

GARETH STANSFIELD . MOHAMMED SHAREEF
(EDITORS)

THE KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED



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The Kurdish Question Revisited

Edited by

GARETH STANSFIELD AND

MOHAMMED SHAREEF

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To the people of Kurdistan

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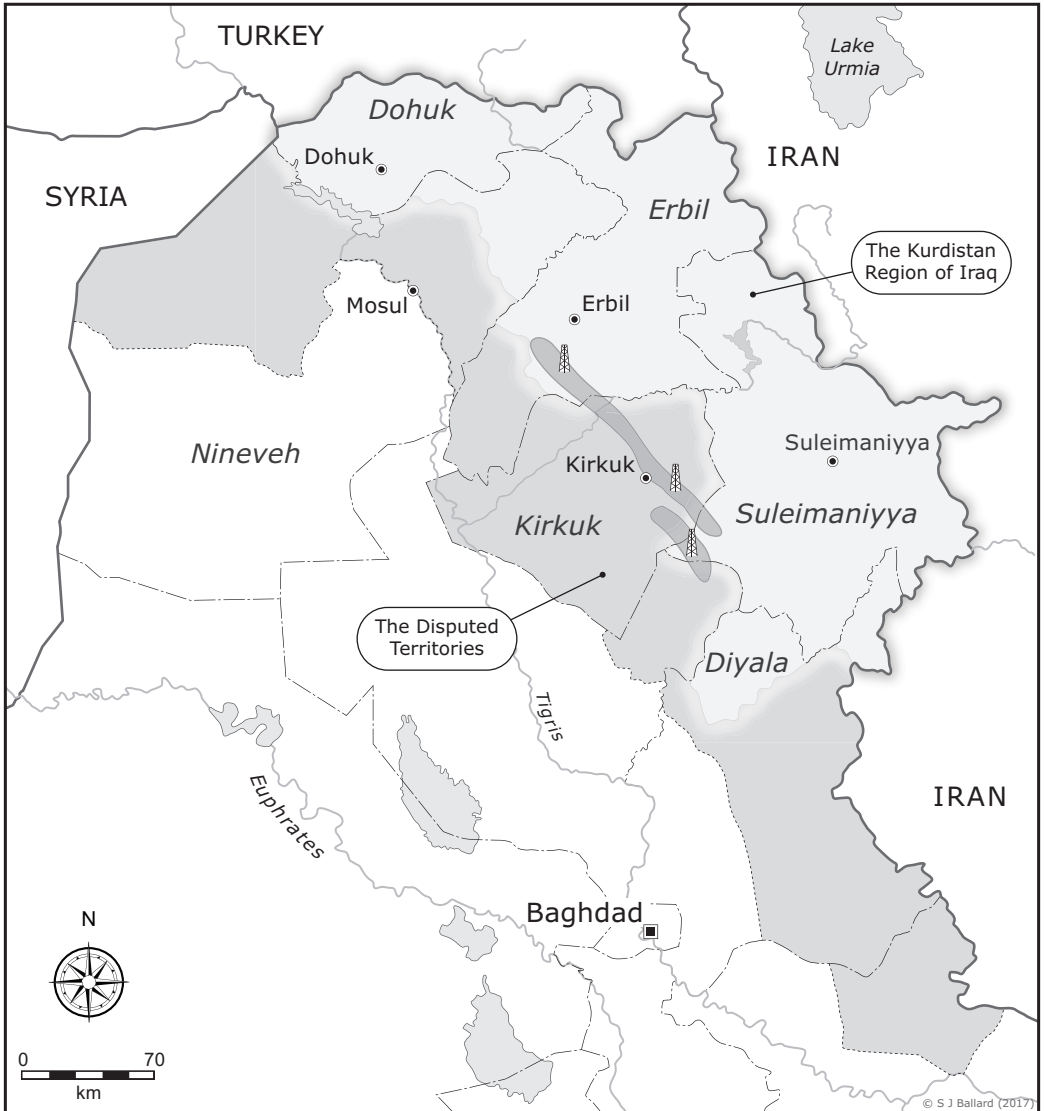
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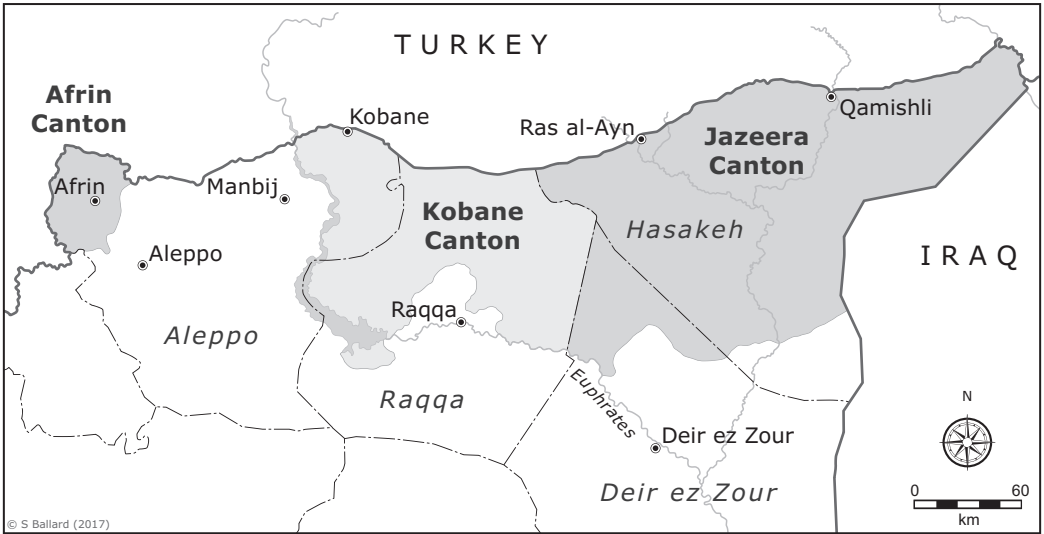
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INTRODUCTION

Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef

Even for the most seasoned of observers, the world of Middle East politics has changed in almost unbelievable ways in a very short period of time. As former senior US State Department official and president of the Council on Foreign Relations Richard Haass stated in a *Foreign Affairs* piece about the rapidly changing situation in the region: “The old order in the Middle East is disappearing. The transition is still in its early phases, and what will follow (and when) is uncertain... Some borders are likely to be redrawn, and some new states may even emerge.”¹ Echoing these sentiments, former UK Foreign Secretary William Hague warned that “[t]he sad truth is that the disorder and civil war that has erupted in much of the Middle East is probably still in its early stages rather than coming to an end.”² Swift though they may be today, these changes started slowly, almost imperceptibly, as different social forces waxed and waned since the end of the Second World War, and as the Middle East state system became more consolidated. Currents of different social movements—whether related to religious belief, sectarianism, nationalism, or to traditional social constructs such as tribes, or the structures that were nurtured under the influence of modernity’s many agencies—interacted with the forces of the state, coming together to form the difficult and sometimes dangerous world of Middle Eastern political life in the period post-Second World War.

The fundamental problem in the post-war Middle East was the existence of the imposed state system that facilitated the rise of authoritarian regimes and nurtured a powerful dynamic of a dominant Arab nationhood in the Arab states, Turkish nationhood in Turkey, Persian nationhood in Iran, and Zionism in Israel.³ From this structural problem stemmed many seemingly irresolvable issues. Among these, nothing was more important in policy and academic circles than the Arab-Israeli conflict and the plight of the Palestinians—a state of affairs that has, in the twenty-first

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century, changed markedly as the relative importance of the Palestinian question seemed to fall down the list of priorities of policy makers, if not in the minds of academics and observers.⁴ Of course, other situations also exercised observers of Middle Eastern affairs. The transformation of Iran from monarchy to Islamic Republic sent shock waves throughout the region and gave added impetus to a sectarian divide that had, for most of the twentieth century, been marginalized in importance and effect in Arab states.⁵ The effects of oil wealth, too, generated much attention, either in terms of the ossifying effect such wealth had on traditional socio-cultural systems, or on the need to maintain the stability of oil-rich states for reasons related to Western interests.⁶ The toppling of pro-Western monarchies and the rise and role of the military in Arab states was also a prevalent feature, and one that came to be viewed as perhaps a lasting, rather than temporary, aspect of the political landscape.⁷ And where were the Kurds in this volatile period? In “state” terms, they were nowhere: no Kurdistan existed as an independent state and, as the decades wore on, the Kurds remained marginalized, suppressed, and oppressed in every state in which they found themselves.

During this post-Second World War period, very few observers thought the Kurdish issue would gain any prominence in the politics and international relations of the Middle East. Even fewer would imagine a region in which the military regimes of the Arab world, and the militarist state in Turkey, would be altered. But these unforeseen events did come to pass. The twenty-first century saw the Ba’ath regime of Iraq removed by US-led military forces in 2003; the established republican/military regimes challenged by popular movements in successive uprisings across Arab countries, otherwise known as the Arab Spring, from 2011; and Turkey reworked from the inside out by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP), mainly from 2008 onwards. In the midst of these sudden and dramatic changes, the once marginalized Kurds became geopolitically central and relevant as their interests aligned with Western powers.⁸ Because of these changes, the Kurdish Question, or “Questions”, of the twentieth century now need to be reconsidered, as ideas that were once posited as hypothetical questions—such as “could the Kurds be independent?”—are now very much real possibilities, if not probabilities, generating even greater debate and discussion than they did in the post-war period because of the far greater likelihood of them coming to pass.

From maligned proxies to valued allies, and back again?

During this period following the Second World War, the subject of the Kurds was not commonly addressed in academic literature, nor was it a focus of journalists beyond those who sought to portray the story of an isolated people in inaccessible lands.⁹ The Kurds were largely seen as an inconvenience by Western powers, who offered little

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other than sympathy as the Kurdish issue was categorized as a domestic issue with little incentive for any political support. Even at the height of the Cold War, senior US officials made it clear that they had no interest in any involvement in the Kurdish cause; and attempts by the Shah's Iran were largely dismissed within this context until 1972, when the Shah made a personal plea to President Nixon. Even that was short-lived when the Shah signed the Algiers Agreement with Saddam Hussein in 1975.¹⁰ This all changed in 1991 when the Kurds of Iraq were thrust into the international spotlight following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the subsequent Kurdish rebellion (*rapareen*) in the north of the country, alongside the Shia uprising (*intifadah*) in the south.¹¹ The Iraqi Kurds felt that a golden opportunity had presented itself with Saddam Hussein this time on the wrong side of history, in contrast to the favored position he had enjoyed during the war against Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary Shia regime in Tehran.¹²

Dating back to the end of the Ottoman Empire and the imposition of international boundaries across the Middle East by competing Western imperial powers, the Kurdish situation had rumbled on throughout the twentieth century and, from the perspective of those Kurds engaged in the several nationalist movements that had emerged, without resolution. The "question" was of critical importance to those states that accommodated, though more accurately subjugated, Kurdish populations—namely Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria—as the presence of a significant ethnic minority in states that were rapidly coalescing around a narrative of a particular dominant nationhood (Turkish, Persian, and Arab) presented an uncomfortable reality and a challenge to them. The Kurdish question(s) would often exercise the judgment and decision-making powers of international actors, including Western powers and the Soviet Union/Russia, as to whether they should acknowledge and recognize atrocities committed against Kurdish populations, or ignore them, or even exploit their effects and use recalcitrant Kurds as proxies to promote their own strategies. It would be a rare occurrence, if it happened at all, that international actors would come to the Kurds' assistance—even when they were systematically targeted in Iran following the rise of the Islamic Republic, subjected to genocide by the Iraqi state during the *Anfal* campaign in the 1980s, or targeted by chemical weapons.¹³ And so the Kurds were either ignored as inconvenient and marginalized outliers in Middle Eastern political life, or sometimes supported as conveniently placed fighters to be deployed in the national interests of others, against the countries in which they found themselves.

The perennial Kurdish weakness had always been that their problems were too big to resolve, but not big enough to be of primary concern to an international community that was effectively a club of sovereign states largely acting to preserve the integrity of its members. It would take a series of very significant developments in world politics to begin the process of aligning the Kurds—and the resolution of the various Kurdish questions—with the interests of the most important states in the international community. This process began in 1991, when Iraqi Kurds fled into the moun-

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tainous border region of Iraq and Turkey as Saddam Hussein deployed his Republican Guards divisions to the Kurdish populated areas where rebellions had begun in earnest following unintentional statements by US President George H. W. Bush, calling upon the people to rise against the regime. From this critical moment in time key dynamics were established, the legacies of which are evident today. Perhaps most significantly is the way in which the United States established itself in the region, becoming an unrivaled military power in the Middle East. Over the years, US interests and partners would move and change: who could have foreseen the warming of relations between the Obama administration and the Rouhani government of Iran, and the consternation this would invoke in Saudi Arabia and Israel? But the US capability to project power in the region, even during the more cautious Obama presidency, remained impressive. And the Kurds, at least those in Iraq and Syria if not in Iran and Turkey, would make the transition from being regarded with suspicion by the US and her Western partners, to being key allies in the struggle against the Islamic State. This also then saw the US find itself in a difficult position with regard to her NATO ally Turkey, yet sharing many interests, including on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

A further key legacy to have emerged from 1991 was the emergence of a piece of territory governed by Kurds and called Kurdistan or, more accurately, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. To be sure, many various “Kurdistans” had existed in different parts of the Middle East over the years, and academics would debate their “Kurdishness” vis-à-vis other forms of pre-modern identities. Many Kurdish nationalists would point to the semi-autonomous Kurdish emirates that existed in the Ottoman and Persian empires as being “Kurdish”, which is true, but they did not exist as “Kurdistan” but rather as manifestations of tribal power in the borderlands of empires that saw utility in empowering pliant local rulers.¹⁴ The twentieth century saw entities emerge that were influenced by the nationalist ideas that had restructured Europe and had taken root in the Ottoman and Qajar Empires, as well as other parts of the Middle East. Sheikh Mahmoud Barzinji of Sulaimani in Iraqi Kurdistan may well have been a local power-holder attempting to use the rhetoric of nationalism to further his power and influence, but his attempt to proclaim an independent Kurdistan, against the wishes of the British occupying powers, exemplified the rising nationalist feelings of Kurds.¹⁵ Perhaps the emergence of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 1991 mirrored most closely the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan in the Iranian city of Mahabad, in 1946.¹⁶ The similarities are striking: both appeared in power vacuums that came after conflict ended, with the Mahabad Republic coming about following the end of the Second World War, and the Kurdistan Region following Iraq’s defeat in Kuwait; and both saw foreign intervention determine their survival. In the case of 1991, this intervention allowed the Kurdistan Region to survive and then prosper; in the case of 1946, the intervention (which was the US effectively forcing the USSR to end its support of the nascent state), saw the Republic end and its leaders executed,

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apart from Mullah Mustafa Barzani who managed to escape to the Soviet Union with his followers, leaving with a deeply held mistrust of US motives, and consequently leading Kurdish notables and nationalists almost simultaneously to form the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq.¹⁷

A Kurdistan Autonomous Region of Iraq was also delineated in the March Agreement signed between Mullah Barzani and the vice-president of Iraq, a young Saddam Hussein, in 1970.¹⁸ The March Agreement would never be implemented due to Barzani's demands to include Kirkuk in the Autonomous Region. Instead, the Autonomy Law of 1974 was unilaterally introduced by the government of Iraq, without including Kirkuk, thus prompting a further Kurdish rebellion that would ultimately fail. But the law's outlining of the territorial parameters of the Kurdistan Autonomous Region greatly influenced the spatial extent of the entity that emerged in 1991. And so, after a long and depressing history of failed or abortive attempts to carve out a piece of Kurdish-controlled territory called Kurdistan somewhere in the Middle East, few expected the entity of 1991 to survive for very long. But, for once, Kurdish interests in Iraq matched the interests of Western powers and, for the first time, the plight of the Kurds, albeit from one "part" of Kurdistan, was disseminated to a global audience through print and TV media. Having saved the Kurds of Iraq from slaughter at the hands of the Iraqi Republican Guard, and then from a savage winter in the Zagros mountains, Western powers found themselves the unintended guardians of the fledgling Kurdistan Region of Iraq—an entity created totally by accident, surrounded by states which viewed the development as a threat to their own integrity, and which therefore existed as a geopolitical anomaly maintained by a highly peculiar set of political circumstances. Few expected this region to survive, and it very nearly did not. Riven with internal rivalries, Kurdish parties in Iraq succumbed to the influence of their neighbors and fell into a series of conflicts between 1994 and 1997; yet against all odds, the entity remained. Looking back at this period some twenty years later, it seems clear that this simple act of survival in the dangerous years of the 1990s should be regarded as the Kurds' biggest success story. Now, the KRI has become an institutionalized presence on the map of the Middle East, creating new dynamics among the Kurds of Iran, Turkey, and Syria, many of whom viewed the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as something to emulate. This was to happen in Syria some twenty-five years later, although following the implementation of a centrally organized plan, very different to the haphazard manner in which the KRI unfolded over a much longer period of time.

The Kurds in Iraq now very openly talk about independence; something that would have been deemed impossible even ten years ago. Various regional geopolitical and economic factors have come together to make this life-long dream seem within reach. The most important factor has been the discovery of large oil and gas reserves in the KRI and the involvement of international oil companies (IOCs) in the sector.¹⁹ Managed correctly, the oil and gas sector could indeed provide the Kurds of Iraq the

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wherewithal to secede and declare an independent republic. Yet many questions need to be addressed, such as the lack of reliable and secure export routes across countries that have not proven to be supportive of any attempts by the Kurds to exist independently in the past. Furthermore, the KRG would need to show its capability in managing its affairs effectively and reducing the risk posed by corruption and the threat posed by having an economy wholly dependent upon oil exports. At the time of writing, the KRG was heavily engaged in facing these problems as the economy of the KRI spiraled into appalling levels of debt, with figures ranging from \$18 to \$25 billion by mid 2016.²⁰ On the political side, the KRI again looked strong when viewed from a certain angle. With a history of multi-party elections, what seemed to be a vibrant parliament, and with an emergent, and vocal, civil society, the KRI was increasingly viewed by many Western observers as a democratic beacon in the region. But the reality was different. The transition to democracy had stuttered and stalled since the end of 1990s and, no matter what the leaders of the KDP, PUK, and Lîstî Gorran said about democracy, the fact remained that the same figures that had been in power in 1991 were still contesting it in 2015. More enlightened figures among the leaderships realized that this was not a tenable situation, but few had workable ideas for how the transition could be re-energized, and how the established parties could facilitate a process that could very easily undermine their hegemonies. In addition to the economic and political developments, the KRI became important to Western powers for military reasons. The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the invasion of Mosul in June 2014 altered the nature of the relationship with the KRI, making the Kurdish *peshmerga* key allies in a fight that, for Western powers, was deemed of unparalleled importance.²¹ But, as with the problems with oil and gas, and also with regard to the faltering performance of Kurdish democracy in Iraq, the military relationship with the West was also problematic, due to one question: if the alliance was built upon the need to target the Islamic State, what would happen once Islamic State was no more? Would the Western powers once again forget about the Kurds, or would this new relationship prove to be more durable? Independence had certainly become possible, but much work needed to be done in these three areas—the economy, the democratic transition, and Western alliances—to ensure that it could, indeed, come to pass.

Meanwhile Turkey, home to the largest population of Kurds, was also seeing significant changes with regard to its domestic political life, and the impact this would have on its own Kurdish question. An early attempt at a Kurdish entity on Turkish territory, the Kurdish Republic of Ararat, lasting only from 1927 to 1930, was the only political structure they had ever achieved.²² The 1970s and 1980s had seen a surge in leftist-rightist violence in Turkey, with Kurds as key supporters of the leftist cause.²³ By 1984, the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (PKK) had emerged as a distinctly Kurdish party—although still heavily leftist in its political orientation—and commenced its insurgent attacks against the Turkish state in what has become one of the

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longest civil wars in the post-Second World War period.²⁴ This new dynamic of violent Kurdish activism in Turkey combined with the example of the de facto state that had come about in Iraq, made Turkey a critical focal point for the development of the Kurdish nationalist movement.²⁵ Yet the PKK failed to carve out an enclave in Turkey to mirror the one that had emerged in Iraq. Instead, the Kurdish movement in Turkey was torn between those forces, in the form of the PKK, that saw violent insurrection as being the only way to satisfy Kurdish nationalist demands in Turkey, and those who had hope that the Kurds could be accommodated successfully within the Turkish state through a political strategy that utilized democratic methods.

However, the Kurdish situation in Turkey has fluctuated greatly since the abduction of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999.²⁶ In what was seen as a positive development, the Turkish government adopted a new outward-facing philosophy of “zero problems with neighbors”, and Ankara won praise both at home and abroad as Turkey re-engaged with the Middle East following a half century of estrangement.²⁷ Business and trade links were expanded with Arab states, as well as with Iran; visa restrictions were lifted with neighboring countries; and from 2008, the relationship between Ankara and the KRI began to show marked improvements. Starting in 2004, Turkey showed some flexibility on the Kurdish issue consequence of the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) rapprochement, or at least the impression that it intended to do something to resolve the Kurdish issue. Also, in late 2008 there was some reconciliation between Iraqi Kurds and the Turks; on 14 October 2008 a special envoy from Turkey, Murad Ocalik, visited the President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Masoud Barzani, in Baghdad, to work toward an easing of relations.²⁸ As regards the US strategic alliance with Turkey and the obstacle this would present to its relations with the KRI, initially the US swung toward the Kurds on some occasions and back to Turkey on others. The US, eventually, came to a point where it could actually have a relationship with both sides, coming to the conclusion that it did not have to be a zero-sum game, and thus giving the Kurds of Iraq heightened legitimacy in international affairs.

From 2008 onwards, Turkey’s relations with the KRI grew gradually closer. Financially, Turkey was the biggest investor in Iraqi Kurdistan. By 2013 the volume of trade between the KRI and Turkey had peaked at 8 billion US dollars. Turkey and the KRI, once at odds because of Ankara’s fears over Kurdish political aspirations, have also found themselves politically aligned since 2011 in their alarm at the Shia-led government of Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki: particularly its tilt toward Iran, especially after the US withdrawal in December 2011 and Maliki’s aggressive attempts at unilateralism and consolidation of power. Following the rise of Islamic State, this tension still exists between President Erdoğan of Turkey and Prime Minister Abadi of Iraq, although the relationship between Erdoğan and the Iraqi Kurds also seems to have suffered in recent years.

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Domestically, inside Turkey the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party's (HDP) spectacular success in the June 2015 elections was a major turning point.²⁹ The HDP became the first pro-Kurdish party to surpass the 10 per cent electoral threshold with its gain of 80 seats in the Turkish parliament and 13 per cent electoral support: seen as a major threat by the AKP government. From a Turkish perspective, the allegedly PKK-associated HDP was transferring the violent and bloody struggle to the hall of the Turkish parliament with the significant vote-share giving the cause the legitimacy it had craved, something the Turkish state was unwilling to concede. A transformation to peaceful politics was not something the AKP was willing to allow. Increasing domestic pressure and intimidation in the Kurdish south-east led to a 21-seat decline and a reduced electoral mandate of 10.75 per cent in the second round of elections held just a few months later in November 2015: simultaneously a disappointment and a major relief, as it was just enough to pass the parliamentary threshold.

The situation in Syria and Iran was less well-known, and far less understood.³⁰ With the Kurds a smaller minority in Syria, the Ba'athist state of Hafez al-Assad found it straightforward to suppress Kurdish political activism. Yet the regime also saw a powerful proxy in the form of Kurdish separatists in Turkey, and encouraged Kurds from Syria—who had been denied Syrian citizenship by the regime—to enrol with the PKK which, in the 1980s, had found in Damascus a strongly supportive patron. With bases made available in the secure Beqaa Valley of Lebanon, the PKK grew its expertise considerably, and saw its ranks swell with a strong and steady stream of recruits emanating from Syria's Kurdish community. But, for those Kurds in Syria who did not want to join the PKK to fight Turkey, but rather sought to find a way to challenge the state system in which they found themselves, the situation was dangerous.

The Kurds in Syria eventually found an opening in the "Arab Spring" of 2011, similar in many ways to the opportunity presented to the Iraqi Kurds after the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990. The unfolding events of the rebellion allowed the Kurds a historic opportunity unlike any since the establishment of the artificial Kingdom of Syria in 1920, and more recently the suppressed and short-lived uprising of 2004.³¹ The Kurds in Syria, in a way not dissimilar to the aftermath of the 1991 uprising in Iraqi Kurdistan, have managed to carve out and establish a de facto entity that has no real recognition, but has within it seeds of a federal system (unilaterally declared in March 2016) that could potentially be applied to the whole country after the dust from the civil war settles. Also similarly to the Iraqi Kurds in the early 1990s, they are serving a political and military purpose immensely important to the West, and the US in particular. Essentially, parallel interests have emerged giving Kurds in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan/western Kurdistan) an unprecedented opportunity. With this new situation, the Kurds in Syria—namely the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and their armed wings the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ)—have inadvertently become allies of major Western powers, especially the US in the fight against the so-called Islamic State. And due to the sequence of

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events related to the Arab Spring, Syria has become a very sensitive area for the Kurds. For the first time in contemporary history, as the co-chair of the PYD, Salih Muslim said during an interview: “the Kurds are fighting for themselves, they have become their own soldiers.” In essence, the Kurds in Syria are about to build a homeland according to their own cultural, social, political, and self-defence plans in this western region of greater Kurdistan, based on theories of Democratic Confederalism, developed by Öcalan and inspired by the writings of political theorist Murray Bookchin.³²

The PYD as the main Kurdish party in Syria, and the YPG and YPJ as the principal Kurdish armed forces in Syria, are actively struggling to draw some clear lines between the major powers in Syria, principally themselves, the Syrian Army, and the Syrian opposition forces. Interestingly and tellingly the PYD itself, including the YPG and YPJ, is under the hegemonic umbrella of the PKK’s Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK). The PYD/YPG organization of Syria is regarded as the third dominant power, alongside that of the state, and the opposition groups such as Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Free Syrian Army. The Kurdish Supreme Committee was created by the PYD and several other smaller Kurdish parties to demonstrate to the public that the PYD does not have, nor intends to have, all the power at its disposal. However, the PYD and YPG remain dominant in Rojava and, since January 2014, they have led in the establishment of three autonomous local governments—known as cantons—in the predominantly Kurdish areas of northern Syria. The mass support the PYD, YPJ, and YPG enjoy among the Kurdish populace can be traced back to the impact of the liberal ideology of the PKK, and the policy of the KCK, on the Kurds of Syria.

On the other hand, in Iran the Kurds had been marginalized and isolated since the early days of the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad of 1946; following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, they found themselves severely discriminated against, not only as an ethnic minority in a state dominated by the narrative of Persian nationalism, but as a minority confessional group—Sunnis—in a state that was now firmly controlled by the Shia religious establishment. This combination of two forms of exclusionist identity politics in the Islamic Republic would prove to be highly detrimental for the Kurds of Iran.

Currently the Kurdish movement in Iran finds itself largely stagnant as a result of the disunity and continuous fragmentation of the existent traditional political parties. These parties also lack grass-roots political support from the domestic population, mostly a consequence of the relative absence of oppression to enrage and inflame the Kurdish movement in eastern Kurdistan, but also due to the lack of a strong and charismatic leadership. However, now with the rise of the PKK-affiliated Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) the political situation may be changing. This organization is emerging as a real threat to the Iranian regime, which has invested significant resources to try to defeat it. Traditionally, the Kurds in Iran have had a slightly different lifestyle from other regional Kurds and thus have gone unnoticed for a long time.

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Their cultural and social rights have been respected to some extent, due to various similarities with the other components of multi-ethnic Iran. Interestingly, the land the Kurds now claim as theirs was recognized as such since the time of the Seljuk Empire; the region was governed and administered under the name of Kurdistan for many centuries.³³ Yet, the notion of diversity could not and has not yet brought about some sort of democratic rule throughout Iran's history. For instance, Kurdish language education and political activities remain prohibited. Essentially, since the Sassanid era, the Kurds have been living within an area that literally translates to "the land of Aryans", and under this guise have been greatly mistreated. In the 1990s and especially after the successive assassination of two leaders of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), Qasimlo in 1989 and Sharafkandi in 1992, the Iranian government announced that the Kurdish struggle against the state had collapsed and the Kurds had accepted that they were Iranians, with limited cultural and no special political rights. Iran, the state reasoned, is a land for all Iranians, including the Kurds and other minority ethnic groups. This has long been the discourse of the Iranian authorities. Yet PJAK, as another Kurdish party that is conducting an armed struggle in Iran, has slightly altered the balance of forces in this decades-long Kurdish defeat. In 2002, PJAK began its struggle with a different methodology and discourse. It was linked to the PKK and became an Iranian branch of the Kurdish movement within a broader system, namely the pan-Kurdish KCK. Despite this small yet significant revival, currently Kurds in Iran have been experiencing some of the most brutal repression in living memory. There are still daily detentions and executions of Kurdish and anti-Iranian regime activists. Yet, due to the relative weakness of the Iranian Kurdish movement's social, cultural, and political cohesion, the national struggle, along with other opposition movements in Iran, have had to endure an almost total absence of recognition and acknowledgement throughout the world.

It is now accepted as a truism that the Kurds were dealt a heavy blow after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Since then there has been a clear transition from colonial rule in the aftermath of the First World War to post-colonial rule characterized by autocratic revolutionary nationalist regimes, in which the Kurds have for the large part been oppressed, ignored, and subjugated. Following the toppling of Saddam's regime after the US-led invasion of 2003, and primarily as a result of the Arab Spring, early signs of democratic rule can be seen within the Middle East. In this development the Kurds have managed to turn the tables, and what was deemed impossible now seems within reach. The recent astonishing recognition by incumbent and former senior foreign policy and intelligence officials that the Sykes-Picot agreement—1916's secret agreement to divide much of the Middle East between Great Britain and France—is now effectively defunct exactly 100 years after it was signed speaks to the rapidly changing situation in the region.

The Middle East is seeing unmistakable upheaval, and the Kurds, far from being marginal actors, are now very much center-stage. But their current salience in regional

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and international affairs cannot be taken as a given, and it cannot be guaranteed that the many and significant gains made by the Kurds, in Iraq and Syria in particular, will not be unraveled in the years ahead. Indeed, this poses yet another manifestation of “the Kurdish question”, but this time acknowledging that political, economic, and social transitions may not simply be proceeding on a positive and linear trajectory. This new Kurdish question is simply “what happens next?” following a period of profound upheaval in the Middle East. Of course, predicting the future is difficult, and especially so when the future in question relates to developments in the Middle East. This collected volume cannot answer these future questions, but it can at least attempt to provide an understanding of how the current situations have emerged, and how their many underlying and interconnected dynamics may manifest themselves in the years ahead.

The Kurdish Question Revisited

The varying situations of the Kurds in the countries in which they reside have been transformed over the second half of the twentieth century. Of course, the political transformations of the Kurds are often the most well known to observers (especially those from the West), to which the wealth of literature on the subject of Kurdish politics would attest. But there have also been concomitant and equally profound transformations occurring in the social and cultural realms, as Kurdish populations have reacted to the new and complex realities of the world around them. Naturally, there are also interactions across these realms, as social and cultural developments and political transformations meet and thus alter how Kurds engage between themselves, across imposed boundaries, and with the wider world.

These transformations are also evident in the realm of the academic study of the Kurds and Kurdistan, with the significant changes in the status of the Kurds in contemporary affairs being mirrored by the considerable expansion in the study of them, across the full gamut of social science and humanities disciplines. From being the preserve of a select few specialists who had very specific foci, the study of the Kurds has now blossomed into a significant and notable area of research within the multi-disciplinary community of those engaged in Middle East Studies in particular, and comparative studies more generally. The result has been astonishing, with the literature on the Kurds and Kurdistan expanding considerably over the last twenty years. What was always a vibrant and active, but small, community of scholars addressing the Kurds has now become a vibrant, active, large, and still growing community from around the globe who have furthered understandings of the Kurds and Kurdistan from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, and through multi- and inter-disciplinary approaches. In addition to many high-quality research monographs, journalistic accounts, and academic journal articles, several excellent edited collections have also been published in recent years on specific and focused aspects of the Kurds and

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Kurdistan. But there exists no single volume that attempts to present a comprehensive overview of the multi-faceted Kurdish question, bringing together expertise in an attempt to cover the entirety of the Kurdish-populated areas of the Middle East, and to bring together scholars and specialists from a range of disciplinary backgrounds to provide a snapshot not only of the contemporary situation of the Kurds and Kurdistan, but also to present a state-of-the-art collection of chapters that show the strength of the field of Kurdish studies, broadly defined, today. This is what we have attempted to do, and we stress our over-use of the word “attempt.” The field of study of the Kurds and Kurdistan is not only broad, but is also geographically and historically complex and presents those authors and editors embarking upon a “whole of Kurdistan” work with numerous organizational problems that we will discuss. These challenges are then multiplied by attempting to provide a snapshot of the academic field across the many and varied disciplines that exist within the social sciences and humanities. As such, we have aimed for comprehensive coverage in *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, but we have had to accept an end result that may well have to suffice as an admirable failure. We hope, however, that it has managed to tick as many boxes as it possibly could.

Struggling Against Boundaries

As we have seen, since the end of the First World War, the Kurds have been divided between Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, with a smaller community also present in the Caucasus region. Therefore, until relatively recently, the study of the Kurds has tended to be ordered according to this imposed state framework. Writers on Kurdish politics would tend to address the situation of the Kurds in one particular country, making reference to the plight of Kurds in neighboring states only when doing so was apposite to the primary analysis. This has certainly been the case for subjects of a political nature—whether historical or contemporary—and this method of taxonomy can also be seen, albeit to a lesser extent, in works that focus on humanities and arts disciplines. Such a framework represents a certain reality that not only had to be acknowledged at an intellectual level—as Kurdish politics were increasingly conditioned according to the host countries in which they lived—but also a reality that imposed constraints on what researchers could and could not do. Entering any part of Kurdish-populated regions was difficult enough in the twentieth century; then to undertake cross-boundary research even more so.

In recent years, more research has been undertaken by scholars keen to uncover the intricacies and nuances of the Kurdish world, whether in terms of political development, economic interactions, social engagements, cultural production, or popular movements, to name but a few areas. This research has seen publications appear that are genuinely pan-Kurdish in their approach, and present a new and exciting set of

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analyses of the Kurds a century after their division into four regions. Even so, there remain serious weaknesses in the knowledge base of the broader field of Kurdish studies. While there has been a very considerable amount of research undertaken on the subject of the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, there was, until recently, virtually nothing on the status of the Kurds in Syria, let alone detailed sociological and anthropological work on how Kurdish society operated under a brutally chauvinistic regime. With the commencement of the Syrian civil war in 2011, and as the Syrian Kurds took up arms, the political importance of what were previously referred to as “the forgotten Kurds”, and the opening up of some areas of Rojava to academic researchers, has seen a nascent and vibrant new literature emerge.

The same cannot be said of the situation in Rojhelat, or Kurdistan in Iran. With the Iranian state suppressing Kurdish activism with brutal efficiency in western Iran, undertaking academic research, investigative journalism, or think-tank analysis writing on the standing of the Kurds in Iran remains difficult to the point of being impossible, and pursuing work on Kurdish culture and arts activities would be equally problematic. Indeed, most research on the Kurds in Iran would have to be done via secondary sources made available through activists, by meeting with representatives of the myriad political parties of Rojhelat, or by trying to piece together a particular picture from whatever can be gleaned from visiting Iran but without undertaking formal research. Indeed, the inability to access Kurdish-populated areas in Iran in any meaningful way means that, even today, this significant part of the Middle East remains *terra incognita* for even the most informed of experts.

In structuring this book, we thought carefully about how best to arrange the chapters, so as to present a thematic approach to “the Kurdish Question” and try to break away from the intellectual status quo that is in itself a product of the political status quo imposed upon the Kurds. The end result is, however, a compromise; a useful and necessary one, too. While a thoroughly thematic approach would have been an interesting avenue to pursue, it became readily apparent that a purely thematic approach, for such a broadly-based collection, would not in itself be representative either of the reality of the Kurdish situation today, or the manner in which academics and specialists largely continue to structure their research. The boundaries of the Middle East state system—stressed and strained though they may be, and challenged by new political and social forces—remain the organizing feature of political life in the region, and also continue to exert a strong influence on the work of those interested in the Kurds and Kurdistan. It is also the case that Kurds still largely operate within this state framework—whether purposefully or passively—and the legacy of this century-old set of boundaries is deeply rooted in Kurdish societies. Maybe years from now Kurds will have dropped statist prefixes such as “Iraqi” or “Syrian” that define what sort of Kurd they happen to be; but in 2017 these identities remain rooted in the broader Kurdish psyche, as does the notion that the Kurdish question

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is multi-faceted, still to be resolved within the boundaries of the established states rather than across the divides.

While we had to succumb to the organizational logic provided by the current state system, we were still determined to illustrate the burgeoning cross-region expertise, as scholars recognize the trans-state dynamics that are increasingly being felt across Kurdistan, and also reflect upon subjects that are perhaps not constrained so easily by these artificial boundaries. Part One of *The Kurdish Question Revisited* commences with “Reflections on Identity, Culture, and the Nation”: three key areas of discussion for anyone with more than a passing interest in the Kurds. Chapters in this section range far and wide across academic disciplines, with concepts of political mobilization being juxtaposed alongside everyday religion, the international relations of the Kurdish sub-system, the development of the Kurdish novel, and a discussion of Kurdish music in Armenia. Jordi Tejel embarks upon a broad canvas survey of the writing of the Kurds’ history in all of their domains, while David Romano further considers the subject of his earlier book on the application of social movement theory to Kurdistan. Two chapters—by Michiel Leezenberg and Diane King—consider the role of religion among the Kurds, with Leezenberg addressing the polar opposites of Sufism and Salafism, and King considering the “everyday” practice of religion. Considering broader notions of identity and memory formation and usage, Hakan Özoğlu addresses the “politics of memory”, but instead of the methods and practice of memory accumulation, rather the phenomenon of “collective forgetting.” Hamit Bozarslan provides a challenging chapter on the Kurdish quest for the Universal. Nationalism and literature are intimately entwined, yet the extremely well-developed body of Kurdish literature is relatively unknown outside specialist scholars: Hashem Ahmadzadeh—one of the leading figures in the study of the Kurdish novel—focuses upon themes in the Kurdish novel and short story, tying their development to the sociopolitical conditions of Kurdish society at the time of writing. Building on this relationship between story-telling and the nation-building process, Christine Allison looks at the politics of folklore in Kurdistan. Part One finishes with Nahro Zagros looking at Kurdish music in Armenia, with particular reference to the Yezidis.

Part Two moves to northern Kurdistan (in Turkey) and is more political in its focus as it addresses the development of the Kurdish question in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. Perhaps the most formative moment in the history of the Kurdish nationalist movement was the Sheikh Ubeidullah Rebellion of 1880, the subject of Sabri Ates’ contribution, in which he recalls how Ubeidullah planned to end the division of the Kurds between Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Janet Klein then turns her attention to the “first Kurdish gazette” and the role played by the Bedirkhan family in producing the pioneering Kurdish-language newspaper *Kurdistan* at the end of the nineteenth century. We then unapologetically have four chapters that address, roughly, a similar subject: the modern manifestations of the Kurdish question in Turkey, particularly since the 1980s. Cengiz Gunes focuses par-

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ticularly on the mobilization of the Kurds in the 1980s and 1990s, explaining the growth of the PKK and its use of nationalist symbols and events to generate a “myth of resistance.” Bill Park plays with the notion of “Turkey’s Kurdish problems” and also considers “the Kurds’ Turkish problems”, presenting a detailed account of the on-off peace process from 2012 to 2015. Considering this issue further, Henri Barkey investigates the rationale that underpinned the peace process between the Turkish state and the PKK, and the evolution of Turkish thinking. Finally, Michael Gunter provides a *longue durée* overview of the “contrasting Turkey paradigms towards the volatile Kurdish problem”, arguing that continuity is as evident as change. Completing Part Two are two chapters that focus principally on the PKK: Joost Jongerden sheds light on the under-studied concept of “democratic autonomy” that has become the cornerstone of the PKK’s political discourse, while Clémence Scalbert-Yücel shows how the wider Kurdish movement’s cultural policies took shape around a rationale formulated by the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan.

Parts Three and Four between them present five chapters on the Kurdish question in Syria and in Iran. Clearly an imbalance in a book that presents far more chapters on the situation in Turkey, Iraq, and the “trans-state” aspect, it remains the case that the weight of activity of academics and specialists on the Kurds in Syria, and especially Iran, is very light indeed. However, the quality is thankfully very high and, in these sections, two important issues regarding the case of the Kurds in Syria are addressed: the relationship between the PYD and PKK by Zeynep Kaya and Robert Lowe, and the role of the Kurds in the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime by Harriet Allsopp. It seems that the Kurds in Iran live not only in political, but also academic, isolation, such is the scarcity of scholars who work on this subject. Nader Entessar provides a compelling account of what he refers to as “the Kurdish conundrum” that exercised the Islamic Republic between 1979 and 2003; Olivier Grojean then questions the multi-ethnic and supposedly cosmopolitan nature of the Iranian state, investigating identities and ethnic hierarchy, while Walter Posch delves into how the Iranian government views the Iranian Kurds from its own state-centric and ideological perspectives.

The Kurdish Question and Iraq is then considered in Part Five. Gareth Stansfield provides an overview of the main political trends and developments that have taken place in the post-2003 period, before four chapters address different key issues. The first of these, written by Mohammed Ihsan, considers the Arabization program of Saddam Hussein’s government in what are now referred to as Iraq’s “disputed territories”; Katherine Ranharter takes stock of the rapid growth of the KRI’s higher education perspective, while Greg Shapland provides an assessment of that most critical resource in the KRI, water, and its role in current and future development plans and opportunities. Finally, Kelsey Shanks provides a forward-looking chapter, taking the subject of “peace education” as a means of managing inter-communal tensions by giving younger people the means to understand and empathize with the world

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around them. Returning to recent political developments, Benjamin Isakhan looks at the Kurdish response to the rise of the Islamic State, and in particular the Kurds' seizing of most of the disputed territories and the manner in which they then used their advantageous position to leverage a much improved relationship with the US and Western powers. Adding further weight to this argument, Renad Mansour delves into the strategy pursued by the KRG leadership as they sought to position themselves favorably with international actors from 2003 onwards. Completing this trilogy of foreign affairs analyses is Mohammed Shareef's chapter: in an erudite analysis, he views the KRI relationship with the US as having undergone a transition since 2003, which after 2014 was subject to a complete paradigm shift in terms of both policy and strategy. Yet, irrespective of the improved relations the Kurds of Iraq have with Western powers, the KRG still needs to generate legitimacy within Kurdistan itself, which in recent years it has very much struggled to achieve. Nicole Watt's powerful chapter on "re-claiming Halabja" investigates the way in which the traumatic memories of the Halabja chemical attack are now contested by the KRG, Kurdish elites, and the local people of Halabja themselves through a febrile set of engagements that have, on occasion, broken down into violence. Recognizing similar dynamics of hegemonic traditional party control, Andrea Fischer-Tahir focuses on the control of the media and political culture in the KRI, asking a series of pointed questions that illustrate how the Kurdish media still have some way to go before they can be considered truly free of state and party influences. A further aspect of Kurdish life in desperate need of change is that of the treatment of women. Nazand Begikhani and Gill Hague present some of their research findings from an extensive research project that focused on honor-based violence (HBV) in the KRI. They note the depressingly slow progress made in eradicating HBV, and the need to establish legal provisions as a matter of urgency. Finally, Francis Owtram broaches the question that many observers ask concerning the Kurds of Iraq: will they declare their independence? Owtram places the discussion within the context of the Iraqi constitution of 2005, concluding that independence may come, but perhaps later rather than sooner, and only if the Kurds manage their political and economic affairs more shrewdly than they have done to date.

The Genealogy of The Kurdish Question Revisited

This collection has had a reasonably long gestation period, perhaps befitting a book of this size and complexity, but being understandably frustrating to those contributors who had the challenge of writing on rapidly moving political events. The initial idea for such a volume came about following the successful creation of a Kurdish Studies programme at the University of Exeter, commencing in 2004. With a range of students, from undergraduates through MA candidates and PhD researchers, all coming together in the green hills of the south-west of England, Exeter's Centre for

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Kurdish Studies proved that there was a significant and wide interest in the field, and the University soon became a destination for students worldwide who were interested in furthering their knowledge of the Kurds and Kurdistan. These developments in Exeter were also mirrored by the building and expansion of research clusters across Europe—especially in France and Germany—and the US, and were intimately linked to new and exciting research initiatives unfolding across Kurdistan, in Turkey and Iraq in particular. The growth of this academic community was also matched by the very rapid growth in wider public interest in the Kurdish question, driven by the changes that began to emerge in the Middle East after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and especially following the commencement of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and the rise and consolidation of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq from 2014 onwards. It was therefore a relatively straightforward notion to conceive of a significant edited collection like this, and it was an idea to which Michael Dwyer of Hurst Publishers enthusiastically lent his support.

An opening research seminar was convened at the Royal Institute for International Affairs, Chatham House, in London in January 2015, which brought together the majority of the contributors to this volume for an eye-opening two days of private presentations and discussions, which then moved into a public event, where those focused upon the contemporary politics of the Kurds engaged in open discussion with London's community of policy analysts. Various other contributors were then invited to join the project in order to ensure that the scope of the collection, and the revisiting of the Kurdish question, would be as comprehensive as possible.

But this book is not only about providing geographically comprehensive coverage of developments in Kurdistan, and ensuring that the range of intellectual disciplines that have interests in Kurdistan and Kurdish society are represented. The book also presents a snapshot of the world of Kurdish studies, bringing together established scholars in the field alongside those specialists who have become engaged in the study of the Kurds from other regional endeavors, and those new scholars who are beginning to make a name for themselves through outstanding and challenging new research. Of course, we could not accommodate everybody that we would ideally have had—although, as the length of the book attests, we certainly did try—but we have attempted to provide a window into who is doing what, and how, in this exciting field, at a critical moment for the affairs of the Middle East in general, and the Kurds in particular. Perhaps a *Revisiting II* should be considered, to ensure that those excellent scholars who were not included, or are in the midst of their studies, may join those presented in this volume. While Middle East politics may be unpredictable, it would seem safe to say that the Kurds and Kurdistan will continue to attract the attention of scholars in the years ahead.

PART 1

REFLECTIONS ON DEBATES OF IDENTITY
AND NATION

1.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON WRITING THE HISTORY OF
THE KURDS IN IRAQ, SYRIA AND TURKEY

A HISTORY AND STATE OF THE ART ASSESSMENT¹

Jordi Tejel

Introduction

During the second international conference on Kurdish Studies held at Exeter during 6-8 September 2012, Djene Bajalan—a colleague and historian—and I were struck by the paucity of panels dealing with Kurdish history. As in previous conferences, an overwhelming majority of papers presented in Exeter focused on issues related to ethnicity, nation, and nationalism, with a near dominance of political science, and to a lesser extent anthropological, lenses. While the field of Kurdish studies, a relative newcomer in social sciences in Western universities, has expanded over the last two decades and continues to do so, it appears still that few academic historians and PhD students are interested in writing Kurdish history.

Prompted by this appraisal, Djene took the lead and organized, with the aid of colleagues at the University of Oxford, a conference entitled *New Perspectives on Writing the History of the Kurds* at St Antony's College (Ertegun House) on 17 May 2013. Bringing together ten junior and senior scholars of different nationalities and from different fields of inquiry—literature, politics, historiography, intellectual history—it was intended that the colloquium would discuss the prevailing narratives and paradigms of interpretation of Kurdish history, society, and culture; thereby

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contributing to the assessment of areas where research is lacking and, eventually, suggesting new grids of analysis. In particular, the organizers invited us to rethink the way we write Kurdish history in order to avoid falling into the methodological and epistemological “dangers” presented by the nationalist paradigm. In other words, we were asked to reflect on alternative ways to write a history of the Kurds from a non-nationalist perspective, which at the same time would not deny “the Kurdish reality.” The papers presented, together with the debates we held, proved that there is in fact a growing awareness of the pitfalls of the nationalist paradigm within the field of Kurdish studies.

In a recent piece, Bajalan pursued this ongoing reflection on an even more positive note for, although “the writing of Kurdish history has not been as prominent among scholars as might have been expected,” a new generation of Kurdish and non-Kurdish scholars trained in Western universities have “contributed greatly to our understanding of the Kurdish past.”² Furthermore, developments in Turkey have led to the “emergence of local historians such as those in the Bogaziçi Performing Arts Ensemble (BGST) [...], as well as the group formed around the popular history journal *Kürt Tarihi* (Kurdish History) [...], who have sought to promote greater understanding of Kurdish history without falling into the nationalistic discourse of earlier generations of Kurdish historians.”³

Thus, is the glass half empty or half full? In order to provide a comprehensive answer to that question, I shall first address the main question of the workshop convened in Oxford, namely whether or not it is possible to write Kurdish history from a non-nationalist perspective, which at the same time does not deny the aforementioned “Kurdish reality.” In the second part of the chapter, I shall provide a quick overview on the origins and development of scholarship on the history of the Kurds in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey in order to improve understanding of the relatively late development of academic history writing within Kurdish studies. I argue that there are enough signs to assess a momentum for academic history writing on Kurds and Kurdistan notwithstanding the need for further research in some of the directions already undertaken, and a number of remaining lacunae.

In that sense, in the third section, I shall point out various alternative approaches that, in my view, deserve further attention from practitioners, as they may offer innovative ways to avoid some of the epistemological pitfalls presented by the national paradigm. Among many potential alternative approaches I shall focus upon only three: comparative history, transnational history, and global history. Although these “alternative” avenues may appear rather obvious, one must bear in mind that within the field of Kurdish studies very few such approaches have been practiced so far. Obviously, the aim of this discussion is not to provide a detailed overview of these methods, but rather to highlight the advantages they offer to historians, as well as their feasibility with regard to the Kurds. Finally, the chapter will develop some methodological issues that are intimately related to the overall discussion.

NEW PERSPECTIVES

National histories

Is it possible to write Kurdish history from a non-nationalist perspective, which at the same time does not deny the Kurdish reality? The answer to that question actually demands some nuance. If the question is whether it is possible to write a Kurdish *national* history without falling into the nationalist paradigm, such prospects seem almost irremediably dismal. First of all, national history writing is an eminently political project where its practitioners see themselves working within the matrix of history, cultural memory, and politics. As such, historians of the nation hold specifically political views of the “imagined community,” its past, its present and, more often than not, its future. Put differently, studying the formation and development of a specific national identity is almost more of an academic exercise in “historical teleology” than a search for any actual historical roots of a nation. It is a process that begins from an already known conclusion, whereby the historian selects events and employs them retrospectively in order to provide a given nation with a sense of historical legitimacy.⁴

Historians such as Stefan Berger have underlined the continued strength of national history throughout the world. It persists despite the shortcomings and negative consequences triggered by the Romantic national paradigm adopted by most, yet by no means all,⁵ European and Middle Eastern historians throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the various forms of discrimination, wars, civil wars, ethnic cleansing, and genocide.⁶

As a matter of fact, national history has been a dominant genre of history writing in Europe for almost two centuries. It is still an important type of historical text outside Europe,⁷ with the possible exception of India, where the field of Subaltern Studies has found an important following in the last thirty years.⁸ In that respect, “national histories can be described as one of the most successful exports of Europe in the imperial age.”⁹ More surprisingly, in spite of the emergence of alternative approaches to national history throughout the twentieth century—Marxist, social, transnational, global, and micro-history, etc.—national histories have witnessed a revival in Europe since 1989, for several reasons.

Firstly, the collapse of the former Soviet bloc and the subsequent creation of new states, along with the discourse about a united Europe, has precipitated the unexpected comeback of the nation as a central subject of study in many Eastern European countries.¹⁰ Secondly, and paradoxically, as ethnicity is now automatically understood to be a social construct, it no longer needs to be “denounced” or deconstructed as such. Thus, as Joep Leerssen points out, under the proviso of its constructed nature, the concepts of “ethnicity” and “national group”—used interchangeably in many cases—are gaining new legitimacy among scholars as operative factors in history.¹¹

Finally, in the Middle East, no less than elsewhere, the nationalist ideal of “one nation, one state” was widely embraced, and the leaders of the post-colonial states

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were expected and encouraged, both by interested groups and the international community, to engage in nation-building. Thereafter, the nation-state became the self-evident spatial unit for professional historians, without need of any further justification. Furthermore, the burden of three distinct but related dynamics—the Millet system, colonial legacies, and the imperatives of post-colonial nation-building¹²—led local historians both to deny or at least overlook ethnic and religious pluralism within their societies, and to place national history at center stage on the intellectual agenda, thereby neglecting other possible narratives.¹³ Sometimes they were moved by genuine enthusiasm; and sometimes they drifted along with the new “forced consensus” and official unanimity.

In the past twenty years, one can certainly identify a growing number of publications focusing on the “forgotten” peoples and groups of the Middle East: Kurds, Alevis in Turkey, Shi‘as in Iraq, Copts in Egypt, and so forth, in addition to memoirs written by dissident activists, leftists and Islamists alike. Yet, these works do not seek to put forward the basis of a new approach to history, but rather to contest the dominant national narrative. Against this background, it seems safe to predict that national history writing in general will continue to predominate for a considerable time to come. In that respect, one could argue that the Kurds, as a people, are also entitled to write their *own* national history, especially since Iranian, Turkish, and Arab national narratives continue to neglect the Kurdish reality as the figment of an “imagined nation.”

Hence, we as historians in the field of Kurdish studies should try to respond to two broad and non-exclusive questions. First, can we write a different, non-parochial Kurdish national history? Second, can we explore other avenues that would complement the mainstream national narrative? I suggest that, before answering these questions, we need to examine the origins and developments of history writing on Kurds in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, as well as the constraints this academic activity has traditionally faced.

Where do we come from and where are we going?

In the first place, one must keep in mind that academic history writing should be distinguished from writings by Kurdish political elites and intellectuals attempting to “root” the nation by constructing a nationalist historiography. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the proponents of a Kurdish historiographical discourse in today’s Iraq (until the emergence of a generation of university-trained Kurdish scholars in the 1960s), Syria, and Turkey have been multifunctional actors, moving between the political and cultural fields.¹⁴ In that sense, Kurdish historiography, and historiography in general, is “part of the construction of a wide range of cultural and

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intellectual knowledge and meanings” and, more importantly, it “has meaning only when it is part of a political process.”¹⁵

Thus, unsurprisingly, the pioneers of Kurdish history in the early twentieth century were members of the Kurdish intelligentsia educated in Western countries or in the Westernized schools of the Ottoman Empire. Like their Arab or Turkish counterparts, Kurdish historiographical producers, coming from different parts of Ottoman Kurdistan, chose periodicals as the main vehicle for the writing of Kurdish national history.¹⁶

Newly created states in the Middle East brought about the physical division of Kurdish groups and the subsequent emergence of distinct national narratives in which the Kurds found no place. In Turkey, where their very existence was denied and Kurdish associations were closed down immediately after the creation/birth of the republic, Kurdish intellectuals were simply unable to produce such a counter-narrative. It was in Syria and Lebanon that certain Kurdish intellectuals, previously based in Istanbul and Diyarbakır, found refuge and worked on founding the Khoybun League.¹⁷ This committee laid out the basis for the conceptualization, in Kurmanji Kurdish, of modern Kurdish nationalism in Turkey and Syria. The continuity of Kurdish discourse in the post-Ottoman period manifested itself in the Khoybun’s project to lead the Kurds toward Western civilization and the declared necessity of modernizing Kurdish society from the top down.

The Khoybun insisted on these aspects as a reaction to Kemalist propaganda, which claimed to have brought “civilization” to Kurdistan. The process of mimesis also affected the discourse about the *we* group and the *other*. Thus, while the official discourse in Turkey (and partially in Iran) depicted the Kurds as tribal and primitive, traditional and anti-modern, the Kurds sought not only to prove that they were indeed “modern” and “civilized,” but also to demonstrate that in fact the Turks were “barbarians” and a model of “uncivilized people.” Though carrying a message concerning an *us* (the “Kurdish national community”), Kurdish intellectuals were not independent of state categories: the search for a golden age, the purity of language, the homogeneity of their society, the “civilized” *we* group as opposed to “barbarians,” among others.¹⁸

Despite their pretensions, the brochures published in different languages during the 1920s and 1930s by the League can hardly be considered historical studies. They have to be viewed instead as a nationalist discourse aimed at legitimizing Kurdish claims and deconstructing the Kemalist discourse on Kurds. Interestingly, however, between the 1930s and 1940s, the two main leaders of the Khoybun, Jaladat, and Kamuran Badirkhan published a series of Kurdish periodicals (*Hawar*, *Ronahî*, *Roja Nû*) in Damascus and Beirut, in which local history (Kurdish Ottoman emirates, local tribes, Kurdish leaders) was present along with *national* political myths and the anti-Kemalist discourse.

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In Iraq, Mohammed Amin Zaki Beg (1880-1948), a former officer of the Ottoman army and a Westernized Kurdish intellectual, during the first half of the twentieth century compiled the most comprehensive studies on Kurdish history and its leading figures.¹⁹ As to the second half of the century, various regimes in Iraq from 1958 onwards did acknowledge the right of the Kurds to create their own Kurdish intellectual platforms. Despite this advance, academic research on Kurdish history remained a sensitive issue in Iraq, compared to research on Kurdish literature and language. In that respect, Kurdish historians had severe difficulty even including “Kurdish history” as a focus of their research agenda. Contrary to common belief, however, scholars took advantage of some spaces of relative academic freedom to publish works on some aspects of Kurdish history. Among the most prestigious Kurdish-Iraqi scholars, one must mention Kamal Mazhar Ahmad (b.1938), lecturer in history in Baghdad for many years and eventually head of the University of Baghdad’s department of history until 2003. He was one of the first Kurdish historians to address the Armenian genocide during the First World War from an academic perspective.²⁰

In parallel, Orientalists such as Basil Nikitine and Thomas Bois, as well as former Western officials in Kurdistan such as Cecil J. Edmonds and William Eagleton, wrote important contributions on various episodes of Kurdish history until the 1960s.²¹ From the 1960s onwards, the renewal of Kurdish nationalism in Kurdistan as a whole piqued the interest of the Western media and research centers in the United States. The Barzani revolt (1961-75), the guerrilla warfare in Iran (1979-83) and in Turkey (1984 until now), and the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq in 1992 each contributed to this. International reporters published significant contributions, in particular on the Barzani revolt,²² and later helped the public become aware of Kurdish suffering during the Anfal campaign in Iraq (1987-8) and the human rights abuses in Turkey.²³ In parallel, the increase of academic studies in Europe and the United States on different aspects of Kurdish society also reflected this new momentum.

Yet, except for some scholars such as Hamit Bozarslan, Nelida Fuccaro, Hans-Lukas Kieser, and Robert Olson,²⁴ up to the 2000s few works were the product of academic historians. Martin van Bruinessen, a well-known anthropologist, has worked extensively on various aspects of the Kurdish issue, including historical events such as the Shaikh Said rebellion, for the last forty years.²⁵ Tellingly, he continues to be one of the most-cited authors in studies dealing with Kurdish history. In the same vein, the very helpful *A Modern History of the Kurds* by David McDowall—a respected British author, albeit not a historian—constitutes one of the works of reference for any student or scholar dealing with contemporary Kurdish history.²⁶

In addition, as Hamit Bozarslan pointed out, between the 1980s and 1990s most of these endeavors had been the result of individual initiatives and personal interest. Scholars in this field had been forbidden to project long-term research programs.

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Further, unlike ancient and medieval studies, modern and contemporary histories of the Middle East “[were] rather poorly developed.”²⁷ And yet, the glass is half full.

An uneven blooming of history of the Kurds and Kurdistan

While practitioners of Kurdish history have faced some trying circumstances in pursuing their work, mainly due to severe political and material constraints, they have also been challenged by broader dynamics that affect academic historians elsewhere. Historians are not, and never have been, the only producers of history writing. Yet, for the last three decades, within the discipline of history, both recent and even present events have imposed themselves on the hegemonic field, both in its academic and popular expressions. As a result, interest in “the very contemporary” has grown exponentially among a wide range of people (journalists, intellectuals, teachers, politicians, and so forth), thereby marginalizing the “academic historian” in favor of the “witness,” and subsequently triggering a sort of identity crisis among professional historians.²⁸

The Middle East has been no exception. Following a tradition already started in Syria among exiled Kurdish intellectuals and leaders,²⁹ it is schoolmasters, intellectuals,³⁰ leading political figures,³¹ and journalists who are the most popular and prolific practitioners of history writing in Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan.

Paradoxically, universities in Iraqi Kurdistan, freed from Ba‘athist ideological constraints since 1992, have further developed neither their departments of history, nor any new scientific approaches for dealing with Kurdish history. On the one hand, at the moment Kurdish universities tend to consolidate and even freeze Kurdish history as focusing on the chapters of mass violence experienced by the Kurds throughout the 1980s and/or backs up political claims over disputed territories such as Kirkuk. Tellingly, the first scientific conference of the Department of History at the University of Sulaimani was organized for 15-17 April 2013 in conjunction with the Ministry of Martyrs’ Affairs under the title “Kurdish Genocide: Processes in History.”³²

According to Andrea Fischer-Tahir, Kurdish political rulers have been exploiting the Anfal campaign since the 1990s in order to ensure Kurdish unity and strong national feeling, endangered by corruption and maladministration. In that respect, the narrative on the Anfal campaign serves another interrelated aim: “to teach ‘the people’ what the word genocide basically means, where it comes from, and that in Kurdistan genocide is not only an experience situated in the past but a lasting (and continuing) threat.”³³

On the other hand, history departments are clearly losing ground compared to other disciplines. Koya University, for example, has only one professor of contemporary history, whereas Soran University and the University of Kurdistan (Erbil) have no department of history at all. The situation is slightly better at the universities of

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Dohuk and Sulaimani, where history occupies an important position in BA and MA programs. Partial marginalization of history as an academic activity in Iraqi Kurdistan may explain, at least in part, why the writing of the modern history of Kurdistan is mainly a non-academic pursuit. They have dealt with a wide range of genres, topics, and periods, from medieval history to local history and memoirs, as well as national issues such as Anfal or the history of the national movement.

In contrast, the flourishing intellectual activity of “popular historians” in Turkey has intersected with a specific internal dynamic. Since the 1990s, and in particular since the early 2000s, one can observe an increasing interest in Turkey’s ethnic and religious diversity. After decades of apparent hegemonic political discourse on the “homogenous identity” of the Turkish citizens, the publication of dozens of books about various “forgotten” or ethnic and religious groups and their histories has allowed many self-made experts to contribute to the revival of (popular) Kurdish history too.

Within this context, Kurdish scholars have launched initiatives to popularize Kurdish history, from a non-nationalist perspective, for a wider public in different ways. The establishment of the popular history journal *Kürt Tarihi* [Kurdish History] in June 2012 is illustrative of this trend. In addition, the relatively new universities in eastern Turkey have played a significant role in awakening the interest of larger sectors of Kurdish society in local and regional history (including the revolts, and Kurdish-Armenian relations) thanks to the organization of seminars and panels, not only at universities such as Hakkari Üniversitesi, but also in cultural centers in cities such as Tatvan or Mardin.³⁴

Finally, scholars reunited around private foundations such as the Ismail Beshikci Vakif have created new spaces for historically informed discussions between academic historians and a larger public.³⁵ In the same vein, Turkish universities outside Kurdish areas have created the conditions for such developments as well. The Middle East Technical University in Ankara and several universities in Istanbul (Bogaziçi, Bilgi, Sabanci) have trained dozens of Kurdish and non-Kurdish students who have produced a significant number of works on different aspects of Kurdish history, which, importantly, have used varying methodologies and sophisticated theoretical approaches. Subsequently, some of them have written their doctoral dissertations in Western universities, paving the way for their publication by prestigious publishing houses in English, thereby reaching a wider readership.³⁶

In addition, a new generation of scholars fully or partly trained in Western universities have attempted to study the history of Kurds and Kurdistan through placing local histories in a broader context, considering, for example, relations with ethnic neighbors in different spatial and temporal contexts. In this respect, Uğur Ümit Üngör, Yektan Türkyilmaz, and Seda Altuğ have examined issues related to mass violence and collective memory among Kurdish and non-Kurdish populations during the interwar years in eastern Anatolia.³⁷ Likewise, the late Ottoman period has

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inspired a number of important works on social relations, tribal politics, and state-society relations in the same region.³⁸

Finally, the revival of interest in the Mandates in Syria and Iraq has opened the door for a series of monographs and articles on the history of Kurds in those countries during the interwar years. Following the pioneering works of Christian Velud on the Syrian Jazira, Syrian Kurds have increasingly been the object of study for authors who have analyzed the formation of contemporary Kurdish nationalism in Syria, urban mobilization in Upper Jazira,³⁹ the delimitation of the Turkish-Syrian border, and the complexity of identity dynamics among Damascene Kurds.⁴⁰ The renewal of mandatory studies in Iraq has allowed for the publication of useful studies on the Yezidis in colonial Iraq, as well as local politics in Sulaimani.⁴¹

All in all, it seems that the focus on locality—local and regional history—rather than on ethnic groups, thereby placing the Kurds in a broader context, is increasingly seen as a way of avoiding the biases of methodological nationalism in area studies. If these promising endeavors are to be continued, there are also alternative historical approaches available that remain, by and large, unpractised within the field of Kurdish studies.

Alternative approaches

I shall now briefly touch upon the advantages that alternative approaches offer to historians in order both to advance the knowledge of a pluralistic history of the Kurds, and eventually to avoid some of the epistemological dangers presented by the national paradigm: comparative history, transnational history, and global history.

Comparative history should be considered as an alternative to the traditional “national narrative.” One should be aware that calls for an explicit comparative history are by no means a novelty. Marc Bloch, a well-known French historian of the interwar era, would even argue that good historians are constantly comparing.⁴² In that respect, if history is more than chronology, which I think it is, any attempt to explain and interpret events in a particular place and at a particular time involves comparison with past events and dynamics, or with events and dynamics happening at the same time elsewhere. As a matter of fact, the units of comparison are not reducible to nations. Researchers may compare localities, economic units, laws, borders, and so on. On the other hand, the purpose of the comparison may also vary. In that respect, scholars might seek either to demonstrate the uniqueness of one particular case (individualizing comparisons) by comparing it to others, or to identify similarities. Comparative historians would state that the comparative method presents some essential advantages, among which, first and foremost, is a better knowledge of their own society through comparison. Further, it allows historians to gain a viewpoint outside one particular regional or national history, and makes history a less provincial

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undertaking. To sum up, comparative history has the potential to equip the historian with new perspectives and new explanations, and ultimately to allow him/her to define new problems.⁴³

Yet, according to Stefan Berger, four conditions need to be fulfilled before successful comparisons can be made. First, the historian needs to be very familiar with more than one social context. Second, practitioners of comparative studies must be clear about their geographical and time boundaries. Choices made in terms of geographical and time scope need to be justified. Third, they also need to be clear about the units of comparison that will fit (or not) into their theoretical and conceptual framework. Finally, comparativists must be aware of the linguistic pitfalls in transnational comparisons involving more than one language,⁴⁴ especially since comparison may be expanded not only to the closest neighbors (Turks, Arabs, and Iranians in this case), but also to other geographical and cultural areas that might shed light on wider historical dynamics.

Comparative history may be an individual academic initiative, but it can also be undertaken collectively. Besides limited collective projects—edited volumes and special issues—in which the comparative approach is explicitly put forward, scholars dealing with comparative history should consider the possibility of establishing stable international networks that ensure the continuity of such endeavors.

Certainly, comparative history has witnessed a revival of interest among scholars as the process of globalization has dramatically quickened throughout the last decades.⁴⁵ Prompted by the latter, historians have become more eager to study the past connections and comparisons between different parts of the world. In that respect, “global history” has taken a step forward in order to study the connections and comparisons across and between world regions.⁴⁶ In particular, social and cultural historians are increasingly adopting global frameworks to bring new insights and methods to their research. A first distinction is however necessary. As some authors put it, the terms “international” and “transnational” or “global” overlap, but they are not synonymous. To Helgren and Vasconcellos, the “international” refers to “developments, events, and ideas that are global in scale” whereas the usage of “transnational” addresses “the crossing of boundaries.” In so doing, transnational studies “include the penetration or exchange of ideas, reform networks, images, technologies, markets, and goods as well as people.”⁴⁷

Although there is no clear-cut boundary between *transnational* and *global* history,⁴⁸ global historians are inclined to consider transnational history as exclusively concerned with connections and interpenetration, whereas global history is also concerned with comparisons. From her side, Isabel Hofmeyr argues that the claim of transnational methods is not simply that historical processes occur in different places, but that they are constructed in the movement between places, sites, and regions.⁴⁹ In so doing, transnational history may “contribute to the discussions about the *whens* and *wheres* of globalization.”⁵⁰

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Regardless of their specificities, both approaches are engaged in a project to reconstruct the aspects of the human past that transcend any one nation-state, empire, or other politically defined territory. Hence, I would argue that both transnational and global histories could allow us to inscribe Kurdish history into a wider, interconnected, and non-nation-state narrative. Thus, global history could prove to be extremely helpful in conducting studies about peasantry and labour in the Middle East, an economic history of the Middle East connected to a larger framework, or the effects of the First World War in the Middle East, using a wide range of documents held not only in the Ottoman archives but also in the British or Russian public records.

African and Asian studies, for example, have greatly benefited from the global and transnational approaches to analyze essential topics for the continent such as slavery, trafficking, and labor.⁵¹ Beyond economic and social issues, global and transnational histories might shed some light on cultural and intellectual processes,⁵² such as the emergence of nationalism and modernity in the Middle East as a “transnational enterprise,” something which has been partially addressed by practitioners of Kurdish history.

Additionally, practitioners of transnational history have examined the role of international organizations, for example, such as the League of Nations and its different bodies in the promotion of educational, scientific, and cultural exchanges, or the limits to its enshrinement of minority rights in the interwar era.⁵³ The post-1945 order was marked by a political and administrative landscape with partially overlapping national and supranational assemblies, administrations, and legal orders, as well as a growing role of non-state actors such as NGOs and international youth movements.⁵⁴

While scholars in the field of Kurdish studies have shown a rising interest in transnational dynamics related to the formation of a Kurdish diaspora and the ever-increasing transnational relations between Kurdish communities located outside the Middle East and in the homeland, so far there have been no serious attempts to study historical events or trends pertaining to Kurdish history from a transnational perspective. Thus, the extant academic literature focuses on emerging “transnational spaces,” “transnational identities,” “refugee problems,” or alternatively on Kurdish political activities in Western countries in order to persuade state actors and groups from “civil society” to intervene in favor of a political solution of the “Kurdish issue,” in particular in Turkey.⁵⁵ Despite the unquestionable contribution of these works to the understanding of current dynamics within the Kurdish transnational space, none of them holds a historically-informed research agenda.

Against this background, any comprehensive research about, for example, the actual role of the Kurdish Student Society in Europe (KSSE) and its transnational connections with a wide array of state and non-state actors (International Union of Students, Henri Curjel’s Group of Rome, and so on) to raise understanding of the evolution of the Barzani revolt between 1961 and 1975, for instance, is still missing.⁵⁶

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While the records of the powerful Confederation of Iranian Students National Union have been examined by Iranian scholars as well as transnational historians,⁵⁷ the documents produced by the KSSE remain largely unexplored.⁵⁸

By the same token, paying more attention to the field of international organizations and the impact of their decision-making policies could also shed light on recent essential developments for Iraqi Kurds, and for the region in general: notably an accurate account for the emergence and consolidation of the “safe haven” established in Iraqi Kurdistan between 1991 and 1992, including the interplay between states, international agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), NGOs, Kurdish political parties and, last but not least, the Kurdish populations.⁵⁹

Some methodological considerations

One may argue that calls for a new research agenda and the enlargement of approaches as well as methodologies are theoretically relevant, yet hardly practicable with regard to the Kurdish case for several reasons. In countries such as Iraq and Syria, which have suffered from invasions, a civil war, or ongoing conflicts, is it possible to write history in keeping with international standards? One must recall that much of the archival material held in Baghdad perished in the aftermath of 2003. Furthermore, in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, access to local and national archival materials has been and still is severely restricted. These are, of course, serious obstacles to conducting comprehensive research on Kurdish history.

For historians, written documents and archival materials are essential, although a very wide range of other sources are commonly used today. Consequently, there is a question regarding the proliferation of sources (written and oral), and methodological approaches. In that sense, despite all the above-mentioned obstacles, there are indeed some windows open to scholars. On the one hand, fieldwork, memory studies, and oral history—increasingly practised in Turkey since the 1990s⁶⁰—might be able to provide a new empirical construction of objects of study and analysis closer to the reality of the internal dynamics in contemporary Kurdish society, particularly in Iraq and Turkey, where restrictions on access to the fieldwork have been relaxed in the last two decades. Of course, oral history, memory studies, and ethnographic methods have their own limits; they allow scholars to study only two generations before. Yet, given the material constraints that historians dealing with contemporary events have to face, they cannot be discarded out of hand.

On the other hand, a creative and expansive use of Ottoman and Persian archives, as Sabri Atesh’s work proves, may greatly contribute to a better knowledge of modern Kurdish history.⁶¹ Likewise, a closer and non-ethnically specific look at French and British archives may also offer new avenues to social and global historians interested

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in issues such as colonialism, peasantry, and the expansion of capitalism in the Middle East. Historians need to start by critically assessing the epistemological value of categories used by the producers of written sources, such as state archives. In that respect, French and British archives, as with any other archival material, were constructed subjectively; thereby they can tell us how the colonial powers viewed or aimed to reshape local societies. Consequently, uncritically accepting mandate categories such as Kurd, Christian, Arab, Alawite, and so forth as local and natural social sub-groups is highly problematic for any historical research.

On another level, the establishment of multinational research groups is also a potential response to such challenges, for practitioners of Kurdish history may take advantage of empirical data drawn from other regions and sources—in the same way they would with other languages—that might have remained inaccessible to them. In the same vein, opening a dialogue with bordering disciplines, in particular sociology and anthropology, in the study of Kurdish history and related phenomena proves to be equally essential. Historians and anthropologists alike have been insisting extensively on the constructed and relational character of identities, as well as the need to locate their analyses in given spatial and temporal frameworks.

In so doing, they recognize the possibilities for hybridity and fluidity of religion and language as extremely important for any dynamic understanding of minority-majority relations. Similarly, they have come to acknowledge the importance of liminal positions and how political or other changes may make individuals or groups liminal, where previously they might have had little reason to consider themselves so.⁶² In that respect, the religious, linguistic, and clannish fault lines within the Kurdish groups, as well as the hybridity of Kurdish segments, should not be seen as *problems* but rather as the *norm* for many Middle Eastern populations. Making hybridity and liminalities central issues in our history writing may help both to avoid the pitfalls of the nationalist paradigm and to enrich our understanding of the history of Kurdistan and beyond.

There are, of course, other methodological issues at stake here, such as the necessity for a constant combination of both sociological and long-term perspectives in order to identify the continuity and discontinuity of certain social and political dynamics; of different scales of analysis (macro, meso, and micro); and of both structural and subjective factors (including perceptions, emotions, and trauma).

Finally, and from a practical viewpoint, interdisciplinary research programs around particular themes need to be reinforced. Africanist scholars, for example, have launched the African Borderlands Research Network (ABORNE). Besides offering a platform for debate and interdisciplinary exchanges, ABORNE “seeks to develop borderland studies as a sub-field in its own right and to promote research activity, including programmes of study at the postgraduate level.”⁶³ In addition, ABORNE aims to provide a mechanism for promoting collaborative research and dissemination amongst researchers based in and outside Africa. The establishment

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of the Kurdish Studies Network (KSN) in 2009 was an important step in that direction.⁶⁴ Yet, compared to initiatives such as ABORNE, the KSN still has a relatively loose research agenda.

All in all, scholars of Kurdish studies, including practitioners of Kurdish history, have indeed undertaken a huge amount of work so far, yet luckily, from the selfish point of view of one of these scholars, we still have a long way to go. The papers collected on this issue are an attempt to bolster those ongoing endeavors and to contribute, with befitting humility, to filling the glass to the brim.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN KURDISTAN

David Romano

Introduction: What are social movement theories?

Social movements involve the mobilization of large numbers of people to challenge power and press for (or resist) social change. While social movements can include formal political parties that share their goals as part of the movement, they are larger and more amorphous than a political party and include a vast array of possible strategies—both legal and illegal—designed to press for (or resist) the social changes their participants and leaders desire. Ralph H. Turner and Lewis M. Killian offer the following definition:

A social movement is a collectivity acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in the society or organization of which it is a part. As a collectivity a movement is a group with indefinite and shifting membership and with leadership whose position is determined more by informal response of the members than by formal procedures for legitimating authority.¹

Social movement theories in turn seek to understand social movements—their goals, identities, strategies, impacts, and fortunes. They may do so by focusing on a few specific issues, such as the discourse and ideological framings of a movement,² or the networks that movements tap into or create.³ Alternately, social movement theories may take a broader look at the sociopolitical contexts that stifle movements or

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allow them to thrive,⁴ the general array of choices and mobilisation strategies that movements pursue,⁵ or the broad cultural framings and identity-based questions that surround social movements' appeal.⁶ Although social movement theorists from these three broad traditions (the "structural" approach, the "strategy" or "agency" approach, and the "culture" or "identity" approach) long sought to demonstrate the superiority of their approach to social movement questions, in the 1990s a growing body of literature emerged about the need to pursue a synthesis of the three broad paradigms in social movement theory.⁷ While some social movement theorists pursued such a synthesis, others contented themselves by leaving aside such epistemological macro-questions and focusing instead on some individual aspects of specific social movements they wished to analyze.

The classic modern example first analyzed by social movement theories was the labor movement in the industrialized world. This movement focused on political and economic (e.g. "material") goals. In the 1960s and '70s the rise of "new social movements," such as environmentalist groups, the anti-nuclear movement, the new women's movements, and animal rights groups, spawned "new social movement theories." These new social movement theories were pioneered in Europe and focused on the non-material goals, post-modern context, and often innovative or unorthodox tactics and culture of these new movements.⁸ All of these social movement theories sought to produce generalizable approaches and insights, despite arising in and focusing on the experience of the Western industrialized world.

Beginning in the 1980s, a growing number of social movement theorists thus sought to apply the literature's insights to non-Western cases and contexts. Some of the most insightful work focused on the broad Latin American social movements that included opposition political parties, civil society initiatives, and armed guerrilla movements working together to change the prevailing status quo in the region.⁹ By the 2000s, social movement theory analysis was being applied to a vast array of cases across the world and continues to provide new insights to contentious politics in a wide variety of contexts.¹⁰

The first attempt to employ social movement theories in Kurdish studies

The author's *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity*¹¹ in 2006 was the first serious attempt to apply social movement theories to the Kurdish case. The book represented an attempt to answer larger questions about how, when, and why significant Kurdish episodes of dissidence and revolt in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran emerged. This work applied various schools of social movement theory to different Kurdish cases, with a special focus on twentieth-century Kurdish uprisings in Turkey.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY & POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

By first applying social movement theories from the three principle paradigms (opportunity structures, resource mobilization/rational choice agency-based approaches, and cultural identity approaches) in isolation of each other, the study sought to demonstrate the advantages and limitations of each broad school of social movement theory. In this sense it was as much a test of social movement theories as an attempt to explain episodes of Kurdish nationalist dissidence. The structural concept of opportunity structures proved to be good at predicting when serious Kurdish uprisings or significant dissidence would occur (in line with Theda Skocpol's expectations, mostly when central states are weak and when the Kurds have elite allies in the center or internationally¹²) as well as the form that such Kurdish movements would take. The open or closed nature of political systems the Kurds lived under played a key role here as well, as in this example from my analysis of Kurdish dissidence in Turkey:

When the institutionalized political system appeared more open, movements willing to operate legally within the system arose. Before the closing of the system in 1924, many Kurdish nationalists sought to be a part of and work from within Ankara's National Assembly. With the advent of the more liberal 1960 Constitution in Turkey, Kurdish nationalists (as well as many voters) supported and joined the legalized leftist movements. After 1960, several attempts were made to found legal political parties supportive of Kurdish aspirations, such as DEP and HADEP. All of these openings of the system proved ephemeral, however, with Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood crushed in 1925, leftist movements outlawed in 1971, liberal freedoms further suppressed in 1980, and parties such as DEP and HADEP closed down by the military. The result of such closures in the system were the Kurdish uprisings in the early days of the Republic and the subversive, violent left-wing (Kurdish as well as non-Kurdish) movements that emerged in the 1970s, of which the PKK became the most successful and best known.

It is not only the relative openness or closure of the political system that had a compelling effect on the character of emergent Kurdish movements, however. The other variables may also play an important role. Elites available to support Kurdish nationalist movements in the 1920s and 30s tended to be aghas, tribal leaders and religious sheikhs. Consequently, the movements that arose during this time period were conservative, melding religion, tribal politics and Kurdish nationalism together, but not seeking to transform Kurdish society or modes of economic production. By the 1960s and 70s, however, the majority of the old elites were either gone (killed, exiled or reduced to insignificance and poverty) or co-opted by the state. In their place, leftist union leaders, intellectuals, media figures and members of the professional classes emerged as the allies available to both leftist and Kurdish nationalist projects. Most of the Kurdish movements (such as the PKK) that arose at this time in turn espoused a socialist and revolutionary brand of Kurdish nationalism.¹³

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Conversely, the opportunity structures approach did not prove particularly adept at explaining the fate of Kurdish movements, nor their impact on Kurdish identity. What should have turned out to be golden moments for these movements, such as the absolute weakness of the Ottoman Empire and nascent Turkish Republic following the First World War, ended with the crushing of organized Kurdish dissidence in the 1920s and 1930s, along with nearly all forms of particularly Kurdish expression in Turkey. Somewhat similar experiences occurred in Iraq and Iran as well. Finally, the most sustained episode of Kurdish dissidence in Turkey's history emerged at a time that did not seem particularly auspicious from an opportunity structures perspective: the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) insurgency and movement emerged soon after the 1980 military coup in Turkey, when structural opportunity factors such as "the presence of elite allies," "the state's capacity and propensity for repression," and "international influences supportive of the state's opponents" hardly appeared to be in the Kurds' favor.

To explain the PKK's rise and eventual hegemonic status amongst Kurdish nationalists in Turkey, I turned to resource mobilization theories and rational choice analysis. These agency-based approaches focus on the strategies and resources available to social movements, including movements with an armed component such as the PKK. Although space limitations do not permit any reasonable summary of the book's examination of PKK strategies, this manner of posing initial questions about the PKK's rise effectively illustrate how these kinds of social movement theories are applied: When it first emerged in the 1970s, the PKK had a plethora of competing radical groups, including the Turkish Kurdish Socialist Party (TSKP), Kurdistan Conservative Party (KCP), Turkish Communist Party and the Marxist-Leninist Turkish Workers' and Peasants' Army (TKP/ML TIKKO), Kizilordu (a breakaway faction of TKP/ML TIKKO), Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP/C), Hizbullah, Turkish Revolutionary People's Army (THKO), Marxist-Leninist Maoist Party (MLM), Kurdistan Proletarian Union (KAWA), Kurdistan Islamic Union (PIK), and Raya Zazaistan (Path of Zazaistan), to name but a few from a long list.¹⁴ The PKK proved able to develop into a mass movement in Turkey despite the presence of so many competitors, little in the way of start-up resources, and an extremely large, well-equipped opposing Turkish military and security apparatus. Part of *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement's* theoretically-informed findings about the PKK's rise centered on the importance of its patient Maoist-style preparatory work before launching the guerrilla war, the initial choice of helping Kurdish peasants oppose unpopular feudal landlords, and the utility of violence to demonstrate PKK militants' credibility and apply disincentives to state collaborators.¹⁵ Resource mobilization insights also point to how the PKK's genesis from the Turkish left helped determine the kinds of strategies, networks, and mobilizing appeals the organization relied upon, all of which significantly differed from Kurdish opposition groups stemming from traditional tribal and religious networks.

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If resource mobilization and rational choice agency-based approaches proved good at explaining the relative success of the PKK in Turkey vis-à-vis competitors, as well as how it emerged even under unfavorable conditions, they nonetheless have difficulty accounting for the cultural shift that the PKK engendered amongst Kurds in Turkey, the sacrifices and dangers that many PKK militants and supporters willingly undertook, and the “why” behind Kurdish nationalist goals in the movement.¹⁶ Whereas resource mobilization and rational choice approaches tend to treat movement goals as a given and proceed from there, the PKK and the state repression it engendered clearly changed Kurdish identities in Turkey. Identity precedes the selection of movement goals and objectives, of course. Because identity is clearly dynamic and in fact one of the issues under contention between states and opposition social movements, assuming it and treating it as a static variable seems less than adequate.

This is, of course, the focus of the third broad school of social movement theories: those approaches focused on culture, ideological framing, discourse, and identity in general. As with the other social movement paradigms, my book applied a modified and simplified variant of the approach¹⁷ to examine shifting Kurdish identities and demands in Turkey from the time of the 1919 Koçgiri uprising to the PKK in the 1990s. Because early Kurdish rebels such as those of Koçgiri, the Sheikh Said uprising, and the Mount Ararat revolt made demands upon the state on behalf of Kurds—for things like autonomy and Kurdish language rights—it could be concluded that a politicized Kurdish ethnic identity existed to some extent even at this early stage. If it had not, the Kurdish elites would not in all likelihood have found it useful to frame their demands in a Kurdish nationalist manner.

Throughout the modern period, Kurdish nationalist identities formed one option of many that people could attach varying levels of importance to. Other possible identities that people could favor instead included the dominant ethnic identity of states such as Turkey, religious-based identities, class-based identities, or various hybrids of these. Social movements attempt not only to appeal to the identities of potential members, but also to shift large numbers of people’s identity to more closely align with the movement in question. *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement* examined the PKK and other Kurdish movements by looking at the following factors:¹⁸

1. The cultural tool kits available to would-be insurgents;
2. The strategic framing efforts of movement groups;
3. The frame contests between the movement and other collective actors—principally the state, and counter-movement groups;
4. The structure and role of the media in mediating such contests;
5. The cultural impact of the movement in modifying the available tool kit.

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Using these factors, one can analyze the competing cultural framing of Kurdish movements and the Turkish state and the impact this had on Kurdish identity in Turkey. In the case of the PKK, a dissident and very politicized Kurdish identity emerged on a mass scale (or re-emerged, depending on one's perspective on nationalism):

the PKK has altered the cultural tool kit of Kurds in Turkey. In addition to increasing the number of people who identified themselves as Kurds, and in many cases politicizing such an identity, the PKK provided a vehicle for individuals to express their identity. Because most expressions of Kurdish identity in Turkey have been constrained for so long, joining the movement, supporting it, or simply participating in mass protests could function as a form of catharsis for a frustrated populace. Many Kurds even came to identify so much with the larger Kurdish nation, or in Anderson's parlance the "imagined community," that they value the well-being and status of the group more than their own lives as individuals. Given such changes in attitudes, Ankara's attempts at solving the problem solely through programs of socio-economic development will come too late. The PKK's insurgency has already changed the values and goals of too many Kurds—one need only think of Horowitz' [1985] observation that in situations of ethnic strife, symbols of ethnic inclusion and exclusion are more a source of conflict than economic competition.¹⁹

If cultural framing and identity approaches provided a good understanding of the "why" of Kurdish dissidence, they were not particularly well suited to explaining the "how" and "when" issues discussed above. How was it that the PKK enjoyed relative success leading the effort in Turkey, rather than any number of other Kurdish-oriented groups that existed in the 1970s, for instance, and why did this occur when it did? These were questions more suited to the aforementioned opportunity structures and resource mobilization approaches.

After relying on the Kurdish case in Turkey to test the three broad social movement paradigms in isolation, I went on to examine what might be offered by a theoretical synthesis of the approaches—as increasingly advocated by leading social movement scholars such as McAdam, McCarthy, Zald, Tarrow, Tilly, Melucci, Meyer, and others beginning in the 1990s. The main task here lay in understanding how the different factors continuously impact, affect, and even mutually constitute each other. As such it was necessary to apply a synthesis of the approaches to Kurdish cases in Turkey (in order to see what additional insights unique to the theoretical synthesis might emerge) and then to Iraq and Iran. Although a satisfying summary of the findings is not possible here, an example of such observations for the case of the Kurds in Turkey provides a good idea of the synthesis:

In addition to being organized enough to take advantage of political opportunities, challenger movements must use their organization to help their constituents perceive the opportunities in question. In the 1920s and 30s, Kurdish nationalist organizations were

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not sufficiently organized to take advantage of auspicious opportunity structures. Although they nonetheless attempted to mobilize for their objectives, the mobilization occurred at different times amongst different Kurdish groups, with the result that Ankara was able to defeat the various rebellions one at a time and one after another. Had Kurdish nationalist organizations at the time effectively reached deeper into general Kurdish society (including many tribal elites, but also the non-tribal peasantry), they might have been able to 1) Affect the identity of the Kurdish masses so that politicized Kurdish ethnicity prevailed more often over regional, tribal, class, or religious identities; 2) Help the masses at large perceive the auspicious opportunity structures for Kurdish self-determination that lay before them between 1919 and 1938; 3) Organize a more unified, coordinated Kurdish mobilization to achieve these objectives, much like the Kemalists had organized a unified and coordinated resistance to Allied, Armenian and Greek encroachments; and 4) Convince outside powers such as France and Britain that providing assistance to Kurdish nationalists would serve their own colonial interests, since the Kurds were a power to be reckoned with.

Crawford Young, writing about ethnicity and politics in 1982, argued that “Most individuals ... have more than one cultural identity. Which has relevance will depend upon the situational context. So also will context determine the saliency and intensity of identities.” We might therefore add that in addition to the situational context, the existence of an organized movement that helps them view their context in a certain light is equally important for the saliency and intensity of identities. Hence the argument of some scholars, such as Melucci, that the structural conditions forming opportunity structures are only important for collective action in so far as they are perceived by social movement actors and the population.²⁰

Phrased otherwise, structure and identity set parameters and limits within which movements emerge and develop their strategies. Movements can also act to change the structures they exist in (for better or worse), spawn counter-movements, and affect the identities around them.

The study concluded by applying a synthesis of the social movement approaches to a broad examination of Kurdish struggles in Iraq and Iran.²¹ In Iraq, for example, the state recognized Kurdish identity from the outset, meaning that Kurdish movements there did not have to work so hard at shifting the identities of their potential constituents.²² Because the main Kurdish movements of Iraq relied upon pre-existing tribal forces and networks to contest Baghdad's power, however, the Kurdish nationalist movement there maintained a very different, more conservative bent than what emerged in Turkey. The more prominent role of tribes likewise increased the saliency of intra-Kurdish divisions in Iraq. Opportunities provided by the 1990–91 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq allowed the Iraqi Kurds to develop a proto-state, however, and begin pursuing the cultural framings necessary for an overarching “South Kurdistani” identity.

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The chapter applying a synthesis of approaches to Iran included the observation that the Kurdish movements tried to take advantage of opportunities that emerged in the 1920s, 1940s, and 1979 to challenge a weakened central state. Intra-Kurdish divisions and the smaller relative size of Kurds to the overall populations of Iran weakened these efforts, however, no matter what strategies the Kurdish movements attempted to deploy. The establishment of the short-lived Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad in December 1945 nonetheless had an enduring effect on Kurdish cultural frames across all the regions of Kurdistan. Presently none of the Iranian Kurdish dissident movements appear able to mount a serious challenge to the government in Tehran, however, no matter what strategies and identity-based framings they deploy.

Subsequent efforts to apply social movement theories to the Kurdish cases

A great many master's degrees and doctoral theses have gone on to employ social movement theories to shed light on the Kurdish case. A non-exhaustive list includes the following in date order:²³

MA theses:

Alis, Ahmet, 'The Process of the Politicisation of the Kurdish Identity in Turkey: the Kurds and the Turkish Labor Party (1961–1971)', MA thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2009.

Couch, Christopher M., 'Aghas, Sheiks, and Daesh in Iraq: Kurdish robust action in turmoil', MA thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2016.

Ercan, Harun, 'Dynamics of Mobilisation and Radicalization of the Kurdish Movement in the 1970s in Turkey', MA thesis, Koç University, Comparative Studies in History and Society, 2010.

Gündoğan, Azat Zana, 'The Kurdish Political Mobilisation in the 1960s: The Case of the "Eastern Meetings"', MA thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2005.

Kavak, Seref, 'The Democratic Society Party as a 'Party for Turkey': Official and Grassroots Politics of a Changing Identity 2005–2009', MA Thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2010.

O'Connor, Francis Patrick, 'Armed Social Movements and Insurgency: The PKK and its communities of support', MA thesis, European University Institute, 2014.

Sornsins, Kristin M., 'Out of the Mountains into Politics: The Kurdish Nationalist Movement of Iraq', MA Thesis, Central European University, 2008.

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Toktamis, Kumru, 'From Mobilisation to Nationhood', MA thesis, New School for Social Research, 2007.

Yeleser, Selin, 'A Turning Point in the Formation of the Kurdish Left in Turkey: The Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearths (1969–1971)', MA Thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2011.

Doctoral theses:

Dryaz, Massoud Sharifi, 'De la résistance microscopique à l'action collective organisée: engagement et désengagement des militants dans l'espace kurde', PhD thesis, L'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, 2015.

Saeed, Seevan, 'The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From the PKK to the KCK', PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2014.

Uslu, Emrullah, 'The Transformation of Kurdish Political Identity in Turkey: Impact of Modernisation, Democratisation and Globalisation', PhD Thesis, University of Utah, 2009.

A number of publications likewise indicate the increasing prominence of such approaches within the field of Kurdish studies.

Journal articles and collected editions:

Ceren, Belge, 'State building and the limits of legibility: Kinship networks and Kurdish resistance in Turkey', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43:1 (2011), pp. 95-114.

Çicek, Cuma, 'Ulus, din, Sınıf: Türkiyede Kürt Mutabakatının İnsası', *İletişim* (2015).

Ersanli, Busra, Gunay Goksu Ozdogan, and Nesrin Ucarlar (eds), *Türkiye Siyasetinde Kürtler: Direniş, Hak Arayışı, Katılım* 3rd edn (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016).

Güneş, Murat Tezcür, 'When Democratization Radicalizes: The Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey', *Journal of Peace Research* 47:6 (2010), pp. 775-89.

O'Connor, Francis 'Radical political participation and the internal Kurdish diaspora in Turkey', *Kurdish Studies* 3:2 (2015) pp. 151-71.

O'Connor, Francis and Leonidas Oikonomakis, 'Preconflict Mobilization Strategies and Urban-Rural Transition: The Cases of the PKK and the FLN/EZLN', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 20:3 (September 2015) pp. 379-99.

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Şimşek, Sefa, 'New Social Movements in Turkey Since 1980', *Turkish Studies* 5:2 (2004) pp.111-39.

van den Berge, Wietse, 'Syrian Kurdish Political Activism: A Social Movement Theory Perspective', *Middle East: Topics and Arguments* 4 (2015) pp. 160-69.

Watts, Nicole F, 'Activists in Office: Pro-Kurdish Contentious Politics in Turkey', *Ethnopolitics* 5:2 (2006) pp. 125-44.

After 2006, book-length monographs applying social movement theory to Kurdish topics also began appearing. The aforementioned *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement* of 2006 appeared in Turkish translation in 2010.²⁴ Other studies frequently began by criticizing the work for failing to include an examination of some issue or factor, or not going into sufficient depth on some matters.²⁵ In contrast to the broader, "forest-oriented" approach of my first application and test of social movement theories, these authors went on to provide more detailed examinations of the "trees" via a more focused analyses of a number of specific issues, or a single case study. In this sense, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement* may have succeeded in helping to provide some of the next generation of Kurdish studies scholars with ideas to work on and further develop. A number of in-depth, interesting, and useful social movement oriented contributions to the field have emerged since 2006. Noteworthy recent Kurdish studies books that situate themselves within the social movement theoretical literature include:

Books:

Aydin, Aysegül and Cem Emrence, *Zones of Rebellion: Kurdish Insurgents and the Turkish State*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015.

Gunes, Cengiz, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance*, New York: Routledge, 2012.

Gürbüz, Mustafa, *Rival Kurdish Movements in Turkey: Transforming Ethnic Conflict*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016.

Tejel, Jordi, *Syria's Kurds, History, Politics and Society*, London: Routledge, 2008.

Watts, Nicole, *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010.

Tejel's study of the Syrian Kurds begins by situating itself within social movement studies:

a study of political mobilization during the mandatory period is impossible if its interpretation hinges on a binary minority/majority opposition (Kurd/Arab) when each of the two

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groups constitutes a hybrid sociopolitical entity. In other words, if the Syrian state was in a construction phase during the French Mandate, the Kurdish “group” was experiencing a transition in its own right.²⁶

Although a good portion of the book focuses on providing historical detail about the Kurdish political situation in Syria, Chapter 5 in particular applies a social movement theoretical synthesis to explain very limited (at least until 2004) Kurdish political mobilization in the country:

The Kurdish movement, like all social movements, must maintain collective action in time and space. Structures of political opportunity, defined as a series of coherent dimensions of the political environment which can both encourage and discourage people from taking political action, take on great importance in this context. Generally speaking, at moments when the elites and their political groups become vulnerable to the opposition, social movements are more likely to be initiated and to inspire collective action. At the same time, such political opportunities can be missed due to the lack of an organized social movement.²⁷

In the Syrian case, Tejel describes an “ambiguous space” that the Ba’athist regime created, wherein Kurdish communal political mobilization was repressed but some interaction, collusion, and cooperation between Kurdish nationalist parties and the regime was nonetheless permitted.²⁸ The regime allowed just enough collusion to delegitimize cooperating Kurdish elites and their parties in the eyes of their Kurdish constituencies, in fact, while harshly repressing those who would not work with the regime at all. This and other factors outlined by Tejel accounted for the dearth of Kurdish political challenges in Syria until very recently (after the publication of Tejel’s book), when the unparalleled “political opportunity” of the Syrian civil war finally allowed Kurds in the country to organize and push forward their own national agenda.

Watts’ study in contrast chooses to focus on a particular facet of Kurdish social and political mobilization in Turkey: attempts to form legal political parties within the Turkish electoral system. For this analysis Watts deploys an in-depth synthesis of social movement theories, examining how changes in the socio-political opportunity structures within Turkey and some Kurds’ decision to try to take advantage of this led to the creation (and subsequent banning) of a number of pro-Kurdish political parties functioning parallel to (but neither completely subservient to nor fully independent from) the armed struggle of the PKK. The way she poses her research question (as well as the nuanced answers she finds to it) offers an outstanding synthesis of opportunity structures, resource mobilization, and identity factors:

In the 1990s and early 2000s, state authorities detained and tortured pro-Kurdish activists, raided their offices, confiscated their computers and documents, and restricted their freedom to publish, travel, and organize meetings. At least 112 Kurdish party members were murdered in the 1990s. Thousands more were imprisoned, and many were prohibited from

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any further participation in political life. Simply moving into conventional institutions, in other words, did not ensure “conventional” treatment or routine political outcomes. Given these decidedly difficult circumstances and the less-than-obvious rewards of working within the system, why did Kurdish activists use formal politics to promote their cause? What opportunities did they find, and what constraints? What impact did their incorporation into the mainstream political framework have on the movement, its supporters, the furthering of its goals, and its relations with the Turkish state?²⁹

Part of Watts’ answer to this question refers to McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly’s notion of “transgressive contention,”³⁰ wherein Kurdish activists used their limited access to the legal political system to issue constant challenges to its taboos (often by the very act of representing themselves as Kurds) and to pursue “contentious politics” vis-à-vis the Turkish state. Besides contesting the Turkish state’s cultural framings and policies, the Kurdish activists also tried to create a competing zone of governances in municipalities they controlled, complete with divergent norms and notions of what it was to be a citizen there. The result has had and continues to have far-reaching impacts on Kurdish mobilization in Turkey and Turkish politics and society in general.

Cengiz Gunes’ *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey* chooses to rely mostly on the identity-based social movement approaches, examining the discourse, ideology, cultural framings, and myth-creation of the PKK’s version of Kurdish nationalism. He does so from a post-structuralist viewpoint, refusing to treat Kurdish identity as primordial and largely static and also rejecting approaches that attempt “objectively” to assess the Kurds’ status as a nation.³¹ Instead, he turns to discourse theory³² in order to examine things such as the PKK’s efforts to trace Kurdish ancestry back to the Medes civilization and the PKK’s reconstruction of the Newroz Kurdish new year. In the case of Newroz, the PKK-aligned Kurdish movement constructed a modified legend behind the holiday (of Kawa the blacksmith’s fight against a dictator king) and used Newroz celebrations to help change Kurdish identity, mobilize the population against dominant Turkish representations of identity, and in general to socialize people into the national movement. Gunes’ research questions demonstrate his focus in this work:

- How was the category of ‘Kurd’ produced and reproduced within the two discourses [the 1960s and post-1960s discourse] deployed by the Kurdish nationalists? In particular, how are difference and Kurdish subjectivity being constructed within each discourse?
- What kind of political project is proposed by the Kurdish National Movement? How has it changed over time?
- What is the relationship between the assertion of Kurdish identity and the official Turkish (Kemalist) identity?

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- Why and how did the discourse of democracy replace the previous ‘secessionist’ discourse of national liberation?
- What is the character of this discourse of democracy? How or to what extent does it address questions of pluralism, both within and outside the Kurdish community?
- To what extent has this discourse of democracy challenged the dominant conceptions of democracy in Turkish society at large?³³

Aysegül Aydin and Cem Emrence’s *Zones of Rebellion* takes a somewhat different approach. To answer this question, they rely on quantitative data they sourced from news reports regarding violence in Turkey. The authors ask, “How do insurgents and governments select their targets? Which ideological discourses and organisational policies do they adopt to win civilian loyalties and control territory?”³⁴ They thus compare the strategies of the PKK and the Turkish state in three kinds of zones, which they categorize as: zones of control (or rebellion for the PKK), zones of contestation, and zones out of reach (the zones obviously differ in a binary manner according to the actor). These strategies are in turn linked to the ideological appeals that both actors attempted to make in what amounts to competing “hearts and minds” campaigns. Neither the state nor the PKK was able to claim victory in the conflict, because ideologies and organizational/institutional factors inherent to both actors limited their strategic choices. Although only a very limited taste of their analysis is possible here, the following provides an example of how they approached these issues:

we highlight the role of brokers, entrepreneurs that link two previously unconnected social sites, in organizing collective action in support of the insurgency. Brokerage is instrumental in forging common fronts out of local cleavages. While the presence of brokers solves the thorny issues of mass mobilization and legitimacy, the absence of such entrepreneurs means limited civilian support to the rebel cause. In that respect, brokers play a critical role in generating compliance. These “frame-bridgers” can be found only in certain political spaces: It requires a unique type of social capital to bridge the differences among individuals, groups, and regions. The PKK example is instructive. As an intermediary, the Transition Zone legitimated the military struggle with nationalist messages and set an example for the rest of the country with its collective action agenda. However, civilian unrest was hard to come by in other Kurdish areas. The problem was the absence of political brokers in these sites.³⁵

Each zone of conflict, and the contested zones in particular, displayed different strategies regarding violence at different times, and various kinds of ideological appeals by the competing actors. In the case of the PKK, the authors argue that:

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Once rebels learn to be a closed group of practitioners, they turn first on rival groups. Next is the community, which they seek to transform through violence and other means. Finally, the state emerges on the horizon as a political target—only if the rebel group has been resourceful enough to survive in early stages. In their struggle with the state, rebels calibrate their political independence, autonomy, or some other form of power-sharing arrangement, depending on the extent to which it can challenge the state.³⁶

The fifth book on the Kurds relying on social movement theories, Mustafa Gürbüz's *Rival Kurdish Movements in Turkey: Transforming Ethnic Conflict*, was a few weeks short of release at the time of writing. Examples of Gürbüz's approach in the book, with citations and a close examination of his argument, are therefore not possible here. The study sits squarely within the social movement theoretical tradition, employing a theoretical synthesis of opportunities, strategies, and identity to examine competition between three rival movements in Turkey: the Sunni Muslim Gülen movement (which used to enjoy linkages with the Justice and Development Party or AKP government), the PKK-aligned Kurdish movement with its various political parties and associations, and the Hizbullah-aligned Kurdish movement³⁷ with its Huda-Par legal political arm. One of the more interesting observations coming out of Gürbüz's study³⁸ explains how Islam itself became a contested field for the three movements. Because the Gülen movement was trying to shift Kurdish identities and mobilize people with a 'de-Kurdified' version of Islam, and Hizbullah was combining Kurdish nationalism with a Salafi (often Jihadi-infused) interpretation of Islam, the formerly secular PKK-aligned movement suddenly rediscovered religion. Given that many Kurds remain Muslims who value their religion, the PKK did so in an attempt to compete for people's loyalties. Islam was recently reintegrated into the movement and "patriotic imams" were recruited to hold prayer services in the street, outside the purview of the state's mosques (which at the time had a heavy Gülen presence in them) or the Hizbullah-aligned prayer groups.

Conclusion: Which way forward for social movement theories and Kurdish studies?

A unified, over-arching synthetic social movement account of Kurdish social movements in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria—as this author attempted to produce in 2006—was probably never achievable in any truly satisfactory sense. No manuscript of any reasonable length could possibly address the myriad complexities, variations, and diverse history of such a phenomenon. As much as such an attempt simplifies and make intelligible the topic it investigates, it leaves out and distorts innumerable phenomena and nuances.

Instead of pursuing such a chimerical goal, Kurdish studies today seem to be busily producing a wide array of more focused analyses on topics that include Kurdish civil society networks, pro-Kurdish parties within institutionalized politics, efforts at iden-

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tity construction, diaspora networks, cross-border linkages within Kurdish society, insurgent strategies, and competing cultural framings, among others. These efforts should be viewed as the construction of the various pieces of a vast jigsaw puzzle. Properly fitted together,³⁹ the component parts of this puzzle form an important part of a wider theoretical literature that helps us understand the Kurds and their efforts to affect the world they inhabit. In other words, advances in the social movement literature in Kurdish studies serve as one more example that the field has finally moved beyond basic description and is rapidly coming into its own. This has been most evident in studies on the Kurds in North Kurdistan/Turkey. There undoubtedly remains a plethora of topics to investigate from a social movement theory perspective, especially as regards Kurdish movements in Rojava/Syria, Bashur/Iraq, and Rojhelat/Iran.

RELIGION AMONG THE KURDS

BETWEEN NAQSHBANDI SUFISM AND IS SALAFISM

Michiel Leezenberg

In 2014, the Kurds once again came to international attention; this time, however, it was not primarily their confrontation with existing states that captured the imagination, but rather their confrontation with a new, and radical, religious movement, the so-called Islamic State (IS), and in particular with its offensives against Sinjar in northern Iraq and Kobanî on the Syrian-Turkish border. In the popular press, images of civilians of the Yezidi minority fleeing the roundly genocidal IS onslaught onto Mount Sinjar acquired almost biblical qualities; likewise, reporting about Kobanî created a Manichaean opposition between “modern” Kurdish guerrillas, many of them women, against “medieval” IS fighters reported to treat captured women as slaves. Behind these reductionist and often overheated headlines, one may legitimately ask why the Kurds, the vast majority of whom are Sunni Muslims, proved impossible to mobilize for the project of an Islamic State, and refused to rally behind IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who had pronounced himself caliph in July 2014. Was it primarily religious, national, or other factors that make the Kurds less open to violent Salafi-Jihadi brands of Islam?

A different but related question is whether there are any varieties of Islam that may be considered specifically Kurdish—or are seen as such by Kurds themselves—and whether one may as a result speak of a “nationalization” of religion among the Kurds. I will address these questions by, first, discussing the current state of studies about religion among the Kurds; second, I trace the early modern rise of specifically

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Kurdish articulations of Sunni Islam; third, I discuss the confrontation of Kurdish religiosity with secular nationalism and Salafism in the twentieth century; and fourth, I discuss the rise of politicized forms of religion among the Kurds, some of which might be qualified as Salafi-Jihadi, in the 1980s. I will conclude with a few comments about the present predicament.

The study of religion among the Kurds: the current state

There is surprisingly little academic research on the various formations of Sunni Islam among the Kurds. Until the present, research on religion in Kurdistan has displayed a clear bias toward religious minorities like Christians and Jews, and in particular to heterodox groups like the Yezidis and the Ahl-e Haqq. The former two have attracted attention because of their relevance for Semitic and Biblical studies, while the latter two have the appeal of the exotic, and of seeming to be specifically Kurdish religious formations. Thus, perhaps more studies have appeared on the Yezidis alone than of all other religious groups among the Kurds put together.¹

It is not my intention to cast doubt on this research, much of which is quite valuable. Taken together, however, this bias has led to a systematic downplaying of more orthodox forms of (Sunni) Islam that play a role in the lives of the vast majority of Kurds.² A number of authors have studied the Sufi orders in the region, but generally with less attention to matters of doctrine, and more to Sufi sheikhs as leaders of (nationalist) organizations and rebellions.

The relative dearth of studies on more mainstream forms of Sunni Islamic religiosity among the Kurds may result from a tacit assumption—which one may call “orientalist” if one likes—that orthodox varieties of (Sunni) Islam display relatively fewer local particularities, leave relatively less room for regional identities and nationalist agendas, and are shaped by Arab culture and Arabic-language learning rather than by local customs and vernacular traditions. This assumption, however, is misguided: on closer inspection, it appears that specifically Kurdish forms of Sunni Islamic religiosity did emerge in early modern times. Below, I will therefore focus on articulations and re-articulations of more orthodox forms of Sunni Islamic religiosity in the early modern and modern periods, at the expense of religious minorities like those mentioned above. This is not to say, of course, that the complex interactions of evolving religious minority traditions with the development of a secular Kurdish national identity (and of new forms of politicized fundamentalist Islam) are not worth studying, or are any less important.³ Lack of space is the only justification I can give for this omission.

RELIGION AMONG THE KURDS

Islam among the Kurds: a short historical sketch

It has long been known that Kurds generally belong to the Shafi'i *madhhab* (one of the four schools of Islamic law in Sunni Islam), as opposed to their generally Hanafi Turkish and Arab neighbors; more specifically, they also have a significant attachment to Naqshbandism. Below, I will briefly sketch how this identification came about. The creation of a pre- or proto-nationalist Kurdish Islamic tradition appears to have occurred primarily among the smaller rural *madrasas* of northern Kurdistan, which were less susceptible to the influence of the Ottoman authorities and of the state-backed *ulema* (scholars), and to the apparent encouragement of the use of Turkish next to Arabic, than the mosques and *madrasas* in the bigger cities of the region. The seventeenth-century Ottoman travel writer Evliya Çelebi noted that the Kurds were famous for their religious learning in Arabic and Persian; but starting in the late seventeenth century, a number of introductory textbooks came to be written in Kurmanji, the northern Kurdish dialect. These textbooks subsequently became part of the *rêz*, or *madrasa* curriculum, all over northern Kurdistan. The most famous of these textbook authors is, of course, Ehmedê Khanî; he not only composed the *mathnawî* poem *Mem û Zîn*, which appears to have been widely read in *madrasa* circles, but also wrote several short Kurdish-language works of religious learning, like the *Nûbihara piçûkan*, a small rhymed Arabic-Kurdish vocabulary, and the *Eqîdeya Emanê*, a short profession of the Sunni Islamic faith according to the Shafi'i rite. Next to these rhymed works, which also include an older *Mawlûd* or biography of the prophet by Mullah Bateyî (d.1491), in the eighteenth century a number of prose works for use in local *madrasas* were written, like Elî Teremaxî's *Tesrîf*, on the morphology of Arabic, Persian, and Kurdish; and Mullah Yûnus Khalqatîni's *Terkib û Zurûf*, a commentary of sorts on Abd al-Qâhir al-Jurjânî's famous short textbook on *nahw* or "syntax," the *Miyyat al-amîl*. Soon, all these works would become staple items of the curriculum for the rural *madrasas* in northern Kurdistan; jointly, they embody what one may call the vernacularization of Kurdish *madrasa* learning, i.e. the rise of the northern dialect of Kurdish as a language of written literature and religious learning.⁴

Another specifically Kurdish development in early modern Islamic learning is the emergence of the Khalidiyya branch of the Naqshbandi order in the nineteenth century. Its founder, Mawlana Khalid Naqshbandi (1776-1827), has attracted rather less scholarly attention than such early modern reformers as Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Shah Waliullah, but authors like Albert Hourani and Butrus Abu-Manneh emphasized his tremendous importance; as some authors have argued, Mawlana Khalid has been crucial in identifying "Sufism in general, and the Khalidi branch of the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya brotherhood in particular, as the leading element of Islamic revivalism in the Ottoman polity of the time."⁵ He was born in Qaradagh in the Shahrazoor district, into a family belonging to the Jaf tribe. During a pilgrimage to Mecca, he was intrigued by an Indian saint sitting with his back

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toward the Kaaba, and was moved to turn to India. In Delhi, he was initiated into the Mujaddidi branch of the Naqshbandi order, which had originally been founded by Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624); in agreement with this tradition, he enjoined his followers to abide by the shari'a, to follow the sunna, and to avoid *bid'a* or heretic innovation. In around 1812 he returned to Kurdistan, until his increasing rivalry with local Qadiri Sheikh Ma'ruf Nodê forced him to flee the city. In 1821 he left for Baghdad, and eventually settled in Damascus, from where his deputies spread to various parts of the empire, in particular to its non-Arab parts.

Martin van Bruinessen has explained the rapid rise of the Khalidî Naqshbandî *tariqa* among the Kurds in the nineteenth century, in part at the expense of the rival Qadiri order, as resulting from the Ottoman abolition of the Kurdish local hereditary kingdoms or emirates as part of their centralizing Tanzimat reforms;⁶ but this rise began well before the onset of the Tanzimat in 1839, and appears to be part of a wider early modern religious dynamic. The most important factor in this dynamic was undoubtedly the late-eighteenth-century emergence of the Wahhabi movement in the Arabian peninsula. In 1801, warriors of this movement attacked the Shia shrine cities in southern Iraq, besieging Najaf and sacking Karbala; in 1806 they even captured Mecca. These rapid conquests not only dealt a serious blow to the political prestige and religious legitimacy of the Ottoman authorities; they also provoked the local Shia clergy, who felt increasingly unprotected without the support of loyal local tribes, to initiate a campaign of converting the population of southern Iraq to Shiism.⁷ Butrus Abu-Manneh has plausibly argued that the Khalidiyya Naqshbandi reform movement, too, was at least in part a reaction against the Wahhabi onslaught: although there are no explicit statements on Sheikh Khalid's reaction to the Wahhabi conquest, his immediate departure from Wahhabi-held Mecca for Delhi—where he went on to study with Shah Waliullah's followers—may indicate a negative attitude to the Wahhabiyya.⁸

Already in the 1820s, some of Sheikh Khalid's deputies had settled in Istanbul; after his death, the order quickly became more dependent on Ottoman patronage and financial support. Although Sultan Mahmud II initially tried to curb the order's expansion, a number of Sheikh Khalid's followers quickly gained positions of influence in the capital, especially in the wake of the demise of both the Bektashi order associated with the Janissaries and the Greek revolt.⁹

In short, the rapid rise of the Khalidiyya Naqshbandis among the Kurds was due not only to the local effects of the Tanzimat reforms, as van Bruinessen argues, but appears to be part of a broader pattern of Islamic renewal across the Ottoman Empire. Thus, in Iraq, Naqshbandis vied with Wahhabis and Shiites for the favor, or the souls, of the population. If this hypothesis is correct, it goes some way to explaining the Khalidiyya's pronouncedly anti-Shia and—as we shall see—increasingly polemical anti-Wahhabi or anti-Salafi character.

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Mawlana Khalid was not only a religious reformer or innovator, but also—alongside and possibly in competition with his great Qadiri rival, Shaykh Maʿruf Nodê—a pioneer of the written use of the Sulaimaniya dialect of Kurdish. In the early nineteenth century, when the Hawrami dialect was still the major medium of literary expression encouraged by the Baban court in Sulaimaniya, both Nodê and Khalid started writing works in the vernacular of the local population. Shaykh Maʿruf compiled a short rhymed Arabic-Kurdish vocabulary comparable to Khaniʿs *Nûbihar*, the *Ehmedî*, and Sheikh Khalid wrote a profession of faith, the *Eqîdetname*, in a very simple prose.¹⁰ They thus gave an important impetus to the vernacularization of the Sulaimani dialect, which ultimately came to be known as Sorani, and which started around a century after that of the Kurmanji dialect in northern Kurdistan.¹¹

In short, from the late seventeenth century onwards, specifically Kurdish forms of religious learning arose, at first in the northern parts of Kurdistan, but from around 1800 onwards also further south, in the area centered around Sulaimaniya. Although these developments were not themselves nationalist, they contributed to laying the foundations for a modern vernacular and language-based Kurdish national identity.

The twentieth century: Kurdish Islam confronting secular nationalism

In the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this reformist religion increasingly coalesced, or collided, with newly emerging forms of secular nationalism. Thus, in the wake of the 1878 Russo-Ottoman war, the Naqshbandis quickly adopted the novel patriotic, or nationalist, vocabulary of “love for the fatherland” (*hubb-î vatan*) and defense of the nation.¹² It has also been observed that the Kurdish sheikhs, because they could mediate in the now-increasing tribal conflicts, “became the obvious focal points for nationalist sentiment”;¹³ thus, a number of revolts interpreted as nationalist or “proto-nationalist” have been led by, in particular, Naqshbandi sheikhs. This is not to say, of course, that the Naqshbandis are the sole or even necessarily the most important Sufi order involved in the Kurdish national movement. The Qadiri order in particular, which was characterized by more ecstatic *dhikr* rituals and more hereditary forms of leadership than the Naqshbandis, played a major role in a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century revolts in the Kurdish provinces, and more generally in the development of a Kurdish national movement, yielding nationalist leaders like, most famously, Sheikh Mahmood Barzinji; likewise, both the Talabani and the Barzani families have Qadiri backgrounds.¹⁴

Another doctrinal, or ideological, development of late-nineteenth-century Khalidi Naqshbandi Islam is its increasingly pronounced anti-Wahhabi or anti-Salafi character. In early-twentieth-century publications, Salafis like Rashid Rida, most famously, are generally called *lâ-madhabîyya* or “no-madhab.” One of the central dogmas of the Naqshbandi conception of faith or *imân* is respect for the madhhabs; this article of faith pits the Naqshbandis directly against the Wahhabis, who—nomi-

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nally, at least—brandish the adherence to a particular madhhab as a form of *taqlid* or slavish imitation, or worse, idol worship (*shirk*). In practice, of course, Wahhabis abided by the Hanbali rite; but the ideology of rejecting the legitimacy of madhhabs has proved a powerful and enduring aspect of Wahhabi, and more generally Salafi, reformulations of the Islamic faith. Most famously, in the late nineteenth century, a pamphlet appeared in Ottoman Naqshbandi circles alleging that Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab had been visited by a British spy who taught him to drink whisky and conspired with him to destroy true Islam. Versions of this tale circulated in Naqshbandi circles in the form of both oral traditions and printed pamphlets, even as far afield as Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁵

In the 1920s, the Naqshbandis in formerly Ottoman lands suffered a number of major setbacks, though not a *coup de grâce*, in their confrontation both with secular nationalism and state-backed Salafism. First, in 1925, the Wahhabi warriors of the Bani Sa'ud conquered Mecca and Medina and ousted the Naqshbandis, for whom these cities had been major centers for transnational organization and mobilization. Second, a series of legal measures taken by the staunchly secular and militantly nationalist Kemalist rulers of the new Republic of Turkey seriously weakened Naqshbandism. Firstly, they ordered all Sufi lodges to be closed; secondly, they ordered the closing down of all *madrasas*; thirdly, they banned the use of Kurdish both in public and in private. Thus, the establishment of the Republic of Turkey dealt a major blow both to Kurdish vernacular learning and to the Naqshbandi networks that gave Kurdish society greater coherence.¹⁶

In the longer run, however, these measures led to the adaptation of the Naqshbandi order to the new circumstances, and to its transformation from a collective *tariqa*-based form of religiosity to a more individualized, depoliticized, and print-based faith, which successfully adapted to the demands and constraints imposed by the secular-nationalist Turkish state, and of a more urbanized and increasingly literate society.¹⁷ The most famous example of such adaptation is undoubtedly the career of Said Nursî (1876-1960), author of the voluminous, and widely read, *Risale-i nur*, and famous as the inspiration for the so-called Nurcu movement. It is less well known that in his early years Nursî had been an ardent Kurdish patriot, who moreover saw no contradiction between his Islamic reform agenda and his Kurdish national solidarity.¹⁸ Thus, in his *Divan-ı harbi örfi*, written in 1909, Nursî praises the “patriotic zeal” with which his friend Khalil Khayali of Mutki has “created the basis of our language” through his work on Kurdish orthography, grammar, and syntax; stating that “language is the key to the future of peoples,” he concludes with an appeal to the “Kurdish lions” to wake up from their “five hundred-year slumber.”¹⁹

Nursî expressed his admiration for such heroes of vernacular Kurdish learning as Melayê Jezîrî, Ehmedê Khanî, and Mawlana Khalid, and was actively involved in efforts to open Kurdish-language schools in the Ottoman Empire's eastern province,

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and even proposed a “University of the East” to be built in Van. These efforts were inspired not only by a belief in instruction in one’s native tongue as basic to national awakening, but also by a view/project of the Shafi’i madhhab of Sunni Islam as a Kurdish national religion. In the newly formed Republic of Turkey, however, Nursî’s national and political projects came to an abrupt halt. After the suppression of the Sheikh Said revolt in 1925, Nursî was sent into domestic exile in Isparta province; in his later years, he carefully abstained from any statement that could be construed as political activism, whether of an Islamic religious or a Kurdish nationalist character.

Thus, Naqshbandism, and more specifically its Khalidiyya branch, underwent a major transformation. In Republican Turkey, although virtually invisible, it ultimately came to constitute what Yavuz calls the “matrix” out of which the major Islamist personalities and movements in twentieth-century Turkey have emerged.²⁰ Naqshbandi discourse, institutions, practices, and networks, he argues, have decisively shaped the outlook of Islamists like Said Nursî, Fethullah Gülen, Necmettin Erbakan, Turgut Özal, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, even if some of these may hardly, and others not at all, be described as “Sufis” in anything like the conventional sense of the word. Thus, already before the Kemalist ban on Sufi orders, Nursî had dismissed the *tariqas* as backward.

Furthermore, a good many Naqshbandis displayed a clearly Kurdish consciousness, although they were generally not exclusively, unambiguously, or even explicitly Kurdish. As one Kurdish scholar, himself of Naqshbandi sympathies, recently argued, Kurdistan is actually a “Naqshbandistan.”²¹ While such sweeping claims are undoubtedly an overstatement, they point to an enduring role for Naqshbandi sympathies and conceptions, even if, as noted above, as an organizational framework or institution, the Naqshbandi *tariqa* is no longer a major force in Kurdish society, whether in Turkey or elsewhere.

Syria and Iraq, the new Arab states with substantial Kurdish minorities, were rather more tolerant of organized forms of religion than the Turkish Republic; although the different branches of the Ba’ath Party that came to power in both countries in 1963 considered themselves secular and socialist, neither of them outlawed the Sufi orders. Rather, it was their Arab nationalist agenda that increasingly clashed with Kurdish aspirations. In Ba’athist Iraq, Sunni Arabs were a minority, and the Muslim Brothers were far weaker than in Egypt or Syria; religion may have played a role in organization or mobilization, but it was hardly turned into an ideological expression of the confrontation between the Kurdish insurgency and the regime, which was generally articulated in secular nationalist, rather than in religious or sectarian, terms. In Syria, Assad’s Ba’athist regime leaned heavily on Alawites of rural backgrounds, and consequently marginalized the majority Sunni Arab population, in particular in cities like Aleppo, Homs, and Hama; in these cities, opposition to the regime was increasingly articulated in Salafist terms, and expressed through groups including, most importantly, the Muslim Brotherhood. Hence, the regime integrated