influence in the police and judiciary proved to be crucial in the AKP's struggle against the military.

The second main reason for the AKP's attempts to reach out to the Kurds was electoral concerns. The Kurdish support for the party was particularly important during the crucial 2007 parliamentary elections. The AKP victory in these elections did not only enable the election of Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül as president, but also facilitated a series of trials targeting high-ranking army commanders. The 2010 referendum approving a series of constitutional amendments was central to the party's strategy to subdue the high judiciary and further reduce the political autonomy of the military.[27] These amendments introduced civilian trials of members of the army accused of violating the constitution, subjected decisions of the high military council to judicial review, lifted the immunity of the leaders of the 1980 coup, and changed the composition and appointment procedures of the high judiciary. As the AKP formed a powerful coalition bringing diverse social and political forces together, it became more assertive vis-à-vis the military.

The discovery of hand grenades in a derelict home in Istanbul in June 2007 gradually expanded into a series of investigations targeting several hundreds of individuals, including high-ranking generals, politicians, journalists, and businessmen. According to the indictments, these individuals were members of a clandestine armed organization within the state (known as *Ergenekon*) and conspired to overthrow the government. A separate investigation started in January 2010 after the Turkish daily *Taraf* published documents about a coup plan organized by the First Army Command (known as *Balyoz*) in March 2003. Public prosecutors ultimately indicted 365 individuals for an incomplete attempt to overthrow the Turkish government. Meanwhile, several other investigations put many other soldiers on trial.

The *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri* (TSK) commander and the commanders of the land, air, and navy forces resigned as an act of desperate protest in August 2011, but the trials continued unabated. By early 2013, more than one-tenth of all active generals were in prison.[28] The final verdict in the *Balyoz* trial was reached in September 2012. More than 300 suspects were given prison sentences. The final verdict in the *Ergenekon* trials was reached in August 2013. İlker Başbuğ, the commander of the Turkish Armed Forces between 2008 and 2010, received a life sentence for his alleged leadership of the organization.[29] The Court of Appeals verified most of the *Balyoz* sentences in October 2013. The verdicts in the *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* trials symbolized the ultimate demise of the political autonomy of the Turkish Armed Forces. The victories of the AKP over the military leadership enabled the government to initiate direct negotiations with the insurgency that may contribute to shorten the duration of civil war.[30]

A third major reason for the AKP's Kurdish reforms was the challenge presented by the PKK violence. Especially after the failure of a Turkish army land operation to destroy the PKK camps in the Iraqi Kurdistan in February 2008, there was a growing consensus that the insurgency could not be defeated by military solutions (for the views of the army commanders on this subject, see Bila 2010).[31] As the military's political power gradually declined, the AKP was better positioned to pursue direct negotiations with the insurgents and to adopt a reformist strategy. Hence, the timing of the first direct meetings with the Turkish state and the insurgent leadership at large was not coincidental. The parties had their first face-to-face meeting in Oslo, the capital of Norway, in September 2008. After Öcalan submitted a roadmap to the government representatives in August 2009, Hakan Fidan, the head of the Turkish intelligence service, *Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı* (MİT), started to attend the bilateral meetings. As the negotiations continued, the PKK declared ceasefire in May 2009. According to the KIVE dataset, 152

people lost their lives as a result of the insurgency-related violent events in Turkey in that year. That was the lowest level of fatalities since 2003.

The process produced a series of reforms (see Table 8.1). The most notable development was the establishment of a public TV station broadcasting in Kurdish in January 2009. However, the hopes that the meetings would result in the demobilization and disarmament of the PKK proved to be highly unrealistic. The AKP government allowed a group of PKK members to return to Turkey in October 2009. The group was triumphantly met by large and cheering crowds at the Habur crossing. The images of guerrillas treated as victorious war heroes provoked the nationalist Turkish public opinion and weakened the government's already feeble resolve. Even before the Habur incident, the government pursued a strategy of mass incarcerations to weaken the Kurdish nationalist activism. The police operations starting in April 2009 resulted in the arrest of almost 4,000 Kurdish politicians and activists by October 2011.[32] Yet, the meetings continued. A total of eight to nine meetings took place until the June 2011 parliamentary elections.[33] This process practically ended with the PKK attack in Silvan district of Diyarbakir that killed 13 soldiers on July 14, 2013. However, before the attack, the clashes had an upward trend as visible in Figure 8.1. During the campaigning for the 2011 parliamentary elections, both sides adopted a more combative rhetoric and appeared uncompromising.

By fall 2012, the armed conflict reached unprecedented levels since 1999. According to the KIVE dataset, a total of 541 people lost their lives in Turkey throughout that year. Furthermore, the Kurdish nationalists sought multiple avenues of resistance to bring pressure on the AKP government. On September 12, 2012, the 30-second anniversary of the 1980 coup, a group of PKK prisoners initiated a hunger strike. The core demand of the prisoners was the end of the isolation of Öcalan who was not allowed to meet with his lawyers since July 2011. Many more prisoners joined the strike over time. By early October, around 180 prisoners in 17 prisons were on strike.[34] When Öcalan called for an immediate and unconditional end to the strikes on November 17, hundreds of prisoners on strike were joined by prominent public personalities, including Kurdish parliamentarians such as Ahmet Türk and Leyla Zana.[35] Consequently, the hunger strikes ended with a *quod pro quo* between the government and Öcalan. The government ended Öcalan's isolation and restored his public access; Öcalan terminated the strikes before any deaths. It later became evident that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was seeking to establish a presidential system through constitutional amendments, sought the support of the Kurdish nationalists. In exchange for their voting support, Erdoğan would be willing to make

unprecedented concessions favoring the Kurdish nationalists. A similar situation occurred in 2010 when the AKP-initiated constitutional amendments received majority support in a referendum in which many Kurds voted yes.

The negotiations between the government and Öcalan became public when Ahmet Türk and Ayla Akat of the *Barışve Demokrasi Partisi* (BDP), another Kurdish nationalist electoral party) visited Öcalan in his island prison. Different from the earlier round, the negotiations in 2013 involved the BDP as a key interlocutor whose main function was to facilitate communication between Öcalan and the PKK leadership based in the mountainous Qandil region of Iraqi Kurdistan. Öcalan's Newroz message on March 21, read to a very large crowd in Diyarbakır, raised the expectations that an imminent resolution was finally on the horizon. He explicitly called for the PKK-armed units to withdraw to their camps in the Iraqi Kurdistan and declared that now it was the time for armed struggle to give way to democratic political struggle. After some hesitation and foot dragging, the PKK leadership announced that its forces were withdrawing in early May. Overall, both the Turkish security forces and the PKK fighters refrained from attacking each other. After a PKK attack in early January 2013, no significant clashes were reported for the rest of the year. In fact, according to the KIVE dataset, a total of 34 people lost their lives during the year. Fifteen of them (14 militants and a soldier) lost their lives in a large-scale PKK attack against a border outpost on January 7. This was a retaliatory attack against a military operation that killed ten insurgents, including a high-ranking commander, on December 31, 2012.

However, by late summer 2013, it was clear that the incompatibility between the insurgent and the government demands remained huge.[36] Moreover, police brutality and Erdoğan's firebrand rhetoric in reaction to the Gezi protests of May and June 2013 was a major blow to Erdoğan's international image, deepening political polarization and weakening his power to establish a presidential system under his leadership. The rift with the Gülen movement and the corruption scandal in December 2013 further undermined Erdoğan's unilateral rule that reacted with measures further curbing judicial independence. In this regard, the suspension of violence by itself did not advance democratization at least in the short term. Ironically, the AKP's authoritarian turn was associated with a truce with the Kurdish nationalists. However, as Erdoğan temporarily abandoned his presidential ambitions under a new system empowering the office of the president, his incentives to offer significant concessions to the Kurdish nationalists declined. The PKK makes four core demands: (1) the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish identity, (2) a process of decentralization that would increase self-governance at local levels, (3) the integration of the insurgents

into the political system including the liberation of Abdullah Öcalan, and (4) Kurdish language education in public schools. By summer 2013, the PKK leadership was complaining that the government was not reciprocating to its confidence-building moves. It declared the suspension of the withdrawal of its forces in early September. The AKP government's responses, which were announced as part of a "democratization package" on September 30, 2013, fell dramatically short of Kurdish nationalist expectations. The government's only partial response to these demands was to allow Kurdish language in private schools (see Table 8.1). It appeared that the government's main concern was to sustain the ceasefire at least until the March 2014 local and the August 2014 presidential elections and to maintain its electoral support among the ethnic Kurds. Not surprisingly, the reactions of the Kurdish nationalist leaders to the package were negative. In an interview, Cemil Bayık, the leading PKK commander, characterized the package as "sabotaging the process initiated by the Kurdish people's leader Abdullah Öcalan."[37] A shaky ceasefire was still in effect, but earlier hopes that the 30-year-old armed conflict was nearing an end were dashed. The possibility that armed clashes may start again was high as "rebel organizations fighting on behalf of excluded ethnic groups are generally more willing to accept longer periods of fighting until a decisive outcome is reached."[38]

Coalition Building and Ethnic Empowerment

After three decades of violence, it is highly unlikely that either party would achieve a military victory. While the Turkish state remains much stronger than the insurgents, it seems unable to defeat the insurgents. Yet, the insurgents lack resources to make the Turkish state retreat from parts of the territories they seek to govern. They are also too weak to achieve their most important demand, the establishment of an autonomous Kurdistan similar to the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, by force. Given the improbability of victory by either side, public discussions focus on the relative merits of two distinct but interrelated paths to end the conflict: democratization and a negotiated settlement. As argued above, democratization by itself would unlikely to bring an end to the insurgency as long as the conditions that make it feasible persist.

The central problem with the negotiations is the incompatibility between the state and insurgent positions. The Turkish state is unwilling to forgo its authority over education, finance, judiciary, and internal security in the regions claimed by the Kurdish nationalist movement. Yet, a negotiated settlement to the Kurdish conflict in Turkey would inevitably involve decentralization, allocating some of the powers enjoyed by the Turkish state (i.e.,

education, tax collection, judicial decisions, and police) to popularly elected local authorities. Furthermore, recent scholarship suggests that negotiations lead to sustainable peace only under some restrictive conditions. Negotiated settlements are unlikely to be successful in the absence of external powers guaranteeing the security of the warring parties during the transition period.[39] Additionally, negotiated settlements do not necessarily result in durable peace and democratization in the long run even if they may "save lives" in the short run.[40] While decentralization may reduce ethnic conflict, it may also foster demands for secessionism in the presence of strong regional parties such as the BDP.[41]

Negotiations between the Turkish state and the Kurdish nationalists would have a better chance of success in a political environment characterized by more fragmentation allowing for greater minority access to executive power. The way in which political power is configured in Turkey severely restricts Kurdish representation at the executive branch of the government and higher echelons of the state bureaucracy. In contrast to arguments suggesting that all citizens regardless of their ethnic background could rise to positions of power as long as they subscribe to the prevailing Turkish nationalist ideology as Heper [42] and Aktürk[43] argue, an ongoing study offers some preliminary findings supporting the view that the Turkish state has actually been ethnicized to the exclusion of the Kurds. It shows that the Kurdish representation among the provincial governors, the most powerful authorities at local level given Turkey's highly centralized system, in the post-1980 period has been disproportionally low. Only 29 of 496 governors in this period were born in the 17 provinces with significant Kurdish populations (birth provinces of 134 governors remain unknown). These ratios are well below population ratios of these provinces to Turkey. Interestingly enough, some of the governors born in the predominantly Kurdish provinces are not ethnic Kurds.[44] Furthermore, the Kurdish nationalist parties are excluded from executive power and their parliamentary representation remains well below their voting share, thanks to the 10 percent electoral threshold instituted after the 1980 coup. The AKP government has been the major beneficiary of the threshold since 2002 and has refused to lower it despite demands from the Kurdish nationalists and other opposition parties. Overall, the Kurdish conflict in Turkey fits the pattern of ethnic exclusion identified as one of the major reasons for civil war in the modern world. The formation of nation-states dominated by certain ethnic groups at the expense of others generates acute grievances fuelling armed rebellion.[45] In fact, the violation of the political legitimacy principle of self-determination has been one of the main causes of warfare.[46] As David Mason argues in his contribution to this volume, the Turkish political system has neither provided the Kurdish

nationalists a good chance of being included in the governing coalition nor offered institutional and constitutional safeguards against the extinction of the Kurdish ethnic group.

Under these conditions, the Kurdish nationalists would have a greater chance of securing their demands only when other major players in the Turkish system need their support. Such a situation briefly occurred when Prime Minister Erdoğan's presidential system ambitions generated an opportunity for the Kurdish nationalists, until the developments throughout 2013 undermined the immediate *raison d'être of* a possible deal between the two sides. In any case, negotiations would be more fruitful only if the Kurdish nationalists first gain more representation at the political power.[47] A more fragmented party system with a lower barrier of entry would allow the Kurdish nationalists to gain more parliamentary seats and become part of a coalition government. As they have access to political power, they could directly affect policies that would alleviate some of the Kurdish grievances (i.e., the lack of Kurdish public education and the Kurdish underrepresentation in the state administration). As shown elsewhere, ethnic parties' commitment to nonviolent politics significantly increases as they gain access to executive decision making.[48] The lowering of the 10 percent electoral threshold would be an important step in this direction. Furthermore, mainstream Turkish parties are more likely to adopt multilingualism if they need the cooperation of the Kurdish nationalists to form a government, as occurred in different periods in Malaysia and Singapore.[49] As the Kurdish nationalists gain more bargaining power and access to executive power, a power-sharing agreement incorporating PKK militants into the institutional system and hence reducing their incentives to fight could contribute to democratization in the long run.[50]

Notes

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5. Kemal Kirişçi and Gareth M. Winrow, *The Kurdish Question and Turkey: An Example of Trans-State Ethnic Conflict* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), p. 142.
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CHAPTER 10

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Kurdish Dilemma in Iran

Nader Entessar

Introduction

Iranian nationalities have played an integral part in the country's century-long anti-authoritarian, anti-imperialist, and pro-democracy movements. The Kurds of Iran have certainly been an integral part of this struggle, and they have largely framed their demands for recognition of their sociopolitical and cultural rights within the broader context of a democratic and decentralized Iran. The purpose of this chapter is to examine factors that have inhibited the realization of Kurdish demands since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. In particular, the chapter seeks to analyze the role played by the securitization of the Kurdish demands in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and how the nexus between securitization and coercion redounds to the detriment of the broader democratization in the country. In other words, Kurdish demands for greater cultural and sociopolitical space will have a spillover effect into the larger Iranian society and will help the country establish a transparent and democratic political system that is responsive to the needs of all of its constituent elements.

Identity Demands vs. Securitization of Identity

As Janine Clark and Bassel Salloukh have noted, the scholarly debate about identity formation has been heavily dominated by constructivist

explanations associated with interpretations that assume that "ethnic identities are a product of material and political struggles in specific historical contexts."[1] One of the best examples of constructivist explanations can be found in the writings of Benedict Anderson and his pioneering work on the process of identity formation and the rise of nationalism among various nationalities and ethnic groups.[2] In Iran, the development of the Kurdish national movement, especially its politicized variety, must be placed in the broader context of the country's journey toward modern, territorially based nationalism. The Russo-Persian war of 1804, which resulted in the loss of vast tracts of Iranian territory in the Caucasus to the tsarist Russia, was arguably a defining moment for the development of Iranian nationalism based on the "myth of unity" among the country's constituent parts and groups.[3] Iranian officials as well as intellectuals began to develop a new concept of Iranian identity away from its long-established cultural construct (i.e., Iran as cultural entity) and toward a land-based, territorially focused, and Persianized concept of nationhood. That is, as Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet has observed, the "Iranian homeland, though still formally the birthplace of Armenians, Kurds, and Baluchis, as well as Farsi and others, increasingly came to represent the *vatan* [country] of Shi'i Persians through the persistent efforts of the state to extirpate competing cultures."[4]

In the same vein, Mostafa Vaziri argues, *a la* Benedict Anderson, that the modern concept of Iranian nationhood has been an imaginary construct created by Iranian intellectuals and historians to glorify Iran's past and create a fictitious notion of territorial unity.[5] Vaziri, of course, does not deny the existence of a strong sense of Iranian identity and culture. What he contends is that nationalism based on the close identification of a nation with an all-powerful and centrally controlled state dominated by a single ethnic group is an "imagined" phenomenon. In addition, one can posit that this would inevitably lead to a clash of nationalisms in multinational states, especially when the central government is based on authoritarian structures.

In general, constructivist arguments do a good job of explaining the nuances involved in identity formation but they do not "do a good job of explaining ethnic conflict."[6] The Kurdish predicament in Iran, as elsewhere in the Middle East, has not been so much the product of Kurdish identity formation but the result of securitization of ethnic issues in the country. States that frame the presence of nationalities and ethnic demands in terms of security tend to adopt repressive policies toward these groups as they increasingly view the recognition of ethnic rights or autonomy as tantamount to secession.[7] The so-called Kurdish problem in the Islamic Republic of Iran has been first and foremost the product of the state's policies that

have consistently securitized ethnic issues and have failed to institute a desecuritized approach to nationality issues since the Islamic revolution.

It is worth noting that the Kurds enthusiastically supported the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979—a broad spectrum of the Kurdish population participated in the revolutionary process from the outset. However, the initial Kurdish euphoria over the demise of the Pahlavi monarchy gave way to the bitter realization that the new revolutionary regime, like its monarchical predecessor, would look at Kurdish demands through a security lens. In fact, after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, it became quite clear that Ayatollah Khomeini's objective of establishing a strong and centralized Islamic state would clash with the goals of the autonomy-seeking Kurds in Iran. Moreover, Khomeini rejected ethnic differences among Muslims. Nonetheless, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic did recognize the existence of linguistic diversity among the Iranian people. In Article 15 of the Constitution, Persian is recognized as the official language of the country. All official communications must be in Persian. However, the uses of local languages in the media and in the classroom are permitted so long as they are used in conjunction with Persian.[8] In practice, classroom instruction in Kurdish is not tolerated by the authorities, and Kurdish language media operates under severe restrictions.

On March 3–31, 1979, the Iranian government conducted a referendum asking the country's citizens to vote on a single proposal—to maintain the monarchical system or replace it with an Islamic republic. Neither of these two choices was palatable to many Kurds and to Adbul Rahman Ghassemlou, the Secretary General of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), who had returned to Iran after years of exile in Europe. The KDPI, as well as many other secular groups in the country, boycotted the referendum. However, Khomeini's exhortations for a massive turnout resulted in an overwhelming victory for the new regime as 98 percent voted to replace the monarchy with an Islamic republic.[9]

Furthermore, many Sunni religious leaders opposed the designation of Shi'ism as the official religion of the state in the new constitution. According to Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, the then head of the Assembly of Experts which had been charged with drafting the country's new constitution, conflicting opinions were expressed by the members of the Assembly on this issue. The Sunni clerics, as well as some Shi'i members of the Assembly of Experts (e.g., Hassan Azodi) preferred Islam, rather than Shi'I Islam, to be designated as the official religion of the country.[10] In the final analysis, those favoring the inclusion of Shi'i Islam as the official state religion prevailed. They argued that the overwhelming majority of Iranians are Shi'i Muslims,

and that even the monarchical constitution had recognized Shi'i Islam as the official state religion. Moreover, they reasoned that the Sunnis would still be able to follow their religious practices and follow the rulings of their own religious courts.[11]

Ultimately, tension between the Islamic authorities and the Kurds manifested itself in a series of armed clashes between the forces of the KDPI and the newly created Revolutionary Guard loyal to the nascent Islamic Republic. In order to stem the tide of armed conflict in Kurdistan, Sheikh Mohammad Sadegh Sadeghi Guivi (better known as Sadegh Khalkhali) was dispatched to the region to try to punish those who had taken up arms against the new regime in Tehran. In a series of hasty trials that lacked the most basic elements of judicial integrity and fairness, Khalkhali condemned scores of Kurdish nationalists to death. Continuing armed clashes between the Kurds and the Iranian military and Revolutionary Guards led to the banning of the KDPI at the end of autumn 1979 and to Ayatollah Khomeini's designation of Ghassemlou as *mofsid-e fil arz* (corrupter of the earth). However, shortly before the complete breakdown of negotiations between the Kurds and the representatives of the Iranian government, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a conciliatory message addressed to the people of Kurdistan. In his message, Khomeini, for the first time, publicly acknowledged the legitimate grievances of the Kurds and promised to continue negotiating with religious and nationalist Kurdish leaders until peace and calm was restored in the area. Khomeini's message further stated that a lot of people in Iran had suffered under the monarchy and the revolutionary government, and he asked the Kurds to join him in the name of God to "save our country and to direct our energy against the real enemies of the country led by the United States."[12] The content and tone of Khomeini's message to the Kurds differed in his previous messages and was indicative of the Ayatollah's fear that the continuing securitization of the Kurdish issue would redound to the detriment of the Islamic Republic.

The Reform Movement and the Kurdish Issue

The end of the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–1988 and the eventual coming to power of a reformist movement in Iran promised a "return to normalcy" and a new approach to the Iran's myriad socioeconomic problems, including a fresh approach to the neglected nationality issues. The election of Mohammad Khatami as Iran's president in May 1997 and the defeat of conservative forces in the February 2000 parliamentary elections generated a great deal of expectation for political change in Iran. Khatami, a mid-ranking reformist cleric, received some 70 percent of the popular vote with

a clear mandate to change Iran's political system and allow the emergence of a genuinely pluralistic culture in the country. As Khatami had stated, "we cannot expect any positive transformations anywhere [in Iran] unless the yearning for freedom is fulfilled. That is, the freedom to think and the security to express new thinking."[13] Furthermore, Khatami, from the beginning of his presidency, emphasized the notion of inclusiveness, or "Iran for all Iranians" as he called it, and the importance of the rule of law in nurturing and enhancing the foundation of Iran's political system.[14]

Khatami, however, was unable to confront his conservative opponents throughout his presidency. In Kurdistan, city council elections were routinely nullified by conservative forces and the credentials of either pro-reform or independent Kurdish politicians or candidates were summarily rejected when they sought to run for various provincial offices. Even in a few cases when pro-Khatami officials managed to come to office, their tenure was short. For example, Abdullah Ramazanzadeh, the Governor General of Kurdistan and a Khatami supporter, was summoned before the Special Court for Public Officials in April 2001 and was charged with the "dissemination of lies." Ramazanzadeh's "crimes" were based on his objections to the nullifications of votes of two constituencies in the Kurdish cities of Baneh and Saqqez; thus, he was accused of libelous statements against the country's powerful Council of Guardians, which had ordered the nullification of the aforementioned constituency votes.[15]

Moreover, some of the prominent individuals in the reform movement had earlier participated in the suppression of Kurdish uprising, thus creating an undertone of mistrust between some Kurds and the Khatami administration. For example, Hamid Reza Jalaipour, who became a significant architect of the reform movement that brought Khatami to power, had spent some ten years in the province of Kurdistan fighting Kurdish autonomy demands. As a commander of a Revolutionary Guard unit, and later as the governor of Naqdeh and Mahabad and Deputy Governor General for Political Affairs in Kurdistan, Jalaipour was at least partially responsible for some of the worst revolutionary excesses in that region. When asked if he had any remorse for ordering the execution of 59 Kurdish nationalists, Jalaipour refused to offer an apology for his past actions by claiming that he could not be held responsible for actions undertaken when he was a revolutionary in his 20s during wartime conditions.[16] It may be unfair to single out an individual for actions undertaken under war conditions, but this highlights the difficulty the reformists of various political stripes have continuously encountered in articulating a coherent nationality policy in Iran. It also reinforces the perception that even the reformists could not break away from the mindset that securitizes the ethnic demands.

The Return to High-Intensity Securitization

Iran's ninth presidential election in 2005, which ultimately resulted in the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the country's president, was marked by an open discussion of the "nationality issues" by some of the candidates. This marked the first time since the establishment of the Islamic Republic that ethnic and nationality issues were recognized as part of public policy debate, and several candidates openly sought the votes of Iranian nationalities. Mostafa Moin, the main candidate of the reformist camp, made a special effort to woo voters from the non-Persian nationalities and turned Iran's multinational character into an important part of his campaign platform. Moin criticized both those who ignored the country's multinational nature and those who sought to divide the country along ethnic, religious, and linguistic grounds. In this vein, Moin promised complete equality for all Iranian citizens, which is a right guaranteed under the Iranian constitution. Recognizing discrimination as potentially destabilizing, Moin stated that his administration would be composed of all nationalities.[17] Echoing Khatami's campaign slogan, Moin also made "Iran for all Iranians" the centerpiece of his presidential campaign. In addition to Moin, several reformist personalities and writers opined that without recognizing the rights of Iranian nationalities, democracy would not take root in the country. Furthermore, many reformists welcomed Jalal Talabani's election as president of Iraq and viewed his accession to power in neighboring Iraq as the natural progression of the recognition of nationality rights in the region.[18]

Moin was defeated in the first round of the presidential balloting. Unlike the candidates of the reform bloc, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the winner of the 2005 presidential election, campaigned on a platform that emphasized socioeconomic justice above everything else. His main target was the country's lower class, the *mostazafin* in Khomeini's lexicon, whose economic conditions had deteriorated under the outgoing Khatami administration. Although Ahmadinejad did not make the issue of nationality rights part of his campaign, he was certainly not an unknown figure among the Kurds. In the early years of the post-revolutionary era, Ahmadinejad was assigned to the Ramazan base of the Revolutionary Guards, with responsibility for military operations in Western Iran, including the Kurdish regions of the country. Ahmadinejad later served in other capacities in Western Iran, including a stint as a principal advisor to the Governor General of Kurdistan.[19]

Given the negative connotation of the activities of the Revolutionary Guards in Kurdistan, it was not surprising that the Iranian Kurds participated minimally in the country's presidential election of 2005. Between the two finalists in the second round of the election, Ahmadinejad received

17,248,782 votes while his opponent Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani garnered 10,460,701 votes.[20] According to figures released by Iran's Interior Ministry, 62.66 percent of eligible voters participated in the election, with the highest turnout (80.43 percent) in the Ilam province and the lowest rate of participation (37.37 percent) in the province of Kurdistan. West Azerbaijan, which includes the cities of Mahabad and Uromiyah with their large Kurdish population, recoded the second lowest participation rate (44.02) in the country.[21] In short, the Iranian Kurds expressed their dissatisfaction by boycotting the 2005 presidential elections in large numbers.

Moreover, the military confrontation between the Kurds and the Iranian government forces once again intensified as the Kurdish issue became more securitized during Ahmadinejad's presidency. In particular, Iranian forces and guerrillas of the newly formed The Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), an offshoot of Turkey's Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK), have engaged in low-level military confrontation inside Iranian Kurdistan and along the Iraq-Iraq borders near the Qandil Mountains with mounting casualties on both sides. The involvement of outside groups in Kurdish affairs in Iran has added an unpredictable twist to the war of attrition in Iranian Kurdistan.[22]

The most significant development in Iranian Kurdistan in the post-Khatami era has been the grassroots uprisings and other acts of civil disobedience in several Kurdish cities throughout the country. The spark that ignited the Kurdish challenge to the post-Khatami Iranian government was generated by the July 11, 2005 shooting of Shavaneh Qaderi, a young Kurdish activist from Mahabad. Subsequently, a number of websites posted photographs purporting to show Qaderi's mutilated body, which contributed to street demonstrations not only in Mahabad but also in several other Kurdish cities, including Baneh, Bukan, Sanandaj, and Saqqez.[23] In addition, several Kurdish groups, including university students in Tehran, issued statements supporting the Mahabad demonstrations and condemning the actions of the Iranian security forces, especially those of the Revolutionary Guards, in suppressing Kurdish demonstrations.[24]

The conditions were further exacerbated by the crackdown on two popular Kurdish-language weeklies, *Ashti* and *Asou*, and the arrest of Roya Tolooi, the editor of the monthly *Rasan* and a well-known activist in Iranian and Kurdish women's rights groups. In mid-2008, a number of Kurdish nationalists, including Farzad Kamangar, Farhad Vakili, Ali Heydarian, Anwar Hossein Panahi, Adnan Hassanpour, and Hiwa Butimar, received death sentences that were challenged by several human rights organizations.[25] These are reflective of a pattern of human rights abuses that have affected the Kurds in recent years.[26]

On the other hand, a number of reformist Kurdish groups and civil society organizations have continued to challenge the boundaries of government authority and push for the recognition of Kurdish rights within the confines of the existing sociopolitical system in Iran. This trend has been reflected in the myriad magazines and newspapers that reflect the vitality of Kurdish intellectual life in the country. For example, the weekly *Sirwan*, which published sophisticated analytical articles on Kurdish politics and society, and the equally analytical bi-weekly *Hawar* provided objective information in a manner that one does not find by reading highly politicized Iranian Kurdish publications in Europe and North America. Unfortunately, both of these publications, which are no longer in print because they were banned by Ahmadinejad's government, as well as other similar publications have to continuously engage in a losing battle for survival in today's Iran.

Furthermore, large-scale arrests of Kurdish civil activists have intensified since Iran's 2009 controversial presidential election, which solidified the grip of conservative forces on Iran's governing structures. For example, in February and March 2013, the Mahabad Intelligence Office arrested a score of young Kurdish activists, including Farzad Samani, Rasoul Khezr Morovat, Ghassen Ahmadi, Vafa Ghaderi, Ali Azadi, and Khosrow Kordpour, the managing editor of the highly popular *Mukrian News*.[27]

Iran's presidential election of 2009 and the subsequent upheaval and mass protests against the results of the election by a wide spectrum of Iranian citizens augured the emergence of what has been dubbed the "Green Movement." Although some Kurdish reformists were involved in the Green Movement, by and large the Kurdish rank and file was not energized by the latest iteration of the reform movement in Iran. Although the two leading figures of the Green Movement, Mir Hossein Moussavi (an ethnic Azeri) and Mehdi Karroubi (an ethnic Lor), campaigned on a platform of restoring dignity and rule of law, neither of them focused his presidential campaign on the nationality issue. However, the Green Movement's manifesto spells out in some detail the goals and objectives of the movement in lofty terms. It emphasizes the Green Movement's respect for Iran's nationalist (i.e., secular) and Islamic heritage, supports respect for individual rights and nonviolent modes of political discourse, promises justice and liberty for all Iranians, offers support for equal rights for men and women, and rejects all forms of discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, ethnicity, and nationality.[28]

Some analysts have argued that Iranian nationalities and ethnic groups were not mere observers as the Green Movement unfolded throughout the country. Instead, they played an active role in the formation of the Green Movement. According to the Kurdish journalist and political activist Mohammad Ali Tofighi, a former member of the now banned reformist

group Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the widespread pro-change and democratic sentiments that erupted in support of the Green Movement following the 2009 disputed presidential election had been influenced by the "ethnic discourse that has sought to liberate diverse Iranian ethnicities from oppression and discrimination."[29] Similarly, Saman Rasoulpour, a Kurdish human rights activist and journalist, observed that the "unprecedented emphasis of the two reformist presidential candidates [Moussavi and Karroubi]" on minority and ethnic demands had raised ethnic issues to the forefront of contending political issues in the 2009 presidential election.[30]

Shortly prior to the June 2009 presidential election, Mehdi Karroubi, in a frank and wide-ranging interview with Iran's Press TV, addressed the question of endemic inequality and ethnic discrimination in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Karroubi's words, the country's constitution clearly states that "all minorities and all followers of different religions are equal . . . I think we should have an approach where all people regardless of their gender, religion, or ethnicity can feel that they are part of this government. Nobody else is saying the things that I am saying."[31] Indeed, no other presidential candidate was treating the ethnic question in the way Karroubi was addressing this issue.

Those Kurds with propensity to support the reform movement indeed participated in the Green Movement and took part in the street demonstrations that were organized during the early phases. The Coordinating Council of Kurdish Reforms (*Shoray-e Hamahangi-e Eslahat-e Kurd*), which had been formed in 2004 in the last year of Khatami's presidency, issued a strong statement calling for full participation of all Iranian citizens in the February 20, 2011 national march in support of the goals of the Green Movement.[32] The Council warned the Kurds to refrain from "military adventurism" that would not only hurt the Kurdish cause but also provide an excuse for the Iranian government, as well as other regional countries, to suppress Kurdish demands on the pretext of fighting terrorism.[33]

Notwithstanding the support given to the Green Movement by several Iranian ethnic groups and nationalities in the early stages of the Movement's existence, the overall level of support for this latest manifestation of "reformism" in Iran has now lost its earlier appeal. Both Moussavi and Karroubi, the putative leaders of the Green Movement, have been under house arrest since the 2009 presidential debacle. There is no recognized "leader" or galvanizing figure behind the Green Movement today. For some Kurds, like journalist Tofighi, who had earlier supported the country's reform movement, in general, and the Green Movement, in particular, this latest manifestation of reformism in Iran ultimately failed to address the root causes of

authoritarianism in the country and thus lost its appeal not only to a large segment of the Kurds but also to many other democratic activists in Iran.[34]

Moreover, it is important to note that no significant figure in the Green Movement undertook measures to establish direct contact with Kurdish political organizations or groups lest they be accused by their opponents of associating with "separatist groups." When Mostafa Hejri, the secretary general of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, issued a statement in support of the Green Movement's objectives and political goals, the conservative governing forces in Iran used Hejri's statement as "proof" of the Green Movement's support for a "Kurdish armed group."[35] All in all, the inability of President Khatami's government to, inter alia, address ethnic problems in Iran and the lingering suspicion that the country's reformists play the "ethnic card" as an election tool against their conservative opponents have resulted in what can best be described as the "benign neglect" of the Green Movement by Iran's Kurdish population.

Rouhani and the Kurds: A Move away from Securitization?

Iran's presidential election of June 2013 generated a vigorous campaign among contending candidates with varying views on politics, the economy, the nuclear dispute with the West, and a host of domestic issues. Although ethnic issues were included in the campaign platforms of most of the presidential candidates, they did not play a central role in either the campaign or televised debates among the main contenders. Hassan Rouhani, the winner of the presidential contest, did not have any specific program to deal with ethnic issues and limited his comments to generalities on equal cultural rights for all Iranians.[36]

Unlike the presidential elections of 2005 and 2009, Iran's 2013 presidential election, the voter turnout in all Iranian provinces was high. This was especially true in Kurdistan and the provinces with high concentrations of Kurdish population, such as the Province of West Azerbaijan and Kermanshah. In the Province of Kurdistan, 62 percent of eligible voters participated in the 2013 presidential election, and nearly 80 percent of the votes were cast for Rouhani, thus making Kurdistan the province where Rouhani enjoyed the highest margin of victory.[37]

In his first 100 days in office, President Rouhani established a special bureau in the office of the president to handle the so-called ethnic issue. He appointed Ali Younesi, a cleric who had served, inter alia, as the Minister of Intelligence during the Khatami's reform era, as his special advisor and liaison in ethnic affairs. Younesi has taken some steps in reaching out to various ethnic groups and has stated that his main task is to ensure the safety and

equality of all ethnic groups while moving away from securitizing ethnic issues. In fact, he has stated that looking at ethnic demands and grievances through a security lens is dangerous and counterproductive.[38]

In the same vein, Abdul Mohammad Zahedi, the newly appointed Governor General of Kurdistan, has stated that his administration's priority is to de-securitize Kurdish issues and instead turn Iranian Kurdistan into a model for Kurds all over the world.[39] Reiterating the same sentiments, Abdolreza Rahman Fazli, Iran's interior minister, also conveyed his desire to de-securitize ethnic issues during Rouhani's presidency. As a Kurd himself, Fazli expressed his desire to "professionalize" the administration of the Kurdistan province and place technocratic competence as the sole criterion in selecting officials in that province.[40] If indeed the Rouhani administration succeeds in his stated goal of desecuritizing ethnic issues, then a major step will have been taken in resolving Kurdish predicament in Iran.

Finally, some Kurdish organizations inside Iran may get an opportunity to revive their fortunes under the Rouhani administration. The Kurdish United Front (KUF) is a good case in point. The KUF was formed in 2005 by Bahaaddin Adab, a Kurdish deputy representing the cities of Sanandaj, Kamiaran, and Diwandara in the Iranian Parliament (*Majlis*). In addition to establishing the KUF, Adab was instrumental in forming the Kurdish faction in the *Majlis* to highlight issues that were of particular concern to the Iranian Kurds. The KUF, however, was never able to establish a following among the Kurdish population of the country due to its organizational weakness and the securitized political environment in Iranian Kurdistan. It was also unable to receive a working license from Iran's authorities. According to Hamid Fazeli, a founding member of the KUF, the organization hopes that under Rouhani it will be able to revive itself and act as a bridge between the Kurds and the Iranian government.[41] In order to accomplish this task, the KUF must first overcome its own factional divisions and develop a framework to allow its constituency to work together.

Support given to Rouhani's presidential campaign by Iran's nationalities and ethnic groups should augur well for Kurdish demands for greater democratization in the country. One of Rouhani's campaign slogans was "Ethnic Participation for Iran's Progress," and this catchy phrase was highlighted throughout Rouhani's presidential campaign. Once elected with the majority support of Iran's ethnic groups, President Rouhani appointed Ali Yunesi as his special advisor on ethnic nationalities and religious minorities. Although Yunsei has not yet been able to score any major accomplishments, he nonetheless has expressed his desire to change and de-securitize ethnic issues and has promised more transparency in addressing demands of the country's ethnic groups.[42] Rouhani has recognized that the Kurdish vote for

him was a vote to end discriminatory and undemocratic policies and to end the cycle of violence.[43]

Iran's fractious political structure and the existence of competing centers of power may continue to make it difficult for a president, even a pragmatic one, to rein in the activities of the state's coercive instruments in Kurdistan and elsewhere, however. For example, the number of executions has not abated noticeably since Rouhani's accession to power. The state's arbitrary treatment of what it considers separatist activities among the Kurds needs to be controlled to promote inclusive democracy in the country.[44] That requires, inter alia, establishing an independent and accountable judiciary that upholds the rule of law and administers justice equitably.

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CHAPTER 11

The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria

Robert Lowe

Introduction

The instability of the Syrian Civil War has enabled Kurdish political and military actors to take control of parts of northern Syria, marking the emergence of the nascent political entity of *Kurdistana Rojava* (West Kurdistan).[1] This de facto autonomous Kurdish zone has developed politically, administratively, and militarily to the point that in November 2013 the largest Kurdish party there felt able to declare a transitional administration. Western Kurdistan was previously a vague concept rarely used by most Kurds, and this new political structure is fragile and underdeveloped. Nevertheless, it has become an important feature of the Syrian and Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape, and its future, and that of the wider Kurdish population of Syria, is a key factor in the future of the war-torn country.

Kurdish actors in Syria sit within a complex web of dynamics involving Kurdish factionalism, the Ba'thist regime, the Syrian oppositions, neighboring states, and trans-national Kurdish politics. While much of Syrian society has been shattered by bloody civil conflict, Kurds in certain areas have had some opportunity to debate political and civic organization and models of government and to hold elections. The successful example of autonomous government in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq provides enormous inspiration to most Kurds in Syria. Democratic reforms and a form of devolved government in Kurdish areas could, in the long term, help in the building of a more

tolerant and just Syrian state. The provision of full rights for Kurds as equal Syrian citizens and the establishment of a form of autonomous government need not be a threat to Syrian Arabs or to Syria's unity. Kurds themselves are insistent that democracy and liberalization must be created for all citizens in Syria, not just for their community.

This chapter provides an overview of the course of Kurdish politics during the Syrian Civil War and offers some analysis of the major developments and issues. The chapter provides context to understanding the aspirations of the Kurds, the practicalities of these being realized, and the effects this would have on the future shape of Syria. Amid the dust of the war and the complex geopolitics that deeply affect the Kurds, the demands and goals of the Kurdish national movement in Syria are poorly understood. These will be examined both for their own intrinsic importance and because they must form the basis of an argument in support of the plausibility of a more democratic and pluralist Syria emerging after the war which manages to reconcile the Kurdish population within the new order.

The final section explores how Kurdish demands could be accommodated within a reformed Syrian Republic without prejudice to the interests of the non-Kurdish population. A range of mechanisms exist to manage relationships between states and minorities, including provisions for minority rights, forms of self-governance, power and wealth-sharing, and cross-border institutions. The successful application of these to the relationship between Kurds and the Syrian state will be essential for the development of stability and democratization in Syria. The chapter concludes by arguing that the inclusion of Kurds as Syrian citizens with full equality, opportunity, and political rights for the first time would be beneficial to all Syrian citizens as the country struggles to rebuild, reconcile, and heal after its terrible war.

Kurdish Politics during the Syrian Uprising[2]

Kurds have a long history of opposition to the deeply oppressive Arab nationalist regimes that have ruled Syria since the mid-twentieth century and so might have been expected to be enthusiastic participants from the start of the uprising in March 2011. This history of mobilization and the limited space permitted to Kurds by the regime (which was greater than that afforded to the Muslim Brotherhood, for example) meant that the Kurds were also at that time the best-organized political opposition group in Syria. However, the Kurdish reaction has been more careful, strategic, and complex. This was probably due in part to past experience, particularly of the Kurdish uprising in 2004 and the crackdown which followed, as well as suspicions

that the Syrian Arab opposition retains much of the Arab nationalist ideology of the Ba'thist regime and might be no more accommodating of ethnic Kurds.[3] There is also deep distrust between Kurds and the Islamists who have become prominent in the opposition. Kurds see the Islamists as reactionary and hostile to their political aspirations while the Islamists views the Kurds as secular (or atheist) and separatist. Other factors include the deep divisions within the Kurdish political movement, the weakened legitimacy of the Kurdish parties, and their leadership's close ties to more powerful Kurdish political actors over the borders in Kurdistan-Iraq and Turkey.[4]

Although the reaction in Kurdish areas was more cautious than in other parts of Syria, there were demonstrations and calls for change from April 2011. Initially, these came not from the Kurdish parties or leaders but from youth organizations and the local coordination committees (LCCs) as a number of youth and Kurdish civic and cultural groups expanded their activism.[5] As the uprising gained momentum in the summer of 2011, the Kurdish political parties began to form platforms in response. In October 2011, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) was formed—an alliance of ten parties (rising to 16) and women's and youth organizations and human rights activists and LCCs. The formation of the KNC was a significant development as it marked an unprecedented coalition of the majority of Kurdish parties and organizations and because its demands are greater than those previously made by most parties. This marked a shift away from managing the status quo during the uprising to demanding the fall of the regime and Kurdish self-determination in Syria.

The *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (Democratic Union Party, PYD), probably the largest and certainly the strongest Kurdish party by 2011, did not join the KNC. The PYD is a relative newcomer on the scene, having been founded in 2003, but it taps into an older strain of Syrian Kurdish support for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey. The PYD denies it is a branch of the PKK and tries hard to downplay the depth of the relationship, but it is openly a member of the *Koma Civakên Kurdistan* (KCK, Group of Communities in Kurdistan), the umbrella organization for groups supportive of PKK ideology and goals.[6] The numerous other Kurdish political parties in Syria[7] are not affiliated with the PKK and most of them gravitate toward the influence and support of the Kurdish parties and government in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The PYD's ideology and its superior organization and resources have given it the confidence to operate unilaterally outside the KNC, and in November 2011 it held elections for the first "People's Council of Western Kurdistan" (PCWK), following the ideology of "democratic self-governance" formulated by the KCK/PKK. The establishment of

the PCWK does, in theory, provide the beginnings of a new alternative system of government to the Ba'thist regime in Kurdish areas. In practice, because no parties other than the PYD stood for election, and because there is little distinction between the PCWK and the PYD, the council is only representative of one part of the Kurdish community. The PCWK is part of The Kurdish Democratic Society Movement (TEVDEM), the wider civil society movement that operates within the KCK umbrella. The PCWK comprises six political and civil society organizations affiliated with and including the PYD.

In the first half of 2012, there were various efforts to bring the Kurdish sides together and defuse tensions that threatened to cause inter-Kurdish conflict. Massoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, played a prominent role as a sponsor and broker. On July 11, 2012, these efforts bore fruit as the PCWK and the KNC signed the Erbil Agreement and formed a Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC), made up of five members from the PCWK and five from the KNC. The first meeting of the SKC was held in Qamishli on July 24. In theory, the SKC is a de facto interim administrative body for Syrian Kurdistan that represents all the Kurdish parties and communities, holds authority for political and civic organization, and has control of the Kurdish militias.

The Establishment of Self-Rule in Rojava

The Erbil Agreement created the necessary political platform for the PYD to begin acquiring control of some Kurdish districts. That the "liberation"[8] began on the day following a bombing that killed senior regime figures in Damascus on July 18 was possibly no coincidence. On July 19, 2012, the PYD began to take control of certain towns, apparently in coordination with the Syrian authorities who largely withdrew, although some civil servants remained in post. The Syrian security forces also withdrew from an obvious public presence but some stayed in their bases in the Kurdish areas, keeping a lower profile. The takeover was conducted by the PYD without coordination with the other Kurdish parties. In less than a week, control was gained over Kobani ('Ain al-'Arab), Afrîn, Amudê, Sarî Kaniyê (Ras al-'Ain), and Dêrîk.[9]

By the end of July, much of the areas of Syria traditionally regarded as "Kurdish"[10] were largely in the hands of the PYD. The party asserted itself as the effective authority and along with local Kurdish committees and civic organizations began providing security and essential services. Following decades of stifling repression, there has been a great hubbub of activity: political, civic, and cultural. Political discourse has found unprecedented

freedom and Kurds have begun exploring and debating the possibilities of developing local government. The relaxation of pressure from the Syrian regime has also allowed a flowering of cultural activities and notable efforts to teach and promote the banned Kurdish language. For example in early September 2012, the health council of Qamishli announced the completion of first aid courses in Kurdish.[11]

In November 2013, the PCWK announced the establishment of a transitional administration for Rojava. On this date, after nearly 18 months, the success of the self-rule experiment was mixed. Despite the enormous challenges and pressures, the Kurdish parties, civil organizations, and militias managed to maintain and nurture the infant autonomous structure and to provide at least some basic services and security in the region. Although very fragile, the coalition between the PYD and the KNC still held and its manifestation in the form of the Supreme Kurdish Committee survived, at least in principle, as the ultimate authority over the politics and government of Western Kurdistan. The PYD's paramilitary force, the *Yekînêyen Parastina Gel* (People's Defence Units, YPG), has fought a number of bloody battles with Syrian opposition jihadi groups, notably in Sarî Kaniyê and in Kobani in 2012–2013. In late 2013, the YPG gained the upper hand in this struggle for control. The YPG and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) have a complex relationship, sometimes operating with tacit understanding about areas of control, at other times fighting over territory and resources when the strain becomes too great.

The YPG militia has been crucial for securing and maintaining political control over the Kurdish areas. This militarization of the Kurdish struggle in Syria is new as previously arms have not been used (although many Syrian Kurds fought for the PKK in its struggle against Turkey). This development was inevitable given the increasingly brutal and chaotic nature of the Syrian Civil War that threatened the vulnerable Kurdish pockets of territory and left Kurds with no option but to defend themselves. Further, the PYD's emergence from the trunk of the heavily armed PKK gave that party the experience and resources to organize an armed militia. Other Kurdish parties, which have for decades been proudly peaceful, have begun to form much smaller militias with the aim of counterbalancing against the power of the YPG/PYD.[12] As many as 10,000–15,000 Kurdish refugees from Syria have fled to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, around 1,200 of whom are being trained by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) into a *peshmerga*-style militia for Western Kurdistan that could act as a counterbalance to the power of the YPG.[13] This force is the cause of considerable strain between the YPG/PYD and the KRG/KNC parties, and the YPG/PYD has so far refused to allow this force to cross the border into Western Kurdistan.

Threats to Kurdish Autonomy

Rojava faces massive threats to its stability and existence. There have been enormous challenges and problems for an underdeveloped society with no previous experience of self-government which is stuck on the edge of a war zone: how to provide food and fuel, services including electricity, water, health care, education, and rubbish collection; and the expansion of corruption and illegal activities, including drug smuggling, extortion, and paramilitary harassment.

A fundamental weakness is geography as unlike Kurdistan–Iraq, Western Kurdistan lacks both the contiguity, which provides political coherence, and the mountains, which provide defense. Further, sizeable non-Kurdish communities (Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, and others) live in the areas in which the majority of the inhabitants are Kurdish.

Despite unprecedented efforts at unity within the Kurdish national movement, deep divisions and serious tensions persist. The most important is that between the PYD and the KNC coalition, which teeters on the edge of violence and remains a serious threat to the development of effective local government. This division is greatly exacerbated by the authoritarian nature of the PYD.[14] Similar to the PKK, the PYD is not naturally inclined to tolerate other Kurdish groups and challenges to its hegemony. Since 2011, it has consistently acted unilaterally and it has used its YPG militia, the most powerful force in Kurdish areas, to enforce its will as reported in numerous cases of intimidation and violence against Kurds who do not back the PYD.[15] Its commitment to intra-Kurdish unity remains questionable, and there are also suspicions about the extent of its links to the regime.[16] There is no doubt these links exist, for example, following the 2012 takeover the regime continued to pay the salaries of civil servants in Rojava. But the suggestion that the PYD and the regime are naturally close is an exaggeration; both sides treat the relationship as expedient and there is underlying hostility.

The Kurdish movement in Syria is long established and highly fractious. The main rift established in the last decade is that between the PYD and the other 20 or so parties. The parties which make up the KNC also have a long history of schism, although the unprecedented opportunities of 2011–2012 appear to have bound them closer than before.[17] The Erbil Agreement is holding and there appears to be a measure of cooperation between the PYD and KNC through the SKC and in establishing committees and building up local services. However, the coalition is less than two months old and looks very fragile. The key question is whether the need for unity in the service of the Kurdish community will override deep political disagreements and friction on the ground.

Politically, the main issue is the level of influence afforded to the PKK. The KNC parties are deeply opposed to what they see as interference in Syrian Kurdish affairs by an armed group whose main interest lies in its struggle within Turkey. The PYD denies it is the Syrian branch of the PKK and accuses other parties of being beholden to Massoud Barzani and even the Turks. The history of the PKK's relationship with the Syrian regime and the relative ease with which the PYD appears able to operate have led non-PYD supporting Kurds to accuse the PYD of secret links to the Syrian regime. The sides also do not agree on what form of government to establish in Kurdistan: terms are used vaguely but it appears that the PYD opposes the type of federalism that is being discussed by some of the other parties.

The disagreements between the sides are evident in the trivial: holding separate demonstrations and arguing over which flags to fly (PKK and Öcalan banners or the Kurdish flag). The schism also has a much darker side as there has been a series of accusations of kidnappings and beatings.[18] In most of these, the PYD is accused of enforcing its will through intimidation and force of arms by detaining and assaulting Kurds who are critical of it. The PYD responds that it is protecting the Kurdish community and that Turkey is stirring up division by supporting and arming Kurds hostile to the PYD.[19]

Eva Savelsberg and Jordi Tejel argue that there is no prospect of the Kurdish transition leading to democracy in the short term, citing the authoritarianism of the PYD and the failings of the other parties as obstacles.[20] Harriet Allsopp acknowledges the deep problems posed by the PYD but offers a more optimistic assessment, arguing that the security of the Kurdish areas is currently paramount and that the parties broadly share the same goals and have managed to maintain their coalition.[21] Despite the clear and difficult rift between the sides, the latter argument holds greater weight as the KNC and the PYD continue to adhere in principle to the terms of the Erbil Agreement and to negotiate on improved cooperation and a more united platform for presenting Kurdish demands. The position of the PYD, as the far stronger party, is critical. Alongside grabbing power on the ground, it continues to preach unity within the Kurdish movement, not least because it does not enjoy unanimous support among Kurds and because it prefers to avoid poor relations with the relatively powerful KRG.

The surrounding neighborhood does not give much encouragement for Western Kurdistan's future. Most immediately, jihadi groups fighting the Ba'thist regime, notably Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Shams, have since late 2012 been engaged in repeated battles with the YPG for control of border crossings and Kurdish towns. The Islamists view the Kurds as ideological enemies as well as rivals for control of territory and

resources. The relationship between the Kurds and the wider Syrian Arab opposition is more complicated. A greater obstacle to the establishment of self-government in Western Kurdistan is what may be called "non-Kurdish Syria," that is, the 85–90 percent of Syrians who are not Kurds.

The Ba'thist regime has systematically repressed Kurds for decades and remains the government of Syria. The regime offered sops to Kurds at the start of the uprising by responding to two of the Kurds' most prominent demands: granting citizenship to some of the stateless Kurds and repealing Decree 49 that was prejudicial to Kurdish economic rights in border areas. The tactic was clearly to prevent the Kurds joining the uprising and opening up another front against the regime. The regime has also withdrawn from many Kurdish areas, apparently expediently choosing to avoid confrontation while it is in a desperate struggle for survival elsewhere in Syria. But there is no reason to assume that the last relic of pan-Arab nationalism, which has a long history of repression of its Kurdish population, has developed respect for Kurdish rights. Should the regime win the war, it is likely to turn its attention to reasserting control over the Kurdish areas.

Then there are the many factions of the Syrian opposition. The more liberal and pluralistic of these, the National Coalition and the National Coordination Committee, have expressed commitment to including Kurds as equal citizens and ending discrimination. However, no part of the non-Kurdish opposition is likely to favor autonomous government in Western Kurdistan because of the deep roots of Arab nationalism and the fear of Syria fracturing. Opposition figures have accused the Kurds of failing to join the revolution and, while broadly sharing the same democratic goals as the Kurds, have made clumsy and insensitive remarks.[22] The Free Syrian Army is openly hostile to Kurdish self-government.[23]

As ever in Syrian Kurdish politics, the geopolitical situation is highly influential. The three components of Western Kurdistan all sit tight against the Turkish border. The complexities of the struggle between Kurds in Turkey and the Turkish state will continue to have great bearing on the Kurds in Syria. Turkey has chosen to play a major role in the Syrian conflict. Its position toward the Syrian Kurds is framed entirely within the context of its determination to defeat the PKK. Its hostility to further gains for Kurds in the region and conviction that the PYD is the PKK in Syria makes Turkey a huge threat to the nascent local government in Western Kurdistan. Turkey holds the awkward position of supporting democratic change in Syria, but not for the Kurdish population there.

Turkey describes the PYD as a "terrorist formation." Indeed, Turkey chooses not to distinguish between the PYD, which undoubtedly is very close to the PKK, and the many other Kurdish parties, which are not.

Throughout the crisis, Turkey has bullishly threatened intervention in Syria as a "natural right" if "terrorists" threaten Turkey from beyond the Syrian border.[24] Kurdish control of towns across its southern border is highly troubling for Turkey and it has responded with severe criticism. Erdoğan accused Bashar Assad of handing over control to enable PYD/PKK terrorist activities against Turkey.[25] It may well also be attempting to stir up the divisions between the Kurds by trying to break the KNC–PYD alliance.[26] Relations calmed during 2013 as illustrated when Saleh Muslim Mohamed, the Co-President of the PYD, visited Ankara for talks with officials in July. Western Kurdistan is unlikely to gain much international support. At the time of the "liberation," the United States, strongly supportive of Turkey and fearful of Syria splintering, immediately announced its opposition to Kurdish autonomy in Syria.[27]

The influence of the PKK is also a challenge to the emergence of a democratic Western Kurdistan. While the PYD denies it is a sub-branch of the PKK, it is clearly very closely affiliated to the party and strongly influenced by its ideology, practices, and leadership. The PKK does not have a promising record of adherence to democratic practices. While the language of the PYD is more accommodating, it has shown PKK-like tendencies in its paramilitary style control on the ground and harsh response to criticism. It is worth noting however that Western Kurdistan could also be a challenge for the PKK. As Aliza Marcus has pointed out, the PKK does not tolerate rival groups in Turkey but the PYD has committed to work with others in Syria.[28] If Kurds in Syria soon become free to practice multiparty politics, then it will be harder for the PKK to deny this to Kurds in Turkey. Its involvement in Syria might, under the right circumstances, actually helps democratize the PKK.

The Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq is acting as a supporter and broker of Kurdish political development in Syria. It is also providing a haven for refugees and training for Kurdish soldiers defecting from the Syrian army. But the KRG is unlikely to prove sufficiently strong or committed to Western Kurdistan should the Syrian civil war truly engulf Kurdish areas. While Massoud Barzani is promoting himself as the pan-Kurdish leader, the interests of the KRG will come first. The other prominent Iraqi Kurdish leader, Jalal Talabani, is opposed to the revolution in Syria, owing to his long history of friendly relations with the Assads.

Kurdish Aspirations for Equality

It is necessary to consider what changes Kurds seek in a new Syria. Kurdish demands can be split into three categories: an end to ethnic discrimination

toward Kurds (which would affect all Kurds regardless of where they live);[29] the establishment of representative democracy in Syria; and a form of autonomous government for the majority-Kurdish populated areas. The first category of demands is deeply embedded in the Kurdish national and cultural movement and has formed the basis of Kurdish political mobilization in Syria since the mid-twentieth century. It would be relatively straightforward to draft legislation to overturn the existing discrimination practiced by the Syrian state to provide equality to Kurdish citizens. Indeed, after the March 2011 uprising the Assad regime quickly and easily enacted laws to deal with some of the most egregious injustices, most notably granting citizenship to some of the approximately 400,000 Kurds denied this by the state and repealing Decree 49 which curbed property rights for Kurds. These moves were a transparent sop to the Kurds to dissuade them from joining the uprising.

Despite the deeply fissiparous nature of the Kurdish national movement in Syria, the parties are generally in agreement on many issues. There is nothing terribly radical, nationalist, or unreasonable about the majority of Kurdish demands. Most are for the basic human rights that form an essential component of any democratic and representative system of government. Some demands are specific to Kurds, others have relevance for other minority groups, and many are also shared by opposition groups who wish to see a form of democratic and pluralist government established in Syria.

All Syrians share the current prime concern—security. Kurds appreciate that their areas have escaped the level of violence endured elsewhere but are acutely aware of their vulnerability as the civil war has endured and become increasingly bitter and complex. Islamists, the FSA, the regime, and the Turkish state are all current or perceived threats to Kurdish areas. Attacks on Kurdish towns in northern Syria by Islamists in 2013 have brought the war to the Kurds for the first time and have increased support for the paramilitary YPG, even from Kurds opposed to the PYD, as it is the only force capable of protecting Kurds. Kurds have migrated from war-torn cities across Syria to the relative safety of the north, while thousands have fled the country, with a significant refugee population developing, especially in Kurdistan-Iraq.

The greatest pre-war concern, also shared by most Syrians, was economic. Despite some official optimism, the underlying economic conditions and prospects for most Syrians were very poor. Economic prospects for Kurds were even worse due to discrimination. Drought, increases in diesel prices, the dismantling of the socialist agricultural system, population rises, the lack of state investment, and job creation have also caused high levels of poverty, unemployment, and migration. The war has of course caused a

further deterioration in living standards, and securing food, resources, and some form of an income remains a critical problem.

Kurdish demands for political reform are also shared with many Syrians, and there are large common areas of interest with the non-Islamist Syrian opposition. Kurdish parties have long called for an end to the state of emergency and the one party system, democratic reforms, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, and the guarantee of human rights and the legalisation of parties based on ethnicity.

Then there are additional demands that are specifically ethnic, reflecting the official discrimination practiced against Kurds since the 1950s.[30] The most pressing "Kurdish" issue has been the state's refusal to recognize the citizenship of approximately 400,000 Kurds. A census carried out in al-Hasaka in 1962 stripped 120,000–150,000 Kurds of Syrian citizenship, leaving them and their descendants without basic civil rights. The number of these stateless people, the *ajanib* and *maktoumeen*, has grown considerably in subsequent years.[31] Their restricted status means they are not allowed passports, cannot own property, cannot work in many professions or the public sector, and do not receive the same education or health care as Syrian citizens. This discrimination ensures severe poverty. In April 2011, the regime granted citizenship to registered *ajanib*, but not to the *maktoumeen*, a category of stateless Kurds with even fewer rights than the *ajanib* who number approximately 100,000. Providing full rights to the *maktoumeen* would also be a simple step.

Since Arab nationalism gained a hold in Syria in the mid-twentieth century, special discrimination against Kurdishness means that any manifestation of Kurdish identity, however minor or cultural, has been defined as political and hence forbidden. The Kurmanji language is banned from use in education, the public sector, or business; other "foreign" languages are not. Before the war, possession of Kurmanji publications or music could lead to detention while wearing Kurdish dress and/or celebrating Kurdish festivals was highly risky. Changes to the Syrian constitution and legislation to provide cultural and linguistic equality are essential for reconciling Kurds to the Syrian state and enabling them to participate as full Syrian citizens with the same rights as Arabs. For example, the KNC calls for recognition of national rights of the Kurdish people in accordance with international conventions such as the UN Charter and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.[32] The Kurdish parties demand constitutional recognition of Kurdish as an official language, as has been secured in Iraq. Even merely ending the official ban on the Kurdish language would have an enormously positive impact.

A further demand is recognition of the Kurdish people in the Syrian constitution, ideally as a second nationality living in its historical land. This

will require a fundamental change to the described identity of the Syrian state, which remains the last outpost of Arab nationalism, and one of only three states, which officially describes itself as ethnically "Arab."[33] The term "Syrian Arab Republic" is deeply problematic for Kurdish citizens of Syria, and dropping the exclusive ethnic adjective would take Syria one major step toward inclusion and tolerance.[34] It would also be a positive move for other non-Arabs, including Armenians, Assyrians, and Turkmen. Kurds also campaign for the right to form political parties based on ethnicity. The many Kurdish parties have always been illegal and have suffered consistent harassment and prosecution.

This list of "softer" requirements is neatly summarized in a passage in the first Erbil Agreement signed by the KNC and the PYD in July 2012:

> [We have] a unified political objective . . . based on the immutable values of the Kurdish people as a nation and ethnicity in Syria and should work towards the overthrow of the dictatorship in Damascus, the construction of a democratic, pluralistic state, and the creation of a new Syria with many ethnicities. This new Syria will satisfy the aspirations of our people be recognizing its existence as an original people in the constitution. The Kurdish question must be solved democratically.[35]

Devolved Government for Kurdish Areas

Until 2012, the Kurdish national movement in Syria had barely flirted with the idea of devolved or autonomous government for Kurdish areas. The prospect was wholly unrealistic and any expression of interest in the idea attracted the harsh attention of the authorities. Despite the shining success of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and proposals explored for the government of Kurdish areas in Turkey, the concept of Syrian Kurdistan or Western Kurdistan received very little attention. Even the term was rarely used and then mostly only by the PYD and some more radical nationalist groups operating from abroad.

The war has changed everything. The vacuum of authority in the north of the country, the vulnerability felt by the Kurdish territorial pockets, and the sharp opportunism of the PYD have created both a physical entity (or entities) controlled by Kurds and the more nebulous but increasingly tangible idea of Western Kurdistan. Many Kurds support the PYD/PCWK and the security and systems the organization is developing. Others do not support the PYD but do like the idea of some form of Kurdish self-government. Some Kurdish political actors, including the parties with the longest histories, fear overreach, as well as a PYD power grab, but the increasingly

established facts on the ground make it difficult to go against the tide and indeed further weaken their already dwindling popular support.

The course of the war may shift and if the Islamists or the regime gain power in the north, Western Kurdistan could be snuffed out. But while the YPG is successfully defending the "liberated" areas, something called "Rojava" exists and hence Kurdish ideas for its development need to be considered. A return to the pre-war status quo is now utterly unacceptable to Kurds, and while some may be content to gain improved rights in Syria, others, notably including those with guns, are now wedded to the idea of autonomy in Rojava. According to Saleh Muslim Mohamed, "If the regime returns, it will not be as before. Anything taken by the people cannot be taken back. The PYD will, first, protect our own people."[36] A KNC member remarked, "Let it (the regime) fall 1,000 times. But if the political infrastructure stays the same . . . we as Kurds won't have our rights. So we need to change the whole system, because the infrastructure hammers in the idea of a centralized state."[37]

Two other ideas may be ruled out. An independent Western Kurdistan is neither desired nor remotely viable. Rojava lacks sufficient population numbers, contiguity, and internal unity, and also has significant non-Kurdish populations and an economy that is completely dependent on the rest of Syria. A pan-Kurdish independent state is also not possible (and very probably not desired), given severe differences between the political elites of the different parts of Kurdistan as well as linguistic and cultural differences. The only option remaining that would satisfy the wishes of many of the Kurdish population is for some form of self-determination settlement within a new Syrian state structure.

Given the novelty of the idea, the speed of events, and the more pressing matters on the ground, it is no surprise that ideas of self-determination have not yet been well developed or explained. The PYD and the KNC lack a common vision, and indeed within the KNC there is incoherence. The KNC calls for "national self-determination within the unity of the country," but has no agreed view on what form this should take.

The federal model provided by the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is highly influential, in particular among the KNC parties that are close to Massoud Barzani. For example, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria favors a full federal state and in the summer of 2012 began using the term "Syrian Kurdistan" for the first time.[38] This model would establish a federal Syria with other communities, including Alawis, Christians, and Druzes given the right to autonomous federal regions. Similar to Iraq post-2003, ethnic and religious identification would define the structure of the new Syria. Qamishli would be the capital of a noncontiguous Kurdish region that

would include the three northern pockets. Following a census, minorities within the region would receive a share of seats in the regional government and on the municipal councils, based on population.[39]

As the PYD is strongest in the Afrîn and Kobani areas, while the KNC parties are stronger in Qamishli and the Jazira, it is conceivable that this structure would be split into PYD (pro-PKK) and KNC (broadly pro-KRG) areas. This would enable Abdullah Öcalan and Massoud Barzani to treat each as their sphere of influence. The PYD rejects the idea of such a division, expressing fears this would divide Syria.[40] The party probably also feels the wind is in its favor and hopes to establish control of the Jazira also.

A different watered-down model based on citizenship has some currency among KNC parties who are closer to Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, President of Iraq, and an old ally of the Assads. They argue that a federal structure would not work for Kurds because of the geography of Western Kurdistan and because large numbers of Kurds live in the major cities. Under this proposal, the Syrian government would fully recognize Kurdish rights and Kurds would play an active role as full and equal Syrian citizens. The areas with large Kurdish populations would have an undefined form of self-rule.

The PYD has other ideas. While it does act as an ethno-nationalist Kurdish party, the PYD also proclaims adherence to Abdullah Öcalan's ideology for improving government and society.[41] The party calls for "democratic autonomy" or "democratic confederalism," identical to that proposed by the PKK in Turkey. Under this plan of "decentralization," democratic autonomy would be established for all Syrians, not just for Kurds. Öcalan argues that the nation-state, capitalism, and socialism have all failed and that a more direct, bottom-up system of self-government should be established as an alternative form of power to that of the state.

It is this system that the PYD has been seeking to build in Rojava through the establishment of elected local councils, self-defense committees, and the YPG which all report to the People's Council of Western Kurdistan. The PCWK and the PYD are members of the KCK, an international executive body for organizations supporting democratic confederalism (and the PKK). The existence of the councils predates the war but it was only with the collapse of regular state control that they have assumed meaningful responsibilities. Democratic confederalism remains a vague, idealistic, and untested idea. Rojava is now providing its first experiment in practice and should this continue, the PYD's and PKK's commitment to the idea, and ability to implement it as an alternative system of government, will be severely tested.

The PYD took control of Kurdish towns in 2012; it is the leading party in designing and administering Rojava, and is the only party to run a militia of any strength. And yet the party appears opposed to the ideas of autonomy for Western Kurdistan discussed by some of the other parties. The PYD stresses that it wants Kurdish areas to stay in Syria, preferring a less sharply defined form of self-government. The party is not interested in Western Kurdistan emulating models set by Kurdistan-Iraq or Scotland. The PYD's plan involves towns with Kurdish majorities electing councils to run local administration. These councils then report to the PCWK, a body with executive and legislative branches. Democratic confederalism would not be restricted to the Kurds—the party argues that all of Syria would benefit from this system, which would ideally function similarly throughout the country. In practice, the PYD is highly pragmatic, and realpolitik and the imperative to retain the control it has established are likely to trump ideology.[42] Western Kurdistan also provides strategic depth to the wider PYD/PKK struggle against Turkey and provides the PKK with a sphere of influence to balance against the rising power of the KRG.

The Kurdish Issues, Democratization, and the Future of Syria

As argued in the introduction to this volume, democratization must be viewed as a continuum rather than an absolute. For this process to begin in Syria, there must be a corresponding process that begins to dismantle the state's discrimination toward its Kurdish population. It is inconceivable that Syria could start taking steps toward democratic reform without addressing the legitimate demands of Kurds to be treated as full Syrian citizens with the same rights of opportunity and cultural practice as non-Kurdish Syrians.

A number of Syrian (and non-Syrian) parties are currently fighting in a civil war which is approaching its fourth year. While the outcome remains unclear and it is easy to be grimly pessimistic, it is also possible to envisage scenarios that could support reforms for Kurds as part of processes of accommodation and greater inclusion. The Islamist elements appear intractably hostile toward the Kurds. But the regime and the non-Islamist opposition could be involved in solving the Kurdish issues, either through expedience or because of a genuine commitment to plurality and reconciliation. Ending ethnic discrimination against Kurds would be straightforward, at least on paper. In practice, it would take longer.

A settlement of the question of self-determination and decentralized government, the issue of what has become called "Rojava," will be far more complicated. Politicians involved in negotiations between the Kurds and

the Arab opposition acknowledge that this is the key sticking point.[43] In general, Syrian Sunni Arabs are deeply opposed to Western Kurdistan and any form of devolution or federation in Syria. The Kurds are unclear and disunited on the issue. Western Kurdistan is riddled with internal weaknesses and sits in a deeply hostile environment.

However, because the genie is now out of the bottle, a new and imaginative arrangement will need to be found in time that can provide an institutional setting for the Kurds, and other minorities in Syria, to pursue their claims through peaceful, political means. The unacceptable alternative will involve the use of force. There are numerous models for accommodating the claims of ethnic minorities within a state, with or without some form of devolved government, which have comparative value for establishing such provisions for Kurds in Syria. These include the Åland Islands, Mindanao, South Tyrol, and Northern Ireland.[44] Non-Kurdish Syrians need not fear the dismemberment of Syrian territory. Kurds seek their rights within the framework of the Syrian state and have no alternative. After nearly a century living within the modern Syrian state, many Kurds are heavily Arabized and have complex layers of identity which include being "Syrian." Unlike Kurds in Iraq who have a stronger and more exclusive loyalty to Kurdishness, most Kurds in Syria have a broader sense of identity that also encompasses Syria.

The outcome of the increasingly chaotic struggle in Syria is uncertain, but the one scenario that would most assure the Kurdish position—the establishment of a democratic, pluralistic government—is perhaps the least likely, at least in the short term. The central thesis of this volume flips the argument: rights and democracy for Kurds will benefit the states in which they live. Following this argument, the securing of full equal rights for Kurds in a new Syrian political order and the consolidation of some form of a representative-devolved administration in Western Kurdistan would help Syria to become more democratic.

Welcoming the Kurds fully into political and civic life in Syria would be of immense benefit to the country when it moves forward after the war. The exclusion of a community numbering roughly 10 percent of the population is inimical to developing a democracy. If given the opportunity as full equal citizens, Kurds have the potential to contribute far more to public life in Syria. The Kurdish national movement has a long and consistent history of commitment to democratic goals, and all of its many parties continue to stress the importance of building a democracy throughout Syria and working with non-Kurdish fellow Syrian citizens. The Kurds also have an unusually long history of political-cultural mobilization in Syria that gives them greater experience than most Syrians. Further, the fact of the Kurds' minority status makes them naturally open to tolerance, pluralism, and fair

representation. The inclusion of the non-Kurdish minorities in Western Kurdistan is important.[45] So far the language of the Kurdish parties has been that of inclusion and equality. Some notable Christians have joined the PCWK, and the PYD is very keen to publicize its efforts to include the minority groups in the local government of Kurdish areas. This commitment remains to be fully tested in Rojava, but the example of minorities living in Kurdistan-Iraq offers some encouragement.

The development of self-rule in Kurdish areas could be beneficial for the growth of democracy in Syria. The country is badly over-centralized, and dispersing power more widely across the country and into more hands will help democratization. Concurrent with Kurdish self-rule, other areas could work out their own arrangements if these are felt suitable. There is suspicion and probably not much understanding in other parts of Syria about the possible advantages of decentralization in a diverse country. If Syria in its pre-2011 form is no longer viable, a decentralized state could become a possible option for other minority communities, especially the Alawis and Christians. There is also need to disperse power within the autonomous Kurdish area to be inclusive of the many non-Kurdish minorities and to combat the authoritarian tendencies of the parties, especially the PYD.

The problem of authoritarianism within the Kurdish parties requires addressing. The uprising has laid clear a deficiency in legitimacy and the older parties are struggling to maintain their relevance, although they tend toward cooperation because of the necessities of their size. The PYD has increasingly shown strong authoritarian tendencies and its commitment to Kurdish unity and to democracy is questionable. It is clear that the PYD's relationship with the PKK and the other Syrian Kurdish parties is crucial. If the party is merely a sub-branch of the PKK that is entirely subservient to the goals of the PKK, then trouble lies ahead. PYD leaders appear to recognize this and the need for the party to become a genuinely Syrian Kurdish party. The need to increase popularity among the large number of Syrian Kurds who do not support the PYD and to gain international legitimacy and support (as a non-PKK "terrorist" organization) has encouraged the party to insist that the only link is ideological.[46] Further, the reconciliation of Syrian Kurds to a future Syrian state will require negotiation and compromise between the PYD and the non-Kurdish Syrian opposition. This also requires a commitment to Syria, rather than to the PKK's struggle.

The Kurdish model in Iraq is very relevant to Syria's future. The Kurds' long and eventually successful struggle for security and equality within the Iraqi state provides visible inspiration. As David Romano argues in this volume, the Kurds were the primary force pushing for a more liberal and decentralized system with checks and balances in Iraq. Also similar to Iraq,

in Syria there is a need to avoid a return to an unrepresentative, and often brutal, "strongman" rule from the center, whether Ba'thist or from another strain. The Kurds in Syria could play an important role in preventing this.

It is also possible that the regime or its successor could see the value of decentralization and minority rights as a means of gaining support from the Kurds and other minority groups, or at least avoiding their open hostility. The balance of power during the war and in its aftermath may well require inducements and deals from those aspiring to govern Syria, or parts of it. Support from non-Sunni Arab groups would be very useful to the Ba'thist regime that is struggling to contain the largely Islamist-led political and military opposition. The concessions quickly handed out to the Kurds at the start of the uprising suggest that the regime might be prepared to offer further reforms, at least for the sake of expedience in the short term, to help tip the balance of power in its favor. Similarly, one or more successor regimes might also put realpolitik ahead of ideology.

Conclusion

Will the "liberation" of July 2012 turn out to be of historic importance or a fleeting footnote in the history of Syria and of the Kurdish nation? Either way, as the *Serhildan* of 2004 failed but established a stronger sense of Syrian-Kurdish identity, the establishment of Rojava has given a taste for equality and self-government that the Kurds of Syria will not give up lightly. According to one Kurd interviewed in Qamishli in August 2012, even if nothing else happens, "*Kurdistan çe bû yê*" "(Western) Kurdistan has been established."[47] The emergence and expanded use of the term and idea of "Rojava" is important. The PYD-controlled local administration faces massive problems but the very fact of its existence is highly significant. This is a development of major importance in the development of the Kurdish national movement in Syria and is a natural step forward from the *Serhildan* of 2004 in the evolution of a distinctively "Syrian-Kurdish" ethno-national struggle.[48]

It is clear that meaningful democratization in Syria cannot occur without a fundamental change in the state's relationship with the Kurdish minority. Kurdish assertiveness, the more tolerant positions of most of the Syrian opposition, and the concessions already granted by the Ba'thist government mean that a return to the deeply discriminatory regime of the past is unlikely. Kurds are closer to cultural, social, and political equality as citizens of Syria, although risks to these gains remain. Solving the Kurdish issue in Syria is necessary for the continuum of democratization to begin taking place, but it is not sufficient. The Kurds are a single small, albeit

relatively important, piece in the puzzle. If the day arrives when a new Syrian political order is willing to accommodate the democratic wishes of the Kurdish population, including the right to choose a form of autonomous government within the country, then Syria will be at least on the path toward democratization.

Notes

1. In 2013 the short form, "*Rojava*" has gained common usage among Syrian Kurds and some other interested parties to refer to the PYD-controlled areas of Syria. The term will be used in this chapter.
2. For more detailed and excellent analyses of developments in Kurdish politics during the uprising and war, see Harriet Allsopp, "The Kurdish Autonomy Bid in Syria: Challenges and Reactions," and Eva Savelsberg and Jordi Tejel, "The Syrian Kurds in 'Transition to Somewhere," both in Michael Gunter and Mohammed Ahmed (eds.) *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2013); and Michael Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst, 2013).
3. Saleh Muslim Mohamed, the co-president of the PYD, argues that the revolution began in 2004, not 2011. Interview with author, London, December 3, 2012. For analysis of the 2004 uprising, see Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Robert Lowe, "The *Serhildan* and the Kurdish National Story in Syria," in Robert Lowe and Gareth Stansfield (eds.) *The Kurdish Policy Imperative* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2010); and Julie Gauthier, "Les événements de Qamichlo: Irruption de la Question kurde en Syrie?" *Etudes kurdes* 7 (2005), pp. 97–114.
4. The problem of legitimacy is examined by Allsopp, 2013, pp. 226–231.
5. See Savelsberg and Tejel, 2013, pp. 202–208.
6. "The PYD and the PKK are brother organisations." Interview with Saleh Muslim Mohamed, December 3, 2012.
7. There were approximately 20 parties at the time of writing: the number fluctuates regularly owing to splits and coalitions. For further analysis of the parties, see *Who Is the Syrian-Kurdish Opposition? The Development of Kurdish Parties, 1956–2011* (Berlin: Kurdwatch, 2011) and Harriet Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria: An Existence Denied* (Berlin: Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien, 2005).
8. The term "liberation" is disputed because the Syrian regime retains a presence in these areas and also because some argue that the PYD is no less authoritarian than the Ba'thists. "The pictures of Bashar Assad have simply been replaced by pictures of Abdullah Öcalan. Nothing has changed." Interview with a Kurd from Syria, London, September 25, 2012.
9. The PYD also held control of Ashrafiya and Sheikh Maqsud in Aleppo for a while but the conflict between the Syrian regime and the Free Syrian Army later spread there.