

LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS  
AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

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# **Whose Kurdistan?**

## **Class Politics and Kurdish Nationalism in the Middle East, 1918-2018**

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A thesis submitted to the Department of International Relations of the London School of Economics and Political Science for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

London, 13 September 2020

# Declaration

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# Abstract

This thesis is a study of the different trajectories of Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East. In the late 2010s – years of momentous advance for Kurdish forces in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria – Kurdish politics was deeply divided into competing movements pursuing irreconcilable projects for the future of the Kurdish nation. By investigating nationalism as embedded in social conflicts, this thesis identifies in the class basis of Kurdish movements and parties the main reason for their political differentiation and the development of competing national projects. After the defeat of the early Kurdish revolts in the 1920s and 1930s, Kurdish nationalism in Iraq and Turkey diverged along ideological lines due to the different social actors that led the respective national movements. In Iraq, the Kurdish national movement that emerged in the early 1960s was largely dominated by the tribal and landowning elite and primarily interested in preserving existing social hierarchies, while middle-class progressive nationalists were systematically sidelined. Conversely, in Turkey, as the Kurdish traditional elite had been co-opted into the Kemalist state in the 1950s, the nationalist struggle was resumed in the late 1970s by a generation of Kurdish students of peasant extraction that framed their project as an anti-colonial struggle and that violently opposed both Turkish security forces and Kurdish landlords. The thesis argues that these opposing trajectories of Kurdish nationalism were influenced by the evolving class structure of the newly established states of Turkey and Iraq, and by their location in the international state system and within global capitalism. The analysis of the social origins of competing 'nationalisms' provides a novel approach to the study of nationalism based on Historical Sociology and Political Economy and offers a materialist reading of the history of Kurdish politics.

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# List of Abbreviations

The acronyms for political organisations are used in the language they are most commonly known. Normally, names of organisations that are originally written in the Latin script (for example, Turkish or Kurdish Kurmanji) keep the original acronym while names originally written in the Arabic script (for example, Arabic, Persian, Sorani Kurdish) take the acronym of their English translation. The following list specifies the country in which the organisation is predominantly active unless the name of the country is already present in the organisation's name or they are transitional organisations.

## **Kurdish Organisations and Institutions**

BDP	Peace and Democracy Party (Turkey)
DBP	Democratic Regions Party (Turkey)
DDKO	Revolutionary Cultural Societies of the East (Turkey)
DEHAP	Democratic People's Party (Turkey)
DEP	Democracy Party (Turkey)
DTK	Democratic Society Congress (Turkey)
DTP	Democratic Society Party (Turkey)
HADEP	People's Democracy Party (Turkey)
HDP	Peoples' Democratic Party (Turkey)
HEP	People's Labour Party (Turkey)
KCK	Kurdistan Communities Union
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraq)
KDPI	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran
KDPS	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraq)
KUK	National Liberators of Kurdistan
PKDT	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey
PJAK	Kurdistan Free Life Party (Iran)
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (Turkey)
PSK	Kurdistan Socialist Party (Turkey)
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Iraq)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syria)

## **Non-Kurdish Organisations and Institutions**

AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
ANAP	Motherland Party (Turkey)
CHP	Republican People's Party (Turkey)
DP	Democrat Party (Turkey)
DYP	True Path Party (Turkey)
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
ICP	Iraqi Communist Party
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
MHP	Nationalist Action Party (Turkey)
NDP	National Democratic Party (Iraq)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OHAL	Governorship of Region in State of Emergency (Turkey)
RP	Welfare Party (Turkey)
SCP	Syrian Communist Party
SHP	Social Democratic Populist Party (Turkey)
TİP	Workers' Party of Turkey
UN	United Nations

**Map 1 - The Kurds at the End of the Ottoman Empire**



-  Border of the Ottoman Empire before 1918
-  Kurdish-majority areas
-  Republic of Mahabad (1946)

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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### **The Purpose and Questions of this Thesis**

This thesis was conceived and written in years of momentous change for the Middle East and the Kurds. After the defeat of the *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant* (ISIL) in Kobanî in January 2015, a large Kurdish-controlled region emerged in north-eastern Syria, alongside the one that had existed in northern Iraq since 1991. In the meantime, almost one hundred municipalities in south-eastern Turkey were ruled by a pro-Kurdish party. Even if the Kurds were still a people without a state, in the mid-2010s, they reached a degree of self-rule without precedent in modern times. Yet, Kurdish politics was fragmented and divided. The border between the Kurdish-controlled regions of Iraq and Syria was closed, preventing much-needed supplies from reaching the ISIL frontline. In Syrian Kurdistan, the Kurdish opposition linked to the Iraqi Kurds was silenced and repressed while forces sympathising with the Kurdish struggles in Syria and Turkey were banned in Iraqi Kurdistan. The *Kurdish Regional Government* (KRG) of Iraq suspended the regional parliament in summer 2015 and Kurds took to the streets on a daily basis protesting their own Kurdish rulers. The Kurdish movement in Iraq, on the one hand, and those in Turkey and Syria, on the other, are divided by profound ideological differences and opposite political projects for the future of the Kurds. The ruling Kurdish parties in Iraq are pursuing, through semi-authoritarian means, a classic nation-building project aimed at secession from Iraq and the integration of Iraqi Kurdistan into the global economy. The dominant Kurdish forces in Turkey and Syria have developed a project of community-based stateless democracy that rejects nationalism and yet there are significant doubts on its compatibility with a basic level of political pluralism. Rooted in divergent historical paths of development dating back to the partition of the Kurdish land after the

dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, this divide seems far stronger than the feeling of pan-Kurdish solidarity. Pursuing opposite nation-building projects, the dominant Kurdish forces are locked in a political and military competition that places them on the opposite fronts of the zero-sum geopolitics of the Middle East.

These internecine conflicts fit well into the Orientalist picture of a Middle East dominated by primordial allegiances and tribal, ethnic, or sectarian identities – an idea that still holds ground in the academy and dominates the policy circles informing great-power strategy on the region. In the Orientalist narrative produced in the West and developed in parallel to colonial expansion, nomadic and tribal people were depicted as noble warriors whose tradition of freedom allowed them to resist Oriental despotisms and yet condemned them to a primitive and violent existence. *Lawrence of Arabia* crystallised this view in his famous tirade against the Bedouins: “So long as the Arabs fight tribe against tribe, so long they will be a little people, a silly people, greedy, barbarous, and cruel.”<sup>1</sup> These ideas were deployed to justify colonial tutelage and yet were not alien to the pre-colonial Middle East. The nomadic inhabitants of imperial and state borderlands – like the Kurds but also the Bedouins or the Berbers – were often portrayed by the neighbouring settled peoples who dominated them as unruly tribal warriors incapable of developing advanced forms of politics and society. In the 1950s, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Said claimed that, to quell the revolt of a Kurdish tribe, he simply had to “send a bag of gold to a neighbouring chief.”<sup>2</sup> These stereotypical readings of Middle Eastern politics feed culturalist understandings of the region as the seat of ancestral conflicts that resist modern and rational modes of politics and prevent the spread of democracy and the free market. By locating the sources of contemporary conflicts in the unchangeable character of the Kurds and their region, these readings erase politics.

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<sup>1</sup> David Lean (dir.), *Lawrence of Arabia* (Columbia Pictures, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> Cited in David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 10.

To counter this depoliticising narrative, this thesis seeks an alternative explanation to the present divide within Kurdish nationalism capable of reconnecting contemporary Kurdish politics with the history and political economy of the Middle East region. As this study will show, all Kurdish nationalist groups aim at the self-determination of the Kurdish people and hold a similar understanding of the Kurdish nation – *who* the Kurds are and *where* Kurdistan is. Despite these apparently fundamental commonalities, the relationship among these groups is conflictual to the point that competition overshadows forms of cooperation. This contradiction begs questions on the origins and resilience of the present conflicts within Kurdish nationalism: *What determines the political divides within a national movement?* This question can be further unpacked to explain the current state of Kurdish politics as well as to engender broader theoretical considerations: *What is the origin of conflicts among Kurdish nationalists and why are they so resilient? What is the origin of the alternative and competing nation-building projects they pursue? What is nationalism if it can be associated with the most diverse set of ideological propositions? What determines the political content of nationalist movements?*

By adopting an approach based on Historical Sociology, this study dissects the competing Kurdish nationalist projects that developed in the twentieth century and finds their roots in class politics. In a century of deep change that altered Kurdish society beyond recognition, social classes were transformed by the long-term spread of capitalist social relations, the encroachment of colonialism, the Cold War, as well as the geopolitical partition of the Kurdish lands and their incorporation into the four nation-states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Changing relations of power within Kurdish society triggered the development and diversification of alternative nationalist projects whose influence depended on their capacity to give political expression to existing class interests. Class struggle is by no means the only driver of politics but the history of Kurdish nationalism shows that the power of political movements goes hand in hand with their capacity to give voice to and draw their strength from material grievances and

demands. Drawing these considerations from the history of the Kurdish national movement and scholarly debates on nationalism, I suggest that we cannot understand the competing forms of Kurdish politics in the Middle East without understanding their class origins and basis.

This introductory chapter explains the purpose of this study by highlighting the issues of contention concerning the Kurdish Question, the Kurds and Kurdistan, as well as the scholarly interpretations of the rise of Kurdish nationalism. After suggesting an appropriate methodology based on Historical Sociology, I explain the choice to select the history of the Kurdish movements in Turkey and Iraq as the case studies. The introduction ends with an outline of the organisation of the thesis around seven pivotal moments in the history of Kurdish nationalism in the past century.

### **Kurdish Nationalism and the Kurdish Question**

This thesis investigates the class politics that lies behind the competing Kurdish nationalist projects that developed over the past century. It is a study of Kurdish nationalism that treats nationalism as a historical product the meaning of which shifted depending on which social group raised the national flag. The next section highlights the complexity of pinning down the Kurds and Kurdistan but also shows that we can adopt some viable definitions without reproducing the nationalist paradigm that presents Kurds and Kurdistan as natural or perennial entities. In these terms, this is a study of Kurdish nationalism and not a national history of the Kurds, a distinction reflecting a fundamental methodological concern that drives the research and shapes its scope.

National histories, defined as “one of the most successful exports of Europe in the imperial age,”<sup>3</sup> inherently create and reproduce national teleologies that present the nation as a natural fact,<sup>4</sup> endowed by history with unique

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<sup>3</sup> Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz, *The Contested Nation : Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2.

<sup>4</sup> In these terms, *natural* does not only mean *biological* in the sense of informed by some form of pseudo-scientific racism. Naturalising the nation means also

features and often a unique mission that distinguishes it from all other nations. Nationalism thus becomes the historically inevitable process of the 'awakening' of an objectively existing and yet dormant nation. Nationalist historians "read national histories backward" to find fundamental dates that mark the stages of national formation and the awakening of national consciousness.<sup>5</sup> In these terms, national histories are not only controversial from a political perspective, as a form of historiography that is in itself the product of nationalism and that is deployed as a tool of nation-building. They are also problematic in analytical terms. By treating nationalism as an autonomous force only caused by the very existence of the nation, they conflate *explanandum* and *explanans*, producing a circular narrative in which the awakening of national identity is both the object of investigation and its explanation.

In this thesis, I try to do the opposite. While acknowledging the existence of the Kurdish nation as a historical and not as a natural fact, Kurdish nationalism is studied here with a sociological lens to identify the historical contexts of its development and the reasons for its ever-shifting meaning in the material interests it serves and legitimises. The different and competing forms that Kurdish nationalism took in over a century of history are treated as alternative political projects rather than stages of the same process. The best antidote to the idealism inherent in national histories is a materialist approach that allows us to discuss Kurdish society as a locus of conflicts and opposing interests rather than an organic community whose threats can only come from outside or from an immature national consciousness.

The first consideration that follows the commitment to avoid writing a national history is that being a Kurd implies by no means being a Kurdish nationalist. At no point in history have Kurdish nationalist movements represented the totality of the Kurds. The past century of struggles is a

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identifying its origins in a remote past that far preceded the awakening of modern nationalism.

<sup>5</sup> Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan, and Kevin Passmore, eds., *Writing National Histories: Western Europe Since 1800* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 10.

history filled with uncountable examples of Kurds who, because of tribal rivalry, class antagonism, or ideological differences, fought against the national movement or that simply identified with the states from which they were supposed to be liberated. If these considerations apply to virtually all examples of national liberation movements, the contested nature of nationalism in the Kurdish case is particularly significant for two reasons. In the first place, the dominant role of tribal structures in the Kurdish region led to the inevitable overlapping of any new form of political divide with older tribal rivalries. This meant that in virtually all cases in which a Kurdish tribe took part in the national movement, rival tribes were driven to the opposite side regardless of ideological considerations. Secondly, the partition of Kurdistan between Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria after World War I put these states in the position to generously reward Kurdish loyalism at home while supporting Kurdish nationalism abroad to destabilise their neighbour with the consequence of deepening the divide between nationalist and non-nationalist Kurds.

The next chapter will outline the theoretical framework of this study by extensively reviewing established theories of nationalism. The aim is to find avenues that avoid treating nationalism as an autonomous force and allow studying it as embedded in political and social conflicts. Ernest Gellner defined nationalism as “a political principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.”<sup>6</sup> The next chapter will problematise this popular definition and particularly its implications on the relationship between nationalism and culture. However, Gellner’s take on nationalism is a useful starting point for it suggests that nationalism always involves a re-definition of political boundaries and not simply the expression of a cultural identity. This means that the existence of a collective cultural identity, that, in the Kurdish case, dates back to literary work of the sixteenth century, is a necessary but insufficient condition for nationalism to develop. Nationalism comes into being only with the idea that the borders the nation

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<sup>6</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 1.

and the borders of the state – must coincide. It can, therefore, be expressed in both the demand for independence or regional self-government whereas a mere call for cultural recognition does not *per se* constitute a nationalist programme.

In these terms, nationalism is an eminently modern phenomenon and nationalist discourse had, among the Kurds, little or no political significance before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918.<sup>7</sup> The partition and incorporation of Kurdistan into the newly-established states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, the assimilationist nation-building process these states pursued, and the uneven socio-economic development that this incorporation engendered for the Kurdish regions are all historical reasons for the rise of Kurdish nationalism. As a result, this rise can be freed from the teleology inherent in the idea of the national awakening and treated as a framework, made possible by the abovementioned historical circumstances, within which Kurdish political actors could frame their claim to power over the region.

These reflections on nationalism and on the risks involved in writing national histories circumscribe the scope of this study clarifying what this thesis is and is not about and enable some viable working definitions of the Kurds and Kurdistan.

### **The Kurds and Kurdistan**

As this thesis is about Kurdish nationalism in its historical expressions, the definition of the Kurds and Kurdistan is not its subject of investigation, except insofar as these terms are historically framed by Kurdish nationalists. However, to avoid blindly reproducing the nationalist discourse, it is important to outline the problematic nature of these questions to anticipate the way the words 'Kurd' and 'Kurdistan' will be used in this thesis. The most common characterisations of the Kurds as “a people without a country” and

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<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 3.

“the world’s largest stateless nation”<sup>8</sup> suggest that defining the border of the Kurdish nation – both in terms of land and members – is an inherently problematic task or, better, an eminently political decision. However, even if the Kurdish nation does not have a state to issue passports and set the boundaries of its membership, millions of people around the world identify as Kurds, regardless of their Turkish, Iraqi, or German passports or even the lack thereof. It is precisely the resilience of Kurdish national identity and its persistent political significance in the absence of a state that make Kurdish nationalism such a compelling subject.

The Kurds are normally identified with the speakers of a number of Iranian languages hailing from the region that straddles the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The self-identification of these linguistic groups within a collective Kurdish identity is the result of a long historical process. Kurdish nationalist historians and political organisations have defined these boundaries by attributing a common ancestry to these groups and traced the origins of the Kurds in the Medes, an ancient Iranian people that settled in present-day north-western Iran around the seventh century BC.<sup>9</sup> In the words of Mustafa Barzani – arguably the single most prominent Kurdish nationalist leader of the twentieth century – “deeply rooted in history since before 3000 BC, our people, with distinct characteristics, undeniably inhabited the Zagros mountains.”<sup>10</sup> This idea served the political purpose of constructing a common past for people speaking languages that are only in part mutually intelligible even if the ‘Median hypothesis’ has been challenged on philological grounds.<sup>11</sup> Kurdish scholar Mehrdad Izady does not go that

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<sup>8</sup> Gerard Chaliand, ed., *A People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1993); ‘Who Are the Kurds?’, *Al Jazeera*, 1 October 2017, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/kurds-170516072934887.html>>.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example: Taufiiq Wahbi, *The Origins of the Kurds and Their Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).

<sup>10</sup> Mustafa Barzani, ‘Speech Presented to the Congress of the Kurdish Exiles in the Soviet Union: Baku, January 19, 1948’, *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, XI.1–2 (1997), 35.

<sup>11</sup> David MacKenzie argues that the Kurdish languages belong to the south-western Iranian group, unlike ancient Median, that belongs to the north-western group. See,

far back and yet claims that the Kurds were a defined ethnic group before the Islamic conquest in the sixth century and that since then the “Kurds are a multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-racial nation, but with a unified, independent, and identifiable history and culture.”<sup>12</sup> In historical records, *Kurdistan* – literally the land of the Kurds – was first mentioned in the work of early Arab geographers and, in the twelfth century, the Seljuk Sultan Sanjak established a *Koordistan* province in present-day north-western Iran.<sup>13</sup> In the early sixteenth century, the term became of common usage to define the mountainous borderlands between the Ottoman and the Persian empires along a line that still roughly coincides with the current north-western borders of Iran.

Calling the region Kurdistan did not imply, however, the demarcation of defined ethnic boundaries. In a region historically dominated by tribalism and nomadism, Kurdish tribes coexisted with Turkish and Arab tribes, merged and split over the centuries: the tribal confederations that ruled the area in the fifteenth century – the *Aq Qoyunlu* and *Kara Qoyunlu*, the White and the Black Sheep – were mixed Turkish and Kurdish.<sup>14</sup> The ‘Turkish’ Safavid dynasty was probably originally Kurdish and was Turkified first, and then Persianised, while at the same time claiming an ‘Arab’ descent via the Prophet Muhammed. When the region was ruled by the Ottomans (1516-1918), the use of the word *Kurd* often had a social rather than a linguistic connotation since it was used to collectively identify the tribal and nomadic people of the region as opposed to the sedentary population. In the early 1920s, Turkish sociologist Ziya Gökalp observed this dynamic at play in his native Diyarbakır where the distinction between a Turk and a Kurd largely

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David N. MacKenzie, *Kurdish Dialects Studies I-II*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>12</sup> R. Mehrdad Izady, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook* (Washington: Taylor & Francis, 1992), 185.

<sup>13</sup> T. Maria O’Shea, *Trapped between the Map and Reality: Geography and Perceptions of Kurdistan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 230.

<sup>14</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History*, 9.

overlapped with that of an urban and a rural dweller.<sup>15</sup> It was the development of nationalism in the region in the early twentieth century – the very subject of this thesis – that forced people with different and fluid identities “to opt for an unambiguous [Kurdish] ethnic identity.”<sup>16</sup>

Historical evidence seems to dispel the idea of a primordial ethnogenesis of the Kurds as a distinct group. In the course of the twentieth century, the Kurds were increasingly identified with the speakers of the Kurdish language as the trait that most significantly distinguished them from their neighbours. This characterisation based on language – albeit more solid than other features discussed below – comes with two problems. First, there is hardly such a thing as a Kurdish language. Kurdish people speak several dialects, that are only in part mutually intelligible,<sup>17</sup> but the absence of a Kurdish state prevented the rise of one of them to a unified *national* Kurdish language. As modern sociolinguists taught us in the past century, “a language is a dialect with an army and navy” and distinguishing between a *national* language and a *vernacular* dialect is always a political statement.<sup>18</sup> The two most widely spoken Kurdish dialects are *Kurmanji* – predominant among the Kurds of Turkey, Syria and the Dohuk province in Iraq – and *Sorani* – spoken by most Iraqi and Iranian Kurds. Kurmanji and Sorani are both official languages in the autonomous Kurdish Region of Iraq and use respectively the Latin and Arabic scripts. There are many other Kurdish

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<sup>15</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, ‘Kurds and the City’, in *Joyce Blau: l'éternelle Chez Les Kurdes*, ed. by Hamit Bozarslan and Clémence Scalbert-Yücel (Istanbul: Institut Français d'études anatoliennes, 2018) <<https://books.openedition.org/ifeagd/2199?lang=en>>.

<sup>16</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, ‘Kurdish society, ethnicity, nationalism and refugee problems’, in *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*, ed. by Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl, *The Kurds*, 35-37.

<sup>17</sup> Iranologist Philip Kreyenbroek argues that the two most-spoken Kurdish ‘dialects’ Kurmaji and Sorani differ from one another as much as German and English. Philip G. Kreyenbroek, ‘On the Kurdish Language’, in *The Kurds*, ed. Kreyenbroek and Sperl, 53-56. In my experience, this statement exaggerates the difference and speakers of the two languages seem to communicate fairly easily. However, the growing mutual intelligibility might also be a recent phenomenon driven by the rise of the Kurdish-language mass media since the early 1990s.

<sup>18</sup> The quote is widely attributed to Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich. Cited in Ronald Wardhaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997), 28.

dialects such as *Zaza* in Turkey, as well as *Gorani* and other southern dialects in Iraq and Iran. The second problem with a linguistic definition of the Kurds is that not all Kurds speak Kurdish. The troubled history of the Kurds over the past century, the policies of assimilation imposed on them, and the mass forced and spontaneous migration meant that it is fairly common to meet people who identify as Kurds even if they can barely – or not at all – speak any of the Kurdish dialects.

In religious terms, most of the Kurdish speakers are also Sunni Muslims of the Shafi'i school, a trait that distinguishes them from both the neighbouring Arab and Turkish Sunnis, who follow the Hanafi school, and the Persian and Azeri Twelver Shias.<sup>19</sup> However, many Kurdish speakers are Alevi in Turkey and Twelver Shia in Iran, and the two religious minorities of the Yazidis and the Yarsanis use respectively Kurdish Kurmanji and Gorani as their liturgical language. Islam in Kurdistan has also been historically characterised by the dominance of Sufism in particular of the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders. Religion, however, only played a prominent role in the first phase of Kurdish nationalism, during the Kurdish revolts of the interwar period discussed in Chapter 3. After that phase, Kurdish nationalist movements tended to be secular and to define the Kurdish nation in terms of language to mark a clearer distinction from the (fellow Muslim) neighbouring peoples.

An important aspect of Kurdish society is tribalism. Kurdish rural society was, up to the mid-twentieth century largely organised in tribes. In the richest scholarly account of Kurdish tribal society, Martin van Bruinessen describes the Kurdish tribe as a

socio-political and generally also territorial (and therefore economic) unit based on descent and kinship, real or putative, with a characteristic internal structure. It is naturally divided into a number of sub-tribes, each in turn again divided into smaller units: clans, lineages, etc.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Veli Yadirgi, *The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey: From the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 24-25.

<sup>20</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 51.

Van Bruinessen emphasises the importance of the two social and political roles in tribal society. First, the *agha*, the tribal chief, who sits on top of each unit of the tribal hierarchy – clan, sub-tribe, tribe – and commanded a degree of political authority over his fellow tribespeople. Second, the *shaykh*, the leader of a Sufi brotherhood, who does not belong to any tribe and thus maintains a super-tribal mediatory authority. Kurds were never all tribal and, up to the twentieth century, tribes were the dominant form of social organisation among nomadic Kurds. Settled Kurdish peasants were generally not part of any tribes and, along with most Christians living among the Kurds, were unfree and politically subjected to Kurdish aghas or shaykhs.<sup>21</sup>

Van Bruinessen goes a long way to explain that we should move beyond the traditional dichotomy between tribe and state, as conceptual opposites, and instead look at tribes as shaped by the policy of the states they gravitate around to the point that they “can even be seen as *creations of the state*.”<sup>22</sup> In the history of the Kurds, the tribal policy of the Ottoman Empire was to have long-lasting consequences: from the creation of Kurdish tribal confederacies and their elevation to borderland princedoms in the sixteenth century to their destruction during the administrative centralisation of the nineteenth century and the state-sponsored tribal revival of the closing decades of the Empire. During the twentieth century, tribes suffered a gradual decline of their social function accelerated by the process of urbanisation. Particularly, the role of the agha and the shaykh changed dramatically. With the spread of capitalist relations in the Kurdish countryside, aghas and shaykhs were in the position to register in their name land that was customarily owned by the tribe or by the Sufi lodge and gradually became large landowners while their fellow tribespeople became waged labourers. This process was heavily supported by the central states who kept relying on these traditional powerholders to maintain order in the Kurdish periphery. This transformation heavily affected the traditional

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 134.

kinship-based solidarity that held tribes together and tribal loyalties gradually waned. It was by no means an even process and many tribes continue to play an important social role.

Highlighting the complexity of these transformations is important because, in this thesis, I almost exclusively speak about the 'tribal elite' rather than tribes. That is because the class stratification that occurred in tribal society is by far its most relevant aspect in regard to the development of nationalism. Where 'tribes' are mentioned, it is to emphasise episodes in which people mobilise as members of the tribe regardless of the position they hold in it. As will become clear, these episodes became rarer and rarer in the twentieth century.

As mentioned before, the land of Kurdistan is normally identified with a region that, straddling state borders, includes south-eastern Turkey, the far north and north-east of Iraq, north-western Iran, and north-eastern Syria. Kurdish nationalists make a point of stressing the unity of the Kurdish land and use the cardinal directions to identify each of the regions under foreign occupation. So, the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria are called Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western Kurdistan, or simply by using the Kurdish for north (*Bakur*), south (*Başur*), east (*Rojhelat*) and west (*Rojava*).

This form, however, does not help define the 'external borders' of the Kurdish nation, that is to say, to identify which areas are *predominantly* inhabited by Kurds. This predominance is problematic to assess for a number of reasons, the first of which is the region's cultural diversity. Before the indigenous Christian population was virtually wiped out during the First World War, the eastern-Anatolian homelands of the Kurds and the Armenians largely overlapped. Even today, there are no defined linguistic borders between Kurdish, Turkish, Persian, and Arabic speakers, and large areas, as well as important cities, have mixed populations, while linguistic enclaves exist throughout the region. Secondly, in the twentieth century, the Kurds were victims of Arabisation policies in Iraq and Syria and forced assimilation in Turkey that changed the demographic balance of many mixed areas. In addition to that, the state of semi-permanent warfare, the

scorched-earth and mass deportation strategies deployed by the states to quell the various Kurdish revolts, as well as poverty and structural underdevelopment, forced millions of Kurds to leave their homes. Forced and voluntary migrations contributed to the Kurdification of previously mixed cities and the creation of large Kurdish diaspora communities in non-Kurdish cities. The third problem with defining predominantly Kurdish areas is that Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran systematically prevented large-scale statistical research on the ethnic composition of the region, making a reliable assessment of the Kurdish population impossible. To overcome these shortcomings, I refer to the predominantly Kurdish areas as the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, or Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian, and Syrian Kurdistan with unspecified borders. The terms south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, north-eastern Syria, and north-western Iran will be used when the Kurdish regions are referred to from the perspective of the central states. To make these terms meaningful, they will be associated, where possible, to clear topographical reference points and to the administrative divisions of the states, such as the Turkish provinces (*iller*) and the Iraqi governorates (*muhafazat*). The borders of the predominantly Kurdish areas drawn in Map 1 are a rough approximation and must be used only to geographically place the events analysed in the following chapters.

Due to the abovementioned scarcity of statistical data on the ethnic composition of these states, estimates of the size of the Kurdish population are often loaded with political significance. Moreover, when such surveys did exist, state authorities had an interest in 'correcting' the number while interviewees might have been reluctant to disclose their Kurdish identity to state officials. For example, in the last of such surveys conducted by Turkey in 1965, the people who declared Kurdish as their mother tongue were 2.3 million people or 7.7 per cent of the country's population,<sup>23</sup> far below the estimates of most scholars. Even by using the same data, Servet Mutlu has recalculated the 1965 Kurdish population as 3.13 million and 10 per cent of

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<sup>23</sup> Servet Mutlu, 'Ethnic Kurds in Turkey: A Demographic Study', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 28 (1996), 517–41.

the total population.<sup>24</sup> Table 1 collects estimates of the Kurdish population worked out by scholars. Those numbers can serve as a reference point to inform the historical analysis but, given the lack of reliability, will not be cited here to support a particular argument. For the purposes of this study, Kurds are those who identify as such.

Source	Year	Turkey		Iraq		Iran		Syria		Other	World
		Pop.	%	Pop.	%	Pop.	%	Pop.	%	Pop.	Pop.
Mutlu 1996 <sup>1</sup>	1965	3.13	10.0								
Vanly 1971 <sup>2</sup>	1965	6.7	21.5	2.3	27.5	4.5	18.3	0.5	9	0.4	14.4
Van Bruinessen 1992 <sup>3</sup>	1975	7.5	19	2-2.5	23	3.5	10	0.5	8.5	0.1	13.5-15
McDowell 2004 <sup>4</sup>	2000	15.4	23	4.2	23	5.7	10	1.0	6.1	2	24-27

Table 1 - Total Kurdish population (Pop.) is reported in millions.  
The percentage indicates the share of the Kurdish population in the respective country.

The next section surveys the existing literature on Kurdish nationalism showing how it often failed to depart from the national-history paradigm. However, it also discusses the works that can inform the study of Kurdish nationalism as embedded in social conflicts.

### The Literature on Kurdish Nationalism

The study of Kurdish politics is a relatively recent scholarly enterprise. Before the events of the Kurdish insurgencies in Turkey and Iraq in the late 1980s and early 1990s attracted a great deal of international attention, scholars of Kurdish politics had to rely on few works of historical and anthropological scholarship.<sup>25</sup> Even after the 1990s, when the literature on the subject grew exponentially, interest in the Kurds has followed the pace of events and has been dominated by works of political science and its subdisciplines, and, to a lesser extent, sociology and anthropology. A lot of

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> To mention some of the most influential: Vladimir Minorsky, 'Les origines des Kurdes', *Actes du XXe Congres Internationale des Orientalistes*, Louvain (1940), 143-152; Fredrik Barth, *Principles of Social Organization in Southern Kurdistan* (Oslo: Universitet i Oslo, 1953); Vasily Nikitin, *Les Kurdes: Etude Sociologique et Historique* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1956); Derk Kinnane, (1964), *The Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964); Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, *Kurdistan and the Kurds* (London: Collets, 1965); Vanly, *Survey*.

this literature tended to age fast hindering the creation of a body of cumulative knowledge on Kurdish politics. This is a common tendency in political science – especially when event-driven – and in the case of Kurdish studies, this short-sightedness of the literature is also due to the objective scarcity of background work in Kurdish history that could provide social scientists with well-informed historical analyses.<sup>26</sup> A symptom of this issue is the proliferation of edited volumes that, even when insightful, tend to offer fragmented knowledge.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, a considerable amount of literature on Kurdish politics belongs to the field of security studies written from a profoundly ideological counterterrorism or counter-insurgency angle and aimed directly or indirectly at policy-makers.<sup>28</sup>

Within this vast literature, this section reviews some of the most influential works on Kurdish nationalism, briefly surveying the literature that reproduces a culturalist and identity-based explanation and more extensively discussing works that give space to socio-economic factors and that were thus more relevant to the present study on class and nationalism. Before delving into the analysis of the literature, it is important to note that the relationship between nationalism and social classes is largely absent from literature on the Kurds. This is due mostly to the scarcity of specialist

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<sup>26</sup> For a discussion on this, see Jordi Tejel, 'New perspectives on writing the history of the Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey: A history and state of the art assessment', in *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, ed. by Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef (London: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3-16.

<sup>27</sup> To name just a few titles published solely in 2019: Michael Gunter, ed., *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019); A. Faleh Jabar, and Renad Mansour, eds., *The Kurds in a Changing Middle East: History, Politics and Representation* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019); Anwar Anaid, and Emel Elif Tugdar, eds., *Iraqi Kurdistan's Statehood Aspirations: A Political Economy Approach* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Mehmet Gürses, David Romano, and Michael Gunter, eds., *The Kurds in the Middle East: Enduring Problems and New Dynamics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> For example: İhsan Bal and Sedat Laçiner, *Ethnic Terrorism in Turkey and the Case of the PKK: Roots, Structure, Survival, and Ideology*, (London: Frank Cass 2004); Mitchel P. Roth and Murat Sever, 'The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate: Funding Terrorism through Organized Crime, A Case Study', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 30.10 (2007), 901–20; Mustafa Cosar Ünal, 'The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Popular Support: Counterterrorism towards an Insurgency Nature', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 23.3 (2012), 432–55.

political economy literature and the virtual absence of Marxist scholarship on the Kurds – with some exceptions discussed below. Therefore, this overview of the literature, rather than discussing the missing alternative arguments on the role of social classes, focuses on analysing the space given by the literature to the role played by socio-economic structures in the rise of Kurdish nationalism. Finally, this section discusses the works on Kurdish politics in Iraq and Turkey that most significantly influenced the arguments I developed on the two case studies of this thesis.

As already described earlier in this chapter, many Kurdish nationalists – like most nationalists in general – tend to see the Kurdish nation as a perennial entity that has existed since far before nationality became a principle of state organisation. The development of nationalism in the twentieth century was thus a natural consequence of the oppression of the Kurds by other – Turkish, Arab, Persian – nations. This discourse is reproduced by Kurdish and non-Kurdish scholars who attribute the development of nationalism first and foremost to the suppression of Kurdish identity. For Wadie Jwaideh, after World War I:

The Kurds, now in a resentful mood, were rendered even more restive and unmanageable by the heightened impact of Western civilization [...] a development they felt threatened to undermine their way of life. The Kurdish masses, with the encouragement of their leaders, were determined to resist this influence. The various Kurdish rebellion, besides being violent manifestations of Kurdish nationalist sentiment, were also waged in defence of the Kurdish way of life.<sup>29</sup>

The Kurdish revolts of the interwar period are framed by Jwaideh in cultural terms, as a movement of the entire Kurdish nation in defence of its identity. In Ofra Bengio's triumphalist account of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq, the story takes an epic tone:

The amazing story of the Kurdish revival in Iraq, following the genocidal war of 1988–1989, very much resembles that of the Jews following the Holocaust. Within the first four years after that war, the Kurds managed to launch an ambitious project for Kurdish nation

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<sup>29</sup> Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 292.

building and state building [...]. And although the Kurdish national project encountered enormous internal and external obstacles [...] its success was [...] achieved through the accumulated fruit of eighty-five years of ongoing struggle.<sup>30</sup>

These works refuse to problematise Kurdish nationalism by erasing its contested nature and the conflicts within Kurdish society. They are problematic both in analytic terms, because they provide a simplistic historical picture, and in political terms, as they reproduce a narrative that legitimise the power claim of the Kurdish elite, especially in the context of Kurdish self-rule in Iraq.

A large part of the literature on Kurdish nationalism, however, emphasises the fundamental role played by the socio-economic transformations of the twentieth century – such as urbanisation, mass literacy, the role of modern states – in the development of Kurdish nationalism. In some authors, these premises are implicitly framed within an approach based on modernization theory, a *power-free* way of analysing the political economy, that inevitably leans towards culturalist explanations. For instance, the democratic deficit of the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq is then attributed to the resilience of tribal social structures – as in Hussein Tahiri – or to the development of an rent-driven ‘culture of dependence’ – as in Denise Natali.<sup>31</sup> This line of argument ends up depoliticising social conflicts and – even beyond the intention of the authors – absolving the Kurdish elite by moving practices such as corruption and patronage from the realm of politics to the one of culture. Even more problematic is the case of a more recent strand of literature produced within Iraqi-Kurdish universities in which mainstream political economy is deployed to depoliticise the power relations of the region.<sup>32</sup> David Romano’s account of the rise of Kurdish nationalism in

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<sup>30</sup> Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State Within a State* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), 315;

<sup>31</sup> Hussein Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society and the Struggle for a Kurdish State* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2007); Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Nyaz Noori Najmalddin, ‘The Failure of Economic Reform in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (1921-2015): The Vicious Circle of Uncivic Traditions,

Turkey offers some interesting insights – including the attention towards the role of rural conflicts – and yet suffers from similar theoretical limitations.<sup>33</sup> His rational-choice theoretical framework reduces political projects to strategic decision failing to account for the alternative avenues – such as assimilation, Islamism, the Turkish left – that were available to the Kurds.<sup>34</sup>

Martin van Bruinessen's *Agha, Shaikh and State* and David McDowell's *A Modern History of the Kurds* need to be mentioned for their importance in the field.<sup>35</sup> Van Bruinessen's anthropological study is one of the foundational text on Kurdish politics. Despite its little engagement with nationalism, this text remains an essential read on Kurdish politics and its interesection with the traditional structures of Kurdish society. David McDowall's book is by far the most comprehensive history of the Kurds to date. Despite not always complying to academic standards, McDowall provides a rich account on Kurdish history in the twentieth century with a high degree of attention for the socio-economic transformation of the region. Even if neither of these texts provide a particularly significant interpretation of nationalism and lack systematic analysis of its relation to the class structure, they both immensely contributed to this author's understanding of Kurdish history and politics.

A number of specific studies on the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey constituted the most important sources of empirical material and theoretical reflections on the two case studies of this thesis. Of the less sizeable literature published on the Iraqi Kurds – compared to those of Turkey – two books

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Resource Curse, and Centralization', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 45.2 (2018), 156–75, as well as the various contributions included in Anaid and Tugdar, eds., *Iraqi Kurdistan's Statehood Aspirations*; Aram Rafaat, 'The Fundamental Characteristics of the Kurdish Nationhood Project in Modern Iraq', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 52.3 (2016), 488–504.

<sup>33</sup> David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> For a more extensive critique along this line, see Cengiz Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 19-24.

<sup>35</sup> Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*; McDowall, *A Modern History*;

stand out for their attention to the political-economic trajectory taken by the Kurdish region of Iraq in the 1990s, Gareth Stansfield's *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy* and Denise Natali's *The Kurdish Quasi-State*.<sup>36</sup> Despite Stansfield's focus on governance rather than nationalism and leaving aside Natali's abovementioned moralistic conclusion, these two books offer a compelling description of the politics and political economy of the region that deeply influenced the analysis of Iraqi-Kurdish nationalism in this thesis. These are by far the most comprehensive studies on Kurdish self-rule in Iraq after 1991, and yet, despite their attention paid to the political economy of the region, neither of them gives any space to the radical transformation of its class structure and the consequent transformation of Kurdish politics and of the social function of Kurdish nationalism.<sup>37</sup>

The two texts – both about the Turkish Kurds – that most heavily influenced this study, especially in terms of the development of the argument, are Cengiz Güneş's *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey* (2012) and Vali Yadirgi's *The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey* (2017).<sup>38</sup> The fact that

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<sup>36</sup> Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003). Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State*.

<sup>37</sup> Two recent articles do emphasise the function played by Kurdish nationalism in the power structure of the Kurdish region of Iraq even if they are not focused on the political economy. Dylan O'Driscoll & Bahar Başer's article on the 2017 independence referendum and Andrea Fischer-Tahir's chapter on the construction of a collective memory emphasise the instrumental use of nationalism made by the Iraqi-Kurdish elite reaching conclusion similar to those developed in Chapter 6 of the present work. See Andrea Fischer-Tahir, 'Searching for Sense: The Concept of Genocide as Part of Knowledge Production in Iraqi Kurdistan', in *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges*, ed. by Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco, and Hamit Bozarslan (Singapore: World Scientific, 2012), 227-43; Dylan O'Driscoll, and Bahar Başer, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq', *Third World Quarterly*, 40.11 (2019), 2016-2034.

<sup>38</sup> Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*; Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement*. I need to mention also the work by Joost Jongerden on the relocation of the Kurdish peasantry in his Joost Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), as well as the work he co-authored with Ahmed Akkaya on the origins and transformation of the ideology of the Kurdish movement in Turkey (see bibliographical references in Chapter 8 and 9).

Güneş focuses on the political discourse of the Kurdish movement and Yadirgi on the political economy of the region makes their books complementary for research on nationalism and class. Güneş deploys post-Marxist Discourse Theory as developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to stress the multiple historical articulations of Kurdish nationalism discourse.<sup>39</sup> As nationalism is analysed as an empty shell, devoid in itself of ideological content, a discourse analysis of the primary sources reveals the ideological content of each historical articulation of Kurdish nationalism. Thus Güneş can place the expressions of Kurdish nationalism in twentieth century's Turkey in their particular historical context and explain that nationalism was articulated "initially within the Islamist-conservative discourse (the early 1920s), as a modernist discourse (1920s and 1930s), underdevelopment (1960s), Marxist-Leninism (1970s and 1980s), and, finally democracy (1990 onwards)."<sup>40</sup> Even if Güneş is not directly concerned with political economic issues, his analysis of the evolution of the political discourse produced by Kurdish nationalists makes it a fundamental read to understand the development and diversification of nationalist projects.

On the contrary, Veli Yadirgi's work represents a rare case of recent scholarship on the political economy of the Kurds. Since the 1970s, Turkish and Kurdish Marxists came to see the relationship between the Turkish state and the Kurdish region through the prism of colonialism, building on the theoretical premises of Dependency Theory. While acknowledging its merits, Yadirgi departs from this tradition criticising its "static conceptualisation of the relation between 'powerless and peripheral' Kurdish areas and the 'all-powerful and dominant' Turkish state" and its economist premises.<sup>41</sup> Yadirgi re-politicises this literature by framing the underdevelopment of the Kurdish region as an example of 'de-development' resulted from the policies of nation-building pursued by Turkish nationalist

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<sup>39</sup> See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985) and Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 53-57.

governments since the Young Turk Revolution (1908). Deportations, dispossession, and cultural suppression contributed to forestall the development of Kurdistan not just by simply maintaining the region poor but actively rescinding “the prospect of autonomous indigenous existence”.<sup>42</sup> By combining the study of the different ideological trajectories developed within the Kurdish national movement with a thorough analysis of the political economy of the region, this thesis builds upon the existing literature to provide a novel account of the relationship between the evolving class structure and the nationalist projects.

The initial motivations for this study, outlined earlier in this introduction, were strengthened by the analysis of the literature on Kurdish nationalism. Despite the great deal of interest in the subject among social scientists, our understanding of Kurdish nationalism remains fragmented and the debates around its origin are still quite underdeveloped. Although many of the authors do not show any particular ideological hostility towards the study of class structure and give a great deal of weight to socio-economic dynamics, none of the abovementioned works provide a systematic analysis of the role of classes in Kurdish politics and their relationship to Kurdish nationalism.

## **Methodology and Methods**

This investigation of Kurdish nationalism was conducted as a work of Historical Sociology based on the comparison between the history of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq and Turkey. Comparative historical analysis has traditionally been the best candidate in the social sciences to answer the “questions about large-scale outcomes that are regarded as substantially and normatively important by both specialists and nonspecialists.”<sup>43</sup> This focus on the ‘big questions’ drive historical sociologists to use the work of historians with a sociological end, to formulate

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>43</sup> Dietrich Mahoney James and Rueschemeyer, ‘Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences’ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7.

theoretical arguments on long-term processes. It tends to rely thus on secondary sources as its subject is too broad to be based on primary research. In this thesis, events of war and insurgency, the rise and fall of organisations and leaders, and the emergence of different expressions of Kurdish nationalism are played against the backdrop of the *longue-durée* of the evolution of the region's class structure. Alternating these two dimensions is particularly important to avoid economic determinism that treats political events as mere epiphenomenal expressions of structural processes. Even though between the 1980s and 1990s the class structure of Iraqi Kurdistan changed substantially, the *Kurdistan Democratic Party* (KDP) remained the political actor that best represented the interest of the Kurdish ruling class. It remained so *through* the structural transformation of the ruling class but was also the actor that most significantly contributed to the reshaping of the relations of power in the 1990s.

The form of comparison used in this thesis is that of the 'method of difference' needed to explain different outcomes – the different forms of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq and Turkey – to similar initial circumstances – Kurdistan at the time of its partition.<sup>44</sup> This form of comparative work showed its great explanatory power in some of the classics of Historical Sociology that originally inspired this study.<sup>45</sup> However, this thesis follows the Marxist tradition in studying social reality in its unity and resisting the isolation of individual factors and the reduction of broad transformation to a single explanatory variable. In these terms, this thesis remains a 'soft comparison' to avoid letting the methodology determine the conclusion and to maintain an open approach that allows for multi-causal explanations. That is to say that the diversification of the balance of class forces in the

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<sup>44</sup> As opposed to the 'method of agreement' which serves to explain why different circumstances lead to similar outcomes.

<sup>45</sup> Such as Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

two Kurdish regions – the main explaining factor – is analysed in its interactions with local and contingent specificities, the unevenness of economic development, as well as an ever-changing international environment.<sup>46</sup>

However, this study tries to take seriously the criticism advanced by non-Marxist scholars to study not only “very long-run economic development” but to account for the role played by “immediate transformations that occur in the structure and functions of state organizations” and in “the relations between the state and social classes.”<sup>47</sup> If the balance of power among social classes is the condition for the rise of a certain form of nationalism or certain organisations, it is by no means the only determinant of the political outcome. To give an example, the Kurdish revolt in Iraq of 1961-1975 had its origins and found its strength in the power of the traditional landowning class. Yet, the reason it could last for so long and constitute such a challenge to Baghdad is that several foreign powers were – due to exogenous Cold War dynamics – interested in weakening the Iraqi government. When foreign support was withdrawn, the revolt abruptly collapsed. In a similar vein, the counter-insurgency strategy adopted by Iraq in the 1980s and Turkey in the 1990s brought Kurdish rural society to violent and rapid destruction and radically transformed the class structure of the two Kurdish regions with durable political consequences.

Besides its methodological advantages, the choice to carry on a comparative work is partly imposed by the Kurdish reality. Incorporated into four different states since the early 1920s, the ‘histories’ of the Kurds diversified to a point that it is impossible not to follow a country-by-country narration. This is particularly true for the political economy – the focus of this thesis – of each Kurdish region, shaped by the policies imposed by the state centres.

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<sup>46</sup> Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics: State Formation and Development* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 119-121.

<sup>47</sup> Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, 35.

There are three reasons for the choice of the Kurdish movements in Iraq and Turkey as the case studies. First of all, Kurdish organisations from Iraq and Turkey have dominated Kurdish politics for the past few decades, exercising their influence in a competitive way over the Kurds of Iran and Syria. The comparison is thus almost imposed by the circumstances. Moreover, the Kurdish insurgencies in Turkey and Iraq in the twentieth century were the longest and their protagonists shaped transnational Kurdish politics in a far more profound way than any organisation from Iran and Syria. In these terms, telling the stories of Kurdish nationalism in these two countries is the closest way of telling the whole story of Kurdish nationalism. Kurdish national forces in Syria and Iran had enough power to be politically significant in the two countries only in a few historical moments, namely 1945-46 and 1979-80 in Iran, and after 2012 in Syria. Those are exactly the periods in which their stories most significantly intersect with that of the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey and this is when they feature in this thesis (respectively in Chapters 3, 4, and 9).

Secondly, Kurdish nationalism in Iraq and Turkey is also particularly significant because of the strikingly different forms of its development. The facts that they started from very similar structural conditions – in the Late-Ottoman and interwar periods – and that they were always fighting for the *same* Kurdish nation – in terms of who the Kurds are and where Kurdistan is – makes it particularly significant that these nationalist movements radically differed along ideological lines. As Kurdish nationalist movements with different class bases developed two politically opposite national projects, their comparison constitutes a vantage point to investigate the relationship between class and nationalism. In these terms, Iranian and Syrian Kurdistan did not lend themselves to such a ‘clean’ comparison. Iranian Kurdistan was not part of the Ottoman Empire and was separated from the other parts of Kurdistan since the sixteenth century and – despite important commonalities – presented different starting conditions that would have compromised the value of the comparison. Since the Kurdish population in Syria was always smaller and territorially discontinuous constituting a majority in only a few

limited areas, choosing Syria as a case would have led to an 'unbalanced' comparison.

Finally, the choice to exclude the history of Kurdish nationalism in Iran and Syria from the comparison also had a practical reason. The available literature on the Iraqi and Turkish Kurdish movements is far wider and provides enough material for a historical sociological work covering a century of Kurdish history. The literature on the Kurds of Iran and Syria is much more limited and focusing on those two cases would have forced me to change the nature of this study and to rely more heavily on primary research. Considering the difficulties of carrying on fieldwork research in Iranian and Syrian Kurdistan, this was not a feasible option.

In terms of methods, this thesis is largely based on the analysis and comparison of secondary sources as is generally the case in historical sociological analyses covering a long time span and aimed at answering theoretical questions. Different sets of literature were combined in a novel vein, especially the *histoire événementielle* of the Kurdish movement, and the literature on the economic and social history of Iraq and Turkey. In regard to Iraq, these fields were especially disconnected with scholars of Iraq as a whole disregarding the Kurdish region, and students of the Kurds often failing to link Iraqi Kurdish politics to that of the rest of the country. The combination of these two strands of literature was particularly fruitful. For example, reading the history of Iraqi Kurdish nationalism against the backdrop of the history and economic history of Iraq allowed for a much deeper understanding of the motivations and dynamics of the 1961 Kurdish revolution.<sup>48</sup> The secondary sources also include literature produced by international organisations, government bodies, or think tanks, and especially political economic reports.

Primary sources were not central in the development of this thesis mostly due to the long historical period covered – over a century – that did not leave much space to analyse events in detail. For the most recent period – the

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<sup>48</sup> For a discussion on these issues, see Chapter 4.

2000s and 2010s, analysed in Chapters 6 and 9 – newspaper articles constituted an important source of raw information that informed the analysis. Moreover, the scarcity of historical literature on the Kurds, and its frequent gaps, necessitated complementing the secondary sources with 29 semi-structured interviews with Kurdish politicians, former combatants, journalists, and intellectuals. The interviews were conducted in two long trips to the Kurdish region of Iraq (in summer 2018 and spring 2019), in short trips to Brussels, Berlin, and Paris (winter 2019-2020), as well as in London and over the telephone. They were conducted in English, Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic, Dutch, and German, and most of them with the help of a translator. The information collected in this form helped illuminate some obscure historical passages. However, and most importantly, the contribution given by these conversations – and by the many more I had during my fieldwork trips – to my understanding of Kurdish politics and to the reflections that led to the formulation of the argument goes far beyond the space that interviews occupy in the final draft of this thesis.

### **The Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is built around seven chapters on the history of Kurdish nationalism. The first chapter presents a broad picture of Kurdistan in the interwar period, while the following six are divided by the two cases with three chapters on Iraq and three on Turkey.

The first part of the thesis sets the stage for the study of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq and Turkey. This introductory chapter is followed by the theoretical framework (Chapter 2) which assesses modernist approaches to the study of nationalism, highlighting how they tend to treat nationalism as an autonomous force. After having problematised the Eurocentric and idealist tendencies of this literature, the chapter suggests setting aside abstract theorising on the (a)historical nature of nationalism. It proposes instead to study nationalist movements as context-specific expressions of the struggle for state power embedded in class conflicts.

Within this theoretical framework, Chapter 3, the first historical chapter, discusses the earliest politically significant expressions of Kurdish nationalism in interwar Turkey and Iraq as a unitary phenomenon. The Kurdish 'feudal' revolts that took place in both countries in the 1920s and 1930s were the results of the reluctance of the Kurdish traditional elite to be integrated into the newly established states of Turkey and Iraq after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

After the defeat of these revolts, however, Kurdish nationalism in Turkey and Iraq took two opposite trajectories shaped by the different outcomes of the feudal revolts but even more importantly by the different nation-building strategies deployed by the new states, their different degrees of development and integration into the capitalist world-system, as well as the different geopolitical status of the two countries – initially an autonomous middle power the former and a colonial subject the latter, later on the opposite sides of the Cold War divide. All these factors conspired to shape and diversify the class structure of the two Kurdish regions. In the following six chapters, the history of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) and in Turkey (Chapters 7, 8, and 9) is reconstructed through pivotal historical moments in which Kurdish nationalist movements rose and fell against the backdrop of the evolving political economy of the region. The two cases run parallel chronologies, to emphasise the different trajectories of Kurdish nationalism in (roughly the same) historical periods: Iraq and Turkey during the Cold War (Chapters 4 and 7), the 1990s and early 2000s (Chapters 5 and 8), and the increasingly fragmented and unstable Middle East of the 2010s (Chapters 6 and 9). However, each chapter is also a story on its own, in which the evolution of the social and economic structures of the region as well as the agency of the Kurdish political actors change the class basis and politics of the Kurdish national movement.

The concluding chapter of the thesis (Chapter 10) brings together the two cases in a comparative manner, analysing the patterns of political behaviour of the Kurdish social classes. Building on previous chapters, it shows how the diverging structural contexts of Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan drove the

same social classes – the landowning class, the middle classes, and the peasantry – to develop forms of Kurdish nationalism with different strategies and ideologies. This final chapter connects the historical analysis to the theoretical framework of the thesis and shows that the study of the Kurdish national movement constitutes an extraordinary vantage point to make wider considerations on nationalism and class politics.

# Chapter 2

## Nationalism and Class Politics

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### Introduction

The term 'nationalist' is commonly used to describe a wide variety of political movements. The fact that a Marxist anti-colonial movement in southern Africa and a neo-Nazi group in western Europe can be both and unproblematically called nationalist reflects the ambiguity of the term. Historians and social scientists have grappled with the issue since the nineteenth century, but it was only in the last quarter of the twentieth century that a blossoming of publications on the subject created the interdisciplinary field of *Nationalism Studies*. Scholarly interest was driven by an apparent revival of nationalist identities and a parallel demise of class as the principal source of political divide. As workers in the Global North turned their back to social democratic politics and the national liberation movements of the Global South gave way to authoritarian regimes and ethnic conflicts, scholars identified in the nation a source of identity stronger than any 'rational' approach to politics based on material interests or universal values. Even if most students of nationalism profess the modernist belief that the nation is a historical construct, their explanations often fall into the circular argument whereby nationalism is important *because* it is important.

This circularity derives primarily from the idea that the nation-state had its origin in nineteenth-century Europe where it arose out of long-term historical developments and then *diffused* to the rest of the world. The failure to explain nationalism outside the north Atlantic region as anything but an imported idea reflects a Eurocentric bias of the field but it also reifies the idea that nationalism is an autonomous force whose relationship to contextual political struggles is only contingent. Conceptualised in this way,

nationalism exists *regardless* of other social and political conflicts. For this reason, the theories of nationalism have little to say about the actual political content of nationalist struggles and the evident diversity of nationalist movements, the progressive character of some and the reactionary character of others. Ultimately, they tell us very little about the politics of nationalism. To re-politicise the study of nationalism, this thesis follows critical geographer James Blaut in studying nationalist struggles ultimately as *struggles for state power* embedded in class conflicts.<sup>49</sup> Nationalist movements struggling for state power – to win power in an existing state or to create a new state – are always embedded in conflicts between classes, class fractions, and class coalitions outside which we cannot understand their ideological outlook and political programme. Placing nationalist movements within their society's specific set of class relations, shaped by local history, geopolitics and their location in the global division of labour, opens the study of nationalism to empirical investigation. Eschewing grand theories which inevitably compare any expression of nationalism to an original (European) standard, this chapter proposes an alternative way to study the politics of nationalist movements.

### **Diffusionism and Eurocentrism**

The issues outlined above already suggest that the theoretical approach built in this chapter excludes the existence of any primordial root of nationalist feelings. As Roger Brubaker observes, "no serious scholar today holds the view that is routinely attributed to primordialists in straw-man setups, namely that nations or ethnic groups are primordial, unchanging entities."<sup>50</sup> The primordialism held by many real-world nationalists who naturalise and de-historicise the nation has been long demystified by modernist scholars of nationalism. Modernist authors such as Ernest Gellner

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<sup>49</sup> James M. Blaut, *The National Question: Decolonizing the Theory of Nationalism* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1987).

<sup>50</sup> Roger Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 15.

turned upside down the primordialist notion that nationalism is the process of awakening of dormant – yet pre-existing – nations. On the contrary, they successfully demonstrated that nations are the product of nationalist movements that create them by setting boundaries and identifying their essential cultural features.<sup>51</sup> Accepting the validity of the modernist critique of nationalism, this chapter stays within this tradition and proposes solutions to overcome its limits.

Going through some of the foundational works of nationalism studies written by modernist and Marxist scholars, the reader will notice an undertone of contempt towards nationalists. With a certain arrogance, Gellner claims

that the prophets of nationalism were not anywhere near the First Division, when it came to the business of thinking (...) It is rather that these thinkers did not really make much difference. If one of them had fallen, others would have stepped into his place (...) The quality of nationalist thought would hardly have been affected much by such substitutions. Their precise doctrines are hardly worth analysing.<sup>52</sup>

For Eric Hobsbawm, “no serious historian of nations and nationalism can be a committed political nationalist,” implying that real existing nationalisms can only be primordialist.<sup>53</sup> Tom Nairn – a (Scottish) nationalist himself! – thinks that the contradictions of modernity found their solution in “the crudity, the emotionalism, the vulgar populism, the highly-coloured romanticism of most nationalist ideology (all the things intellectuals have always held their noses at).”<sup>54</sup> As Nairn, like Hobsbawm, is also Marxist, his statements are imbued with a profound pessimism for the prominence of irrational – even deplorable – nationalist feelings over universalist and emancipatory politics. He adds:

Nationalism [worked] because it actually did provide the masses with something real and important—something that class

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<sup>51</sup> Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>53</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 12-13.

<sup>54</sup> Tom Nairn, ‘The Modern Janus’, *New Left Review*, 1.94 (1975), 22.

consciousness could never have furnished, a culture which however deplorable was larger, more accessible, and more relevant to mass realities than the rationalism of *our* [emphasis added] Enlightenment inheritance.<sup>55</sup>

The apparent demise of class politics is, for Nairn, the evidence for the strength and autonomy of nationalist feelings. In this famous essay, Nairn describes nationalism as a 'Modern Janus' that, like the ancient Roman god with two faces. is, with no exceptions, "both healthy and morbid [...] both progress and regress" while "fascism tells us far more about nationalism than any other episode."<sup>56</sup>

These considerations can only make sense if nationalism, as an idea, is given an autonomous force and can be theorised upon without connection to material reality. In these accounts, nationalism has an autonomous existence which means that it can reproduce itself in any context and that the presence of nationalism is enough to explain nationalism away. The next section will delve more deeply into the problems that this conceptualisation carries as well as the circularity of the argument that it engenders. But first, it is important to explain the origin of the idea that nationalism is not only autonomous from but also stronger than universal values and class-based politics. To be clear, this thesis has no intention to dismiss the work of Gellner, Hobsbawm, Nairn, or Benedict Anderson whose research provided an invaluable contribution to our understanding of nationalism. On the contrary, the point is to highlight the limits of their approaches, including the theoretical issues that hinder our capacity to investigate the politics and ideologies of contemporary nationalist movements, especially outside the Euro-Atlantic area.

The most consequential outcome of treating nationalism as an autonomous force is the diffusionism that this approach engenders. Modernist authors explain the rise of nationalism and the nation-state in its original European or American cradle with highly sophisticated arguments and paint

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 17.

convincing pictures of the process in those specific historical contexts. After its original emergence, however, nationalism simply spreads to the rest of the world, pursued by local elites eager to follow the European way of success. This 'diffusionism' significantly undermines the explanatory capabilities of these theories, relegating most contemporary nationalist movements to the realm of irrationality and primordial allegiances. In other words, it denies their politics. This attitude fuels the abovementioned contempt that these authors show towards real-world nationalist struggles: if one thinks that nationalism was merely the result of historical processes taking place in nineteenth-century Europe, then, any expression of nationalism occurring later or elsewhere will inevitably be autonomous from those historical processes. It will simply be an idea that spreads across the world.

For Tom Nairn, the diffusion of the idea of nationalism from Europe to the rest of the world is central. Nairn sees nationalism as a catching-up strategy that, rather than developing in the most advanced countries – Britain, France, and the United States – originated in late-coming Italy and Germany.<sup>57</sup> It was the Italian and German elite, frustrated by the underdevelopment of their countries and preoccupied with catching up with their western neighbours that invented nationalism as a strategy of development. It was the Italian and German nationalist movements that provided the blueprint for the elites of other latecomers such as Japan and south-eastern Europe first and the colonised peoples later in the twentieth century. That the Italian and German unification became points of reference for other national movements is certainly true but not that consequential.<sup>58</sup> Nairn's account presents these frustrated nationalist elites as a given, failing to notice how the Italian and German national movements were diverse and

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>58</sup> As Nazih Ayubi explains, the influence exercised by Hegelian idealism of the German and Italian schools in the Arab world was motivated by the search for a form of organicist society as opposed to Anglo-Saxon individualism. It was not a model of nationalism. Nizah N. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 17-21.

conflictual. In both countries, the national movement was initially led by the urban middle and lower classes that found the only way to obtain liberal or even democratic constitutions in the liberation from direct and indirect Austrian domination. In both cases, the Royal Houses of Savoy and Hohenzollern and the landed interests associated with them were less motivated by national feelings than traditional dynastic ambitions and were often in conflict with the respective national movements. The nature of Italy's and Germany's nation-building process was the result of the context-specific compromise between different forces – and the exclusion of others – rather than the desire of an unspecified elite to catch up with mighty Britain. Nairn's argument is even more problematic when applied to colonial contexts especially considering the almost universal opposition of national liberation movements to the indigenous *comprador* elites compromised with the colonial power.

In Benedict Anderson's 1983 *Imagined Communities*, the blueprint of nationalism, composed of "nation-states, republican institutions, common citizenships, popular sovereignty, national flags and anthems, etc." spread from the Atlantic Revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that made the model "available for pirating."<sup>59</sup> Particularly, Anderson gives centrality to 'Creole nationalism' in Latin America showing how the political modern vocabulary of the French revolution was deployed to create a regional system of functionally equal and sovereign constitutional republics.<sup>60</sup> These reinterpreted concepts then travelled back to Europe and provided the basis for nineteenth century nationalism. However, the spread of these political norms to Europe intertwined with the existence of vernacular communities created by print capitalism that did not coincide with the existing polyglot polities of feudal origin – which was a problem unknown to the Spanish-speaking creoles fighting Spanish colonialism. This specific European problem generated a form of nationalism built upon the

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<sup>59</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflecting on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 81.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-66.

centrality of vernacular languages in setting the boundaries of nations.<sup>61</sup> In Europe, nationalism triumphed to such a degree that even the most reactionary royal houses, previously fierce opponents of the principle of nationality, had to come to terms and compromise with the new standard of political legitimacy. This process generated yet another autochthonous form of nationalism, its most reactionary expression, that Anderson calls 'Official Nationalism' and that was to lead to scientific racism and the tragedies of the early twentieth century.<sup>62</sup> Anderson's superb description of these processes and, especially, of how political movements were capable of adopting ideas developed elsewhere and reinterpreting them according to their particular predicament, is lost when the book turns to nationalism in Africa and Asia, where

[a] blend of popular and official nationalism has been the product of anomalies created by European imperialism: the well-known arbitrariness of frontiers, and bilingual intelligentsias poised precariously over diverse monoglot populations. One can thus think of many of these nations as projects the achievement of which is still in progress.<sup>63</sup>

The punctual and evocative terms (creole, vernacular, official), so effectively deployed by Anderson to stress the originality of each expression of nationalism in Europe and the Americas, have no corresponding term to describe the anticolonial movements of the peoples of Africa and Asia. The anti-colonial movements of the twentieth century are instead defined merely as "the last wave" and described as only able to 'pirate' concepts from previous forms of nationalism.

Ernest Gellner's account of nationalism is heavily informed by Max Weber's distinction between traditional and modern societies. Nationalism is the response to a qualitatively more complex social and economic system:

The level of literacy and technical competence, in a standardized medium [...] which is required of members of this society if they are to be properly employable and enjoy full and effective moral

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 67-82.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 83-112.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 124.

citizenship, is so high that it [...] can only be provided by something resembling a modern 'national' educational system, a pyramid at whose base there are primary schools, staffed by teachers trained at secondary school, staffed by university-trained teachers, led by the products of advanced graduate schools. [...] The monopoly of legitimate education is now more important, more central than is the monopoly of legitimate violence.<sup>64</sup>

The most significant marks of nationalism are thus, in Gellner, the political pursuit of a standardised language and the extension to the masses of the high and abstract culture that was previously reserved for the elite and that is now needed for society to function. Gellner's account illuminates the process of nation-building in many European countries in the nineteenth century, convincingly stressing the role played by the standardisation of culture and mass education. Yet, his theories tell us virtually nothing beyond that context. Even when accepting that all modern societies need to reach a degree of cultural unity and a standardised medium of communication, this process is by no means necessarily associated with the construction of the nation. One needs just to think about the numerous countries in which the colonial language kept playing that role – officially or not – after independence: from the Latin American, to the British white-settler colonies, to vast polyglot societies such as India, Congo, or Nigeria. Gellner's stress on language is revealing of a deep Eurocentric bias. It is not a coincidence that his Ruritania, the fictional nation used in the book with an illustrative purpose, is evidently inspired by a handbook case-study of small-nation nationalism from nineteenth-century Mitteleuropa.

As geographer James Blaut explains, most theories of nationalism follow a common diffusionist model that fails to provide a materialist explanation for the spread of nationalist movements in the Global South:

[Nationalism Theory describes nationalism as] a concrete, observable, social or socio-political process, but its cause, or source, or mainspring, or motor, is an idea or ideology. This idea is itself uncaused; or rather it sprang forth in France and Britain 200 years ago as simply the logic of advancing civilization, of creating a modern nation state; and then the idea diffused to the rest of Europe

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<sup>64</sup> Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 34.

and eventually the colonies. Note, therefore, that the idea is primordial; save perhaps in the original West European 'homelands' it arises for no local geographical or historical reason, no reason of economic impoverishment, political oppression or whatever. It results only from the diffusion of an idea.<sup>65</sup>

This diffusionism – a form of idealism of Hegelian origin – pervades most modernist approaches regardless of the geographical area of the Euro-Atlantic region – different in each author – where nationalist ideas are thought to have originated first.

The problem with Nairn's, Anderson's, or Gellner's account is not that political ideas did not travel back and forth across the Atlantic or that nationalists around the world did not learn from each other. The problem with these accounts is rather that they depict nationalism as emerging out of objective material forces but then spreading purely at the level of political discourse. While Europeans and Creole elites can incarnate – in Hegelian terms – the spirit of history, the colonised can only imitate. Nationalism, after its original emergence, is therefore given an autonomous force that needs not to relate to contextual material dynamics and conflicts with the result of de-politicising nationalist struggles.

### **Is Nationalism an Autonomous Force?**

As outlined in the previous section, the most popular scholarly works on nationalism tend to fall into the trap of diffusionism: nationalism emerged in a specific context due to specific historical circumstances but then it simply spreads and can be adopted by political actors even in the absence of those originating circumstances. This approach seems to be inevitable to authors trying to build a 'grand theory' of nationalism able to grasp this elusive concept across time and space with a parsimonious and elegant theoretical construction.

Within such a theoretical framework, nationalism can only survive the structural context in which it developed due to its intrinsic autonomy from

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<sup>65</sup> Blaut, *The National Question*, 18.

those conditions. Then nationalism becomes an autonomous force that exists regardless of contextual factors. Treating nationalism as autonomous is analytically problematic as it conflates explanandum and explanans, producing a circular narrative in which national identity is both the object of investigation and its explanation (*nationalism matters because it matters*). However, this approach is also extremely problematic in political terms, as it depoliticises nationalism concealing the social and political conflicts in which nationalist struggles are always embedded. Commenting on Nairn's book, Blaut observes that foreign domination engendering nationalist movements

seems to consist in nothing worse than a denial to the elite classes in the dominated society of the opportunities for greater wealth (...) Nationalism, then, emerges as a psychological frustration-reaction on the part of the elites of backward countries to the trauma of uneven development.<sup>66</sup>

Presenting nationalism as an autonomous force not only hides social hierarchies and dismisses conflicts by legitimising the conservative claim that nationalism is an expression of transclass solidarity. But, even more problematically - especially for Marxists - it reifies the fictitious separation between the economic and political spheres that is typical of capitalist modernity. In pre-capitalist societies, the economic realm is embedded in cultural and political structures of social reproduction.<sup>67</sup> Economic structures and political, cultural, social (super-)structures are thus indistinguishable and it is meaningless to speak of a separate economic realm. As Ellen Meiksins Wood explains, in advanced capitalist societies the political nature of the appropriation surplus is mystified, and capitalist reproduction is presented as happening only in the economic sphere and as compatible with a democratic framework. For example, workers' struggles for higher wages "may be perceived as merely 'economic'" while we would not think that about "the rent struggle waged by medieval peasants, even

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<sup>66</sup> Blaut, *The National Question*, 79-80.

<sup>67</sup> For a classic exposure of this view, see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

though the issue in both cases is the disposition of surplus labour and its relative distribution between direct producers and exploiting appropriators.”<sup>68</sup> This separation is reproduced by the positivist social sciences, first of all, through the creation of a separate discipline of economics based on technical knowledge and ‘apolitical’ general laws.

The fictitious separation of the two spheres is the reason why mainstream social science can erect boundaries and divide our knowledge of the social world into separate fields of studies or ‘autonomous’ disciplines. If international politics follows its own laws that are not dependent on domestic dynamics, we will need the autonomous discipline of International Relations. If nationalism is an autonomous force existing regardless of the way politics and society ‘normally’ work, we will need an autonomous field of Nationalism Studies. Obviously, a certain degree of disciplinary division within the social sciences is indispensable to limit the scope of research and to organise professional academic life. Yet, the strict adherence to disciplinary boundaries fragments our understanding of the social world and has long been rejected by all strands of critical scholarship from Marxism to post-structuralism, from feminism to post-colonialism.

The reproduction of this separation in modernist accounts of nationalism is most evident in the assumption that capitalism needs no boundaries and that there is an intrinsic contradiction between the spread of state borders – engendered by nationalist movements – and the globalising tendency of capitalism. The multiplication of independent states since the mid-twentieth century is for Nairn “anachronistic” and in contradiction with the spread of capitalism and, therefore, evidence that nationalism is a force autonomous from both class and capitalism.<sup>69</sup> Hobsbawm’s entire account of the history of nationalism, while extremely rich, is based on the idea that nationalism was *rational* in the nineteenth century when unified national markets were conducive to the development of capitalism, and *irrational* in the twentieth

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<sup>68</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 44-45.

<sup>69</sup> Nairn, *The Modern Janus*, 24.

century when nation-states were increasingly in contradiction with a globalising capitalism.<sup>70</sup> The idea that capitalism does not need the state and that tension between the two is ever-present was particularly popular in the last quarter of the twentieth century and had a prominent role in the development of the theory (and ideology) of globalisation. On the contrary, again following Meiksins Wood, it is the separation of the political and the economic spheres that makes the state even more necessary under capitalism as “the powers of surplus appropriation and exploitation do not rest directly on relations of juridical or political dependence” such as that between masters and slaves or lords and serfs:

Absolute private property, the contractual relation that binds producer to appropriator, the process of commodity exchange - all these require the legal forms, the coercive apparatus, the policing functions of the state. Historically, too, the state has been essential to the process of expropriation that is the basis of capitalism.<sup>71</sup>

The proliferation of states engendered by nationalist movements is thus, rather than in contradiction to, functional to the spread of capitalism. This becomes even more evident in the age of global capitalism when huge profit is made precisely through the exploitation of different wage structures across countries and labour can be disciplined under the threat of delocalising production. In these terms, the spread of nationalism and the spread of capitalism are by no means autonomous from each other.

These reflections can introduce a way to investigate nationalist movements as embedded in and mutually reinforced by context-specific social conflicts. The separation of the political and the economic is typical of the advanced capitalist society and is absent not only from pre-capitalist societies but also from societies in transition towards capitalism as well as from societies that occupy a peripheral position in the world economy. Outside the core, capitalism often maintains a brutally extractive nature and the appropriation

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<sup>70</sup> At the end of the book, Hobsbawm even concedes to an ‘End of History’-type of argument (it was published in 1990!) suggesting, through the metaphor of Minerva’s owl, that we might be at the end of the history of nationalism. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 192.

<sup>71</sup> Meiksins Wood, *Capitalism against Democracy*, 29-30.

of surplus is performed via extra-economic – that is to say, political – means, an arrangement that hinders the establishment of formal democracy and favours authoritarian solutions. This distinction is extremely relevant to the study of nationalism because the presence or absence of the formal separation between the political and economic and, more generally, a country's location in the core or periphery of the global economy shape its class structure and political institutions and, in turn, class conflict and potential coalition. These considerations can provide an initial explanation to the reason why nationalist movements against colonialism and neo-colonialism tend to be progressive and often socialist politics because distinguishing between political oppression and economic exploitation is meaningless.

### **Culture, Ideology, and the Struggle for State Power**

Before delving more deeply into the relationship between class and nationalism, it is necessary to get rid of the proverbial elephant in the room. As discussed above, modernist accounts tend to attribute an autonomous force to nationalism. The result is that they end up unintentionally legitimising the culturalist discourse of real-world nationalists – that is to say, that national identity is stronger than any other political divide – a result that defeats the purpose of the modernist critique itself. The relationship between nationalism and culture is clearly a very complex one. This section will discuss first the case of nationalisms which stress the role of cultural homogeneity in setting the boundaries of nations, and then the case of nationalisms developing within pre-existing borders of pre-national states or colonies. The comparison of these two historical expressions of nationalism shows that nationalism comes very close to coincide with the struggle for state power.

The tendency to conflate nationalism with its nineteenth century European manifestation leads scholars and laymen to overemphasise the importance of cultural uniformity in setting the boundaries of nations. This tendency is most evident, again, in Gellner and in the popularity of his definition of

nationalism as the principle demanding the congruity between cultural and political borders (each nation a state).<sup>72</sup> As discussed before, this conceptualisation has little or no applicability to the anti-colonial movements of both the nineteenth and the twentieth century where cultural unity was simply neither the issue of contention nor an objective to pursue. But even in Europe, where language remains the most common cultural criterion to determining national boundaries, many nations are multi-linguistic (such Belgium, Switzerland, Spain) while some linguistic communities are divided into separate nations (such as Germany and Austria; Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, and Bosnia). But even assuming than the abovementioned are all exceptions and that nations fundamentally coincide with linguistic communities, there were always countless more languages than there are nations.

The apparent arbitrariness of the cultural criteria defining the nation is in reality the result of historical contingency, and of the different conflicts and divides running through a given society. Working within the modernist tradition, Paul Brass presents the adoption of specific cultural criteria as the result of the conscious politicisation of culture by the local elite. Nation-building, is for Brass essentially

the process by which elites and counter-elites within ethnic groups select aspects of the group's culture, attach new value and meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilize the group, to defend its interests, and to compete with other groups.<sup>73</sup>

In the struggle for power and resources, elites mobilise objective cultural features that characterise their ethnic group but that were previously unfixed and apolitical and turn them into political symbols with a fixed character.<sup>74</sup> These cultural features – language, religion, tradition, collective

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<sup>72</sup> Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (London: SAGE Publications, 1991), 74-75.

<sup>74</sup> For Brass, an ethnic group is “any group of people dissimilar from other peoples in terms of objective cultural criteria and containing within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the elements for a complete division of labor and for reproduction forms an ethnic category.” The internal division of labour

memory – are objective in the sense that they really exist but their meaning in pre-national and pre-modern societies was continuously shifting as linguistic boundaries were blurry and cultural contamination and religious syncretism were the rule rather than the exception. In the process of ethnic and national identity formation, elites select the cultural features that best serve their political purpose, *freeze* their meaning, and set the boundaries of the ethnic community. In doing so, social elites politicise culture and “the ethnic community or nation created in this way does not necessarily constitute an entirely new entity but one that has been transformed, whose boundaries have in some ways been widened, in other confined.”<sup>75</sup>

Brass identifies several sources of elite conflict that constitute opportunities for elites to politicise culture: the resistance of a local aristocracy against an ‘alien’ conqueror, the struggle between competing religious elites, and between religious elites and local or alien aristocracies.<sup>76</sup> The variety of situations that drive elites to stimulate ethnic and national identities requires a definition of elites that only partly overlaps with that of classes. If in agrarian societies the political elite is often the landed aristocracy and thus coincides with a social class, the class extraction of the religious elite often matters much less. In other cases, the elites can be just a fraction of a social class, like in a modernising society where the political elite might be constituted by the most educated fraction of the middle class as well as military officers, bureaucrats, or the leadership of political parties and the interests that they represent are less often defined by their class than by their institution.<sup>77</sup>

By eschewing treating nationalism as an autonomous force and by grounding it instead in the social conflicts that generated it, Brass offers

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distinguishes ethnic groups from “non-self-sufficient” forms of social categories like class, gender, or age. *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

“contextual rather than teleological explanations”<sup>78</sup> and yet gives us more applicable theoretical insights than each grand theory of nationalism. Brass’s approach allows us to look at the construction of national identities as an eminently political process through which new and old elites can legitimise their claim to power and mobilised subordinate classes belonging to the same ethnic group. Their claim to cultural homogeneity is, in these cases, used to hide opposed class interests. This approach is particularly effective to understand nationalist movements that aim at independence and investigate the particular interest that lay behind the call to national awakening.

In many other cases, nationalism is actively promoted by the elites of states that evolved from pre-modern and pre-national polities – China, France, Afghanistan, Thailand, Iran, Russia, Britain, Japan, etc. – whose boundaries were initially determined with no concern for cultural homogeneity. In these cases, the nation is an ex-post construct, imposed over borders previously set by dynastic wars of expansion. Even in those cases, nationalism is often promoted from the top to play down class antagonisms and stress trans-class solidarity. This is the case, for example, of the ‘official nationalism’ – as Anderson calls it – of the late nineteenth century that grew especially in opposition to the rise of organised labour. As Anderson explains, the link between nationalism and pre-existing political borders is also fundamental in the case of colonialism. Administrative colonial borders – as arbitrary as they are – proved to be extremely resilient, limiting the possibilities of nation-building available. Anderson cites the example of the creole republics in Latin America where the borders of the provinces of the Spanish empire became – roughly – the borders of the new states.<sup>79</sup> This aspect is even more evident in the current borders of most of the post-colonial world – especially Africa, South-East Asia and the Middle East – which coincide with administrative colonial divisions. Most attempts to overcome these artificial borders to build culturally-homogenous nation-states – the *Patria*

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>79</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 47-66.

*Grande* in Spanish America, the United Arab Republic, the *Indonesia Raya* – failed.

What all these different forms of nation-building have in common is that they all represent forms of struggle for state power: either to gain political independence or to gain power within an existing state. However, this argument cannot tell us much about the reason why nationalist movements adopt such different ideologies spanning from fascism to Black liberation. If nationalism is essentially the struggle for state power, what determines the programmatic content of a nationalist movement, its progressive or reactionary character?

This idea that nationalism is an empty shell devoid of ideological content is shared by a wide range of political theorists. Liberal scholar Michael Freedon, for example, claims that “in order to be a distinct ideology, the core of nationalism, and the conceptual patterns it adopts, will have to be unique to itself alone” because “ideologies compete over the ‘correct’ meanings of political concepts.”<sup>80</sup> However, the core concepts of nationalism are vague and empty as they do not provide “answers to the political questions that societies generate.”<sup>81</sup> The core principles of nationalism<sup>82</sup> “are too vacuous [...] to provide interpretations of political reality and plans for political action” and each of them “logically contains a number of possible meanings” and answers “to questions of social justice, distribution of resources, and conflict-management which mainstream ideologies address.”<sup>83</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, the period that we normally associate with ‘the apogee of nationalism’,<sup>84</sup> all the major political ideologies were framed within the principle of nationality: from *Wilsonian* liberal internationalism to the

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<sup>80</sup> Michael Freedon, ‘Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?’, *Political Studies*, 46.4 (1998), 750.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 750.

<sup>82</sup> For Freedon: (a) the priority given to the nation; (b) its positive valorisation; (c) the desire to give to it institutional expression; (d) the role of time and space in determining national identity; (e) the role of sentiment and emotion. *Ibid.*, 751-752.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 751.

<sup>84</sup> Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*.

Soviet Marxist revision of the 'national question' in Lenin and Stalin; from the racial nationalism of European fascisms to the national liberation movements in the colonial world. The Marxist Benedict Anderson presents the principle of nationality, rather than as a modern ideology, as something akin to religion or dynasticism, "taken-for-granted frames of reference."<sup>85</sup> Nationalism can then assume, as Anderson shows in his *Imagined Communities*, radically different political forms.

These considerations lead to the central claim of this theoretical chapter that, rather than another grand theory of nationalism, is essentially a methodological proposal. If we consider nationalism as the expression of the struggle for state power devoid, in itself, of programmatic political content, and we reject – as discussed earlier in the chapter – the idealistic and Eurocentric premises of treating nationalism as an autonomous force, then we need to turn to the context-specific, material conflicts that accompany nationalist struggles. Studying the class structures and trajectories of conflicts within a given society can tell us a great deal about the opposing material interests at stake and thus the ideological tenants that each party is more likely to profess. In these terms, investigating the class character of a nationalist movement – the class that leads it, the classes that take part in it, the classes it opposes – can tell us far more about the politics of nationalism than each of the grand theories developed within the field. As James Blaut suggests, maintaining an empirically open approach is vital if we are to treat nationalism as a form of struggle for state power embedded in class conflicts:

[W]e should not expect [nationalism] to be associated with one specific ideology, because each class or class combination in each kind of nationalist struggle would have an ideological position of its own and these would moreover differ for different historical epochs and geographical circumstances.<sup>86</sup>

In these terms, studying nationalism as embedded in class struggles does not mean ultimately reducing it to an expression of the conflict between

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<sup>85</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 12.

<sup>86</sup> Blaut, *The National Question*, 33.

producers and appropriators. On the contrary, it means analysing the conflicts that take place in a given society and the material interest of social classes, class fractions, and class coalition which determine the allies and enemies a nationalist movement will choose for itself. Earlier in this section, Brass was mentioned to show an effective approach to empirically study how nationalism intertwines with and carries existing local conflicts. We can thus turn to sociological approaches that can help investigate the political posture adopted by class actors.

### **Studying Class**

Studying class does not mean disregarding other societal divides such as gender, culture, or race. On the contrary, class formation is a historical process and the historical expressions of class identity – and including its political manifestations – are imbued with contextual norms. The study of class thickens our understanding of other forms of identity – including national identities. On the one hand, it helps us make sense of them within the social context in which they develop and identify their function in the reproduction of society and its hierarchies. On the other hand, studying normative and cultural structures in relations to material life guards us against shallow forms of cultural essentialism. These considerations are important in order to avoid the forms of economic determinism suffered by orthodox strands of Marxist theory and class analysis in the twentieth century that contributed to discrediting the study of class in the social sciences.

The theoretical reflections elaborated in this chapter hint at an understanding of class as embedded in power relations. Weberian and Marxist scholars developed approaches to class analysis that, albeit in different ways, focus on the centrality of power relations in understanding class structures. Neo-Weberian scholars tend to focus on the concept of 'opportunity hoarding' that see relations among classes as determined by

socially-imposed mechanisms of mobility closure.<sup>87</sup> Accessing high-income jobs and powerful positions are restricted to individuals satisfying certain conditions that vary according to contextual social norms – from boasting a prestigious patrilineal lineage to holding certain university degrees. The restrictions placed to limit access to these position of privilege are what make classes sticky and the mobility across classes limited, allowing for continuity in their reproduction over time. This approach is particularly effective in identifying the role of cultural, religious, and racial discrimination in reproducing class hierarchies. Racializing classes has been a particularly effective way of limiting social mobility in forms as varied as legal mechanisms such as *Jim Crow* or *Apartheid* or pre-emptively dismissing job applicants with Muslim names. Focusing on opportunity hoarding acknowledges the relations of power embedded in class structures highlighting that “the economic advantages people get from being in a privileged class position are causally connected to the disadvantages of people excluded from those class positions.”<sup>88</sup>

The opportunity hoarding approach to the study of class introduces a relational element. However, this relation is only unidirectional: the privilege of the few is guaranteed by the *exclusion* from privilege of the many. In Marxist and neo-Marxist work the relational nature of class is based on interdependency. What constitutes the ruling class is the capacity to appropriate surplus created by – the capacity to *exploit* – the working class. Erik Olin Wright illustrates the difference between the Marxist relational approach and the Weberian mobility-closure approach through two “classical cases”:

in the first, large landowners seize control of common grazing lands, prevent peasants from gaining access to them, and reap economic benefits from having exclusive control of that land for their own use. In the second, the same landowners, having seized control of the grazing lands and excluded the peasants, then bring some of those

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<sup>87</sup> This is, for instance, the approach taken by Charles Tilly in his famous study on the persistence of social inequality. Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>88</sup> Erik Olin Wright, *Understanding Class* (London: Verso, 2015), 18.

peasants back onto the land as agricultural labourers. In this second case, the landowners not only gain from controlling access to the land (opportunity hoarding), they dominate the farm workers and exploit their labour. This is a stronger form of relational interdependency than in the case of simple exclusion, for here there is an ongoing relationship between not only the conditions but also the activities of the advantaged and disadvantaged.<sup>89</sup>

In these terms – as claimed by Wrights himself – the Weberian and Marxist approaches to the study of class are not only compatible but they can be even seen as complementary due to their emphasis on two different ways power shapes relations among classes.<sup>90</sup>

These approaches to the study of class focus on its ‘objective dimension’ as a social structure observable in all modern societies. But identifying the configuration of the class structure of society does not in itself tell us much about the expressions of class politics. The distinction between the objective and the subjective dimensions of class is present in both Marx – respectively ‘class in itself’ and ‘class for itself’ – and in Weber, through his distinction between economic classes and status groups.<sup>91</sup> While classes as an objective phenomenon have objective interests rooted in the conflictual relations between each other, the actual identity developed by class groups is inevitably socially constructed and historically contingent. Classes are not social agents but structures. Saying that political movements are driven by material interests does not imply that they are the direct political expression of a class and that they represent the interests of a class in its totality. Class identity is always shaped by the most diverse range of social phenomena and must be studied on empirical grounds.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>90</sup> Erik Olin Wright already highlighted this compatibility claiming that “inside every leftist neo-Weberian is a Marxist struggling to stay hidden”. Combining the qualities of both approaches was actually the intellectual aim of Wright in the last part of his career. *Approaches to Class Analysis*, ed. by Erik Olin Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-18, 27.

<sup>91</sup> Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. by Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Routledge, 1948), 180-195.

Two elements affecting class identity are particularly central to the development of class consciousness. Firstly, the transnational spread of political ideas that shapes class consciousness. Secondly, and relatedly, the process of political organisation. However, recognising that class interests are socially and historically constructed does not mean denying that there needs to be some degree of consistency between culturally loaded expressions of politics and class interests. Most often, political conflicts are the expression of narrower material interests and see fractions of the same class on opposite sides: the national bourgeoisie versus the comprador elite; the 'native' working class versus migrant workers; the international financial capital versus the domestic market-oriented capital. Such groups are historical and context-specific expressions of the class structure but do not strictly overlap with social classes. On the contrary, it is common to see coalition-building happening among fractions of different classes around narrow objectives.

These theoretical considerations on the study of class help us identify the class motives that lead nationalist movements. If nationalist movements are the expression of classes, class fractions, and class coalitions in their struggle for state power then the political – programmatic – content of these movements will reflect a political project for the state they want to conquer or establish. This approach makes the study of nationalism – as nation-building projects – quite similar to the study of political regimes as the result of a certain set of class relations.

The study of the class origins of political regimes and particularly that of the class configuration that is more likely to lead to democratic and authoritarian regimes has been for long a central research question within Historical Sociology. Pioneered by Barrington Moore with his 1966 classic *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*,<sup>92</sup> this approach brought together, on the one hand, a structuralist study of the origins of social cleavages rooted in the institutional history and political economy of the context and,

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<sup>92</sup> Moore, *Social Origins*.

on the other hand, a more actor-oriented approach that looks at how social actors pursue their strategy through conflict, competition and coalition building. In this literature, class dynamics occupy a central role in social and political conflicts as political interests are largely derived from the common material interest of the members of the group. Within a framework that explains regime outcomes through the relative distribution of power among social classes, Moore claimed a positive causal relationship between the strength of the bourgeoisie and the development of democracy. Building upon his historical and comparative methodology, a number of scholars have criticised the liberal bias underpinning Moore's conclusion and enriched the field by bringing in the role of the modern state and of the international system on the one hand, and a problematisation of the role of the capitalist class in economic development.<sup>93</sup>

Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John Stephens have most convincingly built upon these critiques in their 1992 book *Capitalist Development and Democracy*.<sup>94</sup> Rueschemeyer *et al.* expanded Moore's class-based approach to include the role of the state apparatus and transnational economic processes. However, class remains the central element "to understanding the social structuring of interests and power in society".<sup>95</sup> Through their 'relative class power' model, Rueschemeyer *et al.* survey democratisation processes in the capitalist North Atlantic core, the Caribbean, and South America to reach the opposite conclusion to that of Moore. They show that, in virtually all cases, it was the working class that drove democratic development and that "the classes that benefitted from

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<sup>93</sup> For example, in her critical review of Moore's work, Theda Skocpol introduced some of the elements that will be central to the development of her own work on social revolution. See, Theda Skocpol, 'A Critical Review of Barrington Moore's Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy', *Politics and Society*, 4.1 (1973), 1–34.

<sup>94</sup> Rueschemeyer and others, *Capitalist Development*. Interestingly enough, the conclusions *qualitatively* reached by this book have been recently tested and confirmed *quantitatively* through a large-n study. See Sirianne Dahlum, Carl Henrik Knutsen, and Tore Wig, 'Who Revolts? Empirically Revisiting the Social Origins of Democracy', *Journal of Politics*, 81.4 (2019), 1494–99.

<sup>95</sup> Rueschemeyer and others, *Capitalist Development*, 5.

the status quo nearly without exception resisted democracy.”<sup>96</sup> Despite reaching the opposite empirical conclusion, the authors are confident in the validity of Moore’s framework and particularly in the combination of historical and comparative research. The two dimensions are seen as a way to avoid the voluntaristic nature of single-case historical work on the one hand and the overly structural analysis of comparative research on the other:

to construct a framework of enquiry that is in principle equally well attuned to the study of process and to the recognition of structural constraints. [...] The voluntaristic bias of case-oriented research is counterbalanced by comparison. Even in single-case studies comparative awareness and especially a longer time span of investigation can [...] make the structural conditions of different event sequences more visible. It is, however, actual comparison of cases featuring different structural conditions that really turns things around.<sup>97</sup>

While this approach offers a convincing framework to study political actors as social forces as well as the structures constraining their action, it also calls for a clearer definition of the unit of analysis. The need to operationalise the concept of class in social research in order to study political action *also* as class action requires moving away from a dichotomic division of capitalist societies between the two classes of those who sell and those who buy labour. Building upon the Weberian tradition, Rueschemeyer *et al.* define class through the concepts of *mobility closure* – the tendency of moving between similar class positions – and of *interaction closure* – the tendency to interact mostly with members of the same class. This definition opens up social classes and brings a more complex picture to the surface, in which different fractions of the same class might have opposing interests:

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<sup>96</sup> If capitalist development favours democracy it is not due to but, if anything, despite of, the capitalist class. According to Rueschemeyer *et al.* what enhances the chances of democracy is the structural transformation brought by capitalism that weakens the landowning pre-capitalist elite and strengthens the urban working classes. *Ibid.*, 41-47.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34

With these analytical tools [...] we can distinguish the owners of capital who employ labor on a sizeable scale – the bourgeoisie proper – from the urban petty bourgeoisie. We can identify the lower non-manual employees – such as clerical workers and sales clerks without much of a supervisory role – as a class distinct from middle-level managers and professional experts outside the chain of command.<sup>98</sup>

This approach allows for a much more flexible reading of class dynamics and is able to account for intra-class conflicts and processes of coalition building between fractions of different classes.

The methodology deployed by historical sociologists aimed at explaining the social origins of political regimes as grounded in relations between social classes, can help us investigate the political content of nationalism. Nationalist movements – like all social movements – reflect a class coalition that shapes their political content and programme and that determines what kind of nation they aspire to build. Acknowledging that the political posture – in this case, the approach to nationalism – of social classes in each specific context must be assessed on empirical grounds, the next section sketches the historical patterns of political behaviours adopted by social classes which can guide the empirical analysis to follow.

### **Sketches of Nationalisms**

The last two sections of the chapter discussed the role of existing material conflict in shaping nationalist movements as well as the political posture of social classes. In both cases, I emphasised the context-specific nature of every expression of nationalism and the necessity to study nationalist movements on empirical grounds. However, after acknowledging that the “political posture of class actors cannot be read off the underlying class structure in any one-to-one fashion,” Rueschemeyer *et al.* claim that there “are not infinitely variable either. [...] we expected classes to exhibit definitive central political tendencies.”<sup>99</sup> If class conflicts are one of the

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 51-53.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 5.

fundamental drivers of politics, we can make use of history to identify general patterns of behaviour for class actors in different contexts.

Even if social classes always find their political expression in a subjective form, shaped by cultural norms and local history, classes are ultimately made of objective social relations that present similarities across different contexts: we talk about a Bengali peasantry and a Salvadoran peasantry because we identify a number of similarities such as a particular relation of property to the land. Class analysis is particularly effective to carry comparative research on nationalist movements precisely because it allows us to pin down differences and similarities across different cultural systems that, with different approaches, would remain incommensurable. Every social class tends to develop a discourse about the nation and to develop a form of nationalism loaded with grievances and demands that reflect the understanding that class has of itself and its material interests.

The following section identifies historical patterns in the political posture developed by social classes towards nationalism. It shows that identifying the structural location of each class and the material interests that derive from it can tell us a great deal about the political programme of a nationalist movement, its ideology, and its progressive or reactionary character.

### *Classical Bourgeois Nationalism*

The 'classical' form of nationalism is the one expressed by the capitalist bourgeoisie and deeply associated with the nineteenth-century transition from the *Ancien Régime* to the modern nation-state in Europe. In pre-modern Europe, political power was restricted to the aristocratic and clerical castes and society was regulated through a complex net of historically sedimented privileges. The bourgeoisie that started acting according to a capitalist logic found its rise restricted by insurmountable legal and political obstacles. It was against this system that the bourgeoisie developed its nationalism as a political project to transform the state at its own image. Bourgeois nationalism was thus anti-feudal – aiming at replacing *particular*

privileges with *universal* rights enshrined in a liberal constitution – and secular – aiming at breaking the alliance of ‘throne and altar’. It aimed at replacing parochial traditions and local dialects with a uniformed high culture and standardised language. All these political ideas have an obvious connection to the material interests of the class that produced them. This national project created centralised states and unified markets in which capital could develop and labour was ‘freed’ from feudal and corporatist constraints. Even for Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, witnesses to this process, the creation of this form of state was the historical mission of the capitalist bourgeoisie.

This is the form of nationalism that was of interest for most of the academic discipline of Nationalism Studies and that can be prototypically exemplified by the national movements in Italy and Germany in the nineteenth century. If we limited our interest in nationalism to this historical expression, Tom Nairn’s *Modern Janus*, criticised above, would become significantly more relevant. The industrial bourgeoisie was indeed a class deeply concerned by the competition of more advanced economies. The cases of Japan, Italy, and Germany, cited by Nairn, were all characterised by an economic elite determined to shelter local production and in all these cases nationalism came to be associated – although to a different extent – with protectionist trade policy.

The political content of bourgeois nationalism varied depending on the specific weight gained by this class in each context as well as the alliances it developed. In mid-nineteenth century Europe – especially during the 1848 revolutions – European bourgeoisies largely participated in the revolutionary movements led by the urban working and middle classes on a platform of liberal nationalism, although ambivalent towards their democratic tendencies. However, when the European bourgeoisie had consolidated its power in the second half of the century, bourgeois nationalism became the strongest support of the monarchy and was used to justify militarism and colonial expansion – Anderson’s ‘official nationalism’ – as well as to keep in check the rising power of organised labour.

Bourgeois nationalism was, in these terms, a largely European phenomenon deeply connected to the rise of capitalism in the continent and, as noted earlier, the tendency to subsume all forms of nationalism under this is the result of the Eurocentric bias of the field of Nationalism Studies. In the decolonising countries of Asia and Africa in the twentieth century, the bourgeoisie was nowhere close to being a hegemonic class, also due to the constraints imposed by colonial domination on capitalist development. While bourgeois nationalism was in itself a virtually insignificant phenomenon, the posture of the bourgeoisie towards nationalism most often depended on its economic relation with the colonial power. In these contexts, the most relevant distinction is that between the *national bourgeoisie*, with economic interests in the domestic market and thus nationalist and anti-colonial, and the *comprador bourgeoisie*, economically dependent on the colonial power and thus opposed to independence.

#### *Middle-Class Nationalism*

Another ideal-typical form of nationalism is the one developed by the middle class. However, setting the boundaries of this class is more difficult. By 'middle classes' we mean a diverse set of intermediate social positions that are not directly related to the process of production and that include both the civil society – professionals such as lawyers and doctors, white collars, traders – and the state apparatus – bureaucracy, army officers and teachers. Nationalism is particularly appealing to these groups because they are most likely to provide the staff for a newly-independent or strengthened state due to their education and social status, but also their location 'outside' the production process that allows the bureaucracy to claim a mediatory role in conflicts between capital and labour. Schematically speaking, in cases in which the natives are excluded by the administration and the security forces, middle-class nationalists are most often interested in replacing foreign staff. In the case of colonial states, the anti-colonial nationalism of the native bureaucrats and officers most often reflects their ambition to shift from a position of executors of colonial policies to that of the ruling elite of

an independent state. On the one hand, middle-class nationalism opposes the traditional ruling class by proposing a progressive ideology – liberal or socialist – whereby some sort of meritocracy takes the place of the privilege of birth as the main mechanism of social mobility. On the other hand, it tends to assume a state-centric, developmental and technocratic character that limits the involvement of the popular masses in the political process.

These considerations are consistent with the findings by Rueschemeyer *et al.* about the historically “ambiguous” posture of the middle classes towards democracy:

They pushed for their own inclusion but they are most in favor of full democracy where they were confronted with intransigent dominant classes and had the option of allying with a sizeable working class. However, if they started feeling threatened by popular pressures under a democratic regime, they turned to support the imposition of an authoritarian alternative.<sup>100</sup>

With regards to nationalist movements like in the democratisation process, the intermediate position of the middle classes allows for a variety of coalition-building strategies. On the one hand, fascism developed often a middle class reaction – driven by frustration and fear of social downgrading – to the rise of the labour movement and resulted in an alliance with the dominant classes. On the other hand, decolonisation was often the product of a progressive coalition led by the middle classes and empowered by the support of the organised working classes or peasantry.

The latter case is particularly significant because in many postcolonial societies, army officers state bureaucrats ended up becoming – thanks to their control of the state – the dominant social group. In the words of Guinean anticolonial leader Amilcar Cabral, colonialism – due to its extractive nature – imposes severe limits on the integration of the educated middle class into the colonial elite:

a feeling of bitterness or, a frustration complex is bred and develops among the indigenous petite bourgeoisie. At the same time, they are becoming more and more conscious of a compelling need to

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

question their marginal status, and to re-discover an Identity. [...] Thus, they turn to the people around them, the people at the other extreme of the socio-cultural conflict: the native masses.<sup>101</sup>

In this sense, the limits posed on their upward mobility is the strongest material motive that drives the native middle classes against the colonial power that heavily contributed to their own formation as a class.

Colonialism tends to shape public institutions according to the extractive interests of the colonial power and to rely on traditional pre-capitalist elites. On the hand, this generates security-oriented colonial states in which the army and the bureaucracy tend to be oversized and state officials constitute an educated and connected mass, concentrated in the major urban centres and easy to mobilise. On the other hand, the weakness or sheer absence of a capitalist bourgeoisie whose development is actively hindered by the traditional elite in power allows the middle classes to claim the leadership of the national liberation. This position of leadership in such contexts is shown by the capacity of middle-class nationalists to incorporate the struggles of the subaltern classes. An exemplary case is that of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s. Largely led by military officers and state officials, Arab nationalists in Egypt, Iraq, and Algeria conquered state power thanks to their capacity to integrate workers' and peasants' struggle within the national liberation movement.

As Aijaz Ahmad explains, the apparently contradictory ideological expressions of these classes in power have all in common

a certain fetishization of the State, and the creation of a whole range of disparate and mutually contradictory ideologies – e.g. Western-style developmentalism, the 'socialism' of the radical-nationalists with its emphasis on 'nationalizations', the ethno-religious fascism of the Khomeini variety – which are none the less united in viewing the state as the principal agency of social transformation.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Amílcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches* (New York and London, Monthly Review Press, 1973), 63.

<sup>102</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, 'Class, Nation, and State: Intermediate Classes in Peripheral Societies' in Dale L. Johnson (ed.) *Middle Classes in Dependent Countries* (Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1985), 44-45. It could be argued that the *statolatry* of European fascisms comes from the same class dynamics.

### *Feudal Nationalism*

In the classical forms described above, nationalism remains largely a ' *Tiers État*' phenomenon. The feudal classes are, in the conventional narrative, the defenders of the old order and the most strenuous opponents of the egalitarian principles inscribed in the idea of the nation. Yet, history is punctuated with examples of landed aristocracies raising the national banners and it is so especially in nineteenth-century Europe, the classical locus of nationalism. As eastern Europe was dominated by the multi-national Austrian, Russian, and Ottoman empires, nationalism often emerged from the local landlords concerned with the distribution of land to 'alien' aristocrats from the imperial core, the exclusion from public offices, or the abolishment of ancient privileges. In Hungary and Poland, the nationalism of the powerful feudal class was directed against the absolutist tendencies of the Austrian and Russian empire. In the latter case, the memory of the 'Golden Liberty' the collective aristocratic rule of pre-partition Poland that excluded both the towns and serfs, motivated the anti-Russian feelings of the landed class:

Polish nationalism remained, even after the revolutionary crisis of the seventeen-nineties, essentially an affair of the landed gentry as well as of those social strata which, like the emerging *inteligencja*, originated from, and were still linked with, the traditional feudal elite [that] failed to inject into the Polish bourgeoisie and the peasant masses a feeling of national solidarity strong enough to outlast the loss of political independence.<sup>103</sup>

But this form of nationalism is by no means limited to eastern Europe and similarities can be spotted in the example of the role played by planter class in the national movements of Latin America mentioned before in this chapter. Benedict Anderson offers an interesting and original account on the deep motives of the Hispano-American nationalisms and of the use that the creole elite made of the ideas of self-determination and

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<sup>103</sup> Michael G. Muller, 'Poland' in *Nationalism in the Age of the French Revolution*, ed. by Otto Dann and John Dinwiddy (London and Ronceverte: The Hambledon Press, 1988), 113-114.

constitutionalism. While in France, these ideas were used to take down the Ancien Régime, in Latin America the same ideas were used by the creole landowning class to oppose the metropole when Madrid became more and more inclined to make concessions towards the indigenous peasants and the Black slaves and less and less willing and able to protect the local elite against major revolts.<sup>104</sup> The deployment of the same set of ideas had radically different outcomes in France, where it helped dismantle feudal structures, and in Latin America, where it helped preserve or even strengthen the local racialized class hierarchies.

For Paul Brass, this 'landed-class nationalism' is a common case in contexts characterised by cultural differences – linguistic or religious – between the imperial centre and the local aristocracy which legitimise the claim to local power of the latter.<sup>105</sup> Feudal nationalism is thus often triggered by the imperial centre's attempts to replace the local elite with loyal nobles from the core, or by the alliance between the imperial centre and other local classes – the burghers or even the peasantry – to bypass local powerholders and promote state centralisation. It is thus a form of nationalism characterised by reactionary – in the literal sense – demands. Even in regard to the feudal class, the findings of historical sociological work on democratisation point to a consistently reactionary posture of this class. In Barrington Moore's classic study, "labour-repressive" agriculture – such as feudalism or plantation slavery – that "require political methods to extract surplus, keep the labour force in place and make the system work" is characterised by a landowning class that is the most irreducible opponent of democratisation as the emancipation of agricultural labourers would inevitably bring the end of their power.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Anderson mentions the 'Indian revolt' in Peru, led by Tupac Amaru in the early 1780s and the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 48-49.

<sup>105</sup> Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 26-27.

<sup>106</sup> Moore, *Social Origins*, 434.

In decolonising societies, the 'feudal class' was generally identified with the traditional landed elite opposed to the national movement. One of the almost<sup>107</sup> universal tendencies of colonialism is to rely on the existing traditional elite to sustain colonial domination. As in the abovementioned case of the comprador bourgeoisie, these classes are empowered by the foreign rulers – and even revitalised where they were in decline – giving them a stake in the continuation of colonial rule. They thus tend to oppose national liberation movement. The case of the Arab world is one of the most significant in this sense. British colonialism actively turned traditional notables and tribal leaders in Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq, in a powerful class of landowners which became the most strenuous defenders of the monarchies backed or even imposed by Britain.<sup>108</sup> As mentioned earlier, Arab nationalism and Pan-Arabism in the Cold War era found their most significant supporters in the urban middle classes and their direct target in the traditional elites compromised with colonialism.

### *Nationalism and the Subaltern Classes*

The term 'subaltern classes' begs a definition. In Antonio Gramsci, the subaltern *groups* coincide collectively with the dominated masses, defined in terms of their exclusion from the political process but fragmented along the lines of different forms of exclusion constituted by relations of exploitation, race and nationality, gender, religion.<sup>109</sup> Exclusion and fragmentation, imposed by the dominant classes, are the reasons why Gramsci's subalterns do not constitute a class for itself and live "on the

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<sup>107</sup> Of course, except for the cases of settler colonialism where the indigenous population – elite and commoners – is subject to complete exclusion and suppression.

<sup>108</sup> Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State*, 86-134.

<sup>109</sup> Marcus E. Green, 'Rethinking the Subaltern and the Question of Censorship in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks' *Postcolonial Studies*, 14.4 (2011), 387.

margins of history” or, as in postcolonial scholarship, they “cannot speak.”<sup>110</sup> It is through the process of political organisation that the subalterns overcome their fragmentation and gain political agency and autonomy as a class and thus are able to create an alternative social bloc and “become state.”<sup>111</sup> The relevance of this concept to the present discussion on nationalism is that through political organisation the subaltern classes, like all the other classes, *can* speak, as they can develop their own discourse on the nation and launch their own bid for state power. Due to their subalternity, their position of social subordination, subaltern politics will have an intrinsic emancipatory character and will tend to develop in combination with a progressive ideology.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the movements that led to the pan-European 1848 Revolution had a strong working-class component that was both *patriotic* and radical democratic or even proto-socialist and no contradiction was seen between the two. It was only towards the end of the century that Nationalism and socialism were often presented as the competing products of mass politics in the industrial era respective expressions of the middle classes and the working class. As an expression of working-class politics, socialism was characterised, since the early nineteenth century, by a strong *internationalism* that claimed a commonality of interest among workers beyond national borders. This allowed right-wing nationalists to present socialists and labour organisers as ‘anti-national’ and saboteurs when they rejected chauvinism or colonial expansion. Yet working-class social democratic parties in western Europe, the closer they got to political power, the keener they were to reject this accusation and to frame their claim to power in national terms: In France, Germany, and Britain, they ultimately supported their countries’ war effort in 1914-1918, and developed an ambiguous approach towards colonialism proving their willingness to

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<sup>110</sup> Gayatri C. Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

<sup>111</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. By Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 53.

support even an expansionist form of nationalism. At the time of the Russian revolution, both communists and social democrats debated intensively the 'National Question' and Bolsheviks proclaimed their support for the liberation of the colonised world.

In the course of the twentieth century, the working classes and the peasantry became the backbone of virtually the entirety of the global movement for decolonisation to the point that Marxism became the – almost universally – shared language of the struggle against colonialism. The subaltern classes, where politically mobilised, were more consistently anti-colonial than the other classes as they had to bear the heaviest brunt of the transformation imposed by colonialism of traditional social relations and property regimes. In semi-colonies such as Egypt and Iraq in the 1950s, the subaltern classes were part of wider political coalitions in favour of independence, and workers' and peasants' mobilisation were decisive in giving the final shove that allowed the nationalists to win. In China, the communist mobilised the working class and the peasantry to fight a liberation war against the Japanese invaders, parallel to the one waged by the ruling-class nationalists of the *Kuomintang*. After the war, the two sides fought for state power proposing radically alternative national projects.

Thought through in theoretical terms, subaltern class nationalism primarily aims at a restructuring of the power relations within the state from which the subordinate has much more to gain than they have from external expansion. Foreign rule and colonial domination are most often characterised by hyper-exploitation and extractive practices which push the subordinate classes to support independence and to lead independentist movements. If nationalism is defined in class terms, as a struggle for independence and state power, it is also hardly in contradistinction with the internationalism historically developed by working-class movements. Internationalism *literally* presupposes the division of the world into nations prescribing fraternity among them. That is the reason why we see no contradiction in the expressions of solidarity

towards the struggle for self-determination of oppressed nations, such as the Palestinians or the Kurds.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter proposed an alternative way to study nationalist movements. Established theories of nationalism present sophisticated accounts of the origins of nationalism explaining its development as the result of objective historical circumstances and placing its origin in a specific time and space – most often nineteenth century Europe. However, after its ‘rational’ origin, nationalism simply diffused to the rest of the world even in the absence of the original conditions of its emergence. Nationalist struggles in the colonial world appear to be driven by the autonomous force of the principle of nationality disconnected from pre-existing social and political conflicts. Nationalism is thus depoliticised as the political content of nationalist movements – their progressive or reactionary character – is only given secondary importance.

However, if both academic and public discourse can use the term nationalism to describe movements as far apart as a neo-Nazi group and a Marxist national liberation movement, the term inevitably loses meaning and analytical usefulness. To shed light on the ideological content and programme – that is to say, on the actual politics – of nationalist movements, this chapter proposed to study nationalism as the expression of the struggle for state power embedded in class conflict and coalition building. Studying the class politics behind a nationalist movement allows us to understand their ideological positions and political posture in the interests it represents and serves within society. This means that nationalist movements must be ultimately studied on empirical grounds in light of the specific class structure and relations of power out of which they developed.

The chapter showed how the study of class origins of political regimes within Historical Sociology can provide a point of reference to identify historical patterns of the political behaviour of social classes. The last

section of the chapter sketched these historical patterns surveying the forms of nationalism developed by social classes across history and formulating theoretical considerations that can guide the study of nationalist movements on empirical grounds, which is the subject of the following chapters.

# Chapter 3

## Feudal Nationalism in Kurdistan (1918-1946)

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### Introduction

This chapter reconstructs the social origins of Kurdish nationalism in the interwar period showing that the first phase of the Kurdish national movement was essentially a class project promoted by the tribal landowning elite. Until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the Kurdish traditional elite largely identified with the Ottoman state and legitimised its position of power through tribal and religious sources. With the establishment of the Middle East state-system after World War I, the Ottoman successor states of Turkey and Iraq experienced a series of revolts whereby the Kurdish tribal elite attempted to renegotiate their power over the tribal periphery threatened by the centralising ambitions of the new states. Kurdish identity, only elaborated in cultural terms in the Ottoman context, was thus politicised in the form of a feudal nationalism, loaded with the conservative demands of the tribal elite and deployed to legitimise their claim to power over the region. The pre-nationalist *Kurdish* discourse that had developed in the previous decades, was thus emptied of its initial progressive and modernising character and filled with political demands that reflected far narrower class interests of the Kurdish traditional ruling class.

The Kurdish revolts that took place in Turkey, Iraq, and, to a lesser extent, Iran, between 1919 and 1946, followed a well-established pattern of state-tribe relationship and presented a number of shared features that allow us to study them as a unitary phenomenon. Despite their narrow class basis, the feudal-nationalist revolts – and particularly the short-lived Kurdish Mahabad Republic – assumed a central role in the nationalist narrative and the development of a pan-Kurdish identity. This step is particularly

important because the different extent of the defeat of feudal nationalism – and of the Kurdish traditional class – in Iraq and Turkey engendered two divergent paths of development for Kurdish nationalism.

### **Kurdistan in the Late Ottoman Period**

Kurdish nationalism developed in a time of great transformation. Between the early sixteenth century and the First World War, Kurdistan constituted the border region between the Ottoman and the Persian empires. Given the remote and mountainous nature of Kurdistan, the two empires allowed a higher degree of autonomy for the local elite and the region was organised in a system of vassal emirates functioning as border marches. The Kurdish emirs were paramount chiefs ruling over a tribal confederation and their legitimacy rested on their vassalic relationship with the Ottoman Sultan or the Persian Shah. Their courts thrived on their location along the Silk Road and allowed for the first development of several Kurdish languages in the written form.

The power of the Kurdish emirs on the Ottoman side of the border ended in the mid-nineteenth century when the modernisation project promoted by the *Porte* in Istanbul required – and allowed for – a stronger presence of the central authority in the periphery of the empire. One by one, the emirates were suppressed through a series of military campaigns. However, the actual presence of the Ottoman government was all but ineffective and the local elite, composed by *aghas*, the tribal chiefs, and *shaykhs*, the heads of Sufi brotherhoods (generally *Qadiriyyah* and *Naqshbandiyyah*) maintained a strong political role. As a matter of fact, tribal leaders were empowered by the replacement of the paramount authority of the emirs with the distant rule of Istanbul. The suppression of the emirates led to increasing inter-tribal violence. Unrelated to any of the local tribes, the shaykh traditionally held the position of mediator between aghas and, with the spread of tribal

conflicts in the late nineteenth century, the shaykhly caste experienced a political golden age.<sup>112</sup>

The transformation of the region was accelerated by the inclusion of Kurdistan into the imperialist projects of the European powers through the disruptive effects of the Christian missionaries active among the religious minorities and the looming threat of Russian expansion. Moreover, the Kurdish areas were severely impoverished by the decline of the land routes of long-distance trade weakened by the growth of European maritime power. With trade, the Kurds also lost a significant part of their rich manufacturing production, especially textile, due to the competition of cheap industrial products from Europe. Distance from the sea denied Kurdish agriculture the opportunities brought to farmers of coastal Anatolia by the increasing European demand for agricultural goods. If between the 1830s and 1912 Istanbul and Izmir almost tripled their population, the Kurdish Diyarbakır lost a quarter of its inhabitants.<sup>113</sup>

Part of the long-term process of modernisation and centralisation of the Ottoman Empire – known as *Tanzimat* (reorganisation) period – the Land Code of 1858 had a deep impact on the Kurdish region. The Land Code promoted the private property of the land with the aims of boosting agricultural production and creating an easily taxable class of landowners. In Kurdistan and other peripheral regions, the project had also the objective of sedentarising nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes by turning herders into farmers. The year of 1858 should be seen as the starting point of a long historical process of transformation, since the actual enforcement of the Land Code took decades and, in some areas, was only implemented by the states that succeeded the Ottoman Empire. The Kurdish tribal elite,

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<sup>112</sup> For more on the instability created by the suppression of the emirates, see van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 175-181; McDowall, *A Modern History*, 38-53; Hamit Bozarslan, 'Tribal Asabiyya and Kurdish politics: a socio-historical perspective' in *The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics*, ed. by Faleh A. Jabar and Hosham Dawod (Beirut: Saqi, 2006), 134-138.

<sup>113</sup> Charles Issawi, *The Economic History of Turkey, 1800-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 34-35.

empowered by the suppression of the emirates, greatly benefitted from this long-term process of agrarian reform. In his work on the tribal structure of Kurdish society, anthropologist Martin van Bruinessen explains that Kurdish rural life gradually lost its communal features.<sup>114</sup> The aghas and – and even more frequently – the shaykhs took advantage of their position to register communal, tribal, and religious lands under their name and then to enforce their property rights.

This process of class stratification of Kurdish society was accelerated in 1891 when the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II tried to incorporate the Kurdish tribes into the Ottoman state and army through the institution of the *Hamidiye*, a corps of irregular cavalry modelled after Russia's Cossacks. By distributing weapons directly to the tribal chiefs, the Hamidiye increased the power of the aghas and brought about a sort of tribal revival. It was never fully controlled by the Ottoman authority and was often involved in sectarian violence contributing to the collapse of the fragile intercommunal relations.<sup>115</sup> The establishment of the Hamidiye cavalry increased the coercive power of the tribal leadership and their capacity to grab communal lands through violence.<sup>116</sup>

The transformation of Kurdish tribal society induced by the suppression of the emirates, the Land Code, and the institution of the Hamidiye led to a deep restructuring of the class structure of the region. As the cultivators were deprived of their traditional collective rights, the tribal elite gradually evolved into a class of large landowners. Most of their non-tribal serfs, as well as many tribespeople, became their sharecroppers or waged labourers, a process that gradually reduced the difference between the two groups and that enormously increased the power of the tribal elite over the rest of

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<sup>114</sup> Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 181-184.

<sup>115</sup> Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>116</sup> Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 160-120. According to Robert Olson, in 1910, the Hamidiye cavalry enlisted 53,000 men. Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925* (Houston: University of Texas Press, 1989), 10-11.

the Kurdish rural population. This process of social stratification, that was still ongoing in the early decades of the twentieth century, is essential to understanding the social context in which Kurdish nationalism developed and spread. The modernising reforms of the Ottoman sultans resulted in a radical transformation of the Kurdish tribal elite with many leaving the countryside and turning into a class of absentee landlords.<sup>117</sup> However, their tribal lineage continued to serve as a source of legitimacy to the power that they exercised over their constituencies, often their former fellow tribesmen turned peasants.<sup>118</sup>

In the rapidly changing social context of the Ottoman Kurdish provinces, nationalist discourse had, up to World War I, an almost insignificant presence. The Kurdish elite kept drawing its power from traditional sources of legitimacy and therefore they neither challenged that of the Ottoman sultan nor imagined themselves outside the boundaries of Ottoman citizenship and Muslim identity. Only at the end of this period, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 boosted the development of ethnic nationalism in the Empire and especially that of Turkism.<sup>119</sup> The Young Turks, even though officially supportive of Ottoman unity,<sup>120</sup> gave way to the development of a specific Turkish identity. As the term Kurd was at that time still commonly associated with a tribal condition and not a national identity, most members of the urban Kurdish elite saw themselves as Ottoman citizens and even

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<sup>117</sup> Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 81.

<sup>118</sup> The process described in this paragraph regards largely the Muslim population. Most of the autochthonous Christians living in the region (Armenians, Syriacs, Assyrians) had always been politically subjected to the Kurdish (or Turkish) tribes. However, the condition of the Christian population is less relevant to this study since most of the Christians in the region were killed, assimilated or forced to leave during World War I.

<sup>119</sup> In Erik Zürcher's account of Turkish history, the Young Turks Revolution on 1908 represents the decisive moment that divides Late-Ottoman and modern Turkish history. Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1997), 1-8.

<sup>120</sup> For a definition of the late Ottoman political identity see Zürcher's concept of Muslim nationalism. Erik J. Zürcher, 'The Vocabulary of Muslim Nationalism', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 137 (1999), 81-93.

embraced Turkish nationalism.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, the idea of ‘Kurdishness’ as a distinctively cultural, rather than social, identity started to rise in the years between the 1908 revolution and the First World War. The first manifestation of Kurdish national identity was still expressed within the framework of Ottomanism and its promoters called for autonomy for the Kurds within the Ottoman state, rather than independence. Kurdish national consciousness was in that sense neither particularly different nor particularly late, compared to Turkish or Arab nationalisms. In general terms, promoters of national identity among the Muslim peoples of the empire did not imagine themselves out of the framework of a reformed – for Turks – and decentralized – for Arabs and Kurds – Ottoman state.

The first *Kurdist* clubs and papers were established in Istanbul in the early twentieth century to demand administrative, economic, and educational reforms for the Kurdish provinces. They were promoted by a cohesive group of aristocratic Kurds mostly working for the Ottoman state as public servants and “connected to one another through kinship ties or the Naqshbandi network”.<sup>122</sup> A prominent role was assumed by once-powerful Kurdish princely families, such as Bedirxhans and Babans, exiled to Istanbul after the suppression of the emirates and their following was largely constituted by Kurds hailing from leading tribal families but based in the capital. They share an urban lifestyle and cosmopolitan education but also a deep disconnect with Kurdish tribal and rural society which they viewed with a “kind of paternalism” as composed by infants in need of their leadership to enter the modern world.<sup>123</sup> The efforts to spread their views in the Kurdish provinces met little enthusiasm and, the few branches of the Kurdist clubs that were opened in Kurdish cities like Diyarbakır or Bitlis,

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<sup>121</sup> A case in point is that of Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924), a half Kurd from Diyarbakır who became one of the most enthusiastic ideologues of Turkish nationalism. See: Heper, *The State and Kurds*, 52-57.

<sup>122</sup> Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 87.

<sup>123</sup> Keith Hitchins, ‘Kurdish Elites and Nationhood in Anatolia, 1890s-1938’, in *Joyce Blau*, ed. by Bozarslan and Scalbert-Yücel.

“became, in effect, local organizations, where, in the absence of intellectuals of the sort active in Istanbul, local elites, espousing more traditional ideas, used the clubs to further their own interests.”<sup>124</sup> Alienated from their lands and with a narrow social base, these early pioneers of Kurdish identity had very few followers in the Kurdish provinces and even fewer among the masses.<sup>125</sup> As Janet Klein argues, describing these early Kurdist organisations as proto-nationalists fits into an Orientalist and Eurocentric historical narrative that portrays the Ottoman Empire as destined to collapse as the result of the inevitable spread of opposing nationalisms.<sup>126</sup> On the contrary, as long as the Ottoman Empire existed, nearly all political expressions of Kurdish identity remained within the framework of the Ottomanist ideology. It was only after the end of the empire that Kurdish identity came to express a more unambiguous demand for separation.

### **Defining Feudal Nationalism**

This section conceptualises the first stage of Kurdish nationalism from 1918 to 1946 showing that it largely constituted a unitary phenomenon transcending the political fragmentation of the region after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. In the few years following the Armistice of Mudros (October 1918), the Ottoman Middle East was permanently partitioned into several new states,<sup>127</sup> which divided the Kurdish lands and deprived the Kurdish elite of their main source of political identity, the Ottoman Muslim citizenship. Moreover, the centralising ambitions of the new states

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<sup>124</sup> Hitchens, *Kurdish Elites*.

<sup>125</sup> Hamit Bozarslan, 'Some Remarks on Kurdish Historiographical Discourse in Turkey (1919-1980)' in *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. by Abbas Vali (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 27.

<sup>126</sup> Janet Klein, 'Kurdish Nationalists and Non-Nationalist Kurdist: Rethinking Minority Nationalism and the Dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1909', *Nations and Nationalism*, 13.1 (2007), 135-53

<sup>127</sup> Turkey, Iraq and Syria for what the Kurds are concerned, but also Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine.

threatened the local power of Kurdish tribal landowners who feared a more invasive presence of the central authorities on their lands. The response was a form of 'feudal nationalism' due to the dominant role played by the Kurdish traditional ruling class in both contexts.

The rest of the chapter will discuss the events in Turkey and Iraq showing how similar uprisings resulted in different outcomes loaded with consequences for the development of Kurdish nationalism in the two countries. Although the focus is on the developments in Turkey and Iraq, Iran was the theatre of similar events. In the interwar period, Iran was going through a process of modernisation partly inspired by Turkey<sup>128</sup> and the reaction of the Kurdish tribal elite can be read within the same framework of feudal nationalism.<sup>129</sup> What is particularly significant about Iran in this period is that the experience of the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad of 1946 can be seen as the final act of this first phase of the Kurdish movement and as a decisive moment for construction of the transnational dimension of Kurdish politics.

The concept of feudal nationalism was used in reference to the Kurds by Amir Hassanpour in his book *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan* (1992), to describe the first literary expressions of Kurdish cultural distinctiveness in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>130</sup> The term is intentionally oxymoronic, as Hassanpour meant to point out the historical contradiction inherent in the development of national feelings among a tribal aristocracy,

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<sup>128</sup> Erik Zürcher and Touraj Atabaki's comparative work on the projects of modernisation in Turkey and Iran in the 1920s emphasises the learning process between the two regimes: "The denial of a Kurdish identity after 1928 in Iran echoes that in Turkey after 1926. The influence of the Kemalist example seems to have grown after the shah's 1934 state visit to Turkey." Touraj Atabaki and Erik J. Zürcher, *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Ataturk and Reza Shah* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 110.

<sup>129</sup> For example, the revolt led by the tribal chief Simko Shikak between 1918 and 1922, and again in 1926.

<sup>130</sup> Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Research University Press, 1992).

rather than a national bourgeoisie, due to the absence of the latter.<sup>131</sup> Despite Hassanpour's problematic application to the context of the Kurdish emirates, the concept of feudal nationalism greatly captures the peculiar class nature of the Kurdish revolts in the interwar period. Rather than a contradiction, Kurdish 'feudal nationalism' is a convincing refutation of the standard account of nationalism as the historical expression of the nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie. As argued in Chapter 2, if nationalism is freed from a teleological and diffusionist perspective and framed as a struggle for state power embedded in class conflicts, the term feudal nationalism assumes a much more consistent meaning. Framed in those terms, the nationalism of the traditional landowning classes is a fairly common phenomenon in rapidly modernising societies characterised by a degree of ethnic differentiation. Modernising states, with their bureaucracy, aim at establishing a direct presence in peripheral areas which was previously mediated by local elites. This process implies a significant loss of political power for the local elite and, if a cultural difference between the centre and periphery exists, the local elite is likely to try to politicise the local culture – promoting nationalism – to mobilise the population against the central state.<sup>132</sup>

The term 'feudal', in the Kurdish context, identifies the tribal aristocracy – aghas and shaykhs – that by the end of the nineteenth century had transformed into a class of large landowners through the accumulation of land that was previously the collective property of the tribes or mortmain (*waqf*). Like in a pre-capitalist feudal system, the appropriation of the agricultural surplus was pursued by the tribal elite via extra-economic means thanks to their military prowess and their position of power within

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<sup>131</sup> Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language*, 56-57. For a discussion on the use of this term in the context of the Kurdish emirates, see Abbas Vali, 'Genealogies of the Kurds: Constructions of Nation and National Identity in Kurdish Historical Writing' in *Essays*, ed. by Vali, 87-97.

<sup>132</sup> See, Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 272-275.

the Ottoman state.<sup>133</sup> This transformation took place in a context in which Christian and non-tribal Kurdish peasants were already politically subjected to Kurdish aghas. Van Bruinessen compares the conditions of the Kurdish peasantry to that of the serfs in medieval Europe: "Their lords considered them as their private property, owned in the same way as their sheep and mules".<sup>134</sup> A British traveller of the early nineteenth century described the tribal elite and the peasantry as "totally distinct races" adding that

A tribesman once confessed to me that the clans conceived the peasants to be merely created for their use; and wretched indeed is the condition of the Koordish cultivators [that] much resembles that of a Negro slave in the West Indies.<sup>135</sup>

The expansion of the private ownership of the land in the second half of the nineteenth century and the land-grabbing practices of the tribal elite drove many tribesmen into a similarly subordinate condition. As they lost their customary rights over the land, they became sharecroppers or waged labourers in the estates of their agha or shaykh.

Given this context, the Kurdish elite had no reason to dream of a Kurdish nation-state. In the Ottoman Empire, a polity based on dynastic and religious legitimacy in which the Sultan was both head of the imperial Ottoman house and Caliph of the Muslims, the Kurdish elite never challenged its place within an Ottoman society that was hierarchically divided along religious lines. The members of the Kurdish elite were either of prestigious tribal lineage or the heads of the Sufi brotherhoods, the most powerful religious organisations in the region. When conflicts between the local elite and the central government arose, it was nearly always to negotiate the degree of local autonomy rather than to claim independence. Kurdish revolts in the Ottoman Empire must be thought of within the mechanism that Şerif Mardin calls the

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<sup>133</sup> For a definition of feudalism in these terms, see Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974), 401.

<sup>134</sup> Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 50.

<sup>135</sup> Cited in Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 27.

Ottoman 'tacit contract'.<sup>136</sup> As Hamit Bozarslan explains, although the tacit contract did not legitimise open revolt against the Sultan, "the Ottoman state tradition conceived of rebellion, or at least resistance, as a means of bargaining and negotiation by the subordinate peripheral groups for improving their status within the state."<sup>137</sup> The frequent tribal revolts in the Ottoman Empire – as well as Qajar Persia – must be understood within this framework of state-tribe relationship. However, the end of the empire left a number of smaller states each pursuing a nation-building project led by its Turkish, Arab, or Persian majority and each of them promoting modernisation and centralisation policies that challenged the political power of traditional elites. Most important of all, the new states appeared determined to claim the monopoly of violence – thus to disarm local elites – and the administration of justice taking away from the tribal elites their most fundamental sources of power over their tribesmen and peasants. That was the context in which the Kurdish elite adopted a nationalist discourse to legitimise its revolts against the new authorities.

As mentioned earlier, the promotion of Kurdish identity had been initiated by Istanbul-based intellectuals in close association with a project of modernisation, albeit in a top-down and paternalistic fashion. Even though, after the fall of the empire, these Kurdist groups largely adopted a more defined nationalist agenda, they were incapable of starting a social movement of their own due to their lack of a power base in the Kurdish region. When the Kurdish tribal elite revolted against the modernisation projects promoted by the new states, these nationalist political organisations had to join the movements from a subordinate position and to give up on the progressive character of their nationalism. Examples of this phenomenon can be drawn from each of the Kurdish regions: the *Azadi Committee* in Turkey that supported Shaykh Said's rebellion (1925) but also the Iraqi-Kurdish *Hiwa* (1939) and the Iranian-Kurdish *Komala* (1942) that

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<sup>136</sup> Şerif Mardin, "Freedom in an Ottoman Perspective," in *State, Democracy, and the Military: Turkey in the 1980s*, ed. by Metin Heper and Ahmet Evin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988), 23-35.

<sup>137</sup> Bozarslan, *Some Remarks*, in *Essays*, ed. by Vali, 185-186.

had to surrender the leadership to two tribal landowners, respectively Mam Vasta Hilmi and Qazi Muhammad. Moreover, the first modern Kurdish political parties, the *Kurdistan Democratic Party* of both Iran (1945) and Iraq (1946) elected as presidents two religious leaders, Qazi Muhammad and Mullah Mustafa Barzani. The support lent by urban intellectuals provided a degree of national legitimacy to the feudal revolts and allowed to inscribe these early episodes within the nascent narrative of a Kurdish national movement. However, these revolts were overwhelmingly led and fought by members of the tribal elite and virtually all led by shaykh, due to their traditional inter-tribal authority.

Moreover, the Kurdist intellectuals utterly failed to serve as a link between the feudal nationalist leaders and the popular masses. One of the other prominent features of the phase of feudal nationalism was precisely the lack of popular participation and the apathy, if not outright hostility, of the Kurdish rural masses. As Van Bruinessen points out:

Contemporary reports [...] suggest that the subject peasantry, even if they had vague nationalist feelings, were more strongly motivated by resentment against their landlords. Indeed, in the later Kurdish risings in Iraq, which were more widespread than Shayk Said's revolt, the non-tribal peasants did not participate in any significant scale, but they did rise against their landlords several times.<sup>138</sup>

From the perspective of the peasantry, as Bruinessen continues, these revolts were “not directed against their own exploiters, but against a government that promised to curtail the power of these exploiters”.<sup>139</sup> The passive attitude of the peasantry is relevant as it confutes the characterisation, by contemporary Turkish nationalists, of the Kurdish revolts as a Turkish *Vendée*, in which the Kurdish masses were deceived into rebellion by their backward shaykhs.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 294. A similar point is made by Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, 98.

<sup>139</sup> Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 294.

<sup>140</sup> Mesut Yeğen cites, for example, the 1925 tribunal that sentenced to death Shaykh Said: “Everybody must know that as the young Republican government will definitely not condone any cursed action like the incitement and political re action [...]. The poor people of this region who have been exploited and oppressed under

The point at stake is that the Turkish effort to deny any national character to the feudal revolts of the interwar period pushed authors sympathetic with the Kurds to over-emphasise it. Robert Olson, in his detailed account of the 1925 Shaykh Said Revolt, goes to great lengths to show the rebels' commitment to the Kurdish national cause. Despite his acknowledgement of the narrow class basis of the rebellion, the sheer lack of involvement of the urban population, the material and religious grievances driving the tribal elite, Olson defines it as "the first large-scale nationalist rebellion of the Kurds" and even a "proto-type of a post-World War I nationalist rebellion."<sup>141</sup> This discussion is meaningful only if framed within an understanding of nationalism as a completely autonomous force and national identity as sufficient motivation for action. On the contrary, if the feudal revolts are placed within the material reality of interwar Kurdistan, with its social and political conflicts, then there is no reason to doubt their national character. Feudal nationalism is the natural outcome of the grievances and demands of the Kurdish ruling class whose reproduction as a class was threatened by the new states and who thus understandably turned towards separatism to establish their own state. The next two sections show how the events of Turkey and Iraq fit into the feudal nationalism paradigm.

### **Kurdish revolts in Kemalist Turkey**

When, in September 1914, the Ottoman Empire joined the Great War, its north-eastern provinces became the front-line of the war against Czarist Russia. The Caucasus front was characterized by an increasingly sectarian dimension of the conflict, in which the local Christian population was seen as a 'fifth column' of the enemy and, episodes of ethnic cleansing multiplied. Tribal Kurds, enrolled as irregular forces in the Hamidiye cavalry,

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the domination of sheikhs and feudal landlords will be freed from your incitement and evil, and they will follow the efficient paths of our Republic which promises progress and prosperity." Mesut Yeğen, 'Turkish Nationalism and the Kurdish Question', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30.1 (2007), 128.

<sup>141</sup> Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, 153-164.

participated in the massacre and deportation of the Armenian population moved by the fear of future Christian domination but also, more prosaically, to take over their properties. When, in 1919, after the surrender of the Ottoman Empire, sectors of the army led by Mustafa Kemal (later known as Atatürk) rose against the post-war settlement that had imposed a colonial partition of Turkey, most of the Kurdish tribes joined Atatürk's rebellion. The Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923) was largely fought under the banner of Islam, to defend the Sultan-Caliph, and to protect the Ottoman land from the Christian powers. Kurdish tribal leaders were particularly concerned by the expansion of the newly-established and internationally-backed Armenian state in eastern Anatolia and feared the consequences of their involvement in the Armenian genocide.<sup>142</sup>

These international dynamics frustrated the aspiration of part of the Kurdish nationalist intelligentsia who had seen in the collapse of the empire a brief window of opportunity for Kurdish statehood. Most Kurdish tribes answered the appeal to Islamic brotherhood and sided with the Turkish forces. In December 1919, the Kemalist army defeated the Armenians and asserted its control over eastern Anatolia, including most of the Kurdish areas. If, during the war of independence, the stress had been placed on Muslim brotherhood, the more the new Ankara-based Kemalist government consolidated its power, the more the official ideology shifted towards Turkish nationalism, modernisation, and secularism. The victory in the liberation war had given Mustafa Kemal a degree of power and prestige that allowed him to move towards the implementation of a far more radical programme. With the abolition of the sultanate (1923) and the caliphate (1924), the source of legitimacy chosen for the new republic was the *Turkishness* of its people. The promise to establish an autonomous Kurdish region in south-eastern Anatolia, approved in February 1922 by the national

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<sup>142</sup> Hamit Bozarslan, 'Kurds and the Turkish State'. In *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, Volume 4, ed. by Reşat Kasaba (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 335-337.

assembly but never implemented,<sup>143</sup> was put aside and assimilation became the only response to Turkey's ethnic diversity.

The denial of Kurdish identity at the inception of the Turkish Republic can be seen as the historical beginning of the Kurdish question in Turkey. However, explaining the outbreak of the Kurdish revolts of the interwar period solely as a response to the ideological shift of the Kemalist republic towards Turkish nationalism and secularism is problematic. On the one hand, this argument reproduces a teleological perspective that sees in the rise of nationalism the endpoint of Ottoman history and Kurdish nationalism as its last – and unsuccessful – manifestation. This is the case of Robert Olson's reading of the 1925 Shaykh Said Revolt as the culmination of a four-stage Kurdish national awakening that started in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>144</sup> As pointed out before, the traditional elite of the Kurdish provinces had not yet shown any particular manifestation of national feelings and tended to see itself as part of the Ottoman Muslim elite. On the other hand, this argument obscures the material dynamics that seem to be the actual trigger of the Kurdish revolts. After the abolition of the monarchy and the caliphate, the Kemalist project proved to be antithetical to the traditional sources – tribal and religious – upon which the local power of the Kurdish elite rested. Moreover, the abandonment of any project of regional autonomy revealed the ambition of the new Turkish state to impose its much more intrusive presence in the periphery of the country. This process became increasingly apparent to the Kurdish elite as, with the end of the war, Ankara started filling the administration of the predominantly-Kurdish south-east with loyal officials coming from western Turkey.<sup>145</sup> While these tangible threats to their power were the prime reason for the Kurdish revolts, the assimilationist policy of the Kemalist was almost exclusively a concern for the small circles of urban-based Kurdistans who joined the revolts

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<sup>143</sup> Heper, *The State and the Kurds*, 118-123.

<sup>144</sup> Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, 1-25.

<sup>145</sup> McDowall claims that all the senior and half of the junior administrative posts in the Kurdish areas were filled by Turks. McDowall, *A Modern History*, 191.

in a subordinate position. The fact that the culturalist explanation had such a long-lasting impact is likely due to a choice of historical narrative. After the failure of the feudal revolts, the history of the genesis of the Kurdish national movement was written by the intellectual vanguard in exile rather than the tribesmen who actually led the revolts.<sup>146</sup>

The Kurdish revolts in interwar Turkey must be understood within the framework of a long period of tribal agitations in the periphery of the new republic. In the two decades following the establishment of the state, Yadirgi counts twenty-seven episodes of Kurdish revolts while seventeen of the eighteen military campaigns conducted by the Turkish army between 1924 and 1938 took place in Kurdish areas.<sup>147</sup> These numbers signal that the inquietude of the tribal elite was widespread even though only a few major uprisings made use of Kurdish nationalist discourse.

The most significant episode that showed the potential of nationalism to give voice to growing tribal anxiety in the Kurdish areas was the 1925 rebellion. Led by Shaykh Said, this revolt mobilised the Kurdish tribes to the point that it constituted a real threat to the stability of the Kemalist regime. The abolition of the caliphate and the imposition of Turkish as the sole national language of the Republic in 1924 were seen as affronts to the Kurdish elite. Besides their immediate religious and cultural meaning, these initiatives were politically loaded and put in doubt the idea that all Muslim elites would be treated equally by the new republic as they were in the old empire. Moreover, the wave of Turkish civil servants sent to the Kurdish region threatened the prerogative of the Kurdish elite to enforce their will on their peasants and to administer justice among their tribesmen. In the same years, the Kemalist government discursively showed its hostility towards the backwardness of the tribal elite, even threatening to expropriate and redistribute their land.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 266-267.

<sup>147</sup> Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 168.

<sup>148</sup> Despite the government's threatening statements, a very limited form of land redistribution was implemented in 1929 (Law 1505) with only negligible effects on

Shaykh Said of Palu, a prominent Naqshbandi master and powerful landlord, planned and organised the revolt with the *Azadi* (freedom) committee. Heirs of the late-Ottoman Kurdist clubs, the founders of Azadi had a background similar to the previous organisations – urban and state employees – but it was predominantly formed by action-oriented Ottoman army officers.<sup>149</sup> In early 1925, in a climate of rising tensions in the Kurdish provinces, Shaykh Said declared the restoration of the caliphate and called for a member of the Ottoman house to become the King of Kurdistan. The revolt did not last for more than a few months and exhausted its force around the siege of Diyarbakır which remained loyal to Ankara. Notwithstanding its limited duration, Ankara had to organise a massive military intervention and guerrilla activities by tribal forces continued for years. The Ararat revolt (1927-1930) can be seen as a continuation of Shaykh Said's, also due to a similar interaction between nationalist and tribal elements.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, the social engineering project aimed at dispersing the Alevi Kurdish population of the Dersim region through mass deportation provoked a popular revolt in 1936 that was led by Sufi leaders and answered with the mass extermination of rebels and civilians.<sup>151</sup>

The Shaykh Said rebellion is the most significant episode of Kurdish feudal nationalism in Turkey. The rapid adoption of nationalist jargon by the tribal elite had been a consequence of the reforms that directly threatened its power in the region. This discourse had been borrowed by nationalist organisations that saw Kurdish nationalism as a progressive force for the re-birth and modernisation of the south-east. But its employment by Shaykh Said and the other rebel leaders reflected more closely traditional sources of legitimacy or at least a mixture of modernity and tradition. The nationalist nature of the proclamation of a Kingdom of Kurdistan, for example, is

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the rural structure of the Kurdish region. Ugur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 145.

<sup>149</sup> Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 279-281.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>151</sup> Bozarslan, *The Kurds and the Turkish State*, 341.

contradicted by the invitation of an Ottoman Turkish prince to take the throne. As Hamit Bozarslan points out, the Azadi Committee was filled with intellectuals and former Ottoman officers of Kurdish extraction but educated in Western-style schools and academies and often with a background in the Young Turks' and Kemalist movements. This urban elite "considered the tribal chiefs and religious brotherhoods to be *mutegallibiyya* (usurpers) or obstacles preventing the Kurds from accessing 'civilisation'. They rejected the state mainly because it was a Turkish – i.e. non-Kurdish – state".<sup>152</sup> However, the lack of social bases of this group forced them to lend their national credentials to the tribal forces "which initially rejected the state not because it was a Turkish state but simply because it imposed and militarised borders."<sup>153</sup>

The defeat of the Shaykh Said rebellion convinced the Kemalist elite that the militarization of the Kurdish region was the only way to avoid the resurgence of reactionary forces. The wave of repression, executions and deportation employed by the Turkish state in the following two decades transformed the relations of power in the region. The implementation of the Kemalist reforms was even accelerated by the Kurdish revolts. For example, in 1925, Atatürk took advantage of the Shaykh Said revolt to close down all the Sufi brotherhoods of the country, seen as representative of a backward and irrational form of Islam but also as powerhouses for supporters of the previous regime.<sup>154</sup> The repression vertically hit the whole society of the Kurdish region and particularly curbed the power of the tribes which, by the 1940s, had lost all their capability of military mobilization. Prominent tribal families were decimated, and the survivors had to come to terms with the Kemalist regime. The outcome of this process was the transformation of the Kurdish elite, a process completed with its gradual re-integration into the political system in the 1950s. Tribal dynamics gradually gave way to a new

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 339-340.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 339-340.

<sup>154</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey*, 191.

form of social stratification in which the members of the elite were less and less tribal and religious leaders and more and more absentee landlords.

Despite their national character, these revolts can still be read within the framework of the Ottoman 'tacit contract' to negotiate power between the centre and the periphery and, according to Bozarslan, that is probably the mindset with which the majority of the participants joined the revolts.<sup>155</sup> However, unlike the Ottoman Empire, the new Turkish state had no intention to negotiate sovereignty over its border areas with the local elite. The result of this process was that the Kurdish elite had to abandon their allegiance to both traditional forms of power and to any political form of Kurdish identity. However, as Chapter 7 will show, they soon realised that adopting a mild version of Kemalism – generally that of the conservative parties that dominated Turkish politics from the 1950s – was enough to be integrated into the national political system and to have the Turkish security apparatus protecting their property from a more and more turbulent peasantry. In this context, feudal nationalism disappeared from the Turkish context and Kurdish nationalism only re-emerged in a radically different form as the instrument of a new generation of Kurds of peasant extraction. Turkey's Kurdish nationalists in the 1960s and 1970s will draw upon different ideological sources and will direct their actions against both the Turkish state and the very same Kurdish landowning class that led the feudal revolts in the interwar period.

### **Kurdish revolts in Hashemite Iraq**

The situation of the Kurds who remained south of the Turkish border was quite different. After the surrender of the Ottomans in October 1918, British forces recognised the authority of the Kurdish tribal leaders who controlled the mountainous eastern and northern parts of Mosul province. Since the British were promising autonomy for the Kurdish areas, Kurdish chiefs tended to recognise British rule and seemed to be much more worried by

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<sup>155</sup> Bozarslan, *Some Remarks*, in *Essays*, ed. by Vali, 185-186.

the possibility of being incorporated into the Arab state centred in Baghdad. Their first concern was to keep state officials as far away as possible from their estates and distant British rule could have allowed them the same degree of autonomy they had enjoyed under the Ottoman Empire. In these years and in those that followed the establishment of the British mandate of Iraq in 1921 under the Arab Hashemite monarchy, the Kurdish tribes rose numerous times against the intrusiveness of the new state and its colonial patron and demanded the fulfilment of the early promises of local autonomy. Britain repressed the early revolts and, once Iraq was given partial independence in 1932, ultimately sided with Baghdad as the stability of the Hashemite state was regarded as strategically important to its wider colonial interests. The Kurdish revolts that took place in the interwar period in Iraq present the traits of feudal nationalism. They were led by powerful religious leaders and the Kurdish nationalist urban intelligentsia was absent at least until the late 1930s. Townspeople tended to be hostile to the tribal leaders often welcoming British and Iraqi repression while the peasantry was indifferent to the revolt when not in revolt itself against their abusive Kurdish landowners.

In the last months of 1918, British authorities started making deals with Kurdish tribal leaders to stabilise the region after the withdrawal of Ottoman forces. Among them, Shaykh Mahmud Barzanji was appointed as governor of Sulaymaniyah, the biggest Kurdish town in Iraq. Mahmud Barzanji hailed from a centuries-old family of Qadiri shaykhs and was a large landowner who held great authority over the tribes of the Sulaymaniyah hinterland.<sup>156</sup> The recognition of local authority by British officers was sought by these tribal leaders as a form of external legitimation that did not imply any actual control since, in this early period, the British had little or no military presence in the region. Shaykh Mahmud from his position of governor of Sulaymaniyah claimed to be the ruler of the entire Kurdish region, a position that the tribal leaders who had been assigned different districts had no

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<sup>156</sup> Michael Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 25.

intention to acknowledge.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, Shaykh Mahmud was extremely unpopular among the townspeople of Sulaymaniyah who were concerned by his authoritarian and violent methods.<sup>158</sup>

In spring 1919, the British attempts to mediate among the various actors pushed Shaykh Mahmud to start a revolt that British troops took a few months to quell. Despite the references made by the rebels to the Kurdish nationalist character of the revolt, this first episode of feudal nationalism in Iraq was extremely localised and both the people of Sulaymaniyah and many Kurdish tribes of the area remained neutral when not openly siding with the British. The revolt was followed by a long period of tribal disorders. Shaykh Mahmud's nationalist claims must be put into perspective. On the one hand, his contacts with Mustafa Kemal, intent on fighting Turkey's independence war, show that he had not yet abandoned the ideal of Muslim unity. On the other hand, Shaykh Mahmud's revolt was part of the wider tribal agitations against the British that affected both Arab and Kurdish provinces of Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the war and that escalated in the 1920 country-wide revolt.

As Chapter 4 will discuss more extensively, British colonial authorities were extremely keen to appease tribal leaders. To restore order, they recalled Shaykh Mahmud from his exile in southern Iraq in November 1922 but, at the beginning of the following year, the shaykh was again in revolt. Iraqi and British forces were able to retake Sulaymaniyah only in May 1924 and Shaykh Mahmud kept raiding the area until 1932 when he was defeated. In the meantime, a new revolt had been initiated in 1931 by another shaykh, Ahmed Barzani,<sup>159</sup> who claimed his right to collect revenues among his tribe and refused to accept an Iraqi garrison in his lands. Baghdad suppressed the revolt only in 1933 and Ahmed Barzani was sent into exile.

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<sup>157</sup> Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society*, 55-56.

<sup>158</sup> For Mahmud Barzanji's rule of Sulaymaniyah and the revolts discussed below, see Mcdowall, *A Modern History*, 151-183.

<sup>159</sup> Despite the assonance, there is no relation between the Barzanji and the Barzani families.

The feudal nationalist revolts of the 1920s and 1930s in Iraqi Kurdistan did not have any real followers apart from a small number of tribal landowners and their fellow tribesmen. Despite the early usage of a nationalist vocabulary, the urban middle class of the towns kept fearing the abusiveness of the tribal leaders and refused to bend to their rule. Moreover, the Kurdish towns, located in the valleys, were economically connected to the Mesopotamian plain far more than they were with each other and only Sulaymaniyah, the biggest of them, demanded a degree of administrative autonomy.<sup>160</sup>

It was precisely in Sulaymaniyah that a group of middle-class intellectuals established, in 1922, the first Kurdish nationalist organisation in Iraq, the *Association for the Independence of Kurdistan*.<sup>161</sup> The association, established by former Ottoman officer Mustafa Pasha Yamulki strongly opposed Shaykh Mahmoud's rule over the city due to his violent methods and was closed down by the shaykh. Urban-based Kurdish nationalism experienced significant growth in the 1930s. The nationalist circles in Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk, along with Kurdish students in Baghdad and Mosul, found several nationalist organisations almost exclusively of progressive, socialist, and – more and more – anti-colonial orientation.<sup>162</sup> In addition to the aforementioned hostility of the townspeople to the tribal and landowning elite, this urban intelligentsia was pushed to the left by the *Iraqi Communist Party* (ICP) that, established in 1934, was the only national party officially in favour of Kurdish self-determination.<sup>163</sup> Like in Turkey, Kurdish nationalist organisations in Iraq initially strongly opposed the power of the tribal landowners whom they saw as a backward force that prevented the modernisation of the region. However, as the events unfolded in the 1940s,

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<sup>160</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History*, 166-167.

<sup>161</sup> Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society*, 57.

<sup>162</sup> Yaniv Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq: From Insurgency to Statehood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 44-45.

<sup>163</sup> Johan Franzén, *Red Star Over Iraq: Iraqi Communism Before Saddam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 57-63.

the lack of military prowess and manpower of the urban intelligentsia forced them to cooperate with the tribal leaders from a subordinate position.

In 1943, Ahmed Barzani's brother Mullah Mustafa started a new revolt.<sup>164</sup> Despite the small size and limited geographical reach of the revolt, the mountainous nature of the terrain helped Barzani keep the Iraqi army at bay for two years.<sup>165</sup> Due to the relative success of the revolt, elements of the emergent urban national movement became more and more aware of the necessity of collaboration with tribal forces. Some groups started supporting the revolt providing national legitimation to what would have otherwise been a merely tribal uprising. Barzani was simply demanding amnesty for those involved in the 1931 revolt and the possibility to settle again in Barzan, his ancestral land. Kurdish historian Fared Assasard claims that, when Sulaymaniyah-based nationalists asked him to include administrative autonomy in his demands, he could not understand what they meant.<sup>166</sup> When Barzani's forces were overpowered by the Iraqi army in late 1945, he and large part of his men were forced to cross the Iranian border.

North-western Iran had been under the occupation of the Soviet Union since 1941 and nationalist elements of both the Azeri and the Kurdish minorities had set up their own Soviet-backed provisional governments. In December 1945, local Kurdish nationalists proclaimed a Kurdish republic in the town of Mahabad and elected Qazi Muhammad as its president. The fact that Qazi Muhammed was a member of a prestigious religious family<sup>167</sup> shows that the Kurdish movement in Iran was following similar dynamics of those in Turkey and Iraq, where the weak urban nationalists had to compromise with the traditional elite.<sup>168</sup> The arrival of Mustafa Barzani from Iraq gave the

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<sup>164</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History*, 290-293.

<sup>165</sup> Kerim Yıldız, *The Kurds in Iraq: The Past, Present and Future* (London: Pluto Press, 2005) 169-170.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with Fared Assasard (Sulaymaniyah, 2018)

<sup>167</sup> Gunter, *Historical Dictionary*, 169-170.

<sup>168</sup> This dynamic of interaction is particularly interesting in the context of the Mahabad Republic, as Kurdish forces had the chance to experiment with a degree of self-government. According to Hamit Bozarслан, the Mahabad experiment resulted in a mix of modernising reforms and tribal and religious politics. Hamit

Mahabad Republic a pan-Kurdish dimension and strengthened its nationalist credentials. In summer 1946, Qazi Muhammed promoted the establishment of a unified political party, the *Kurdistan Democratic Party* (KDPI) and was elected as its president. This example was followed by Mullah Mustafa who sent a letter to most of the Kurdish organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan asking to unite in a single Kurdish national party.<sup>169</sup> Despite the widespread hostility towards the tribal leadership, most Iraqi-Kurdish nationalists followed Barzani's request and founded the Iraqi *Kurdistan Democratic Party* (KDP).<sup>170</sup> The congress also elected Mullah Mustafa as the president of the party. The Mahabad Republic did not survive the year.<sup>171</sup> As the Red Army withdrew, Iranian troops entered Mahabad in December 1946 and sent Qazi Muhammed to the gallows. Mullah Mustafa was able to flee and, with a handful of his men, found shelter beyond the Soviet border. Ibrahim Ahmed – who was to become one of the most prominent Kurdish nationalists in Iraq – claimed that Mahabad taught them to “never again let tribal leaders lead their national liberation revolution and to take a new enlightened true liberation course that will match the changing world condition and progress.”<sup>172</sup>

The relations of power on the ground had forced Kurdish urban nationalists in Iraq to accept the alliance with the tribal elite and to surrender the leadership of the emerging national movement. However, the experience of Mahabad marked also the beginning of complex and troublesome relations between urban and tribal Kurdish nationalists in Iraq. Tensions between

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Bozarслан, "'Being in Time': The Kurdish Movement and Universal Quests' in *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, ed. by Stansfield and Shareef, 67. For a similar reading of the relationship between Kurdish nationalism and traditional social structure in Iran, see Farideh Koochi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran: Pastoral Nationalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 165-196.

<sup>169</sup> Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement*, 46.

<sup>170</sup> Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society*, 105-106.

<sup>171</sup> For a detailed, albeit dated, account of the Mahabad Republic, see: William Eagleton, *The Kurdish Republic of 1946* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

<sup>172</sup> Ibrahim Ahmed, 'The Republic of Kurdistan: A Personal Memoir', *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, 11.1/2 (1997), 31-32.

these two components and their conflicting class bases were to become a constant feature of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq. As Chapter 4 will show, the continuous conflicts within the KDP will finally lead to the split of the urban and leftist component that, in 1975, established the *Patriotic Union of Kurdistan* (PUK).

## **Conclusion**

After a brief introduction to the social and political context of the Kurdish region between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this chapter discussed the emergence of the Kurdish national movement in the interwar period. The Kurdish revolts that took place in Turkey and Iraq after World War I had some common characteristics that allow us to group them under the label of feudal nationalism. In these countries, the Kurdish traditional elite revolted against the centralisation project promoted by the new nation-states that succeeded the Ottoman Empire. These revolts had a predominantly tribal character and Kurdish urban nationalists, unable to take up arms against the state on their own, joined in a subordinate position despite their ideological opposition to the conservative tribal elite. The form of nationalism that this process generated was filled with the particular demands of the Kurdish tribal elite which emptied it of its initial progressive character. As the chapter argued, denying the national character of these revolts, due to the prominent role played by the tribal aristocracy, reproduces a narrow understanding of nationalism as a bourgeois and European phenomenon. On the contrary, reducing the Kurdish revolts to a selfless expression of nationalist feelings triggered by the denial of Kurdish identity erases their conflictual nature and fails to explain the lack of participation of the Kurdish masses. This chapter thus deployed the concept of feudal nationalism to explain the undisputable national character of these revolts – as their goal was the establishment of a Kurdish state – but also their extremely narrow social basis. Rather than a contradiction of history, feudal nationalism was the consistent response of the Kurdish landowning class to the modernisation process of the new states that, by challenging

their power over the Kurdish periphery, threatened their reproduction as a class.

The era of feudal nationalism shaped the subsequent developments of the Kurdish national movement in two important ways. First, the creation of a Kurdish transnational political space. Each revolt, even if not directly linked to the others, was part of a single phenomenon that presented similar characteristics in all the Kurdish regions. The Kurdish leaders of these years took inspiration from the Kurdish revolts in the neighbouring countries and many Kurds started looking at Kurdistan as a single trans-border political space. Cooperation among the Kurdish rebels had its highest moment in 1946, when Mustafa Barzani and his tribesmen from Iraqi Kurdistan participated in the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in Iran. Mahabad acquired a central role in the narrative of Kurdish nationalism. The Kurdistan Democratic Party founded in Mahabad established a sister party in each of the Kurdish regions and, despite never achieving operative unity, became the first Kurdish transnational party.<sup>173</sup>

The second long-term consequence of the feudal revolts was the diversification of the Kurdish movement. This chapter sets the stage for the development of the different trajectories of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey and Iraq as rooted in the different outcomes of the initial and unitary 'feudal phase'. The Kurdish feudal elite that led the revolts of the interwar period underwent different processes of incorporation into the new states of Turkey and Iraq. As Chapter 4 shows, the Kurdish revolts of the 1920s and 1930s in Iraq must be placed within the broader context of the tribal agitations that took place throughout the country. The response of the British colonial authority was to appease the tribal elite by legally legitimising their land-grabbing tendencies and turning them into a powerful landowning class in support of the Hashemite monarchy. The empowerment of the Iraqi-Kurdish traditional elite made it the best candidate to raise the Kurdish national flag when – with the end of the monarchy in 1958 – the revolutionary

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<sup>173</sup> For the establishment of the Turkish and Syrian KDPs, see, respectively, Chapters 7 and 9.

Iraqi regime directly threatened their power over the land. Chapter 7 shows how, in Turkey, the crushing defeat of the Kurdish revolts of the interwar period forced the Kurdish elite to accept a position of subordination into the new Turkish state and to give up the political meaning of their Kurdish identity. Given this context, Kurdish nationalists in the 1970s turned to the peasantry to challenge both the Turkish state and the Kurdish tribal landowners. In these terms, the present chapter showed the origins of the divergence for the unfolding of two – opposite in their class dimension – trajectories of Kurdish nationalism.

**Map 2 - Kurdish Region of Iraq and Major Tribes**



# Chapter 4

## Land Reform and Kurdish Revolt in Postcolonial Iraq (1946-1991)

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### Introduction

This chapter covers the history of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq from the development of the anti-colonial movement in the 1940s to the establishment of Kurdish self-rule in 1991. After the failure of the feudal revolts of the interwar period, Kurdish nationalism became temporarily a marginal force in Iraq as the Kurdish tribal and landowning elite was integrated into the country's ruling class. This process was actively promoted by Britain, Iraq's colonial overlord, according to the project of creating a class of large landowners in support of the Hashemite monarchy. As the chapter shows, the history of Iraq and its Kurdish provinces in the 1940s and 1950s can be told with virtually no reference to Kurdish nationalism. In these decades, politics in the Kurdish region was, as in the rest of Iraq, dominated by the growing movement against the monarchy and its colonial protector as well as by the anti-landlord mobilisation of the impoverished peasantry. The resurgence of Kurdish nationalism in the early 1960s must thus be placed within the history and political economy of postcolonial Iraq and the restructuring of its class structure under British rule that tremendously empowered tribal landowners. Kurdish nationalism only emerged as an important political force after the Iraqi Revolution of 1958 that brought an end to the Iraqi monarchy and to British influence threatening the interests of the Kurdish elite. The Kurdish landowners revolted in response to the project of land redistribution and taxation promoted by the post-revolutionary Iraqi government, giving the Kurdish revolt that started in 1961 and lasted until 1975 a strong class character.

The 1961 uprising was triggered by the spontaneous revolt of tribal landowners against the empowerment of the peasantry and the implementation of the land reform, rather than by Kurdish nationalist forces who only reluctantly lent their support. Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish revolts of the 1930s and early 1940s, became the natural point of reference of the uprising thanks to his status in Kurdish tribal society and the justified perception that his nationalist project was compatible with the class interest of the revolting aghas. The urban-based and leftist nationalists leading the KDP, unable to link their national claims to the wider struggle for democracy in Iraq, were forced – like in the interwar period – to follow Barzani from a subordinate position. The KDP provided nationalist legitimacy to the tribal revolt of the 1960s and put aside its demands for social transformation. The situation only changed in the second half of the 1970s, when the defeat of Barzani's revolt and the growth of the Kurdish left – fuelled by a tumultuous process of urbanisation – allowed for the establishment of the PUK, a Kurdish nationalist force alternative to Barzani's KDP. This chapter explains the social origins of the Kurdish revolt of 1961-1975 in the set of class relations imposed on Iraq by colonial rule. The relations of power between the peasantry, the urban middle classes, and the tribal landowners shaped the development of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq and imposed the conditions for long-term dynamics such as the division between KDP and PUK. Moreover, the events of the 1960s were central to the development of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq as they determined a set of power relations between the different class actors that gave the Kurdish national movement in the country a predominantly conservative character.

### **Class and Politics in Colonial Iraq**

The participation of Iraqi-Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani in the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in 1946, was a critical moment for the history of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq. The establishment of the KDP in the same year constituted the culmination of the Kurdish revolts that followed the

creation of the Iraqi state in the 1920s and 1930s. This momentous year marks, however, also the end of the first phase of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq. As Mullah Mustafa took refuge in the Soviet Union, the KDP went underground and remained marginal until its re-emergence after the Iraqi revolution of 1958 when Brigadier 'Abd al-Karim Qasim overthrew the Hashemite monarchy.

The forms in which the Kurdish movement re-emerged after the 1958 revolution were shaped by the structural transformation that Iraq underwent in its first decades of existence. Largely the 'invention' of British colonial administrators, the mandate-state of Iraq was created in 1920 by the merging of the Ottoman *vilayets* of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra according to the broader geopolitical interests of the British Empire. The new state included an extremely diverse population, with a clear Arab Shia majority and two significant Arab and Kurdish Sunni components as well as numerous smaller groups including Sunni and Shi'a Turkmen, Christians of different denominations, Kurdish-speaking Yazidis, and a sizeable Jewish community that largely fled to Israel in the 1950s. The dominant role that the Sunni minority had played in Ottoman times was preserved by the British who imposed on the country a 'foreign' Sunni king, Faisal of the Hashemite family from Hejaz that had supported them during World War I. Apart from drawing borders in disregard of ethnic and religious identities, the projects of social and institutional engineering promoted by the colonial overlord shaped the history of the country for decades to come. The relations between Britain and Iraq were regulated by a series of Anglo-Iraqi treaties the first of which, in 1922, established the mandate state of Iraq. The 1930 treaty – revised and renewed in 1948 – recognised Iraq's nominal independence – proclaimed in 1932 – though ensuring wide British influence in the form of military presence and control over the country's foreign policy and oil resources. Until the new revolutionary government in 1958 repudiated the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, the relationship between the two countries was, in all but name, that of semi-colonial rule.

Britain's approach to Iraq was largely shaped by two contradictory objectives.<sup>174</sup> On the one hand, the colonial power had to make sure that the new institutional arrangement would not threaten British monopoly over the oil of Iraq and would preserve the colony's geopolitical function of protecting wider British interests in the Persian Gulf. On the other hand, to reduce its own financial burden, Britain needed a viable Iraqi government seen by its people as legitimate enough to maintain public order. This contradiction was ultimately resolved in favour of Britain's colonial interests and at the expense of the King's legitimacy and popularity and the early Iraqi state was thus based on a "duality of power", as "cabinet ministers, as well as provincial governors, district executives, and city mayors, were assigned British 'advisors' whose views were expected to be taken "into careful consideration" and who deeply shaped the early stages of state-building.<sup>175</sup>

British colonial rule had long-term consequences on the process of class stratification of Iraq, particularly through its tribal policy. The social and economic history of this period has been masterfully captured by Hanna Batatu's monumental work on the social structure of monarchical Iraq. In his 1978 *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movement of Iraq*, Batatu provides a wealth of data on the structural transformation of the first four decades of Iraqi history.<sup>176</sup> He describes in length the process through which British administrators empowered tribal leaders<sup>177</sup> - both in Arab Iraq and in the Kurdish areas - in order to create a ruling class of conservative landowners that would be inherently pro-British. Already in 1916, in the

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<sup>174</sup> Adeed Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 8-14.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>176</sup> Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'thist, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

<sup>177</sup> When Batatu speaks of shaykhs, he broadly refers to the traditional elite of Iraq's tribal areas including large parts of the Shi'a south, of the Sunni west and of Kurdish north. As Chapter 3 shows, the tribal elite of the Kurdish region was composed by the shaykhs, heads of the sufi brotherhoods, and the aghas, the leaders of the tribes. In the Arab context, however, shaykh is used to address both tribal chieftains and religious authorities.

midst of the war, the British instituted the *Tribal Criminal and Civil Disputes Regulation* – confirmed by royal decree in 1924 – that made the tribal chiefs responsible for administering justice among their tribesmen, giving them tremendous power and little accountability in the process. The gradual process of de-tribalisation which Iraq had been undergoing since the end of the nineteenth century due to its gradual integration into the global markets was suddenly reversed, “the progress of villages toward independence from surrounding tribes forbidden, and the escape of peasant tribesmen from the shaykhs’ lands prevented.”<sup>178</sup>

The process of privatisation of communal lands initiated by the Ottoman Land Code (1858) was greatly accelerated by the Land Settlement Laws of 1932 and 1938, “which facilitated the transfer into [the shaykhs’] hands of vast expanses of state and customary tribal land.”<sup>179</sup> This process took place evenly in both Arab and Kurdish Iraq: in 1958, five of the twenty largest landowners of the country were Kurdish (or Arabized Kurds), including the single largest one (Table 2). With the intent of creating a solid class of landowners, the British rigidly classified tribes and subtribes and coercively imposed the shaykhs over their fellow tribesmen, through a process of social engineering that “decisively transformed the shaykh’s place in Iraqi society and the character of his political role.”<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 94-95.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>180</sup> Relying on archival material, Toby Dodge shows that the colonial officers were driven by the romantic and Orientalist view of a “pre-modern and rural” Iraq “untainted by the negative and destabilizing effects of capitalism” in which “the Shaikh and his tribe were therefore ‘naturally’ the dominant institutions through which British policy aims were to be realized.” Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 83-84.

<b>Family</b>	<b>Social and political role</b>	<b>Tribe</b>	<b>Sect and ethnic group</b>	<b>Area owned (in dunums)</b>	<b>Governorate</b>
Jaf Begzadah	Tribal chiefs, <i>sadah</i> , <sup>b</sup> deputies	Jaf	Sunni Kurd	539,333	Sulaymaniyah, Diyalah, Kirkuk
Al-Amir	Tribal shaykhs, one state minister, one senator	Rabi'ah	Shi'i Arab	442,066	Kut
Al-Yawer	Tribal shaykhs, one deputy	Shammar	Sunni Arab	346,747	Mosul
Al-Yasin	Tribal shaykhs, one deputy	Mayyah	Sunni Arab	344,168	Kut
Al-Farhan	Tribal shaykhs, one deputy	Shammar	Sunni Arab	310,314	Mosul, Baghdad, Dulaim
Al-Qassab	Tribal shaykhs	Ass-Sarra	Shi'i Arab	261,924	Kut
As-Sa'dun	Ex-tribal shaykhs, <i>sadah</i> , one prime minister	-	Sunni Arab	219,756	Kut, Basra, Hillah, and Mosul
As-Sayyid Rustum Kakai	<i>Sadah</i> of the Kakai sect	-	Kakai Kurd	191,039	Kirkuk
Al-Jaryan	Tribal shaykhs, deputies	Abu Sultan	Shi'i Arab	183,722	Hillah, Kut
Royal Family	<i>Sadah</i>	-	Sunni Arab	177,000	Baghdad, Kut
At-Talabani	Shaykhs, deputies	Zangana	Sunni Kurd	137,163	Kirkyk and Diyalah
Suhail an-Najm	Tribal shaykhs, one deputy	Banu Tamin	Shi'i Arab	125,502	Baghdad, Diyalah
Abu Tabikh	Tribal <i>sadah</i> , one deputy, one senator	-	Shi'i Arab	124,496	Diwaniyyah
Al-Mgutar	Tribal <i>sadah</i> , deputies	-	Shi'i Arab	117,839	Diwaniyyah
Ach-Chalabi	Merchants; state ministers; deputies	-	Shi'i Arab	108,810	Baghdad, Diyalah
Al-Khudairi	Merchants, deputies, high state officials	-	Sunni Arab	100,159	Kut, Baghdad, Diyalah
Al-Jamil	<i>Sadah</i> and 'ulama, one state minister, one senator; deputies	-	Sunni Arab	92,166	
Khudair	deputies	Juhaish	Sunni Arab	84,592	Mosul, Baghdad
Baban	Ex emirs of Sulaymaniyah, one premier, state ministers, deputies	-	Sunni Arabized Kurd	81,353	Kirkuk, Diyalah, Hillah
Al-Hafid al Barzanji	<i>Sadah</i> and shaykhs; one state minister	-	Sunni Kurd	71,716	Sulaymaniyah

<sup>a</sup>For the rest of the list, see Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 58-60.  
<sup>b</sup>*Sadah* (plural of *sayyid*) is the title of those claiming descentance from Prophet Muhammad.

The new power of the tribal elite was sealed in the political institutions of the new state. When Iraq had sent its representative to the Ottoman parliament in 1914, none of them was a tribal leader. By contrast, among the 99 members of the Iraqi Constitutional Assembly elected in 1924, "no fewer

than 34 were shaykhs and aghas.”<sup>181</sup> Before the inaugural session of the assembly, these tribal chiefs took a public oath “to support the [Anglo-Iraqi] Treaty and not to take any action without common consent,” to expand the Tribal Disputes Regulation, and to prevent the government from alienating the land they had recently appropriated.<sup>182</sup> The oath showed that, at the very moment of the establishment of the Iraqi state, this group already demonstrated a significant degree of class consciousness that transcended ethnic and sectarian divides as well as the awareness that their class interests were best served by British colonial rule. As Batatu points out, the decaying power of the shaykh was resuscitated by colonialism as “life was pumped into it artificially by an outside force that had an interest in its perpetuation.”<sup>183</sup> The consolidation of the shaykhly class as the dominant economic and political group made direct colonial rule redundant: Britain recognised Iraq’s nominal independence in 1932 while maintaining control of its oil and foreign policy.

The concentration of a large part of the county’s arable lands in the hands of a few – largely tribal – families who were also the holders of political power prevented economic development and fuelled social conflicts. Even if agriculture constituted the largest sector of the economy, landowners were barely taxed and the state’s revenues had to rely on unequal indirect taxation. Moreover, as long as the landlords could use their political power to expand their estates at the expenses of small farmers and uncultivated lands, they had no incentive to invest capital in the modernisation of agriculture. The system was therefore characterised by a very low level of productivity and accumulation was sustained through land-grabbing – favoured by the collusion of the state apparatus – and the increasing exploitation of the peasantry.<sup>184</sup> Low productivity and exploitation drove the

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<sup>181</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 95.

<sup>182</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>184</sup> Samira Haj, *The Making of Iraq, 1900-1963: Capital, Power, and Ideology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 36-38.

peasants towards forms of passive and active resistance. Land desertion was the most common reaction: As hungry peasants fled the countryside, the urban population of Iraq increased from 30 per cent in the 1930s to 42 per cent in 1958 and Baghdad's population doubled. However, one of the most important characteristics of the two decades preceding the 1958 revolution was the spread of rural conflicts. Batatu points out that the enrichment of the shaykhs at the expenses of their fellow tribesmen undermined tribal loyalties which made the shaykhs "simultaneously rising as a class and decaying as a traditional status group."<sup>185</sup> From 1947 to 1958, nine major peasant revolts broke out in Iraq, three of which in the Kurdish region.<sup>186</sup> The first of these revolts, in 1947, took place in the countryside of Sulaymaniyah and was directed against Shaykh Latif, the largest landowner of the area and son of Mahmud Barzanji who had led the allegedly Kurdish nationalist revolts of the 1920s.

This overview of the structural transformations of Iraq between 1920 and 1958 shows that the early history of the country can be told with no mention of the Kurdish movement. The tribal revolts that took place in the Kurdish province of Sulaymaniyah in the early 1920s and that were led by Shaykh Mahmud Barzanji, when placed within the history of Iraq, do not look much different than the tribal revolts that took place in the rest of the country in the same period. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, a time of wide geopolitical transformation and redefinition of borders and hierarchies, tribal shaykhs and aghas were in the position to mobilise sizable military forces and to renegotiate their power vis-à-vis the new imperial rulers. The nation-wide tribal agitations of 1920 – Including Shaykh Mahmoud's Kurdish revolt in Sulaymaniyah – was a decisive moment that, in the words of Samira Haj, convinced "colonial officers [to take] systematic

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<sup>185</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 6.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 467-468.

measures to legitimize the power of the shaykhly class and their claims to the land.”<sup>187</sup> As Hanna Batatu’s central argument goes:

The tribal rebellions of the first decades of the monarchy [...] appear in retrospect as the gasps of a tribal world approaching its end. The rural rebellions of the last decade of the monarchy were of an entirely different character. They were rebellions not under shaikhs but against them, and were made by tribesmen whose customary ideas and norms of life had been shaken to their foundation. [...] The old, patriarchal, life-furthering relationship which once tied the tribesmen to their shaikh had given way to an overlord-quasi-serf relationship which chained them to distress and privation, and the idea now sank into them that this was not an unalterable state of things. The idea was, of course, spread by Communists.<sup>188</sup>

This social arrangement was bound to generate the opposition of the exploited peasantry. The next section shows how the mobilisation of the peasants gave the chance to other class actors such as the industrial workers, the urban middle classes and the – thin yet existent – non-tribal bourgeoisie to express their grievances against a state organised around the interests of the tribal landowning class and of the colonial power. Even in the context of growing opposition and unrest of the 1950s, Kurdish nationalism maintained a marginal role and social and political struggle in the Kurdish region was characterised by anti-landlord and anti-colonial mobilisation just as in the rest of Iraq.

### **The Iraqi Revolution of 1958**

Rising tensions in rural areas, as well as the increasing presence of impoverished peasants in the largest cities, constituted fertile ground for the growth of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) since its foundation in 1934 and throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The communists’ demand for land

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<sup>187</sup> Haj, *The Making of Modern Iraq*, 30. As already mentioned in Chapter 3, the Kurdish revolts led by Mustafa Barzani in 1931-32 and 1943 had a much more idiosyncratic character and saw the participation of pretty much his own tribe only. Despite their importance for the developments of the Kurdish movement, these ‘later’ tribal revolts were not significant to the history of Iraq.

<sup>188</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 46.

reform resonated among the landless peasants and the party built a strong base in the Kurdish north thanks also to its official commitment toward Kurdish self-determination. Jalal Jawhar remembers the political atmosphere in the Kurdish village where he grew up:

when communism spread in the 1930s and 40s, there was a lot of support in Iraq and Kurdistan for the party. They were against the aghas and tribal leaders whom they accused of collaborating with the imperialists. They were telling the people that [the ICP] would bring back all the land that the aghas and the tribal leaders had taken from them.<sup>189</sup>

The ICP grew even stronger among the workers of the small industrial sector and, in the 1940s, came to dominate a rapidly growing labour union movement.<sup>190</sup> Despite the fierce repression faced by the labour movement, the clandestine work of the ICP to organise and mobilise the urban and rural masses provided the opposition to the monarchy with a significant degree of popular support. The other two major components of the opposition were the *National Democratic Party* (NDP), expression of the liberal-minded and non-tribal bourgeoisie, and the Ba'ath Party, on pseudo-socialist and pan-Arabist positions, strong among the urban middle class.<sup>191</sup>

The reluctance of the other opposition parties to co-operate with the communists was only slowly overcome thanks to the national uprisings of 1948, 1952, and 1956. During the 1940s, all opposition forces came to blame Iraq's underdevelopment on the combined power of the dominant shaykhly class and British imperialism sealed in the Hashemite monarchy. The first uprising took place on the occasion of the renewal of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty in 1948, that confirmed all the privileges previously awarded to Britain. The second uprising, in 1952, was partly inspired by the nationalisation of the oil

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<sup>189</sup> Interview with Jalal Jawhar (Sulaymaniyah, 2019).

<sup>190</sup> In the early 1950s, there were 12,000 industrial workers in the country. *The Economic Development of Iraq* (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1952), 133. In the same years, twelve of Iraq's sixteen legal labour unions were led by the ICP. Joel Beinin, *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 128.

<sup>191</sup> For an analysis of the of the social bases of Iraq's main opposition party in the monarchical period, see: Haj, *The Making of Modern Iraq*, 85-98.

industry in Iran (March 1951) and the Egyptian Revolution (July 1952) that exposed the weakening of Britain's position in the Middle East. The third uprising, in 1956, broke out in response to the Baghdad Pact (1955) – that locked Iraq in an anti-communist regional alliance sponsored by Britain – and in solidarity with Egypt, under attack during the Suez Crisis. All of these revolts were preceded by waves of rural uprisings and workers' strikes, and the social and anti-colonial characters of the opposition to the monarchy gradually welded together. After the 1956 uprising, the opposition forces formed the *United National Front* – this time with the inclusion of the ICP – that prepared the ground for the revolution of 1958.<sup>192</sup>

The coup d'état that overthrew King Faisal in July 1958 was led by Brigadier 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and supported by a heterogenous republican front that included all the major parties. Qasim's first major challenge came from within this coalition. The pan-Arabist fringes of the NDP and the Ba'athists pushed for Iraq to merge into the *United Arab Republic*, the federation between Egypt and Syria established in February 1958 and led by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Qasim feared that a union with Egypt would have turned him into Nasser's lieutenant while the National Democrats felt anxious about the competition of Egypt's relatively more advanced industry and stronger financial sector. Qasim relied heavily on the ICP to garner enough popular support to resist the pan-Arabist sympathies of the urban masses. The alliance with the communists helped Qasim crush his pan-Arabist enemies but turned the ICP into the most powerful political organisation of the country. Allowed to operate legally and often supported by the government, the ICP experienced, in the first year of the republic, the apex of its strength and popularity.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Decisive to the success of the revolution was the fact that the Iraqi Army was in great expansion and, from the 1950s, started to be packed with officers sympathetic to the nationalists, the Ba'athists and, to a lesser degree, the communists. See, Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, 'The Social Classes and the Origins of the Revolution', *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, ed. by Robert A. Fernea and William Roger Louis (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991), 130-131.

<sup>193</sup> Dawisha, *Iraq*, 176-179.

The growth of the ICP was met with apprehension by National Democrats in power. Tensions came to the surface when, after the purge of the Ba'athists in late 1958, the communists resumed the issue of land redistribution, one of the crucial demands of the revolution against the monarchy. In September 1958 the government had passed a limited land reform.<sup>194</sup> The law compensated large landowners for their losses and allowed the peasants to buy the confiscated land. However, only rich farmers had the means to benefit from the reform whereas most of the landless peasants were unable to access the credit necessary to buy the land.<sup>195</sup> The land reform was supposed to take place in the span of five years, but its implementation proved to be very slow. By the end of 1958, the communists were pushing for more radical land redistribution and started mobilising the peasantry to occupy large estates. Qasim was, however, determined to resist the demands of the communists. In summer 1959 the government started to systematically dismantle popular organisations such as trade unions and peasant societies and to arrest communist cadres indiscriminately. In September 1959, Qasim reinstated Martial Law and the ICP received an organisational blow from which the Iraqi communist movement would never completely recover.

### **Land reform and Kurdish Revolt**

When the KDP resumed its legal activities after the revolution, the ICP was the leading political actor in the Kurdish region. In the preceding decades, the political trend of Iraqi Kurdistan had been consistent to that of the whole of the country: The Kurdish tribal elite took advantage of their position to appropriate communal land and tied their destiny to that of the Arab landowning class and the monarchy. The communists were making gains

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<sup>194</sup> The land reform imposed a limit to personal land ownership at 1000 *dunums* (250 hectares) for the irrigated lands and 2000 *dunums* for the less productive rainfed areas. Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 836-837. The latter largely include the Kurdish valleys.

<sup>195</sup> Haj, *The Making of Modern Iraq*, 120-121.

among the peasantry as the land-grabbing and exploitative practices of the Kurdish elite loosened tribal and religious loyalties. Kurdish nationalism and the KDP survived only thanks to the support of non-tribal middle-class Kurds living in the towns – Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk, but also Baghdad – playing a role that in terms of class representation was similar to that played by the Arab nationalist Ba'ath Party in the rest of Iraq. However, their influence was limited by the small size and little political significance of the Kurdish towns. Moreover, the Kurdish nationalists were facing the competition of the ICP that, unlike the other Iraqi political parties, acknowledged the ethnic specificity of the Kurdish region. Between 1946 and 1958, when Mullah Mustafa Barzani and his tribesmen were in exile in the Soviet Union, the KDP was led by Ibrahim Ahmed, a lawyer from Sulaymaniyah, and his left-leaning supporters. As most of these Kurdish nationalists were Marxist and opposed tribalism and colonialism, their political discourse often overlapped with that of the ICP.<sup>196</sup>

Following the fall of the monarchy, the KDP was allowed to resume its activities and, in October 1958, Mullah Mustafa returned from exile. At the time, the Kurds were natural allies of Qasim's attempt to avoid the merger of Iraq with the United Arab Republic that would have turned them into an insignificant minority within a larger Arab polity. The KDP particularly benefitted from its close relationship with the communist party, at the time the key ally of the government and in November 1958 KDP and ICP signed a Covenant of Cooperation.<sup>197</sup> In this period, Mullah Mustafa's role as chairman of the KDP was largely symbolic and reflective of his prestige among the wider Kurdish population rather than of his influence over the party itself that was run by secretary-general Ibrahim Ahmed. Returning from a 12-year-long exile, Mullah Mustafa was determined to maintain a low political profile vis-à-vis the government and to regain his place within

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<sup>196</sup> Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 267-272.

<sup>197</sup> Franzén, *Red Star Over Iraq*, 116.

Kurdish tribal society. He toured the region, meeting aghas and shaykhs, building alliances but also reactivating dormant tribal rivalries.

The fall of the King and the advent of a new revolutionary government had made the traditional elite countrywide increasingly anxious. A monarchy that recognised and legitimised traditional forms of power had been replaced by a government that spoke a language of modernisation and that painted tribal leaders and shaykhs as forces of the past. Moreover – and more importantly – the land reform represented a direct threat to their position within the class structure of the country and the alliance of Qasim with the communists indicated that the state was no longer going to protect them from revolting peasants. In the Kurdish region, the inquietude of the tribal chiefs did not only have the social dimension of a landowning class scared by the rise of the communists and their cooperation with the KDP. The return of Mullah Mustafa and his good relationship with Baghdad had also a disrupting effect on inter-tribal relations, making the tribes historically hostile to the Barzanis and their associates increasingly nervous. It is in this context of a rapid deterioration of the established relations of power that the tribal agitation of the post-revolutionary periods must be understood. In the spring of 1959, the Kurdish tribes of the Baradost area took up arms against the government. The suppression of the Baradost uprising was a joint effort by the Iraqi Army, the peasant societies backed by the communists and the KDP, and Barzani's tribesmen.<sup>198</sup> For Kurdish historian Wadie Jwaideh, the revolt of the Kurdish Baradosts was, like that of the Arab Shammar in Mosul just a couple of months earlier, a “belated reaction of the conservative and feudal elements against the July revolution.”<sup>199</sup>

In the course of 1959, however, alliances began to shift again. As Qasim gradually turned against the ICP, Barzani pressured the KDP leadership to break with the communists and, in November 1958, the KDP suspended its

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<sup>198</sup> Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 283-284. See also Avshalom H. Rubin, 'Abd Al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq: Centralization, Resistance and Revolt, 1958-63', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 43.3 (2007), 364.

<sup>199</sup> Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 284.

cooperation with the ICP.<sup>200</sup> Several decades of work of the left-leaning intellectuals based in Sulaymaniyah to link the Kurdish question to the broader struggle of the subaltern classes were swept away as Ibrahim Ahmed and his followers were marginalised. As the Kurdish movement re-emerged as a political force in post-revolutionary Iraq, the relations of power within it proved to be the same as in the interwar period. The urban and progressive elements had to capitulate once again to the preponderant power of their tribal allies. Barzani had cared little about the KDP since his return, he had independently pursued his tribal diplomacy and developed a direct relationship with Baghdad. But when the policies and alliances of the KDP did not match his own, he imposed his view on the party. For the moment, Ibrahim Ahmed remained secretary-general of the party but the centre of power of the Kurdish movement was no longer the politburo of the KDP but Mullah Mustafa and his men.

By the end of 1959, Qasim had eliminated his pan-Arabist rivals, significantly curbed the power of the communists, and was growing increasingly wary of the dominant position built up by Mullah Mustafa Barzani in the Kurdish region. The tribes hostile to the Barzanis were aware that Qasim's concerns matched their own and, in November, the chiefs of the Zebari, Surchi, and Raikani tribes turned to Baghdad for protection.<sup>201</sup> Clashes between Barzanis and Zebaris resumed in spring 1960 – the climate of the Kurdish valleys discouraged wintertime warfare – and, this time, Baghdad started to supply the latter with weapons. Throughout 1960, Qasim and Barzani deployed their tribal diplomacy to gain the support of the Kurdish tribes, including the ones that they had fought against just one year before.<sup>202</sup> This

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<sup>200</sup> Johan Franzén, 'From ally to foe: The Iraqi communist party and the Kurdish question, 1958-1975', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 38.2 (2011), 171-172. Edgar O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt: 1961-1970* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 68-69.

<sup>201</sup> Rubin, *Abd al-Karim Qasim*, 365.

<sup>202</sup> Avshalom Rubin describes the dynamics of this tribal diplomacy: "In the spring, Barzani toured northern Iraq, meeting with leaders of the Harki, Baradost, and Pizhdar tribes. [...] Qasim received a delegation of the Jaf tribe in March, Harki and Surchi delegations in May, and Baradost and Khoshnaw delegations in August.

conflict by proxy had nothing to do with Kurdish nationalism and followed the traditional pattern of state-tribe relations: As a tribal chief became too powerful, the central government armed the rival tribes to restore the balance of power in the region and to avoid the creation of alternative centres of power in the country's periphery.

In 1961, since tribal warfare was resumed after the winter pause, Barzani's forces made significant progress against their foes and, in summer, the Zebaris were increasingly isolated as their tribal allies, one by one, left the anti-Barzani coalition. Qasim was still reluctant to confront Barzani directly in the hope that they could eventually reach an agreement.<sup>203</sup> However, different dynamics were to precipitate the situation. Since 1960, the government had started implementing the Land Reform in the Kurdish areas and, in the spring of 1961, had imposed a land tax.<sup>204</sup> In June 1961, a delegation of tribal chiefs from the southern part of the Kurdish region travelled to Baghdad to petition Qasim to abolish the and amend the reform. As Qasim refused to meet them, the tribal chiefs returned to the Kurdish region committed not "to pay the tax or to allow the implementation of the agrarian reform."<sup>205</sup> The rebellion spread rapidly, easily gaining the support of the Kurdish landowning class. In the course of the summer, the rebels were increasingly in contact with Barzani who was fighting his tribal enemies further north. In September, the revolt escalated when tribal forces in the rebel areas attacked a column of Iraqi troops.<sup>206</sup> Although the revolting landowners naturally looked to Barzani for help, Mullah Mustafa was still determined to avoid open warfare with Baghdad and tried to leave with his men for Syria. However, the situation was decided by Qasim bombing

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When the Barzanis appealed to the Baradost for aid that autumn, Qasim gave Shaykh Rashid 60,000 dinars to turn them down." Ibid., 365-366.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 366-368.

<sup>204</sup> Rony Gabbay, *Communism and Agrarian Reform in Iraq* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 108-122.

<sup>205</sup> Sa'ad Jawad, *Iraq and the Kurdish Question, 1958-1970* (London: Ithaca Press, 1981), 77-78.

<sup>206</sup> O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt*, 76.

Mustafa's position and preventing him from crossing the border.<sup>207</sup> The cold war between Barzani and Qasim turned into open conflict and Barzani became the leader of a wider Kurdish revolt.

In the Kurdish nationalist narrative, this moment is seen as the beginning of the Kurdish Revolution in Iraq both because the fight involved, for the first time after the revolution, the Iraqi Army but also because, for the first time, a significant proportion of the tribes – yet never all of them – joined the forces led by Mustafa Barzani. Interviewed on the subject, the current head of the Jaf tribe in the Dukan area Ibrahim depicts the revolt as a national revolution:

It was a national movement. The first step was taken by the tribes, then the local police, the KDP [...] followed. My dad was a tribal leader in the movement. [...] my uncle was the first martyr in the movement along with three other people. They were the first martyrs of the Kurdistan movement, killed on September 11, 1961, near Chamchamal. They were killed when they confronted an Iraqi unit that was heading to Sulaymaniyah and Dukan. They wanted to stop them.<sup>208</sup>

Insisting that the Land Reform played a very small role in the uprising, he emphasises the chaos brought about by the “communist rule” over the country that followed the fall of the monarchy as one of the drivers of the tribal revolt revealing its strong class dimension:

The communist party at that time was influential all over Iraq, including Kurdistan. The KDP was weak. [...] the shaykhs and aghas were assaulted, sometimes even clashes broke out, and people were killed! [...] The communist chaos was very strong in 1959 and 1960. [...] It continued until 1961 and then tensions between aghas and peasants ended because [...] in all of the region, the aghas, the shaykhs, the *bags*, the mullahs united. This is how the revolution started.<sup>209</sup>

As the Barzani forces were increasingly coordinating their war efforts with those of the anti-Qasim tribes, the KDP was torn apart by the contradiction

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<sup>207</sup> Interview with Fared Assasard (Sulaymaniyah, 2018).

<sup>208</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Jaf (Dukan, 2019).

<sup>209</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Jaf (Dukan, 2019).

between its socialist and its nationalist identities. The tribal agitation in the south of the region had an evident class and tribal character that contradicted the commitment of the KDP to land redistribution and the party initially condemned the revolt as reactionary.<sup>210</sup> Moreover, the revolting tribes were adamant that they were only going to accept the leadership of a fellow tribal chief such as Barzani.<sup>211</sup> However, the success of Barzani's tribesmen and the rapid territorial spread of the violence was turning it more and more into a Kurdish revolt and the KDP could not afford to be excluded by a potentially national revolution. Again, Qasim preferred to choose his own enemies and decided on their behalf. On September 23<sup>rd</sup>, two weeks after his first attack on Barzani's forces, Qasim banned the KDP, forcing the entire leadership to join the revolt.<sup>212</sup> The support of the KDP was a priceless gift to the tribal elite allowing its leadership to present the revolt as a national revolution and to hide its original class motives. On the contrary, the party gained very little. Several left-leaning intellectuals left the KDP claiming that the party had capitulated to the reactionary aghas.<sup>213</sup> Moreover, the party leadership was aware that their contribution to the military effort was going to be insignificant and that they risked becoming a mere instrument in the hands of Barzani. To maintain a certain degree of independence, in December 1962, the KDP established its own military forces, the *peshmerga*, ('those who face death') and set up its headquarters in Mawat, near Sulaymaniyah and far away from Barzani's northern heartlands.<sup>214</sup>

After the winter pause, Barzani started attacking Iraqi troops in March 1962. Over the course of the year, the rebel tribal forces gradually developed a more defined command structure and the semblance of an army as tribal fighters were reinforced by more and more Kurdish deserters from the Iraqi

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<sup>210</sup> Jawad, *Iraq*, 80.

<sup>211</sup> Interview Qadir Haji Ali (Sulaymaniyah, 2019).

<sup>212</sup> O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt*, 78-79.

<sup>213</sup> Jawad, *Iraq*, 82.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

Army.<sup>215</sup> Unable to pursue the Kurds in the mountains, the Iraqi Army fought a defensive war and made large use of the air forces. The indiscriminate bombing and raiding of Kurdish villages by the army contributed significantly to the growing popular support for the uprising.<sup>216</sup> With the ICP gone and the KDP on the side of the uprising, the anti-landowning sentiments of the Kurdish rural masses gave way to the terror of the Iraqi army. As Jalal Jawhar – a rare Kurdish politician with a peasant background – recalls:

[the Iraqis] saw no difference between a tribal leader and a peasant, between a teacher and a student. [...] I was a kid in 1963 when they looted and burned down our village [...] they saw no difference between the aghas, the shaykhs, and the people [...] This is why people started to think that national oppression is more important than the oppression of the aghas. Because national oppression meant displacement and death [whereas] the oppression of the aghas meant giving up a third of your harvest. It is not the same as being displaced and killed.<sup>217</sup>

In these conditions, the Kurdish revolt gradually assumed a trans-class character though at the cost of framing away any demands for democracy and redistribution and accepting the leadership of the conservative aghas.

The Kurdish forces that were still on the government's side – and that the rebels derogatorily called *jash*, 'little donkey' – were declining vertiginously. By the end of summer, most of the anti-Barzani tribes had given up, switched to the rebels or became neutral.<sup>218</sup> Moreover, the rebels affiliated to the KDP were operating in the Kurdish cities of Kirkuk, Erbil, and, especially, Sulaymaniyah, where they had virtual control of the streets at night.<sup>219</sup> The inconclusiveness of Qasim's efforts to quell the Kurdish revolt eventually contributed to his downfall. On February 8<sup>th</sup> 1963, Ba'athist officers seized power and executed Qasim. Mullah Mustafa and the KDP

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<sup>215</sup> O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt*, 82-85.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-91.

<sup>217</sup> Interview with Jalal Jawhar (Sulaymaniyah, 2019).

<sup>218</sup> Rubin, *Abd al-Karim Qasim*, 374.

<sup>219</sup> O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt*, 91-92; Rubin, *Abd al-Karim Qasim*, 371.

welcomed the provisional government and agreed on a ceasefire.<sup>220</sup> However, negotiations between Baghdad and the Kurds failed due to Barzani's demands to establish a large Kurdish autonomous region including all the ethnically mixed areas and especially the oil-rich Kirkuk as well as a separate Kurdish army with its own air forces.<sup>221</sup> The talks collapsed in early June 1963 and the Iraqi Army attacked again Kurdish positions.

The war continued until November 1963, when another military coup overthrew the government in Baghdad. The new Nasserite faction in power agreed on a ceasefire and, after secret negotiations, Barzani and the government reached an agreement on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1964, that only listed vague commitments towards Kurdish rights and did not mention territorial autonomy. The KDP leadership, excluded from the negotiations, protested the agreement and refused to comply. Tensions rose between Barzani and the KDP throughout the spring and, in July, Barzani unilaterally convened a party congress. Only a handful of delegates loyal to Ibrahim Ahmed made it to the Congress and were arrested by Mullah Mustafa's men while the entire faction was expelled. In mid-July, Barzani's forces marched on the KDP headquarters in Mawat and forced Ibrahim Ahmed and his followers to flee to Iran.<sup>222</sup> Soon after Mullah Mustafa had ridden himself of his Kurdish rivals, relations with Baghdad soured and, in April 1965, an incident precipitated the war.

Mullah Mustafa was, at this point, the undisputed leader of the Kurdish revolt, recognised by a large part of the Kurdish tribes but also by what was left of the KDP. His rapid turnaround in the negotiations with Baghdad – from demanding virtual independence in 1963 to accepting vague and limited promises one year later – showed that, by 1964, he felt strong enough to take a break from the war with the government and to focus on his internal rivals. From its inception as the uprising of a group of disgruntled landowners, in just five years, the Kurdish revolt had expanded to the towns

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<sup>220</sup> Jawad, *Iraq*, 107-113.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-135.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-172.

and even acquired a certain degree of peasant support. The KDP had sacrificed its progressive programme and given nationalist legitimacy to the revolt only to be forcibly taken over by Barzani's forces while its leftist leadership was purged. The expulsion of Ibrahim Ahmed's faction from the KDP formalised the historical fracture between the tribal and urban strands of the Kurdish movement beyond repair.

### **The Cold War, and the Collapse of the Kurdish Revolution**

After a new ceasefire in 1966, the war continued only via proxies, with Baghdad arming the pro-government tribes hostile to the Barzanis. Moreover, the government invited the KDP expellees to return from exile and started subsidising them as a counterweight to Barzani's forces. Ibrahim Ahmed, whose leadership of the Kurdish left was increasingly shared with his son in law and rising star Jalal Talabani, re-organised his military force and clashed with Barzani's men on numerous occasions.<sup>223</sup>

In July 1968, the Iraqi government was removed by a new coup. The Ba'ath Party, in power again, showed an unprecedented will to approach the Kurds and, between August and September, a series of decrees introduced education in the Kurdish language, established a Kurdish Cultural Academy and a university in Sulaymaniyah, and recognised Newroz, the Kurdish new year, as a national holiday. The main author of this advanced Kurdish policy was Iraq's vice-president Saddam Hussein, a Ba'athist officer, who was rapidly emerging as the strongman of the new regime. The Ahmed-Talabani faction was, at this time, the main Kurdish partner of the government. The Ba'athists had a clear interest in delegitimising Barzani but the partnership with Ibrahim Ahmed and Talabani also had an ideological underpinning. Both groups linked their nationalism to a broader project of modernisation and socialist policies and viewed Barzani as a reactionary feudal leader and as the fifth column of imperialism due to his growing relationships with all of

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 205.

Iraq's enemies such as Iran, Israel, and the United States.<sup>224</sup> In autumn, clashes between Kurdish factions led to a new phase of direct – if low-intensity – fighting.<sup>225</sup>

Rising tensions with Iran convinced Baghdad to reopen negotiations with Barzani and a peace agreement was signed in March 1970. The agreement promised the institution of an autonomous Kurdish region and the Kurds gained ministerial posts as well as the governors of the Kurdish provinces of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Dohuk.<sup>226</sup> By the end of the year, the government had amended the constitution, took steps towards the economic development of the Kurdish north, and, while the pro-government jash were disbanded, Barzani's peshmerga started receiving a salary from Baghdad.<sup>227</sup>

After this initial phase of optimism, however, the relationship between Barzani and Baghdad gradually deteriorated. On the one hand, the Kurds accused the government of promoting an Arabisation policy to change the demographic balance of Kirkuk. On the other hand, Baghdad was aware that Barzani had never stopped smuggling weapons from Iran. Emboldened by Tehran's supply of heavy weapons and anti-aircraft systems, Barzani demanded Kirkuk as the capital of the Kurdish region. Negotiations lingered on until the beginning of 1974 when, in March, the government decided to promulgate a unilateral and limited Autonomy Law for the Kurdish region.<sup>228</sup> As Barzani rejected the plan, war with Baghdad broke out again.

The escalation of the first half of the 1970s was closely related to broader regional and international dynamics. As the Shah of Iran was growing more assertive – and more pro-active in his support for Barzani – Baghdad became inclined to make unprecedented concessions to the Kurds. However, neither side was willing to compromise on the question of Kirkuk

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<sup>224</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History*, 323-324.

<sup>225</sup> Jawad, *Iraq*, 242-246.

<sup>226</sup> Cited in Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society*, 353-357.

<sup>227</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History*, 327-328.

<sup>228</sup> For the text of the 1974 Autonomy Law, see Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society*, 359-365.

that, at the time, provided a large part of the country's oil revenues. The control of Kirkuk would have made the Kurdish region virtually independent which was what Barzani ultimately wanted. In 1972, the signature of the Iraqi-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and the nationalisation of the oil industry in Iraq added new reasons for the United States and Iran to push the Kurds to revolt. In 1973, combined financial efforts from the United States, Iran, and Israel provided the Kurds with one million dollars per month, a figure that was further increased in 1974.<sup>229</sup> The new phase of the Iraqi-Kurdish war reached unprecedented intensity, due to the heavy weaponry at Barzani's disposal and the direct assistance of Iranian special forces.<sup>230</sup> On the other hand, the Iraqi Army had been reinforced by Soviet supplies and by the much greater resources made available by the nationalised oil industry.

However, the deeper involvement of foreign powers in the war was also the reason for its sudden end. On March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1975, Saddam Hussein and the Shah met in Algiers and signed an agreement that settled their border dispute in favour of Tehran. On the same day, Iran and its allies ceased to support the Kurds in all forms and the entire front collapsed. About 100.000 Kurdish fighters and civilians took refuge in Iran, many others surrendered to the Iraqi Army. Complying with the iron laws of the Cold War, the United States made clear that their interest in the Kurdish cause went only as far as it was compatible with the foreign policy of their regional ally.<sup>231</sup> Mullah Mustafa spent the following four years under strict surveillance between

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<sup>229</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 584-585.

<sup>230</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History*, 337-338.

<sup>231</sup> In a letter to the Shah, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger made his order of priorities very clear: "With respect to the Kurdish question, [...] this is obviously a matter for Your Majesty to decide in the best interests of your nation." Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 594. According to Marianna Charountaki, US support to the Kurds only had the function to wear out Iraq while the prospect of Kurdish self-rule would have been an unacceptable outcome to key US allies such as Iran and Turkey. Ultimately, "Kissinger and the Shah both hoped that their clients – the Kurds – would not prevail." Marianna Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East since 1945* (London: Routledge, 2011), 138.

Tehran and Washington, where he died of cancer in March 1979, leaving the leadership of his movement to his sons Idris and Masoud.<sup>232</sup>

With the collapse of the Kurdish forces in 1975, Baghdad restored its authority over the region. However, Mullah Mustafa's exile allowed different Kurdish forces to emerge and compete for the leadership of the national movement. Within the context of the rapid urbanisation and social transformation of the country, the urban and leftist strand of Kurdish nationalism took the chance for an unexpected comeback.

### **Iraq's Two Kurdish Nationalisms**

The expulsion of Ibrahim Ahmed and Jalal Talabani from the KDP in 1966 marks a turning point in the history of the Kurdish nationalism in Iraq. The Kurdish revolt of 1961 had followed the script of previous Kurdish uprising since the interwar period: The progressively minded and left-leaning nationalist intellectuals had to surrender the leadership of the national movement to tribal chiefs due to the far superior military means of the latter. Ibrahim Ahmed and his followers in Sulaymaniyah and other Kurdish towns had tried to give Kurdish nationalism a modernising mission. Like progressive intellectuals in the rest of Iraq and in much of the decolonising world, they viewed traditional social structures such as tribalism as deeply intertwined with colonialism. The ties between the KDP and the communist party in the 1940s and 1950s had been based on a strikingly similar agenda that combined the recognition of Kurdish national rights in a federal and democratic Iraq and social progress. However, the social and economic structure of the Kurdish region did not play in their favour. The peripheral location of the Kurdish lands in the broader economy of Iraq reinforced its rural character. The Kurdish towns remained small and economically marginal and the urban middle classes did not have any link with the overwhelmingly rural masses. Unable to rally popular support, the leadership of the KDP was forced, in the early 1960s, to follow the tribal elite

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<sup>232</sup> Idris Barzani died in 1987

in a rearguard struggle against land redistribution, out of fear of siding with Baghdad against fellow Kurds. However, this contradiction was doomed to explode and, when the Ahmed-Talabani faction was expelled from the KDP, they became an alternative political force.

Rather than being the promoters of a specific political ideology, Mullah Mustafa Barzani and his followers were characterised by a lack thereof. During his decade-long exile in the Soviet Union, between 1946 and 1958, Barzani vaguely adopted some Marxist rhetoric yet strongly rejected class struggle. In a speech delivered at the Congress of the Kurdish Exiles in Baku in 1948, Barzani seemed to perfectly understand that, as a member of the tribal elite, he had no interest in talking the language of class politics:

Our Party defends the interests of all Kurdish classes including chieftains, mercantilists, workers, small landowners, skilled workers, farmers and intelligentsia. It brings all these together under the banner of national liberation of the homeland and defending the joint interests of all classes. Under the banner of this party, class struggle in Kurdistan is not appropriate.<sup>233</sup>

This language set Barzani apart from most of the national liberation movements hosted and supported by the USSR in those years, forces that emphasised the link between anti-colonial struggle and social revolution.

Mustafa Barzani's political project is more easily discernible through the study of his practices and his approach to power. Since the beginning of his political career in the 1930s, Barzani seemed to give little importance to the role of political organisation.<sup>234</sup> He seems to have regarded his chairmanship of the KDP more as a prestigious title that gave him a degree of super-tribal authority rather than an office within the organisational structure of the political party. For all his life, Barzani pursued his personal tribal diplomacy, ignoring the KDP as a decision-making body and distributing party offices to please his tribal allies. This attitude reflected a mindset by fellow tribal

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<sup>233</sup> Barzani, *Speech Presented*, 46.

<sup>234</sup> This aspect was heavily stressed by both Fared Assasard and Kamran Karadaghi. Interview with Fared Assasard (Sulaymaniyah, 2018) and Kamran Karadaghi (London, 2018).

chiefs for whom ideological differences had little or no weight in determining patterns of alliances. Modern political ideologies have been mostly used to retroactively justify decisions that had been made according to the relations of power at a certain time. The Zebari tribe, for example, had consistently opposed Mullah Mustafa throughout the 1960s, but, after the 1970 peace agreement and when Barzani seemed triumphant, they suddenly became Kurdish nationalists. Hoshiyar Zebari, who was also the brother-in-law of Mullah Mustafa, joined the Kurdish movement after 1970 and presents a telling picture of Barzani's attitude:

Well, it's a long story... I was brought up more or less in Mosul, I completed my high school in Mosul. At the time there were some tribal differences between us the Zebari tribe and the Barzanis. But when Mullah Mustafa and the KDP signed the 11 of March 1970 autonomy deal with Iraq, there was a boom of Kurdish nationalism. [...] that was the beginning of change or reconciliation and Mullah Mustafa was a true statesman, a historical leader. Really... with all those Kurds who had opposed him, [...] he pardoned everybody.<sup>235</sup>

Hoshiyar Zebari rapidly rose to prominence in the KDP and, in the 1980s, he had already become one of its most powerful leaders.

When the KDP was established by Sulaymaniyah-based intellectuals in 1946, Barzani accepted to become its chairman under the condition that two powerful landowners and members of the tribal elite were elected as vice-chairmen: Muhammad Kaka Ziyad, an agha from Koya and Latif Barzanji, a shaykh.<sup>236</sup> The ideological shallowness of these personalities is well represented by Latif. Son of Mahmoud Barzanji, the feudal nationalist leader of the 1920s, Shaykh Latif was, like his father, a land-grabbing shaykh and became the target of a major peasant revolt in 1947.<sup>237</sup> Latif's official role in the KDP did not prevent his brother Baba Ali from becoming a minister in

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<sup>235</sup> Interview with Hoshiyar Zebari (Pirmam, 2018).

<sup>236</sup> Interview with Fared Assasard (Sulaymaniyah, 2018)

<sup>237</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 467-468. Anecdotal information collected in Sulaymaniyah says Latif is remembered less for his role in the KDP than for his land-grabbing and exploitative habits. When I asked about Latif, people told me that he would show up at a village with his thugs, shoot his rifle, and claim all the land to the point the bullet touched the ground.

Baghdad several times: first under the King, then under Abd al-Karim Qasim, and once again under the Ba'ath.<sup>238</sup> In the same way, during the Kurdish revolts in the 1960s, Barzani relied on local tribal leaders as commanders of the section of the front where they had their land.<sup>239</sup> This strategy created a direct and quasi-feudal relation between the paramount leader and the local chiefs. But, even more importantly, this strategy demonstrated to the tribal elite that for them the Kurdish revolt was the best way to preserve their power over the land, threatened by a mobilised peasantry and by the land reform. Consistent with this strategy, Barzani's demand for regional autonomy lost all the elements of development and modernisation and revealed its nature as a project of personal rule underpinned by the traditional structures of Kurdish society. It is then not surprising that in the early 1970s, the survival of the Kurdish revolt depended exclusively on the active support of Iran and the United States that systematically opposed progressive movements and regimes throughout the Middle East.

Mullah Mustafa's power over the Kurdish national movement in Iraq was a direct consequence of the structural weakness of its urban middle-class component. The birth of the KDP in 1946 had followed the pattern of class relations that had characterised the Kurdish movement in the interwar period. Intellectuals living in the main Kurdish towns saw nationalism as a project of modernisation and development. Mostly drawn from the urban middle-classes – lawyers, doctors, army officers, government employees – they viewed the tribal structure of Kurdish society as an obstacle to progress. However, unable to confront the government militarily, they had to surrender the leadership of the movement to the powerful tribal chiefs. The presence of part of the tribal elite in the KDP is one of the reasons why the party was unable to take advantage of the period of mass mobilisation against the monarchy in the 1950s. At the time, the Kurdish region was torn apart by rural conflicts and the KDP failed to lead and even struggled to take

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<sup>238</sup> Edmund A. Ghareeb and Beth Dougherty, *Historical Dictionary of Iraq* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2004), 349-359.

<sup>239</sup> Interview with Qadir Haji Ali (Sulaymaniyah, 2019).

part in the mass movement leaving a vacuum that was filled by the communist party. Behind the reluctance of the KDP leadership to link their progressive nationalism to the agrarian struggles there was their unwillingness to break with the sector of the tribal elite with whom they had allied despite the fact that they were exploitative and reactionary landowners, as the example of Latif Barzanji showed. The ICP became the natural point of reference for progressively minded Kurds in the 1950s and the KDP remained a marginal force in the struggles against the landlords and the monarchy.<sup>240</sup>

When the Kurdish revolt of 1961 broke out and Barzani allied with the tribal landowners threatened by land reform, the KDP lost all room for political initiative and was forced into a rearguard struggle against the Iraqi government. Unable to link their action to that of other progressive forces in the country, the KDP put itself at the mercy of Mullah Mustafa, and as soon as a disagreement between the two sides emerged, the latter could simply take over the party with his armed men. Expelled by the KDP in 1966, Ibrahim Ahmed and his followers were reduced to an instrument in the hands of the Iraqi government.

However, the Kurdish uprising that started in 1961 and that continued intermittently until 1975 had more far-reaching consequences for the social structure of the region. On the one hand, Barzani's movement gradually acquired a mass dimension as the repressive measures and scorched-earth tactics of the Iraqi Army were driving a wider portion of the Kurdish population towards the rebels. On the other hand, these practices created continuous waves of rural refugees to the Kurdish towns that added to the ongoing structural process of urbanisation. In 1977, the urban population of

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<sup>240</sup> One example of this trend is Kamran Karadaghi, a Kurdish student in Baghdad in the 1950s, for whom the ICP represented the only option for progressive activism. Karadaghi fell victim to the anti-communist repression of 1961 and fled to the Soviet Union where he completed his studies. Upon his return to Iraq, in the early 1970s, the ICP was no longer a competitive political actor and Karadaghi became active in the Kurdish national movement. Interview with Kamran Karadaghi (London, 2018).

the Kurdish region reached almost 50 per cent.<sup>241</sup> Once they had moved to an urban environment, rural refugees tended to lose their tribal identity. As Kurdish historian Fared Assasard explains in reference to the Sulaymaniyah area, “In the 1970s tribalism wasn’t a significant force, [...] the heads of the tribes were respected, but people would not particularly listen to them.”<sup>242</sup> The rural migrants would be more easily politicised over issues of employment, basic services or the brutality of the security forces. These demands were answered by the far-leftist political organisations that were mushrooming in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The growth, mostly among high-school and college students, of radical leftist groups was a global phenomenon but, in Iraq, it was strengthened by the continuous government crackdowns that targeted the communist party, systematically weakening the strongest force on the left. More generally, there was a widespread belief among urbanised Kurds that the 1975 defeat of the movement had been largely due to its tribal and reactionary character. Qadir Haji Ali, who at the time was a high school student and far-left activist in Sulaymaniyah, recalls: “our problem with the [KDP] was that it was a tribal party, the aghas and the shaykhs were with them, and [we] were against tribalism and the bourgeoisie!”<sup>243</sup>

These transformations constituted the underlying social conditions for the establishment of a Kurdish force alternative to the Barzani-controlled KDP. When the Kurdish revolt collapsed in 1975, Jalal Talabani and other Kurdish leaders of the left took refuge in Syria, while the old Ibrahim Ahmed went into exile in London. On June 1<sup>st</sup>, the *Patriotic Union of Kurdistan* (PUK) was established as the federation of three groups: Jalal Talabani and his followers, *Komala*, a well-organised Maoist group led by Nawshirwan Mustafa, and the Socialist Movement of Kurdistan (*Bezutnawa*) led by Ali Askari and Rasul Mamand. The party was formed as “a broad democratic

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<sup>241</sup> 53.2 per cent in Erbil, 47.2 in Sulaymaniyah, 42.9 in Dohuk. *Iraq Population Situation Analysis Report 2012 (Iraq National Population Commission and UNFPA, 2012)* <[http://iraq.unfpa.org/publications/cat\\_view/1-documents-english](http://iraq.unfpa.org/publications/cat_view/1-documents-english)>, 97.

<sup>242</sup> Interview with Fared Assasard (Sulaymaniyah, 2018).

<sup>243</sup> Interview Qadir Haji Ali (Sulaymaniyah, 2019).

and patriotic front that allows the fighting unity and coexistence of the different progressive tendencies under the leadership of a Kurdish revolutionary vanguard.”<sup>244</sup> They ascribed the collapse of the revolt to “the inability of the feudalist, tribalist, bourgeois rightist and capitulationist Kurdish leadership” and proclaimed the PUK's commitment to autonomy for the Kurds and democracy for Iraq.

### **War, Genocide, and Liberation**

The establishment of the PUK gave new vigour to the Kurdish movement. While the KDP was still reorganising its forces inside Iran, the PUK, thanks to its cells active in the Kurdish towns, was able to start low-key military operations in the region. Between 1976 and 1980, the KDP had little or no presence in the Kurdish region but clashed several times with the PUK in the border areas. The Iranian Revolution in 1979 triggered events with far-reaching consequences for the Kurdish movement. Hoping to take advantage of the country's post-revolutionary instability, Saddam Hussain invaded Iran in September 1980. The Iran-Iraq War, that lasted for much of the 1980s, was one of the bloodiest and most destructive conflicts of the Cold War era and allowed Kurdish forces to resume large-scale military operations in Iraq.

During the following years, the Iran-Iraq war was mostly concentrated in southern areas on the Persian Gulf far from the reach of Kurdish groups. The situation changed in the mid-1980s when Iran started pushing on the northern side of the front with the support of KDP fighters. As the war expanded to the Kurdish region, Saddam started mass recruitment of tribal Kurds into irregular ‘jash’ forces and Talabani found himself squeezed between the Iraqi Army and the advancing Iranian and KDP forces.<sup>245</sup> He had no choice but to reach out to his Kurdish enemies. Sponsored by Tehran,

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<sup>244</sup> *Revolution in Kurdistan: The Essential Documents of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan* (New York: PUK Publications, 1977), 6.

<sup>245</sup> Mohammed Malek, ‘Kurdistan in the Middle East Conflict’, *New Left Review*, 1.175 (1989), 88-91.

the KDP and PUK agreed to join efforts against Baghdad. In May 1987, Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani<sup>246</sup> established the Kurdistan Front with a unified command and a clear division of the frontline. The KDP operated in the north of the Iraqi-Kurdish region – the provinces of Dohuk and Erbil – and the PUK in its southern part – in Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk.<sup>247</sup>

Saddam perceived the unity of the Kurds with the backing of Iran as a mortal threat and responded by appointing his cousin Ali Hasan al-Majid as governor of the north with absolute power. In the spring of 1987, the Iraqi Army started using chemical weapons against Kurdish villages, deporting the villagers and often executing all adult men. These genocidal practices were extended to the entire Kurdish region when, in January 1988, the army initiated the infamous Anfal Campaign. On March 16<sup>th</sup>, about 5,000 people were killed by Iraqi chemical weapons in the town of Halabja. The Anfal campaign continued even when, in August 1988, Iran and Iraq agreed on a ceasefire. By June 1989, between 50,000 and 100,000 Kurds had been killed, thousands of villages had disappeared, and their populations massacred or moved to concentration camps to be finally resettled in newly-built towns where the government could much more easily exert control.<sup>248</sup> Hundreds of thousands of refugees found shelter in Iran and Turkey. The Kurdish revolt, once again, collapsed. As former PUK peshmerga Jalal Abdullah Hamarrahim recalls, “small groups remained active but, once the villages were eradicated, the bulk of the insurgency could no longer survive without their support and we had to withdraw from Iraq.”<sup>249</sup>

In August 1990, Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait triggered the intervention of the United States that easily defeated and pushed back the Iraqi Army. In February 1991, American President George H. W. Bush invited the people of

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<sup>246</sup> His brother Idris had died in January 1987 leaving Masoud as the undisputed leader of the KDP.

<sup>247</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History*, 351-352.

<sup>248</sup> *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds* (Human Rights Watch, 1993) <[www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1993/iraqanfal](http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1993/iraqanfal)>.

<sup>249</sup> Interview with Jalal Abdullah Hamarrahim (Sulaymaniyah, 2018).

Iraq “to take the matters into their own hands.”<sup>250</sup> On March 1<sup>st</sup>, most of the Shiite south revolted forcing the army to withdraw. On March 4<sup>th</sup>, the Kurdish town of Ranya rose against the government and, in a matter of days, Iraqi troops were expelled from the entire Kurdish region. As KDP and PUK had maintained only a very marginal presence in Kurdish areas since the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the revolt was largely spontaneous. While the leaders of the Kurdistan Front hesitantly joined the rebels, the withdrawal of Iraqi troops was most often negotiated by local tribal chiefs and jash commanders.<sup>251</sup> On March 19<sup>th</sup>, Kurdish forces took Kirkuk.

However, both the US and the rebels had underestimated the resilience of Saddam’s military capability. By the end of March, the government had recaptured most of the south and, on March 28<sup>th</sup>, Iraqi troops retook Kirkuk. The Iraqi Army launched a massive air-bombing campaign and swiftly recovered much of the Kurdish region. One and a half million Kurdish civilians tried to leave the region under the bombs of the Iraqi air forces. The brutal repression of the Kurdish uprising became the justification for direct American intervention in Iraq.<sup>252</sup> On April 5<sup>th</sup>, the United Nations (UN) Security Council passed a resolution condemning the repression and, on the following days, the US, Britain and France imposed a no-fly zone over northern Iraq. Unable to use his air forces, Saddam struggled to contain the Kurdish peshmerga. In July, the Kurdistan Front re-took control of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah and, in October, the Iraqi Army again withdrew from the Kurdish areas. At the end of 1991, the KDP and PUK were in control of most of the Kurdish region of Iraq, with the notable exception of Kirkuk.

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<sup>250</sup> ‘Excerpts From 2 Statements by Bush on Iraq’s Proposal for Ending Conflict’, *The New York Times*, 16 February 1991  
<<https://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/16/world/war-gulf-bush-statement-excerpts-2-statements-bush-iraq-s-proposal-for-ending.html>>.

<sup>251</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History*, 371.

<sup>252</sup> However, it seems that Turkey’s pressure played a central role in the decision. Fighting its own Kurdish conflict, Ankara had proven unwilling to let in Kurdish refugees from Iraq. Michiel Leezenberg, ‘Humanitarian Aid in Iraqi Kurdistan’, *Cahiers d’Études Sur La Méditerranée Orientale et Le Monde Turco-Iranien*, 29 (2000), 33-34.

## Conclusion

The American intervention of 1991 marked a turning point in the history of Iraq. After decades of struggle, Kurdish forces took control of large part of the Kurdish-inhabited areas in the country to which the Iraqi Army no longer had access. Kurdish autonomy, though finally achieved via international intervention, was the result of a long liberation struggle that this chapter has presented as rooted in the class relations of the region. The overview of the structural transformations of Iraq during the colonial and monarchical periods showed that the resurgence of the Kurdish movement in the 1960s cannot be disentangled from the broader social and political dynamics of the country. Most of the literature on the Kurdish movement in Iraq follows the path of military campaigns and negotiations and overlooks the structural dynamics that constitute the conditions for the Kurdish movement to emerge and to become a political force able to challenge the central government.<sup>253</sup> Historians of Iraq have instead paid much more attention to the role of colonialism and class stratification in the process of state formation but, in their work, the political events of the Kurdish movement rarely take up more than a few footnotes.<sup>254</sup> By comparing these two sets of literature, a more complex picture of the Kurdish movement emerges. In particular, the comparison reveals the centrality of the colonial period in the process of class formation that sets the conditions for the Kurdish revolts of the 1960s. The strength of the tribal landowning class became an element of primary importance that forced the other strand of the Kurdish movement – the urban and left-leaning nationalists – to a position of subordination. The analysis in this chapter showed that the main issue of contention in Kurdish politics from the 1940s to the 1970s was that of the ownership of land, as in any other largely agrarian society. The anti-landlord mobilisation of the

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<sup>253</sup> See, for example, Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 147-289; Jawad, *Iraq*; O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt*; Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq*; Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iraq*.

<sup>254</sup> This chapter especially relied on Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*. See also Dawisha, *Iraq*; Haj, *The Making of Iraq*; Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*,

peasantry in the 1940s and 1950s, in Kurdistan as in the rest of Iraq, gave an essential contribution to the success of the Iraqi national movement against the monarchy and colonialism that culminated in the 1958 Revolution.

The Kurdish tribal uprising of 1961 was first and foremost a reaction against the empowerment of the peasantry and, therefore, an episode of class struggle. The strength of the tribal landowning class forced the urban middle-class nationalists to join the revolt in a position of subordination that allowed its framing in terms of national liberation. Within this conflict – and in conjunction with the repression suffered by the communists countrywide – the peasantry lost its political agency and villages were forced to pick one side and face retaliation from the other. The result of continuous warfare in the Kurdish region was the gradual destruction of Kurdish rural society. As shown by this chapter, the first consequence of this process was the growth of the Kurdish towns and the emergence of an alternative force of Kurdish nationalism expressed by the establishment of the PUK in 1975. The next chapter will trace the long-term consequences of this process of forced urbanisation, that war and genocide in the 1980s dramatically accelerated. This new ‘war society’ created a radically different class structure and gradually eroded the ideological differences between KDP and PUK that, since 1991, imposed their power duopoly over the – finally ‘liberated’ – Kurdish region of Iraq.

### Map 3 - Kurdish Autonomy in Iraq



-  Kurdistan Regional Government
-  Disputed areas
-  Governorates

# Chapter 5

## The Class Structure of Kurdish Self-Rule in Iraq (1991-2014)

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### Introduction

The social structures and class relations out of which the Kurdish national movement in Iraq developed in the 1960s and 1970s – the subject of Chapter 4 – were radically transformed by the conflict that ravaged the Kurdish region in the 1980s. When the KDP and the PUK, the two dominant Iraqi-Kurdish parties, gained control of the region in 1991, the – largely rural – Kurdish economy had been devastated. In the absence of any source of a productive economy, the two parties competed to coopt the local elite and to gain control of smuggling routes and foreign humanitarian aid. This chapter argues that the result of this competition was the development of a new class structure in which the political leaders and the members of the old elite gained military control over the few sources of accumulation available in the region keeping the population unproductive and dependent on handouts. This set of class relations established in the 1990s was strengthened by the recognition of Kurdish autonomy and the establishment of a unified *Kurdistan Regional Government* (KRG) after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. As the security apparatus remained under the command structure of the two ruling parties, the Kurdish political elite was able to appropriate most of the wealth generated by the sale of the region's oil and had no interest in investing in the development of industry and agriculture. With no alternative available, a large part of the Kurdish population was forced to survive on government handouts tying them to the patronage network of the political elite. This chapter shows that the political structure of the KRG characterised by the absence of the rule of law and the partisan control of security forces and public institutions cannot be understood

without reference to the specific class structure that emerged in the region in the 1990s.

### **Liberation and Civil War**

The withdrawal of Saddam Hussein's army from the Kurdish region of Iraq in October 1991 marked a turning point in the history of the Iraqi Kurds. Protected by the no-fly zone imposed by the United States over northern Iraq, the peshmerga militias of the two major Kurdish parties – the KDP and the PUK – gained complete control over the predominately Kurdish governorates of Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah. The economic and social situation of the region was dire: After more than a decade of destructive fighting and the international sanctions imposed on Iraq in 1990, the Kurdish region faced an additional internal blockade put in place by Saddam upon the withdrawal of his army.

One of the first measures taken by the Kurdistan Front dominated by the KDP and PUK was a general amnesty for all the *jash*, the Kurdish tribal forces that had fought alongside the Iraqi Army and that numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Some of the *jash* had been forcibly recruited by the regime and had maintained a rather passive attitude during the war and in some cases even kept active communications with the Kurdish insurgency. Many *jash* leaders had played a major role in the 1991 uprising that triggered the liberation of the region. However, the intent of pacifying Kurdish society went hand in hand with the determination of the KDP and PUK to incorporate vast chunks of the population in their constituency by negotiating directly with their tribal leaders.

The liberation of the Kurdish region brought with it a geopolitical dilemma. Neighbouring Turkey, Iran, and Syria – each hosting their 'own' Kurdish minority – were extremely uncomfortable with the idea of Kurdish self-rule in Iraq while the United States remained committed to the territorial integrity of the country. At the same time, the internal blockade meant that Baghdad had stopped appointing and paying civil servants in the Kurdish

governorates and the region was in dire need of restoring a functioning administration. To reassure the neighbouring powers that they did not aim at secession, the Kurdistan Front decided to unilaterally implement the old Autonomy Law issued by Iraq in 1970, that had established a regional parliament based in Erbil and organised regional elections in May 1992. Since no other party passed the 7 per cent threshold the KDP and PUK obtained respectively 51 and 49 seats.<sup>255</sup> While all participants accused each other of fraud, tensions were running high between the two parties which had only come together in 1986, after two decades of rivalry and intra-Kurdish fighting. However, keen to maintain international support the KDP and the PUK went through a few days of intense negotiations that ushered in a comprehensive power-sharing agreement.

The *Kurdistan Regional Government* (KRG) created by the two-party agreement established a '50:50 system' that Gareth Stansfield – in the most extensive study of the Kurdish region of Iraq in the 1990s – describes as an equal division of “all executive and legislative positions [...] with real power being unofficially vested in the political bureaux of the KDP and PUK.”<sup>256</sup> The legitimacy of the new system was significantly undermined by the absence of the two party leaders, Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani who did not take any direct role in the KRG government and preferred to exercise their power through lesser political figures showing their half-hearted commitment to the agreement. In 1993, the relationship between the two parties was already deteriorating. The KDP accused the PUK of using the office of the KRG Prime Minister to control the regional institutions and to increase its influence over the Kurdish capital Erbil. Moreover, as both parties had only partly given up their sources of revenues to the government, the PUK was growing wary of the rapid increase in wealth of the KDP due to the latter's control of the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing with Turkey that constituted by far the greatest source of revenue in the region.

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<sup>255</sup> Ruud Hoff, Michiel Leezenberg, and Pieter Muller, *Elections in Iraqi Kurdistan (May 19, 1992): An Experiment in Democracy* (Amsterdam: Netherlands-Kurdistan Friendship Society, 1992), 16, 29.

<sup>256</sup> Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan*, 145.

The *peshmerga*, the party militias meant to become the armed forces of the KRG, were never unified and remained under the separate command structures of each political party.

In a matter of months, tensions escalated into full-blown civil war. In the winter of 1993-1994, the PUK became more and more aware that the KDP's close relations with Iran and the revenue from Ibrahim Khalil were rapidly changing the balance of power in the region. In May 1994, while incidents between followers of the two parties spread, the PUK took over the Kurdish parliament in Erbil definitively breaking the power-sharing agreement.<sup>257</sup> The lack of minimum trust between the two parties made the 50:50 agreement so fragile that the first perceived change in the balance of power was fatal. Moreover, this zero-sum mentality was fed by the new political economy of the region, which made territorial control essential to access the only available sources of revenues, namely the border-crossings and the distribution of international aid.

For about two years, the Kurdish civil war that started in spring 1994 took the form of a low-intensity conflict between the KDP controlling Dohuk and the PUK holding Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. Despite its historical alliance with Iran, the KDP had also been able to build a friendly relationship with Baghdad especially thanks to their cooperation on cross-border contraband. This development inevitably drove Iran and the PUK closer, turning the Kurdish conflict into a proxy war that contributed to its significant escalation. In July 1996, the PUK allowed the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to enter the Kurdish region and attack the Iranian-Kurdish guerrilla that had found shelter in the town of Koya. In response, the KDP attacked Erbil with the direct support of the Iraqi Army and took the Kurdish capital on August 31. The Iraqi-backed KDP offensive continued to the point that the PUK was forced to leave Sulaymaniyah until the end of the year when the heavy weapons provided by Iran allowed Talabani's forces to recover the city. The fighting of 1996 heavily involved the civilian

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<sup>257</sup> Michael Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 76. Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society*, 276-277.

population forcing up to 70.000 followers of the two parties to leave their homes as the frontline moved.<sup>258</sup> The year 1997 saw a series of failed negotiations as well as the direct intervention of another foreign power, Turkey, into the conflict. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Ankara's involvement in the region had been a spillover of its own Kurdish war against the *Kurdistan Workers' Party* (PKK) that had set its bases in the Qandil Mountains north of Erbil. In May 1997, Ankara carried out a large operation against the PKK and kept some of its forces in the region.<sup>259</sup> Given their geographical proximity, Turkey started building a close relationship with the KDP which brought the PUK closer to the PKK but also increased its dependence on Iran's support. When, in October, the PUK launched an offensive to retake Erbil, the KDP managed to thwart the attack with the help of Turkey's air force.<sup>260</sup>

The failed PUK-offensive of October 1997 marked the end of hostilities and, in November 1997, the KDP and PUK signed a truce. The United States, worried about the growing influence of Baghdad and Tehran – its regional foes – over the warring Kurdish parties, took the lead. In September 1998, the negotiations ushered in the Washington Agreement that committed the two parties to re-establish the KRG and to solve all pending issues, such as the sharing of revenues and the freedom of movement within the region, with an American guarantee against the intervention of the regional powers. However, none of those issues was resolved. Each party established its own administration and thousands of followers had to move to the area controlled by their party. The region remained divided into two security areas named after the respective party colours: a KDP-controlled Yellow Zone in the governorates of Dohuk and Erbil and a PUK-controlled Green-Zone in Sulaymaniyah.

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<sup>258</sup> Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society*, 278; Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament*, 86-88.

<sup>259</sup> The 1997 incursion was Turkey's fourth and largest operation in Iraq in the 1990s, involving up to 50.000 troops. Bill Park, *Turkey's Policy towards Northern Iraq: Problems and Perspectives* (London: IISS, 2005), 19-20.

<sup>260</sup> Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament*, 88-89.

## Urbanisation and Dependence

The economic situation and class relations of Iraqi Kurdish society in the 1990s was primarily the result of the destruction brought by a decade and a half of warfare. The Iran-Iraq War and the genocidal Anfal Campaign were followed by the Kurdish uprising of 1991 and by the Kurdish Civil War between 1994 and 1997. These tragic events largely destroyed the rural society of Iraqi Kurdistan and led to a massive process of urbanisation. In the 1990s, the Kurdish region was also subjected to a dual blockade brought by the combination of the UN-imposed sanctions on Iraq and the domestic embargo imposed by Saddam Hussain on the Kurds. Moreover, the withdrawal of the Iraqi army allowed for the flow of a large amount of humanitarian aid that, while providing indispensable relief, further undermined the productive capacity of the Kurdish economy. All these factors together contributed to turning Iraqi Kurdistan into a rentier society militarily controlled by the two major parties.

The long cycle of violence of the 1980s and 1990s drove many Kurdish peasants to leave their villages and find refuge in the Kurdish towns. Baghdad's counter-insurgency campaigns – that ultimately led to the genocidal Anfal Campaign (1986-1989) – were primarily aimed at removing the sources of supply for the Kurdish guerrilla by evacuating thousands of villages and depopulating the countryside. This policy resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of peasants that “were relocated into *mujamma'at*, crude new settlements located on the main highways in army-controlled areas of Iraqi Kurdistan”.<sup>261</sup> The Iraqi Army cleared several miles of territory along the Iranian border of villages and forest and entire areas of the countryside were rendered unviable with defoliant chemicals, landmines, deforestation, and the destruction of wells and irrigation systems. The result of this process was the devastation of Kurdish agriculture and a massive process of forced urbanisation. Rural migrants

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<sup>261</sup> *Genocide in Iraq*, 6.

swelled the Kurdish cities which grew exponentially. Between 1977 and 1997, the urban population of the three Kurdish governorates (Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah) grew from below 50 per cent, to over 70. The average growth of 23 per cent in the urban population of the Kurdish provinces contrasts starkly with the rest of Iraq that experienced virtually none.<sup>262</sup>

The situation became catastrophic in the early 1990s, when the Iraqi government withdrew from the Kurdish region, stopping the payment of civil servant salaries as well as food subsidies and other forms of public assistance while unemployment rose to 70-80 per cent.<sup>263</sup> The end of financial support from Baghdad was part of the economic embargo put in place by Saddam Hussein against the newly-established KRG. The domestic embargo was an additional burden on the Kurdish provinces already hit by the international sanctions on Iraq that were having a devastating effect on the country's economy. The hardship imposed by this dual blockade was mitigated by a wave of humanitarian assistance. Given the restrictions posed by the Iraqi regime on aid delivery in the rest of the country, between 1991 and 1996 the Kurdish region received two-thirds of total aid delivered to Iraq worth over \$1 billion.<sup>264</sup> The aid provided essential goods and services that allowed for the survival of the most vulnerable sectors of society at a time where prices skyrocketed and food and energy had become inaccessible to a vastly unemployed population.

In her well-informed study on the topic, Denise Natali identified two issues with humanitarian aid that structurally affected the Kurdish region. First, despite the sanctions, the UN remained committed to the territorial integrity of Iraq and, to be able to operate in the country, could not directly interact with the Kurdish Government that Baghdad deemed illegal. Therefore, humanitarian aid could not be channelled through the KRG.<sup>265</sup> As most of the

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<sup>262</sup> *Iraq Population Situation Analysis*, 97.

<sup>263</sup> Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan*, 53-54.

<sup>264</sup> Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State*, 30.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

essential goods and services were delivered directly by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the KDP and PUK had no interest in hiring civil servants to run the ministries, setting up government agencies, and developing a public sector. The two parties remained military organisations focused on security rather than political machines working within a parliamentary system. As Natali explains “without the ability to implement its own tax programs, acquire capital or foreign exchange, or negotiate with a foreign government to attract investments, the regional economy experienced no real structural change.”<sup>266</sup> The redundancy of the KRG institutions meant that the KDP and PUK had little incentive to work within shared institutions and much to gain from territorial control, a dynamic that ultimately precipitated the outbreak of the civil war in 1994.

The second issue with humanitarian aid highlighted by Natali is the structural undermining of the productive sectors of the economy. Humanitarian assistance was rarely aimed at capability building, a tendency reinforced by the prohibition to work directly with Kurdish institutions. For example, when the electricity broke down in the Dohuk governorate in 1993, the UN, rather than repairing the grid or funding the creation of an alternative source of energy, “distributed generators that provided temporary but costly power dependent upon imported diesel.”<sup>267</sup> Still, in 2002, the UN purchased four massive generators for the city of Erbil, each of them costing \$2.5 million and requiring 360 oil barrel per month, instead of repairing the Bakhma dam for a total estimated cost of \$2 million.<sup>268</sup>

The role of foreign aid in generating dependence was strengthened by the so-called oil-for-food programme instituted in May 1996 through an agreement between the UN and Baghdad that allowed Iraq to sell oil in order to buy foodstuff and medicines despite international sanctions. The KRG institutions were excluded from the agreement that explicitly stated that the distribution of supplies in Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah was to be

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<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 60 n21.

“undertaken by the United Nations [...] with due regard to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq”.<sup>269</sup> Compared to the \$1 billion worth of aid received during the relief phase, the share of oil revenues destined for the Kurdish governorates (13 per cent) amounted to almost \$10 billion.<sup>270</sup> However, as in the first phase of humanitarian aid, the programme failed to invest in development. The most devastating consequences of this approach were experienced by local agriculture. In the early 1990s, Kurdish agriculture was gradually recovering thanks to the reconstruction of 2.800 villages<sup>271</sup> and, especially, to the effects of the sanctions and the blockade on food prices.<sup>272</sup> In 1996, with the oil-for-food programme, food aid flooded the region and prices dropped, forcing thousands to abandon the countryside and go – sometimes back – to the cities. Rather than buying wheat from local farmers, the UN purchased it from Australia, spending half of the allocated budget in transportation.<sup>273</sup>

### **Warlords and Chiefs: the Formation of a New Ruling Class**

With the withdrawal of the Iraqi Army in 1991, the KDP and PUK gained permanent military control of the Kurdish region. As mentioned before, one of the first issues that the two parties had to face was that of the *jash*, the mostly tribal Kurds who had fought alongside the Iraqi Army as irregular forces. Rather than carrying on a punitive policy towards the former collaborators of the regime, the Kurdish parties issued a general amnesty and entered into a fierce competition to gain the support of their previous enemies. The result of this process was the creation of a new ruling class, formed by the integration between the old *jash* elite and the peshmerga

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<sup>269</sup> ‘IRAQ-UNITED NATIONS: MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING ON THE SALE OF IRAQI OIL, IMPLEMENTING SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 986 (1995)’, *International Legal Materials*, 35.4 (1996), 1100.

<sup>270</sup> Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State*, 53.

<sup>271</sup> Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan*, 53.

<sup>272</sup> From 1990 to 1995, in the Kurdish region, wheat price increased by 50 per cent and the area of cultivated land by 52 per cent. Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State*, 32.

<sup>273</sup> Stansfield *Iraqi Kurdistan*, 42; Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State*, 60.

commanders. Thanks to its military orientation, this new elite was in the position to take advantage of the two major economic activities available – the management of foreign aid and the control over smuggling – to amass great wealth.

The jash leaders were more than military commanders. Almost exclusively the members of leading Kurdish tribal families and often historical rivals of the tribes that had joined the Kurdish liberation movement, these figures had been greatly empowered by the policies promoted by Saddam Hussein in the 1980s. In 1980, the Kurdish economy was still largely based on agriculture and produced a third of Iraq's barley and nearly half of its wheat.<sup>274</sup> However, the devastating consequences of the war combined with the depressing effects of oil revenues over all the non-oil sectors of the economy triggered a rapid decline in profits in agriculture. The decline of agriculture and the growing availability of state funding contributed to a gradual shifting of the traditional elites from landownership towards other more profitable activities. In Iraq as a whole, tribal leaders loyal to the government – along with Ba'ath Party officers – were the main beneficiaries of the privatisation policies promoted by the regime during the Iraq-Iran War.<sup>275</sup> Moreover, the government rewarded political loyalty by assigning lucrative contracts for state-funded infrastructural projects. Gradually, this process led to the transformation of declining tribal landowners into a class of regime-backed entrepreneurs whereby capital – rather than land – became the main source of power.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> M. Sajjadi, 'State of Economy in Kurdistan', in *Kurdistan: Political and Economic Potential*, ed. by Maria O'Shea (London: Geopolitics and International Boundaries Research Centre SOAS, 1992), 50.

<sup>275</sup> For the extent and impact of Saddam Hussein's 1980s privatisation policies, see: Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, 'On the Way to Market: Economic Liberalization and Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait', *MERIP Middle East Report*, 170 (1991), 14–23.

<sup>276</sup> It is however questionable whether this can be called, as Leezenberg does, a 'capitalist class'. Michiel Leezenberg, 'Urbanization, Privatization, and Patronage: The Political Economy of Iraqi Kurdistan', in *The Kurds*, ed. by Jabar and Dawod, 158.

In the Kurdish region, tribal chiefs were also those with enough social power to set up the *jash* units – officially *National Defence Battalions* – the loyalist forces raised among pro-government Kurdish tribes to fight the insurgency. The *jash* leaders were directly funded by the government to set up their own units by recruiting fellow tribesmen. This practice did not only provide the tribal elite with another opportunity for enrichment, but it also strengthened their power over their constituencies. Joining the *jash* was often the only opportunity for rural Kurds to receive a decent salary and avoid being enlisted in the army and sent to the Iranian front. Moreover, this system provided tribal leaders with semi-private armies that could be used for private purposes.<sup>277</sup> The attachment of this ruling class to the Ba’athist government was, however, a marriage of convenience and, when Kurdish forces returned to the region in 1991, they were quick to change side.

The competitive nature of the relationship between the KDP and the PUK forced the two parties to battle to coopt the *jash* commanders. In the words of Hoshiyar Zebari, a powerful KDP leader, the general amnesty was a triumphant process of “Kurdish national reconciliation” whereby the old enemies “were integrated [into the political parties], their properties protected, all cases against them were dropped.”<sup>278</sup> Some leaders hailing from traditionally anti-Barzani tribes made peace with the KDP, others joined the PUK, while those who resisted were brutally murdered.<sup>279</sup> The amnesty allowed them to keep their forces and they often became local warlords enjoying a direct relationship with the party leadership and even switching side whenever it suited them.<sup>280</sup> Not only did the regime change

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<sup>277</sup> Leezenberg, *Urbanization, Privatization, and Patronage*, 158-159. See also, Michiel Leezenberg, ‘Refugee Camp or Free Trade Zone? The Economy of Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991’, in *Iraq’s Economic Predicament*, ed. by Kamil A. Mahdi (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2002), 291-292.

<sup>278</sup> Interview with Hoshiyar Zebari (Pirmam, 2018).

<sup>279</sup> This is the case for example of Hussein Agha, of the traditionally anti-Barzani Surchi tribe, killed with most of his family by KDP forces in 1996. Patrick Cockburn, ‘Kurdish Chief’s Death Brings Civil War Nearer’, *The Independent*, 6 July 1996 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/kurdish-chiefs-death-brings-civil-war-nearer-1327460.html>>.

<sup>280</sup> Leezenberg *Urbanization, Privatization, and Patronage*, 167.

involve no loss of power or status for the old Kurdish elites, it actually strengthened them. The replacement of the overpowerful Ba'ath regime with the quarrelsome Kurdish parties gave them more leverage and autonomy. The result was the creation of a new elite composed of former jash and peshmerga commanders turned politicians both – although to a different degree – tied to the political parties and whose military power gave them the possibility to benefit from the economic opportunities offered by the Iraqi Kurdish context of the 1990s. As some of these personalities, as collaborators of Saddam Hussein, had also been involved in the mass killing of Kurdish civilians in the late 1980s, they desperately needed the protection of the KDP and PUK, as in the case of Qasim Aghay Koya who was involved in the Anfal campaign and who joined the KDP after 1991.<sup>281</sup>

The integration of these personalities impacted on the ideological positions of the two dominant parties which lost any trace of difference. The PUK, given its defined leftist orientation, was to be more deeply changed by this process than the tribal and traditionalist KDP. During the liberation war, the PUK was still a federation of nominally independent parties. In 1992, the three parties decided to merge into the same organisation to run for the regional elections. Jalal Jawhar, at the time, one of the rising cadres in Komala, the most organised and ideologically defined component of the PUK, remembers his and his comrades' reluctance to accept Talabani's leadership of the new unified PUK:

we suggested to change the name of the party but not the beliefs and structure of the party. [...] At the time, I had the belief that we needed to change our direction because the Soviet Union was collapsing. We were willing to renew our ideology. [...] but in terms of leadership, Komala was different [...] shaykhs or [tribal leaders] did not exist in our party.<sup>282</sup>

Locked within a wider and more fluid structure centred around Talabani's personality and network, the more-ideologically defined Komala activists

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<sup>281</sup> Interview with Kamal Chomani (personal communication, 2019). See also Rebwar Karim Wali, 'Qasim Agha, Other Collaborators of Saddam Hussein', *Ekurd Daily*, 31 October, 2010 <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2010/10/state4329.htm>

<sup>282</sup> Interview with Jalal Jawhar (Sulaymaniyah, 2019).

lost their political weight. At its founding congress in 1992, the PUK abandoned its radical socialist positions and announced a 'social-democratic turn', gradually assuming the ideological shallowness that was typical of the KDP.<sup>283</sup> In its first manifesto as a unified party, the PUK erased any reference against tribalism and the traditional structures of Kurdish society.<sup>284</sup> As KDP Hoshiyar Zebari could proudly claim, the KDP and PUK were by then as different as "Pepsi and Coca-Cola."<sup>285</sup> With the primary aim of coopting the old elite, the 1992 electoral campaign was centred around the leaders' personalities with little or no difference in the parties' programmes.<sup>286</sup> However, thanks to this re-branding of the party, the PUK was able to co-opt powerful personalities such as Shaykh Muhammad Kasnazani, a Sufi leader and long-term Saddam collaborator who in the 1970s was even using his pro-government militias against Talabani's forces.<sup>287</sup>

As discussed before, the flow of foreign aid to the Kurdish region in the 1990s offered essential emergency relief but also negatively impacted the economic structure of the region. The UN and other organisations could not deal directly with the KRG institutions but they did hire local staff and had to rely on local NGOs for the delivery of aid and on local construction companies to build essential infrastructure. Given the level of militarization of the region, local warlords – both members of the old elite and peshmerga commanders – and the two dominant political parties could easily take control of the process. The KDP and PUK "set up, or gained control over, numerous local NGOs, which were quickly perceived as lucrative sources of

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<sup>283</sup> Hoff and others, *Elections in Iraqi Kurdistan*, 18.

<sup>284</sup> Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), 'The Program & Political Platform of the Adopted in the First PUK Congress 1992', *PUKmedia*, 2015 <[https://www.pukmedia.com/EN/EN\\_Direje.aspx?Jimare=34632](https://www.pukmedia.com/EN/EN_Direje.aspx?Jimare=34632)>.

<sup>285</sup> Interview with Hoshiyar Zebari (Pirmam, 2018).

<sup>286</sup> Hoff and others, *Elections in Iraqi Kurdistan*, 22.

<sup>287</sup> Martin van Bruinessen 'Tribes and Ethnic Identity', in *The Kurds in a Changing Middle East*, ed. by Jabar and Mansour, 157.

income, and as powerful instruments of clientelization.”<sup>288</sup> On the one hand, the politicisation of aid delivery strengthened the ongoing process of class formation by increasing the opportunities for enrichment for the local elite. On the other hand, as the political affiliation of NGOs, evident to the public, reinforced the idea that the provision of essential services was the task of the political parties and not of public institutions like the KRG, crystallising a pattern of party-state relations that was already familiar to the people who had lived under the Ba’athist regime. Within these relations of power, the large amount of aid brought by the oil-for-food programme from 1996 onwards multiplied the opportunities for private enrichment triggering “an exponential increase in personal wealth for local entrepreneurs” holding the contracts for the sale of crude and the delivery of food.<sup>289</sup>

Stimulated by the international sanctions and the domestic blockade, illegal trade constituted the other lucrative economic activity of the region. Smuggling took place on a vast scale on all borders of the Kurdish region and became the biggest source of revenue for the political parties and a source of enrichment for the dominant personalities within them. The Ibrahim Khalil border crossing with Turkey near Dohuk, mentioned earlier in this chapter, was by far the most lucrative with an estimated annual \$750 million revenues from illicit trade,<sup>290</sup> and its control by the KDP contributed to the outbreak of the civil war. The embargo stimulated the smuggling of all sorts of products into the region and created a “privatised oil trafficking” with Iraqi oil illegally sold in Turkey based on the cooperation of high-ranked KDP and Ba’athist officers in violation of both the international sanctions and the internal blockade.<sup>291</sup> Moreover, the dire conditions of the civilian population created a market for the smuggling of passports, exit visas, and

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<sup>288</sup> Leezenberg, *Humanitarian Aid*, 40.

<sup>289</sup> Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State*, 57-58.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>291</sup> Michiel Leezenberg, ‘Iraqi Kurdistan: Contours of a Post-Civil War Society’, *Third World Quarterly*, 26.4-5 (2005), 637-638. Also cited in Kenneth Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: What Every American Needs to Know Before an Invasion in Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2002), 81.

actual people who were asked to pay up to \$5000 to cross the Turkish border.<sup>292</sup>

The lack of stable revenues, combined with the fact that the peshmerga forces continued to respond to the command structures of the political parties, undermined the autonomy of the KRG institutions making them somewhat redundant. As the economic and military sources of power remained in the hands of the political parties and their allies, the competition between the KDP and PUK for the co-optation of the old elite and that for the control of territory and border crossings was bound to create conflicts that ultimately escalated into the civil war of 1994-1997. With the failure of the PUK offensive of 1997, the war front stalled along a line that roughly divided the governorates of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. The consolidation of the dividing line coincided with the exponential growth in foreign aid brought by the oil-for-food programme that gave the local elite greater opportunities for accumulation and contributed to the end of hostilities.<sup>293</sup> Given the importance of territorial control for these strategies of accumulation, it is not surprising that the Washington Agreement of 1998, which included the commitment to re-unify the KRG, remained a dead letter.

According to Gareth Stansfield, the two Kurdish statelets – each dominated by one of the political parties – that emerged from the civil war, represented a more efficient and stable system than the previously unified KRG.<sup>294</sup> The 50:50 arrangement of 1992 had pushed the two parties to use the KRG offices against each other and it was precisely the perceived change in the balance of power that pushed the PUK to break the agreement in 1994. This argument is also based on the assumption that the post-civil war single-party statelets were more suitable to the context than a multi-party system, given the legacy of Ba'athist rule that had made the population accustomed to the identification of the state with a political party. However, what Stansfield downplays is that the biggest incentive to maintain the separate

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<sup>292</sup> Leezenberg, *Iraqi Kurdistan*, 638.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 639.

<sup>294</sup> Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan*, 6.

administrations was the opportunities for accumulation that that system offered. Unchecked by their rival, each political party was able to consolidate the grip over its respective sub-region especially when the start of the oil-for-food programme promised unprecedented profit. Under the tight military control of their peshmerga forces, the KDP and PUK created a system ruled by the party politburos and for the benefit of their dominant families and political and economic allies. Unlike the context of a limited political plurality of the early 1990s, the new single-party statelets were also far more capable to repress any form of dissent and political opposition.

This process of accumulation had long-term effects on the structuring of class relations in the Kurdish region. In a region devastated by violence and dependent upon humanitarian aid, the Chamber of Commerce of Sulaymaniyah could boast about a thousand millionaires.<sup>295</sup> At the same time, over half of Kurdish families survived with an income of \$25 a month supplemented by a food basket worth \$50 a month funded by the oil-for-food programme.<sup>296</sup> Deprived Iraqi Kurds, made dependent on international aid by the destruction of agriculture and other productive activities, were forced into the condition of clients of a burgeoning patronage system.

### **The 2003 Invasion of Iraq and the unification of the KRG**

The system of governance of Iraqi Kurdistan established in the 1990s and based on two separate single-party administrations came to a sudden end with the US-led invasion of Iraq of 2003. The fall of the Ba'athist regime forced the KDP and the PUK to re-establish a unified KRG framework now finally recognized by Baghdad. However, the class structure developed in the 1990s was strengthened by this new institutional arrangement.

The participation of Kurdish forces in the invasion of the country was a condition for the KDP and PUK to secure the recognition of Kurdish autonomy by the Americans and the Arab forces in post-Ba'athist Iraq.

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<sup>295</sup> Cited by Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State*, 100.

<sup>296</sup> Leezenberg, *Iraqi Kurdistan*, 640.

Months before the invasion, in October 2002, the Kurdish parliament in Erbil was convened – for the first time since 1994 – with the presence of both KDP and PUK members. In February 2003, the two parties reopened each other's offices in the respective areas.<sup>297</sup> The KDP and PUK then formed the *Kurdistan Alliance* and, in January 2005, ran together in the first post-war Iraqi parliamentary elections. The widespread boycott of the elections in the Arab Sunni areas ravaged by the anti-occupation uprising left the country's Arab Shi'a majority and the Kurds in a strong position to determine the future of the country. The PUK leader Jalal Talabani was elected President of Iraq, starting an unwritten norm that would assign the presidency to the Kurds. The country's new constitution was drafted in a very short time and approved by a referendum in October 2005. The constitution recognized Kurdish as the second official language of Iraq and the governorates of Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah as a federal Kurdish region with its parliament and government.<sup>298</sup> However, the rush to approve a constitution left several issues unsolved. Kirkuk and other mixed Arab-Kurdish areas remained under the central government waiting for a referendum to be held by 2007. The referendum never took place and the issue of the disputed territories kept haunting the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil.

The elections for the Kurdish Parliament – the first since 1992 – were held in conjunction with the federal elections of January 2005 and saw the KDP-PUK alliance winning almost 90 per cent of the votes. This triumph was a secure starting point for a new power-sharing agreement. Masoud Barzani was elected President of the Kurdish region and, in January 2006, the two parties signed the Unification Agreement meant to restore the unified Kurdish administration. The agreement, signed by Barzani and Talabani in their role as party leaders, explicitly detailed the distribution of the major political offices between the two parties including a plan of for the following

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<sup>297</sup> Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq*, 276.

<sup>298</sup> 'Iraq's Constitution of 2005', *Constitute Project*,  
<[https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq\\_2005.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en)>

parliamentary term.<sup>299</sup> Forced by the new conditions to find a synthesis, the two leaders established a permanent line of communication to run the region and to confirm their parties' duopoly over the new institutions. As Kamran Karadaghi – then the spokesperson for President Talabani – recalls:

When Talabani became president of Iraq his attitude changed, that was his ultimate aim. Talabani recognized that Barzani was more suitable to become president [of the KRG]. This created a trust between the two and I witnessed it. They solved things together.<sup>300</sup>

The 2006 agreement marked the beginning of a new system, similar to the 50:50 power-sharing deal of 1992, in which all the KRG institutions were monopolized by the two major parties. Compared to the 1992 attempt, the new system had a stronger territorial character since the two parties had been in control of the respective areas – the KDP in Erbil and Dohuk and the PUK in Sulaymaniyah – for over a decade. This territorial dimension was strengthened by the organisation of the region's armed forces that were never unified and remained subject to the command structures of the respective political parties. The KDP-controlled Yellow Zone and the PUK-controlled Green Zone continued to be divided by an actual border with checkpoints flying the respective party flags. The Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs had no real control over the peshmerga making these military units effectively party militias.<sup>301</sup> The fact that the loyalty of the peshmerga forces went primarily to the political parties – or even personalities within the parties<sup>302</sup> – rather than to the region's institutions, constituted a major

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<sup>299</sup> 'Kurdistan Regional Government Unification Agreement', *Kurdistan Regional Government*, January 23, 2006  
<<http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?r=223&l=12&a=8891&s=02010100&s=010000>>.

<sup>300</sup> Interview with Kamran Karadaghi (London, 2018).

<sup>301</sup> Wladimir van Wilgenburg and Mario Fumerton, *Kurdistan's Political Army: The Challenge of Unifying the Peshmerga Forces* (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2015) <[https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ACMR\\_WilgenburgFumerton\\_Kurdistan\\_English\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ACMR_WilgenburgFumerton_Kurdistan_English_final.pdf)>, 1.

<sup>302</sup> "PUK leader Kosrat Rasul Ali, for example, has his own protection brigade called *Hezekani Kosrat Rasul*, which is made up of between 2,000 and 3,000 peshmerga fighters. Similarly, the PUK's Bafel Talabani (one of Jalal Talabani's sons) commands his own antiterror force that is not controlled by any ministry. The KDP's Nechirvan Barzani, the prime minister of the KRG, also has his own personal security force [...]. In addition to these assorted units, there are two PUK

obstacle to the establishment of an effective rule of law in the KRG. As all the opposition parties claim “as long as they [PUK and KDP] control the peshmerga, after the elections, they can do what they want.”<sup>303</sup> Moreover, this system represented an extraordinary source of patronage for the dominant parties which, by distributing stipends and pensions to the peshmerga and their families, secured the loyalty of hundreds of thousands of Kurds.<sup>304</sup>

However, the partisan use of the KRG institutions was not the only consequence of the ruling parties’ control over the military. As Hoshyar Omar claims “they can't control the economy - especially the oil - if they don't have the military.”<sup>305</sup> Even after the reunification of the KRG, the power of the Kurdish elite kept resting on the control exercised by the two parties over the region’s resources. The wider opportunities for accumulation in post-2003 Iraqi Kurdistan reinforced the power and cohesion of the ruling class that had emerged in the 1990s.

### **The Kurdish Economic Boom and Its Contradictions**

In the years following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Kurdish region experienced a period of rapid economic growth. The end of the blockade and sanctions that suffocated the Kurdish economy in the 1990s allowed the local elite to open up the Kurdish economy which led to a massive flow of international investment. The KRG, ruled by the KDP-PUK duopoly, particularly benefitted from a high level of political stability in comparison to

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presidential peshmerga brigades personally controlled by Jalal Talabani or his wife, Hero Ibrahim Ahmed”. Van Wilgenburg and Fumerton, *Kurdistan's Political Army*, 5.

<sup>303</sup> Interview with Aram Saeed (Sulaymaniyah, 2018).

<sup>304</sup> The peshmerga were said to be 120.000 in 2014. However, all the security forces – including the police and the internal and external intelligence agencies – are controlled by the KDP and PUK, making the number of Kurds working in the security sector on behalf of the political parties far bigger than that. Van Wilgenburg and Fumerton, *Kurdistan's Political Army*, 3.

<sup>305</sup> Interview with Hoshyar Omar (Sulaymaniyah, 2018).

the rest of Iraq that was ravaged by the insurgency against the American occupation and the spread of sectarian violence.

Given the recognition of Kurdish autonomy by the 2005 constitution, the KRG could finally count on a relatively stable source of revenue. Based on the estimate of the population of the three Kurdish governorates (3.9 million in 2003),<sup>306</sup> the regional government was entitled to 17 per cent of Iraq's budget almost exclusively derived from the export of oil. In the period between 2006 and 2014, the budget transfer from Baghdad amounted to roughly 80 per cent of the KRG revenues,<sup>307</sup> while revenues from taxes never reached 5 per cent of the total.<sup>308</sup> This flow of revenues combined with the political stability of the region allowed for a tumultuous economic growth. Despite the absence of reliable GDP data separate from that of Iraq, the economy of the KRG was estimated to have grown from \$18 billion in 2008 to \$27 billion in 2012.<sup>309</sup>

Rather than using these resources to rebuild the Kurdish economy through the development of its productive sectors, the Kurdish elite adopted a model of development based on the oil-producing monarchies of the

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<sup>306</sup> *Regional Development Strategy for Kurdistan Region 2012-2016* (KRG - Ministry of Planning, 2011) <[http://www.mop.gov.krd/resources/MoP Files/PDF Files/gd\\_ps/regional\\_development\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.mop.gov.krd/resources/MoP%20Files/PDF%20Files/gd_ps/regional_development_strategy.pdf)>, 55.

<sup>307</sup> *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Assessing the Economic and Social Impact of the Syrian Conflict and ISIS* (World Bank Group, 2015) <<https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.111.479.1009-a>>, 5.

<sup>308</sup> *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Reforming the Economy for Shared Prosperity and Protecting the Vulnerable* (World Bank Group, 2016) <<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/672671468196766598/Main-report>>, XI.

<sup>309</sup> 'Kurdistan Region Facts & Figures', *Invest in Group (IIG)*, 2019 <<https://investingroup.org/country/kurdistan/facts-figures/>>. The Rand Corporation estimated the Gross Regional Product (GRP) excluding natural resources because of the lack of reliable data. According to their report, the GRP of the KRG amounted to 20,954 billion Iraqi Dinars in 2008 and to 27,381 billion Iraqi dinars in 2012. Calculating the Gross Regional Product of the Kurdistan Region - Iraq (KRG and Rand Corporation, 2016) <<https://doi.org/10.7249/rr1405.3>>, xii, 40.

Persian Gulf.<sup>310</sup> In July 2006, just a few months after the reunification of the KRG, the Kurdish Parliament approved a very generous investment law and established a Board of Investment. The law, defined by the KRG Foreign Minister Falah Mustafa Bakir as “amongst the most investor-friendly laws in the wider region”,<sup>311</sup> is largely modelled after the ones in place in the Gulf countries but it allows an even higher degree of freedom and capital returns to foreign investors who are allowed to repatriate their profits in full, to buy land, and enjoy a 10-year non-custom tax break.<sup>312</sup> The KRG encouraged partnership with local businessmen and companies and the Board of Investments has a high degree of discretion in issuing the licences largely favouring economic actors affiliated with the KDP and PUK.<sup>313</sup> Moreover, the KRG established a visa regime that circumvents Iraqi immigration law, allowing most foreigners to obtain an entry visa upon arrival.

These policies paid off. Between 2006 and 2012, the Kurdish region received \$22 billion in investment, 21 per cent of which were foreign direct investment or joint ventures with local partners.<sup>314</sup> In 2012, investment in the KRG amounted to 55 per cent of total investment in Iraq.<sup>315</sup> However, given the extremely favourable fiscal conditions enjoyed by foreign corporations,

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<sup>310</sup> Nicky Woolf, ‘Is Kurdistan the next Dubai?’, *The Guardian*, 2010 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/may/05/kurdistan-next-dubai-iraq>>;

<sup>311</sup> “KRG’s Investment Law Is amongst the Most Investor Friendly Laws in the Wider Region” – Minister Falah Mustafa Bakir’, *The Kurdistan Tribune*, 20 November 2011 <<https://kurdistantribune.com/krgs-investment-law-amongst-most-investor-friendly-laws-wider-region-minister-falah-mustafa-bakir/>>.

<sup>312</sup> ‘Investment Law’, *KRG Department of Foreign Relations*, 2006 <<https://dfr.gov.krd/p/p.aspx?p=69&l=12&s=050200&r=377>>.

<sup>313</sup> This dynamic was so widely recognised that “even Prime Minister [Nechirvan] Barzani acknowledged to [US diplomats] in a 14 August breakfast meeting that there was a perception by foreign investors that they had to partner with either the KDP or the PUK a phenomenon he said he “can’t say is not true.”’ ‘Entrenched Corruption in Kurdistan Region of Iraq’, Baghdad Embassy, *Wikileaks Cables: 08BAGHDAD2731\_a*, 25 August 2008 <[https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BAGHDAD2731\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BAGHDAD2731_a.html)>.

<sup>314</sup> *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq* (2016), 6.

<sup>315</sup> ‘Kurdistan Region - Determined to Grow: Economy, Kurdistan Region, Review’, *Invest in Group (IIG)*, 2013 <<https://investingroup.org/review/236/determined-to-grow-economy-kurdistan/>>.

the effect of this flow of capital on the KRG revenues has been negligible.<sup>316</sup> Moreover, without substantial limitations on the hiring of foreign staff and in combination with the lax visa regime, the KRG investment policy has generated huge profit for the foreign companies and their local partners and yet has had hardly any impact on the overall employment and the wider population.<sup>317</sup>

The flow of foreign capital had its largest and most visible effect in the construction boom which, in just a few years, transformed the skyline of the main Kurdish cities. Private investments built large housing complexes, residential compounds, luxury hotels, and huge shopping malls. In the city of Erbil, the price for 250-square meter plot rose from \$5,000 in 1996 to \$153,000 in 2010 and the cost of housing reached \$423 per meter making large areas of the cities unaffordable for most locals.<sup>318</sup> The country that benefitted the most from the KRG's investment-friendly policy in the construction sector was Turkey that in the mid- and late 2000s was experiencing a tumultuous economic growth. In 2012, Turkish investment in Kurdish real estate reached \$4.3 billion and Turkish construction companies played a central role in restoring essential infrastructure in the Kurdish region.<sup>319</sup>

The end of the sanction regime as well as the following reduction or outright cancellation of customs allowed for the recovery of international trade, even though it did not eliminate smuggling. The Kurdish region of Iraq gained a role as a transit area but, most significantly, as a market for foreign products. The Kurdish unproductive rent-based economy became an extraordinarily important market for Turkey's burgeoning economy as well as for Iranian manufacture and agricultural products. The territorial

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<sup>316</sup> *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq* (2016), 11.

<sup>317</sup> Christina Bache, 'Mutual Economic Interdependence or Economic Imbalance: Turkish Private Sector Presence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq', *Middle East Critique*, 27.1 (2018), 68.

<sup>318</sup> Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State*, 99.

<sup>319</sup> *Kurdistan Region - Determined to Grow*.

distribution of this trade partly overlapped with the political ties between the two dominant Kurdish parties and the neighbouring countries, with a predominance of Turkish products in the KDP-controlled area and a significant role of Iranian exports in the area controlled by the PUK. Turkey, however, had the lion's share. Already in 2007, Turkish exports to the KRG amounted to almost \$1.5 billion and constituted roughly 50 per cent of its total exports to Iraq. In 2013, the total value of Turkish exports was worth over \$8 billion and constituted 67 per cent of its exports to Iraq.<sup>320</sup> This tumultuous increase meant that in 2013 approximately 80 per cent of all goods sold in the region were made in Turkey, making daily life in the KRG completely dependent on its political relationship with Turkey and the state of the Turkish economy.<sup>321</sup>

These trade and investment policies had the most damaging effects on the productive sectors of the Kurdish economy. Cheap products coming from Turkey, Iran, and East Asia flooded the Kurdish markets undermining the recovery of local production. In the first phase of the Kurdish economic boom between 2006 and 2010, industry and agriculture received a low share of the capital invested in the region, respectively 12.08 per cent and 1.89 per cent.<sup>322</sup> The result of this paucity of investment is clearly shown by the insignificance of these sectors in the Kurdish economy. According to data produced by the Rand Corporation, in 2012, industry amounted to 6.1 per cent of the non-oil value-added of the KRG, while agriculture – once the driving sector of the Kurdish economy – to a staggering low of 3.1 per cent.<sup>323</sup> Even if the rainfall was mostly in or above the average in the

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<sup>320</sup> Bache, *Mutual Economic Interdependence*, 71.

<sup>321</sup> *Kurdistan Region - Determined to Grow*.

<sup>322</sup> *Regional Development Strategy*, 41.

<sup>323</sup> Rand's estimates exclude the natural-resources sector which means that the actual size of industry and agriculture in the whole of the Kurdish economy is even less significant than what these figures suggest. Calculating the Gross Regional Product of the Kurdistan Region, xiii.

2000s,<sup>324</sup> the lack of investments and the flow of cheaper products from abroad hit hard. Between 2000 and 2007, agricultural production nearly halved and the number of Kurds who lived off agriculture dropped from 35 to 23 per cent.<sup>325</sup>

### **The Promises of Kurdish Crude**

Since the reunification of the KRG in 2005, oil was the sector that most attracted attention from foreign and local actors. Besides the interests that large oil reserves normally mobilise, oil has, in this case, the particular significance of providing the conditions of viability for an independent Kurdish state but also to immensely strengthen the autonomy of the ruling elite vis-à-vis the rest of Kurdish society.

In 2006, the oil sector in the Kurdish region was extremely underdeveloped due to the internal blockade and the international sanctions over Iraq. The 2005 Iraqi constitution states that the country's oil and gas reserves belong to the Iraqi people as a whole and assigns their management to the federal government in exchange for the equal distribution of its revenues – the 17 per cent share of the KRG – but only explicitly refers to “the present fields.”<sup>326</sup> Estimates that were available when the constitution was being drafted and that was confirmed by geological surveys described the Kurdish region of Iraq as sitting on a massive unexploited 41 billion barrels of oil and 1.5 trillion cubic meters of natural gas.<sup>327</sup> Despite the vastity of these oil and

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<sup>324</sup> *Drought Characteristics and Management in North Africa and the Near East* (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2018) <<http://www.fao.org/3/CA0034EN/ca0034en.pdf>>.

<sup>325</sup> Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State*, 96; *Regional Development Strategy*, 78.

<sup>326</sup> See *Iraq's Constitution of 2005*.

<sup>327</sup> Robin Mills, 'Under the Mountains: Kurdish Oil and Regional Politics', *The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies*, OIES Paper WPM 63 (January 2016) <<https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Kurdish-Oil-and-Regional-Politics-WPM-63.pdf>>, 16-17. In 2017, proven reserves for the whole of Iraq amounted to 148 billion barrels of oil and 3.5 trillion cubic meters of natural gas. *BP Statistic Review of World Energy – June 2018*, 67th Edition (BP, 2018) <<https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business->

gas resources, in 2006 the Kurdish region was still importing all of its electricity.<sup>328</sup>

It is not surprising then that the development of the oil and gas sector became the top priority for the local political elite. Kurdish policy in this field has been largely dominated by the personality of Ashti Hawrami. Appointed Minister for Natural Resources by the KDP in 2006 and – reconfirmed in every cabinet until 2019 – Hawrami promoted an extremely investor-friendly policy determined to quickly develop a Kurdish independent oil sector even at the cost of confrontation with Baghdad. In 2007, the Kurdish parliament approved an oil and gas law that authorised the regional government to sign independent contracts for exploration and production, despite strong opposition from Baghdad. The new law accorded singularly favourable conditions to foreign companies. Unlike the rest of Iraq, where oil companies are treated merely as contractors and are normally entitled to \$1-2 per barrel, the KRG granted to private companies co-ownership of the field in exchange of a royalty of 10 per cent of their gross income. Attracted by these favourable conditions, several medium-sized corporations started operating in the region between 2007 and 2011.<sup>329</sup>

These early operations convinced larger actors to move in. In November 2011, the KRG assigned exploration blocks to the giant ExxonMobil and, in 2012, to the Emirati TAQA, the French Total, the American Chevron, and the Russian Gazprom Neft.<sup>330</sup> Strengthened by the geopolitical significance of these partnerships, the KRG started exporting oil independently via trucks through Turkey and Iran, rather than using the Iraqi pipeline infrastructure. In the meantime, the KRG started building its own pipeline to Turkey that became operative in late 2013. The arrival of these oil giants meant that the

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[sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2018-full-report.pdf](https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2018-full-report.pdf)>.

<sup>328</sup> *Kurdistan Region - Determined to Grow*.

<sup>329</sup> Gülistan Gürbey and Caner Yildirim, 'Perspectives of an Independent Energy Export Policy of Iraqi Kurdistan', in *Iraqi Kurdistan's Statehood Aspirations*, ed. by Anaid and Tugdar, 62-63.

<sup>330</sup> Mills, *Under the Mountains*, 11.

central government could no longer downplay the Kurdish energy policy and inevitably perceived it as a threat to the country's territorial integrity. In response, Baghdad began international legal and diplomatic action against the KRG. As oil started flowing to Turkey through the new Kurdish pipeline the Iraqi government decided to retaliate and, on February 2014, blocked all its budget transfer to the KRG.<sup>331</sup>

Baghdad's strong opposition to the Kurdish oil policy was motivated by both domestic and international concerns. Domestically, the new contracts signed by the KRG undermined the central government's control over the most important economic and geopolitical asset of the country. Erbil's moves were observed with interest by other oil-producing governorates such as Nineveh and Basra, raising the spectre of a dangerous fragmentation of the country and putting at risk its long-term viability as a unitary state.<sup>332</sup> This process would undermine the redistributive capabilities of the central government creating huge disparities between oil-producing and non-oil-producing governorates. Moreover, the decentralisation of Iraq's oil policy would inevitably create local power centres significantly more susceptible to foreign interference. Turkey's strong support for the oil policy of the KRG conveyed a clear message in this direction to the Iraqi government. Turkey is a neighbouring country with a long history of interference in northern Iraq and the development of the Kurdish oil sector took place in a context of growing economic influence and warming ties between Ankara and the KDP. The new KRG pipeline has strengthened this relationship, tying the Kurdish region even more strongly to the growing and energy-thirsty economy of Turkey. In the virtual absence of a Kurdish banking sector, the revenue from the export of oil was transferred to the

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<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

KRG through the Turkish state-owned Halk Bankası, de facto putting Ankara in control of the process.<sup>333</sup>

Political independence through oil has been the project consistently pursued by the elite of the KDP in charge of the sector, even more systematically, since Nechirwan Barzani, nephew of Masoud, took office as KRG prime minister in 2012. The development of the oil sector and the growing ties with Turkey were pursued with the hardly-hidden intention of building the conditions – independent revenues and geopolitical support – to full autonomy or even independence from Iraq. However, this project is not primarily about Kurdish self-determination as it is often presented by both local politicians and foreign experts.<sup>334</sup> The deep relationship between oil and political power will be more extensively discussed in Chapter 6, as it will become more evident with the post-2014 events. However, in the early 2010s, oil had already become an extremely lucrative business for powerful Kurds. Moreover, more economic and geopolitical autonomy from Baghdad meant even less accountability and more opportunity for accumulation for the Kurdish elite over the territory that they militarily control. Since its very beginning, the Kurdish oil policy has been, first of all, an instrument of class power that accelerated the transformation towards a rentier class structure initiated in the 1990s.

### **Subaltern Classes and Opposition in a Rentier (Quasi-)State**

The economic growth of the Iraqi Kurdish region after 2003 took place within the set of the class relations established in the 1990s and discussed earlier in this chapter. Despite the unification of the KRG institutions in 2006, the KDP and PUK retained territorial control over the respective areas through the party-affiliated security forces. This allowed the political elite to

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<sup>333</sup> Ali Ünal, 'Turkey's Halkbank Collects the Revenue of Kurdish Oil', *Daily Sabah*, 24 June 2014 <<https://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2014/06/24/turkeys-halkbank-collects-the-revenue-of-kurdish-oil>>.

<sup>334</sup> See, for example: Yaniv Voller, 'Kurdish Oil Politics in Iraq: Contested Sovereignty and Unilateralism', *Middle East Policy*, XX.1 (2013), 68–82.

maintain nearly absolute control over the economy and the increased opportunities for accumulation offered by the oil rent after 2006.

Even in the 1990s, the revenues of the local institutions and political parties as well as the sources of private accumulation came largely via streams of rent, namely the fees generated by the border-crossings and the management of foreign humanitarian aid. In this context, the institutionalisation of the KRG in the 2000s contributed to completing its transition towards a rentier economy. Given its complete control of the KRG institutions and military apparatus, the ruling class formed in the 1990s was in the position to siphon off a significant share of the revenues from the regional budget. Rather than investing in productive activities, the Kurdish ruling class followed a consistent strategy of accumulation based on the appropriation of public wealth through corruption, misappropriation, and the assignment of public contracts – namely in the construction sector – to companies controlled by political leaders or their allies. This strategy was enabled by the lack of transparency and the partisan control of the KRG institutions. As mentioned before, looking at these practices in terms of class relations sheds a different light on the role of the independent oil policy promoted since 2007. Unlike the budget transfer from Baghdad, the creation of revenues directly within the border of the KRG exponentially increased the amount of money that could be directed to private pockets as well as multiplied the ways through which this process could take place. Maybe: Despite the impossibility to determine exact numbers, but independent investigations locate the numbers in the order of billions of dollars.<sup>335</sup>

This predatory strategy of accumulation went hand in hand with the redistribution of a large part of the KRG budget among the Iraqi Kurdish population in the form of civil servants' salaries, pensions and subsidies. Due

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<sup>335</sup> 'Over \$1 Billion from Iraqi Kurdistan Oil Revenue Missing in 1st Quarter of 2016: MP', *E Kurd Daily*, 7 April 2016 <<https://ekurd.net/billion-iraqi-kurdistan-oil-missing-2016-04-07>>; 'Iraqi Kurdistan Oil Revenue \$1 Billion per Month: Source', *E Kurd Daily*, 2 November 2016 <<https://ekurd.net/kurdistan-oil-revenue-billion-2016-11-02>>.

to the weakness or sheer absence of a productive economy, most of the population was made dependent on government handouts, strengthening the patronage nature of the system and increasing the cost for public expressions of political dissent.

In 2013, more than 50 per cent of the KRG budget was spent on salaries for public servants and pensions and roughly 1.4 million Iraqi Kurds were on the regional government payroll out of a population of just over 5 million.<sup>336</sup> Between 2007 and 2012, more than 80 per cent of the 750.000 new jobs created in the KRG were in the public sector that, in 2014, employed 53 per cent of the region's working population.<sup>337</sup> A significant proportion of public employees earned \$150-200 per month<sup>338</sup> and, in many cases, an entire family relied on one salary making it completely dependent to the local KDP or PUK powerholders in control of public employment. Through this system, a large part of the population was forced into the patronage networks of the two parties and their leading politicians. Even if one salary barely kept a family above the poverty line, public employment remained a far better option than the uncertainty of the private sector. According to official – likely conservative – estimates, unemployment stood at almost 18 per cent in 2009.<sup>339</sup> Moreover, working conditions in the private sector were far from inviting: according to the World Bank, in 2012, a great majority of the employed poor population worked for private employers.<sup>340</sup> Kurdish businessmen in construction, agriculture and in the service sector increasingly relied on migrant labour from Asia and Africa but often also on seasonal workers from Iranian Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq.

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<sup>336</sup> *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq* (2016), cxi.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>338</sup> Anwar Anaid, 'The Nature of Political Economy Challenges of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq', in *Iraqi Kurdistan's Statehood Aspirations*, ed. by Anaid and Tugdar, 25.

<sup>339</sup> *Regional Development Strategy for Kurdistan Region*, 16.

<sup>340</sup> "73% of employed urban poor (primarily construction, commerce and retail, transport, storage and communication) and 78% of employed rural poor (primarily agriculture and construction) worked in the private sector". *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq* (2016), 6.

The KDP and PUK were able to limit the expression of public dissent towards this system thanks to their control of the security apparatus and the dependence created through public employment and other limited forms of redistribution. However, the uneven nature of the KRG development and extremely unequal distribution of power and wealth in the region was bound to generate opposition. The first significant expression of political opposition to the KDP-PUK duopoly came in the form of the rise of Islamist forces. The Kurdistan Islamic Group and the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Kurdistan Islamic Union combined the critique of corruption and nepotism with that of secularism and, until the late 2000s, were the strongest opposition forces in the Kurdish region and particularly in the rural areas where the control by the KDP and PUK was less tight.<sup>341</sup>

However, the most significant challenge to the ruling parties came from within their ranks. In 2009, Nawshirwan Mustafa, one of the most popular veterans of the liberation struggle and the leader of the left-wing of the PUK, split from Talabani's party and established the *Gorran* ('change') Movement. Campaigning against corruption and for political liberalisation, Gorran boomed in the July 2009 elections, winning 23 per cent of the votes and beating the PUK in Sulaymaniyah. The rise of Gorran has shaken the Kurdish political establishment and generated widespread enthusiasm among the public but it has also shown the democratic limits of the KRG system. As journalist Kemal Chomani explains, even if Gorran won the majority of the Sulaymaniyah council in 2013, they had to reach an agreement with the PUK as they soon realised that controlling the local administration was in vain as long as the security apparatus, the civil servants, and most economic activities kept responding to the command structure of the PUK.<sup>342</sup>

Although Gorran's electoral success did not substantially change the relations of power within the regional politics, it was certainly the sign of a wider erosion of the political legitimacy of the local political elite. In February

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<sup>341</sup> See Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq*, 210-220, 277.

<sup>342</sup> Interview with Kamal Chomani (personal communication, 2019).

2011, encouraged by the popular revolts that were shaking the Middle East, thousands gathered in Sulaymaniyah to protest corruption and demand political reform.<sup>343</sup> Despite the violent reaction of the local security forces, protests continue for the following two months and five demonstrators were killed and 150 injured. The repression of the protests was accompanied by the action of masked armed men who attacked the demonstrations as well as the offices of the opposition parties and independent media stations.<sup>344</sup> Major protests in Erbil and Dohuk were avoided by preemptive actions by the KDP and by the exemplary brutality of the response in Sulaymaniyah. The 2011 protests were a watershed moment in the history of the region by significantly undermining the relationship between the ruling parties and large chunks of the population. The images of Kurdish security forces shooting peaceful protests made many realise that the rule of fellow Kurds could be as oppressive as that of any non-Kurdish dictator.

## **Conclusion**

The establishment of a unified KRG, within the framework of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, crystallised a set of class relations in the Kurdish region that had taken shape in the 1990s. After the liberation of the region in 1991, the KDP and PUK competed for the co-optation of the old Kurdish elite. This process led to the creation of a new ruling class, born from the alliance between the KDP and PUK commanders turned politicians and the local elite composed of former Ba'athist collaborators, such as tribal leaders, regime-backed entrepreneurs, and former commanders of the counter-insurgency

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<sup>343</sup> Marina Ottaway and Anas Danial Kaysi, 'Iraq: Protest, Democracy, and Autocracy', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 28 March 2011 <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/03/28/iraq-protest-democracy-and-autocracy-pub-43306>>.

<sup>344</sup> 'Iraqi Kurdistan: Prevent Attacks on Protesters', *Human Rights Watch*, 7 March 2011 <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/07/iraqi-kurdistan-prevent-attacks-protesters>>; 'Criminal Raid Prevents Kurdistan's First Independent TV Station from Covering Sulaymaniyah Unrest', *Reporters Without Borders*, 22 February 2011 <<https://rsf.org/en/news/criminal-raid-prevents-kurdistan-first-independent-tv-station-covering-sulaymaniyah-unrest>>.

jash battalions. Through the control of the security forces, this new ruling class was able to appropriate large parts of the wealth created by various sources of rent, particularly the export of oil after 2005.

As this chapter argued, the inability of the two Kurdish parties to establish functioning institutions and a competitive democracy can be explained by the strategy of accumulation employed by a ruling class largely characterised by its military background – either in the Kurdish insurgency or in the former pro-government forces. The direct control of the armed forces – which were never allowed to become a politically neutral regional army – has enabled the Kurdish elite to appropriate the wealth created by different forms of rent: smuggling and foreign humanitarian aid in the 1990s and the sale of oil after 2005. In turn, the reliance of the Kurdish subaltern classes on different forms of public handouts is not the result of the lack of a work ethic or a culture of dependence but rather the only strategy of subsistence available in that context. The Kurdish ruling class showed no interest in investing in the development of a productive economy. By distributing parts of the region's wealth through public salaries, pensions, and subsidies, the political elite forced a large part of the population into their patronage network, increasing the cost of political dissent. This system gradually led to the erosion of the legitimacy of the KDP and PUK but the combination of military coercion and economic dependence allowed the ruling class to survive the rise of political opposition in the late 2000s.

# Chapter 6

## The Crisis of Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq (2014-2019)

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### Introduction

The structure of power and class hierarchy that developed in the Kurdish region of Iraq in the 1990s and 2000s were deeply shaken by the crisis that started in 2014. Under attack by ISIL and with the oil price falling to record lows, the KRG suddenly became unable to pay public salaries throwing hundreds of thousands of Kurds to the edges of poverty. The austerity policies implemented by the KRG broke the mechanism of redistribution on which the Kurdish rentier system was based. To counter mounting popular rage – manifested in frequent and tense public protests – the ruling KDP and PUK deployed a combination of coercion and persuasion. On the one hand, force was the most immediate response. While the protestors were met with fire by the security forces, the government shut down the parliament for two years (2015-2017) and illegally extended Masoud Barzani's presidential term. On the other hand, the Kurdish elite invested in aggressive nationalist rhetoric that led to the decision of holding an independence referendum, in September 2017, and to the heavy retaliation from Baghdad and neighbouring powers. The combination of these two strategies within the context of the KRG political and economic crisis reveals the class nature of Iraqi Kurdish nationalism and of the separatist project pursued by the political elite. Among the Kurdish subaltern classes, who had to pay the highest price of the economic crisis, the frustrated aspirations to political change gave way to a widespread sense of disillusion and a crisis of Kurdish nationalism as a source of legitimacy for political power in the region. Besides reconstructing the events surrounding the crisis and the

referendum, this chapter also delves into the evolution of the power structure of the region in the 2010s and the growing importance of neighbouring powers. The function of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq is thus revealed as upholding and legitimising the political and class hierarchies of the region. However, the more the nationalist credentials of the ruling elite weakened, the more they had to rely on coercive means to stay in power.

### **War and Economic Crisis**

When the political and economic crisis hit the KRG in 2014, the Kurdish region of Iraq was experiencing a period of rapid growth. Per-capita wealth was almost twice as high as the national average and, despite rapidly growing inequalities, only 3.4 per cent of Kurds were living in acute poverty compared to 13.3 per cent of Iraqis.<sup>345</sup> Poverty remained largely concentrated in the rural areas contributing to a process of continued urbanisation.<sup>346</sup> This period of growth consolidated a set of class relations that had started forming in the early 1990s when the KDP and the PUK took control of the region. As we saw in Chapter 5, the party leaders and their affiliates were able to appropriate most of the wealth generated by the export of oil and kept the rest of the population in a position of subordination and dependent on public handouts. However, this system started crumbling in 2014 due to a combination of political and economic events.

The rift between Erbil and Baghdad over the independent export of oil by the KRG that Baghdad deemed unconstitutional escalated in February 2014 when the Iraqi government blocked all its budget transfer to the Kurdish region. Compared to the IQD 14.3 trillion received in 2013 – 77 per cent of the region's total revenues – in 2014 the KRG only received IQD 1.1 trillion

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<sup>345</sup> *Iraq Human Development Report 2014: Iraqi Youth Challenges and Opportunities*, (UNDP, 2014) <[http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/undp-iq\\_iraqhdr2014-english.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/undp-iq_iraqhdr2014-english.pdf)>, 128-129.

<sup>346</sup> From 1997 to 2012, the urban population grew from 74.2 to 81.7 per cent in KRG and only from 67.3 to 69.2 per cent in the rest of Iraq. *Iraq Human Development Report*, 140, 145.

from Baghdad.<sup>347</sup> Given its very narrow tax base, the KRG could rely only on its independent oil export. As the Iraqi government threatened the KRG with war, a military confrontation was likely avoided only due to the sudden turn of events.<sup>348</sup> In early June, the *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant* (ISIL) invaded northern Iraq and, while the Iraqi army collapsed, the Islamists took control of Mosul and pushed southwards to Baghdad and eastwards to the Kurdish region. ISIL, the evolution of al-Qaeda in Iraq, had thrived in the context of the Syrian Civil War also thanks to its vast use of performative brutality against non-Sunni civilians and prisoners of war that significantly curtailed the morale of the overwhelmingly-Shia Iraqi army. While most of ISIL's pressure was directed towards Baghdad, the Kurdish peshmerga managed to take control of long-disputed Kirkuk after the Iraqi Army evacuated the city. However, when in August 2014 ISIL attacked the areas of the Nineveh Governorate inhabited by the Yazidi Kurds, the KDP-affiliated peshmerga withdrew. As ISIL initiated a genocidal campaign of slaughtering and enslavement of this religious minority, 50,000 Yazidis under siege on Mount Sinjar were only rescued by intervention from Syria and Turkey of fighters affiliated with the PKK.<sup>349</sup>

The war on ISIL imposed a 1000-km long frontline on the KRG forcing Erbil to significantly increase its defence spending. A flow of displaced people from Syria and northern Iraq fled to the Kurdish region increasing the local refugee population from the already-present 250,000 to 1.5 million by the

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<sup>347</sup> DeWeaver, Mark, *The State of the Economy: Economic Issues in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region* (IRIS, March 2017) < <https://auis.edu.krd/iris/publications/iris-booklet-series-state-economy>>.

<sup>348</sup> Gareth Stansfield, 'The Kurdish Experience in Post-Saddam Iraq', in *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, ed. by Stansfield and Shareef, 355-374.

<sup>349</sup> The Kurdish-speaking Yazidis practice a syncretic monotheistic religion autochthonous to the Mesopotamian plain. ISIL sees them as worshipers of the devil which in their eyes gives them right to kill all Yazidi males and enslave the women. Between 2,000 and 5,500 Yazidis were killed and more than 6,000 were kidnapped by ISIL in August 2014. Valeria Cetorelli and others, 'Mortality and Kidnapping Estimates for the Yazidi Population in the Area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A Retrospective Household Survey', *PLoS Medicine*, 14.5 (2017) <<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002297>>.

beginning of 2015 and inflicting a huge burden on the KRG's budget.<sup>350</sup> Moreover, as ISIL advanced to just a few kilometres from Erbil, thousands of foreign staff left the region and tourism, trade and custom revenues collapsed.<sup>351</sup> Licenced investment fell from \$12.4 billion in 2013 to just \$4.4 billion in 2014.<sup>352</sup> However, the heaviest blow to the region's finances was struck by the rapid drop in oil prices. The price per barrel fell from \$108 in June 2014 to \$49 in January 2015 – and continued dropping to reach a low of \$29 in February 2016.<sup>353</sup> Since Baghdad had cut its budget transfer to the Kurdish region, the KRG had been keeping its finances from collapsing through the independent sale of oil but the sudden price drop dashed expected earnings putting the KRG on the brink of bankruptcy.

The financial crisis further highlighted the limits of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq: Unable to print money or issue debt,<sup>354</sup> the only option available to the KRG was cutting expenses. However, public spending – in the form of salaries, pensions and subsidies – was a political pillar of the Kurdish rentier system. Political stability was maintained only through the redistribution of part of the oil-generated rent to the wider population while the ruling class appropriated a large part of it. As the KRG started introducing austerity measures that threw ordinary Kurds into poverty, the dormant popular opposition to the political elite exploded.

### **Protest and Political Crisis**

The combination of the war effort and its economic consequences, and the sudden drop in the price of oil brought the region's finances on the brink of

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<sup>350</sup> *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq* (2016), 2.

<sup>351</sup> *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq* (2015), 36-40.

<sup>352</sup> *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq* (2016), 2.

<sup>353</sup> 'Imported Crude Oil Prices', *US Energy Information Administration*, 2019 <<https://www.eia.gov/outlooks/steo/realprices/>>.

<sup>354</sup> An attempt made in June 2015 to issue KRG bonds was met with little enthusiasm by international investors despite the high remuneration (11-12 per cent) offered. Mills, *Under the Mountains*, 27.

collapse. The KRG halted the payment to contractors and suppliers causing the bankruptcy of numerous companies in particular in the construction and oil sectors and slashing the confidence of domestic and international investors. At the end of 2014, the KRG owed contractors \$12.5 billion which amounted to almost its entire 2013 revenues.<sup>355</sup> As these measures proved to be insufficient to cover the spiralling budget deficit, the Kurdish government proceeded to cut salaries and allowances. In 2015, the government came short of paying four months of salaries.<sup>356</sup> In March 2016, all public employees received cuts for an average of 60 per cent of their wages.<sup>357</sup> As noted in the previous chapter, more than half of the KRG's workforce was employed by the state and hundreds of thousands of families relied on a single public salary.

The effects of these measures on the life of ordinary Kurds were devastating. An independent study estimated a jump in the poverty rate from just above 3 per cent to 12 per cent in 2015 while average meat consumption dropped from 45 kg to just 23 kg a year.<sup>358</sup> Due to the collapse of the private sector unemployment rose particularly among the youth.<sup>359</sup> Total consumption in the region declined by 14 per cent in 2014 and 24 per cent in 2015.<sup>360</sup> The salary cuts of politicians and high-ranked officials did not produce a sense of collective national sacrifice given the widespread awareness that their salaries were little compared to what they gained through corruption and misappropriation. For example, in January 2015, just

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<sup>355</sup> *In Best of Times and Worst of Times: Addressing Structural Weaknesses of the Kurdistan Region's Economy* (MERI, 2016) <<http://www.meri-k.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/MERI-Economic-Report-January-2016-2.pdf>>, 15.

<sup>356</sup> *In Best of Times*, 15.

<sup>357</sup> *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq* (2015), 11.

<sup>358</sup> This information comes from observants from the region and was collected in DeWeaver, *The State of the Economy*, 3-4.

<sup>359</sup> On this, the data is contradictory. For the year 2014, the KRG estimated youth unemployment at 17.6 per cent while for the UNDP it was as high as 36.7 per cent. See *Capacity Building at the Kurdistan Regional Statistics Organization Through Data Collection* (KRG and Rand Corporation, 2014) <<https://doi.org/10.1214/07-EJS057>>, 27-28; and *Iraq Human Development Report*, 53.

<sup>360</sup> *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq* (2016), 4.

before implementing harsh austerity measures, the KRG covered \$375 million of taxes owed to the Iraqi government by Korek a telecommunication giant widely known to be indirectly owned by Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani.<sup>361</sup> The lavish lifestyle of the Kurdish elite was more and more in sharp contrast to the impoverishment of most of the region's population.

In October 2015, after months of delayed and frozen salaries, protests broke out in the Sulaymaniyah province targeting mostly the offices of the KDP. As the party-affiliated security forces responded with fire, five protestors were killed.<sup>362</sup> The deadly outcome of the demonstrations discouraged protests for a while. However, when the KRG extended the austerity measures to the peshmerga forces – dangerously increasing the rate of desertion on the ISIL front –<sup>363</sup> and to the police, popular rage exploded. Protests took place again in February and then intermittently for the whole of 2016 and 2017.<sup>364</sup> While ordinary Kurds were draining their savings and taking loans to make ends meet, popular opposition to the ruling KDP and PUK reached an unprecedented level. It is impossible to determine the exact class composition of these protests but the austerity measures severely hit the vast majority of the population. Besides the public employees – over half of the workforce –<sup>365</sup> the crisis had devastating effects on the poorest components of Kurdish society especially those relying on daily salaries that found themselves without an income overnight.

The austerity policies adopted by the KRG in the aftermath of the 2014 crisis brought about the collapse of the rentier system established in the 2000s.

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<sup>361</sup> Michael Rubin, 'The Continuing problem of KRG Corruption', *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*, ed. by Gunter, 331-332.

<sup>362</sup> 'Iraqi Kurdistan: Ruling Party Forces Fire on Protesters', *Human Rights Watch*, 21 October 2015 <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/21/iraqi-kurdistan-ruling-party-forces-fire-protesters>>.

<sup>363</sup> Florian Neuhof, 'Unpaid Peshmerga Are Voting with Their Feet', *Deutsche Welle*, 2 February 2016 <<https://www.dw.com/en/unpaid-peshmerga-are-voting-with-their-feet/a-19020152>>.

<sup>364</sup> 'Protests Intensify in Iraqi Kurdistan amid Economic Crisis', *Human Rights Watch*, 9 February 2016 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-protests-idUSKCN0V111X>>.

<sup>365</sup> See Chapter 5.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the rapid economic growth of the previous year had allowed the Kurdish ruling class to appropriate huge amounts of wealth mostly through corruption and non-transparent budgetary practices. However, the political implications of this process of accumulation at the top had been mitigated by the distribution of part of the oil rent to the larger population mostly through public handouts. Due to the weakness of the private sector, most Iraqi Kurds were forced to rely on public employment distributed by the ruling parties. By keeping people's income dependant on their loyalties to the parties, the political elite was able to silence the expressions of popular opposition against their predatory practices. However, as soon as the effects of the salary cuts in the public sector kicked in, this political arrangement broke down and protests started taking place regularly. The response of the ruling KDP and PUK was to use the security apparatus to crack down on dissent and to unlawfully shut down the Kurdish parliament where the opposition could give political expression to popular anger.

When the economic crisis started, the KDP and PUK invited the opposition parties to form a national unity government to have them share the political burden of the crisis. The Gorran Movement – which had boomed in the 2013 regional elections on an anti-corruption platform – joined the government in a short-lived atmosphere of national unity driven by the threat posed by ISIL.<sup>366</sup> Gorran received important ministerial posts as well as the speaker of the parliament. Their experience in power was, however, rather disappointing. Their promises of fighting corruption and imposing transparent practices in the administration were frustrated by the resistance posed by the KRG bureaucracy filled with personnel affiliated to the KDP and the PUK that kept responding to their political parties rather than the ministers. For the Minister of Finance, it proved impossible to track down revenues and expenditure to construct a transparent budget as high-ranked bureaucrats kept hiding the size and directions of each stream of revenues.

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<sup>366</sup> The Islamist parties *Kurdistan Islamic Union* and *Kurdistan Islamic Group* also joined the national unity government.

Moreover, Gorran's plan to transform the peshmerga forces from party militias into a regional army was destined to fail as the KDP and PUK made clear they were never going to give up their most powerful instrument of social control.<sup>367</sup> The control of the armed forces proved to be essential to the KDP when its position of power was directly threatened.

The national unity government lasted for little more than a year. In summer 2015, Masoud Barzani's presidential term was coming to an end. As mounting popular anger was mostly directed against the KDP and the Barzani family, the other parties were resolute to block Masoud's re-election. However, when public demonstrations exploded in October 2015, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani accused Gorran of being behind the protests and sacked their ministers. Thanks to its military control of Erbil, the KDP could just shut down the parliament and prevent the speaker from entering the capital.<sup>368</sup> Despite an attempt to mediate, the United States, leading the anti-ISIL coalition, never withdrew its support to the Barzanis providing a degree of legitimacy that allowed the KDP to keep the parliament shut for two years without any repercussion on their international standing.<sup>369</sup>

### **The Evolving Power Structure of the KRG**

The economic collapse and political unrest that started in 2014-2015 accelerated the crisis of legitimacy of the Kurdish political elite and, by extension, threatened the position of the entire ruling class. To understand

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<sup>367</sup> Interviews with Hoshyar Omar (Sulaymaniyah, 2018) and Kamal Chomani (personal communication, 2019).

<sup>368</sup> Mohammed A. Salih, 'KRG Parliament Speaker: Barzani's Term Extension "against the Law"', *Al-Monitor*, 28 August 2015 <<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/kurdish-parliament-speaker-challenge-barzani-legitimacy.html>>.

<sup>369</sup> Veteran peshmerga commander Kaka Hama claims that "American and British representatives [...] told us [that] if Kurds distract themselves with internal issues, they won't have the support of the UK and the US in fighting the Islamic State." 'Kaka Hama: Parties Warned by US Officials to Keep Barzani President', *Rudaw*, 18 August 2015 <<https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/180820156>>.

why popular protests represented such a danger, it is important to step back and discuss the evolution of the Kurdish ruling class between the 2000s and 2010s and its relationship to the political elite. The suspension of the Kurdish parliament on October 2015 represents just the most blatant example of the authoritarian nature of the two-party rule and particularly of the increasing reliance on coercion that followed the rise of a meaningful challenge with the establishment of Gorran in 2009 and the 2011 anti-corruption protests.<sup>370</sup>

In these years, the function of the KDP and PUK and the power relations within them changed. As discussed earlier, the massive amount of wealth accumulated at the top strengthened the hierarchical structure of these organisations. The long period of relative peace that started with the end of the Kurdish civil war in 1997 reduced the importance of party cadres in charge of the peshmerga units vis-à-vis that of the higher-ranking leaders controlling the sources of rent and hence its redistribution downwards. The power of the dominant families increased substantially to the point that the organisational bodies of the parties – such as the politburo and the party congress – lost their political relevance and were replaced by informal relations of clientelism between powerful families and the middle party cadres. Political bargaining at the regional level has been less between political parties than between families that even built cross-party alliances. The KDP and PUK have maintained their role as political institutions that run the affairs of the region but the power relations lie in informal power chains that run downwards from a dominant politician through loyal party cadres and further down to the ordinary constituents in need of employment and protection.<sup>371</sup>

The KDP has been centred around the Barzani family since its foundation and the weakening of the decision-making bodies of the party was less

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<sup>370</sup> See Chapter 5.

<sup>371</sup> For an analysis along these lines, see *After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid* (International Crisis Group, 2019) <<https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/199-after-iraqi-kurdistan.pdf>>.

dramatic. The leadership has been undisputedly in the hands of the lineage of the 'immortal leader'<sup>372</sup> Mullah Mustafa Barzani with his son Masoud as the head of the family. The line of succession informally proceeds via seniority with Nechirvan, the son of Masoud's prematurely-dead elder brother Idris, as the second in line and Masoud's oldest son Masroul as the third. Consequently, when Masoud Barzani was the KRG president, Nechirvan was the Prime Minister and when Masoud resigned in 2017, Nechirvan succeeded him as the president and Masroul became Prime Minister. The KDP does little to conceal its quasi-monarchical structure and individuals within the family are treated as public officials even if they do not hold any office.<sup>373</sup>

These practices have become dominant also within the PUK but in a context of increasing fragmentation. Until 1992, the PUK was a federation of formally independent parties and, under Jalal Talabani's leadership, the party always contained independent powerful individuals. The encroaching of nepotistic practices and corruption was the main cause of the 2009 split by Nawshirwan Mustafa and his followers and their new party Gorran became a powerful challenger to the PUK in Sulaymaniyah in a way that would be unimaginable in the KDP-controlled areas. However, as the most vocal opponents left with Gorran, the power shift from the PUK party structures to family politics inevitably accelerated. The PUK did not hold any party congress between 2010 and 2019 despite its constitution requiring one every four years.<sup>374</sup> Especially since the death of Jalal Talabani in October 2017, the party has been divided into two factions: One led by Talabani's widow Hero Ibrahim Ahmed and their sons and the other by Kosrat Rasul,

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<sup>372</sup> See 'Congresses of Kurdistan Democratic Party (1946-1999)', KDP, <<https://www.kdp.se/index.php?do=congress>>

<sup>373</sup> In April 2019, Masroul Barzani's teenage son was photographed at a sport event rewarding athletes with medals side by side with the French Consul in Erbil. See Kamal Chomani (@KamalChomani), 'Son of Masroul Barzani, could be around 15 yrs old (...)', *Twitter*, 28 April 2019, 17:05 <<https://twitter.com/KamalChomani/status/1122532218298097664>>.

<sup>374</sup> *After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid*, 6.

the acting leader of the PUK after Talabani's death.<sup>375</sup> In the years of the economic and political crisis, the PUK was unable to pursue a coherent strategy. On the one hand, they tried to recover some of the electoral ground lost in favour of Gorran by blaming the region's problems on the KDP and joining the other parties to stop Masoud Barzani's re-elections in 2015. On the other hand, they have kept a higher level of negotiations with the KDP and resorted – as described later in the chapter – to even more virulent electoral fraud to regain the positions lost in Sulaymaniyah.

The rise of a new generation of Kurdish leaders hailing directly from the dominant families heavily tarnished the legitimacy of the two ruling parties. Whereas Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani could still enjoy popularity and respect due to their prominent role in the liberation struggle,<sup>376</sup> the rise of their sons and nephews to power reveals the real nature of the KDP and PUK as family-run enterprises. The consequence of this process on the two ruling parties has been a dramatic loss of their credibility as the champions of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq and the weakening of their legitimacy of the rule over the region.<sup>377</sup>

This was the context in which the collapse of the Kurdish economy and political system occurred in 2014-2015. The refusal of the two ruling parties to address the public's demands for a more equal distribution of the – now scarce – KRG resources cannot be explained solely with the greed of an elite accustomed to a lavish lifestyle. The appropriation of the KRG's public revenues was an indispensable component of their rule. Without siphoning money off the public budget and maintaining control over the provision of public contracts, the Kurdish leaders could not keep feeding the pyramid of

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<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>376</sup> In Sulaymaniyah, Jalal Talabani's figure is still surrounded by an aura of purity. Corruption and nepotism within the PUK are then often attributed to the greed of his family – his wife Hero Ibrahim particularly – who took charge while Talabani was based in Baghdad and then fell ill.

<sup>377</sup> For an analysis of the increasingly dynastic nature of Iraqi Kurdish politics, see Kamal Chomani, 'Kurdistan Region at a Time of Crown Princes', *1001 Iraqi Thoughts*, 28 December 2018 <<https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2018/12/28/kurdistan-region-in-a-time-of-kurdish-crown-princes>>.

interests that sustain their power. The network of businessmen, high-ranked civil servants, private security companies but also tribal leaders in the rural areas on top of which high-level politicians sit would simply collapse if the stream of money and contracts were interrupted and these local power holders would just migrate their loyalty to some political competitor. In these terms, corruption and misappropriation are not solely bad practices but also an indispensable tool that allows the political elite to feed the wider ruling class of the region and maintain cohesion at the top of the class structure. This cohesion became increasingly important as the KDP and PUK were losing popular support.

### **External Relations and Domestic Rule**

The erosion of the legitimacy of the KDP and PUK went hand in hand with their increasing reliance on the external support of, respectively, Turkey and Iran. As all opposition forces claim, the Department of Foreign Relations of KRG held a purely ceremonial function and external relations were the exclusive domain of the two ruling parties, also due to their direct control over the security apparatus.<sup>378</sup> The close relationship built up by KDP and PUK with their neighbours had a dual function for the Kurdish elite. On the one hand, the economic penetration of the region by Turkish and Iranian actors is an extremely beneficial business for politically-connected Kurdish companies. On the other hand, the KDP and PUK tied their geopolitical survival in an increasingly unstable Middle East to the military might of Turkey and Iran, also gaining insurance against the possibility that domestic unrest escalated into a full-blown revolution.

However, such a close partnership with two foreign powers which themselves oppress their Kurdish minorities heavily undermines the nationalist credentials of the KDP and PUK. Kurdish nationalism is inherently

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<sup>378</sup> Interviews with Mustafa Abbas Abbas (Sulaymaniyah, 2018), Aram Saeed (Sulaymaniyah, 2018), Hoshyar Omar (Sulaymaniyah, 2018), Muhammad Hakim Jabar (Sulaymaniyah, 2018), and Muthanna Amin (Sulaymaniyah, 2018).

irredentist as the Kurds are spread as minorities across four countries. The feeling of solidarity among Kurdish speakers across Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria made the KRG a natural haven for Kurdish opposition groups from neighbouring countries. In the 1990s, both the PKK from Turkey and a constellation of armed Iranian-Kurdish organisations settled within the borders of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq giving Turkey and Iran a permanent excuse to violate the KRG territory.<sup>379</sup> The KDP and PUK have had to juggle their close relationship with Turkey and Iran with the widespread popular sympathy toward Kurdish opposition in those countries.

The strategic partnership between Iran and the PUK dates back to the Kurdish civil war in the 1990s and was largely a response to the KDP's growing ties with Baghdad and Ankara.<sup>380</sup> While the PUK was at war with the KDP and under blockade by Baghdad, the Iranian border became the only window to the world for the Sulaymaniyah-based PUK. But Iran's support did not come for free and, in 1996, Talabani allowed Iranian troops to cross the border and attack the Iranian Kurdish fighters of the KDPI hosted in the PUK-controlled area.<sup>381</sup> Since then the PUK was forced into the uncomfortable position of having to police the activities of the KDPI on behalf of Tehran.<sup>382</sup> Despite the paralysis of the Iranian-Kurdish party, Iran kept hitting its enemy across the KRG as shown by targeted assassinations of opposition leaders,<sup>383</sup> and the 2018 bombing of the KDPI bases that killed

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<sup>379</sup> Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society*, 276-299.

<sup>380</sup> Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament*, 111-112.

<sup>381</sup> According to Asso Hasanzadeh, the son of the then-leader of the KDPI Abdullah Hasanzadeh, Jalal Talabani warned the Iranian Kurds so that "when [the Iranians] bombed here, only our peshmerga were left here, our families were sent to the UN camps in Erbil." Interview with Asso Hasanzadeh (Koya, 2018).

<sup>382</sup> Loghman Ahmedi, a young member of the KDPI leadership claims that "we made a very strategic mistake in the early 1990s when we decided to leave our bases in the mountains and came down here. [...] We halted some of our activities because [...] we wanted to give the KRG an opportunity to stabilise and create their own institutions and so on. But that weakened our party." Interview with Loghman Ahmedi (Koya, 2019).

<sup>383</sup> Fazel Hawramy, 'Assassinations Mount as Iranian Kurdish Militants Clash with Tehran', *Al-Monitor*, 7 March 2018 <<https://www.al-monitor.com>>

15 militants.<sup>384</sup> Due to its reliance on Iranian support, the PUK is in no position to effectively protest these violations.

The political ties between Tehran and the PUK parallel the economic penetration of the PUK-controlled areas by Iranian business. The level of economic influence Iran exercises over Sulaymaniyah extends beyond the area's dependence on Iranian-made consumer goods and food supply. The Kurdish political elite – in a more or less transparent way – partners with Iranian firms and takes a stake in the profits made by Iranian investment, while the PUK benefits directly from the control of the border-crossings.<sup>385</sup> Generally speaking, the multi-layered influence exercised by Tehran over an important part of the KRG is one of the reasons why Iran supported the establishment of the autonomous Kurdish region in 2003. This fits in very well with Iran's broader objective of keeping Iraq fragmented and decentralized, to avoid the resurgence of the strong enemy they faced in the 1980s.

Iran's influence over Sulaymaniyah is, however, surpassed by Turkey's sway over the KDP-controlled area of the KRG. Since the PKK established its bases in the Qandil mountain in the north-eastern corner of the KRG in 1991, the Turkish-Kurdish conflict intertwined with Iraqi Kurdish politics. The PKK took advantage of the remoteness of this area to wage attacks on Turkish positions, pushing Turkey to carry on a series of costly but unsuccessful cross-border operations on Iraqi soil. The proximity of the KDP-controlled area to the Turkish border and Barzani's interest in limiting the influence of the PKK deepened Turkish-KDP relations in the 1990s. However, open ties could only develop in the late 2000s, after the Islamist *Justice and Development Party* (AKP) led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan consolidated its

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[monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/iran-kdpi-kurdish-opposition-iraq-assassinations-rahmani.html#ixzz5bkPrbUIC](https://www.monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/iran-kdpi-kurdish-opposition-iraq-assassinations-rahmani.html#ixzz5bkPrbUIC)>.

<sup>384</sup> 'Rockets Hit Iranian Kurdish Opposition Offices in Iraq's Koya', *Al Jazeera*, 8 September 2018 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/rockets-hit-iranian-kurdish-opposition-offices-iraq-koya-180908090605503.html>>.

<sup>385</sup> 'Iran to Establish Goods Trading Center in Iraq's Sulaymaniyah', *Mehr News Agency*, 29 October 2018 <<https://en.mehrnews.com/news/139170/Iran-to-establish-goods-trading-center-in-iraq-s-Sulaymaniyah>>.

power in Turkey and could overcome the resistance of the viscerally anti-Kurdish nationalist establishment. These efforts culminated in the opening of a Turkish consulate in Erbil in 2010. Since then, the rate of Turkish economic investments in the KRG grew exponentially, and cross-border trade flourished. As in the case of Iranian economic penetration, this economic partnership largely benefitted the local Kurdish elite.<sup>386</sup> Profits increased exponentially when the KRG started selling oil to Turkey. Ankara's thirst for cheap fuel offered the KDP leadership the opportunity to bypass Baghdad's constitutional monopoly over the export of Iraqi oil by selling it directly to Turkey. In the early 2010s, the oil partnership with Turkey became one of the most significant points of contention between Iraq and the KRG increasing Erbil's bargaining power *vis-à-vis* Baghdad but reducing its autonomy from Ankara.<sup>387</sup>

The relationship between Turkey and the KDP held also a significant political dimension. Engaged in a long-term campaign against the pro-PKK parties for electoral hegemony over Turkey's Kurdish region, Erdoğan used his relationship with Barzani to demonstrate the compatibility between the AKP values and Kurdish identity. This attempt culminated in Barzani's participation, in November 2013, in a mass rally in Diyarbakır – Turkey's largest Kurdish-majority city – where he shared the stage with Erdoğan in an unprecedented celebration of Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood.<sup>388</sup> This relationship raised Barzani's standing as a pan-Kurdish leader who could provide Turkey's Kurds with a conservative alternative to the militant PKK. However, the Turkey-KDP political partnership suffered a blow in 2015 with the onset of the parliamentary alliance between Erdoğan's AKP and the Turkish far-right characterised by violently anti-Kurdish positions. With little

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<sup>386</sup> See Chapter 5.

<sup>387</sup> See Bill Park, 'Turkey, the US and the KRG: Moving Parts and the Geopolitical Realities', *Insight Turkey*, 14.3 (2012), 109–25.

<sup>388</sup> Çandar, Cengiz, 'Erdoğan-Barzani 'Diyarbakır encounter' milestone', *al-Monitor*, 20 November 2013 <<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/erdogan-barzani-kurdistan-diyarbakir-political-decision.html>>.

or no opposition from the KDP, Turkey resumed airstrikes over the PKK camps in Iraqi Kurdistan that regularly kill local Kurdish villagers. The violation of the KRG territory and the multi-front war waged by Erdoğan against the PKK, the civilian Kurdish opposition as well as the Kurds of Syria,<sup>389</sup> exposed the contradictions between the KDP's nationalism and its relations with Ankara undermining its credibility among the Kurds.<sup>390</sup> Nevertheless, the KDP's economic and geopolitical dependency on Turkey remained intact as shown by the ban on pro-PKK political activities,<sup>391</sup> and the opening of two Turkish military bases on KRG soil.<sup>392</sup> Turkish military presence stirred popular resentments manifested in violent demonstrations.<sup>393</sup>

When looked at from the standpoint of domestic politics, it becomes clear why the benefits of the foreign partnerships of the KDP and the PUK outweigh their cost in terms of political legitimacy. Besides the profits brought by partnering with foreign companies, the KDP and PUK enjoy the backing of a regional power vis-à-vis Baghdad but also their own populations. The stronger their ties with Turkey and Iran, the less accountable they feel to domestic dissent increasing their authoritarian control over the region's politics and economy. When the 2014 crisis broke out, the mounting pressure from below pushed the KDP and the PUK to invest in a much more aggressive nationalist rhetoric in open contradiction

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<sup>389</sup> See Chapter 9.

<sup>390</sup> 'Iraqi Kurds Protest against Turkish "Genocide"', Euronews, 8 February 2016 <<https://www.euronews.com/2016/02/08/iraqi-kurds-protest-against-turkish-genocide>>.

<sup>391</sup> The KDP-controlled KRG Electoral Committee banned from the regional elections of September 2018 the pro-PKK *Tevgar Azadi* despite the fact that the party had been allowed to participate in the Iraqi federal elections of May. Interviews with Aram Saeed (Sulaymaniyah, 2018), Abbas Mustafa Abbas (Sulaymaniyah, 2018), and Tara Muhammed (Sulaymaniyah, 2018).

<sup>392</sup> 'KRG Spokesperson Statement on Turkish Forces Presence in Bashiqa', *Kurdistan Regional Government*, 6 October 2016 <<http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=54994>>.

<sup>393</sup> Fehim Taştekin, 'Storming of Base in Iraq a Grave Signal for Turkey', *Al-Monitor*, 1 February 2019 <<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/02/turkey-iraqi-kurdistan-storming-of-base-grave-signal.html>>.

with their deep ties to Turkey and Iran. However, this contradiction backfired in the occasion of the 2017 independence referendum.

### **The 2017 Independence Referendum**

As mass anti-austerity demonstrations started taking place regularly since late 2015, the KDP and PUK realised that they were standing on increasingly shaky ground. As meeting public demands was not an option, the KRG leadership responded with a carrot-and-stick strategy combining political repression with heightened nationalist rhetoric against Baghdad. After showing no hesitation to fire on protesters, they suspended the parliament and expelled the other political forces from the government leaving a KDP-PUK cabinet to run the affairs of the region without any check while Masoud Barzani remained president even after his term expired in 2015. Parallel to repression, the ruling parties revamped their aggressive nationalist rhetoric to raise the tensions with Baghdad in an attempt to generate a 'rally-'round-the-flag' effect.

The attempt to invest in nationalism and to divert public attention from the economic crisis was aided by the mass popularity of the peshmerga deployed on the ISIL front and by the occupation by Kurdish forces of most of the areas disputed by Baghdad and Erbil. In particular, the Kurdish takeover of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk from ISIL inflamed nationalist feelings, given the city's highly symbolic value for the Kurds. Riding popular sentiments, the KRG president Masoud Barzani raised the issue of Kurdish independence as soon as the war started.<sup>394</sup> In spring 2017, as Iraqi and Kurdish forces liberated Mosul from ISIL while – at the same time – protests in the KRG intensified, a high-level meeting between the KDP and PUK resulted in the decision to hold a referendum by the end of that year.<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> 'Iraq Kurdistan Independence Referendum Planned', *BBC News*, 1 July 2014 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28103124>>.

<sup>395</sup> 'Kurdistan Will Hold Independence Referendum in 2017, Senior Official', *Rudaw*, 2 April 2017 <<https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/020420171>>.

The KDP heavily invested in the referendum to shift the debate away from the political and economic crises and the suspension of the parliament. Masoud Barzani presented the referendum as about “the destiny” of the Kurdish people and therefore as above “any other political framework, or any political parties, or any political problems within the party system.”<sup>396</sup> The KDP managed to present a solid and unified position maximizing their appeal to nationalist voters. The situation was more complicated for the PUK that was going through a period of fragmentation especially since Jalal Talabani fell terminally ill before dying in October 2017. Moreover, the referendum was bound to generate tensions in the ethnically-mixed Kirkuk and jeopardise Kurdish control of the city which had traditionally been a PUK stronghold. The PUK leadership in Kirkuk, supported by the Talabani family, was against holding the referendum in the city. However, Kirkuk governor Najmaddin Karim appealed to the PUK acting leader Kosrat Rasul who sent 3,000 peshmerga to the city to enforce the holding of the referendum.<sup>397</sup>

The nationalist frenzy promoted by the KDP forced the opposition to attenuate their positions. While recognizing the right of the Kurds to self-determination, Gorran questioned the timing of the referendum and demanded to have the regional elections – due in November 2017 – in conjunction with it. When the government convened the parliament on September 15<sup>th</sup>, after two years of forced closure, just to ceremonially proclaim the referendum date on September 25<sup>th</sup>, Gorran and other opposition forces, as well as part of the PUK boycotted the meeting. Observers describe the divide running through the region with the KDP-controlled areas covered with pro-independence propaganda and nothing of the kind in the PUK-controlled areas.<sup>398</sup> On the day of the referendum, 93

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<sup>396</sup> Campbell MacDiarmid, ‘Masoud Barzani: Why It’s Time for Kurdish Independence’, *Foreign Policy*, 15 June 2017 <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/15/masoud-barzani-why-its-time-for-kurdish-independence/>>.

<sup>397</sup> Bill Park, Joost Jongerden, Francis Owtram, and Akiko Yoshioka, ‘Field Notes: On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017’, *Kurdish Studies*, 5.2 (2017), 208.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

per cent of voters supported independence. However, the huge differences in the participation rate present the picture of a very divided region with 91 per cent turnout in KDP-controlled Dohuk and just 55 per cent in Sulaymaniyah.<sup>399</sup>

One of the reasons why many were sceptical of the referendum was the sheer lack of international support needed to make Kurdish statehood viable. The US opposed the referendum and Baghdad threatened retaliation while Ankara and Tehran, fearing the effects of Kurdish statehood on their own Kurdish minorities, restated their commitment to the territorial integrity of Iraq. In the aftermath of the referendum, the KRG leadership found itself completely isolated on the international stage and had to face the retaliatory actions of the neighbouring powers.<sup>400</sup> Turkey and Iran showed their muscles by organising a joint military exercise on the border. Supported by the two neighbours, Baghdad immediately halted international flights to the KRG while Tehran and Ankara closed their airspace to all flights to and from the region. On October 15<sup>th</sup>, Iraqi troops marched on Kirkuk without encountering much resistance and possibly in agreement with the PUK faction that had opposed the referendum in the first place.<sup>401</sup> In just a few days, most of the disputed territories gained by the Kurds during the war on ISIL were lost. The repercussions of the referendum surpassed the most pessimistic expectations and, on November 1<sup>st</sup>, Masoud Barzani resigned as KRG president.

The size and weight of the punitive measures taken against the KRG triggered a debate over the choice to pursue the referendum despite the virtually unanimous international hostility. The independence of a landlocked Kurdish state without the support of any one of the neighbouring powers would inevitably turn into a geopolitical nightmare. Most scholars

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<sup>399</sup> Turnout figures are estimates. *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>400</sup> See, Bill Park, 'Explaining Turkey's Reaction to the September 2017 Independence Referendum in the KRG: Final Divorce or Relationship Reset?', *Ethnopolitics*, 18.1 (2019), 46-60.

<sup>401</sup> Park and others, *Field Notes*, 208.

and observers explained Barzani's choice as the result of miscalculations or of genuine nationalist aspirations that go beyond any material considerations.<sup>402</sup> These interpretations 'orientalise' the Kurdish leadership depicting them as patriotic warriors too naïve to understand geopolitical power games and legitimise Barzani's and the KDP's victimhood narrative. More importantly, these readings dismiss the contested nature of the referendum and the opposition of important sectors of the Kurdish society. More convincingly, the analyses by Palani and others (2019) and, O'Driscoll and Başer (2019) point to domestic political dynamics within the KRG explaining the referendum as a political move by the KDP.<sup>403</sup> However, presenting the referendum solely as Barzani's gamble to stay in power overlooks the structural context that forced the KDP to invest in an increasingly aggressive nationalist stance as their last source of political legitimacy. The referendum must be seen in continuity with this process as well as tied to the increasing reliance on repression and authoritarian methods. The referendum was, in these terms, the ultimate tool of the strategy of survival of the Kurdish ruling class and it is not coincidental that it was promoted and supported by the entire KDP leadership and by a significant part of the PUK.

Even if Barzani made some gross miscalculations, he was aware that a parliamentary majority to keep the presidency for himself was simply not there. Yet, the chaos generated by the referendum allowed the KDP to postpone the regional elections for another year. Ultimately, the KDP – unlike the Iraqi Kurds as a whole – did not lose anything from the referendum and, as the next section shows, they even came out stronger. Masoud

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<sup>402</sup> Just to give some examples: Fahrettin Sumer and Jay Joseph, 'The Paradox of the Iraqi Kurdish Referendum on Independence: Contradictions and Hopes for Economic Prosperity', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 45.4 (2018), 574–88; Morgan L. Kaplan, 'Foreign Support, Miscalculation, and Conflict Escalation: Iraqi Kurdish Self-Determination in Perspective', *Ethnopolitics*, 18.1 (2019), 29–45 .

<sup>403</sup> O'Driscoll and Başer, *Independence Referendums*; Kamaran Palani, Jaafar Khidir, Mark Dechesne, and Edwin Bakker, 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood: Kurdistan's September 2017 Referendum for Independence', *Third World Quarterly*, 40.12 (2019), 2270–2288.

remained the head of the Barzani family and arguably the most powerful individual in the region.

Kirkuk was undoubtedly a great symbolic and material loss but the KDP managed to shift the blame on the PUK forces that garrisoned the city. The traditional hold of the PUK over Kirkuk meant that its inclusion in the upcoming regional elections would have significantly boosted the party in the Kurdish parliament while the control of the Kirkuk oilfields could have allowed the PUK to bridge the gap with the KDP in terms of economic power. However, independent studies show that the oil from Kirkuk will not constitute a significant part of the KRG production for more than a few years and, with the expansion of the oil sector to the region's vast unexploited fields, it will likely become marginal in the course of the 2020s.<sup>404</sup> In the long-term, Kirkuk's oil output would not make a huge difference for the viability of a Kurdish state while its inclusion in the KRG would certainly change the internal relations of power and constitute a permanent source of tension with Baghdad. Ultimately, even if it was not a calculated move, losing Kirkuk was a convenient unintended consequence for the KDP.

The result of the Kurdish referendum was a renewed political paralysis. Under the threat of invasion from Baghdad and the neighbouring powers, the KDP managed to postpone the regional elections for another year, showing that the resignation of President Barzani was not going to bring any step towards the democratisation of the region. The ruling elite had lost its legitimacy in the eyes of most of the Iraqi Kurdish population, yet the militarization of the region seemed to leave no room for political alternatives.

### **The Crisis of Kurdish Nationalism**

The 2017 independence referendum marks a turning point in the history of the Kurdish region of Iraq. Despite the overwhelming victory, the independence of the region was never proclaimed while the KRG had to pay the heavy consequences of the vote. The result was a widespread feeling

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<sup>404</sup> Mills, *Under the Mountains*, 24.

of resentment towards the ruling elite which had lost its legitimacy in the eyes of a large part of the Kurdish population, a feeling manifested in the frequency and width of public protests. However, the continuous use of coercion by the dominant party and the gradual co-optation of Gorran into the ruling establishment generated a pervasive sense of disillusionment for any prospects of political change within the system. The ultimate victim of these dynamics was Kurdish nationalism as the fundamental source of legitimacy for political power in the region.

The hope that the independence referendum would trigger a 'rally-round-the-flag' effect was dashed in just a few days. At the announcement of Masoud Barzani's resignation, a spontaneous crowd stormed the Kurdish parliament in Erbil.<sup>405</sup> Large anti-austerity protests resumed in the fall of 2017 and took place frequently throughout 2018. In December 2017, the police fired on the protestors killing six.<sup>406</sup>

Despite growing popular resentment, the Iraqi federal elections of March 2018 proved to be a success for the KDP and PUK. The KDP triumphed in Dohuk and Erbil, while the PUK became again the first party in Sulaymaniyah. Gorran, after two consecutive electoral victories, dropped from 39 per cent in 2014 to just 23 per cent. Contributing to Gorran's fall was the establishment of the *New Generation Movement*, a populist party founded by businessman Shaswar Abdulwahid Qadir that managed to attract part of the protest vote. However, the most significant characteristics of these elections were the dramatic drop in voters' turnout and the allegations of an unprecedented degree of electoral fraud.<sup>407</sup> The

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<sup>405</sup> 'Protesters Storm Kurdistan Parliament after Barzani Announces Resignation', *Reuters*, 29 October 2017 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-protests/protesters-storm-kurdistan-parliament-after-barzani-announces-resignation-idUSKBN1CY0PI>>.

<sup>406</sup> Gul Tuysuz, Hamdi Alkhshali, and Muwafaq Mohammed, 'At Least 6 Killed during Violent Protests in Iraqi Kurdistan', *CNN*, 19 December 2017 <<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/19/middleeast/iraq-kurdish-protests/index.html>>.

<sup>407</sup> According to Abbas Mustafa Abbas, Professor at Sulaymaniyah University, "more than 100,000 dead people are still in the [electoral] lists. Also, they are duplicating the names. For example, the peshmerga are 300,000 people and they

turnout averagely fell by more than 20 per cent compared to the 2014 elections, as only half of the registered voters showed up at the ballot. In KDP-controlled Erbil, turnout was as low as 43 per cent.<sup>408</sup> The opposition parties were heavily penalised by this low level of participation driven by the widespread sense of disillusionment. A feeling that was well justified. The perception that KDP and PUK had manipulated the results – more heavily than usual – came not only from civil society groups and the opposition parties but also from the Iraqi government and several international organisations.<sup>409</sup> Unsurprisingly, a very similar picture emerged from the Kurdish regional elections held just a few months later on September 2018. Both the KDP and PUK increased their seats in the regional parliament while Gorran lost almost half. The turnout was as low as 58.4 per cent (-16 per cent from 2013) but even this figure might have been manipulated.<sup>410</sup>

The elections of 2018, the first after the beginning of the crisis and popular protests, showed that KDP and PUK were no longer willing to allow any margin to political challengers even at the cost of turning the electoral process into a farce. In this context measuring the actual remaining popular support to the two ruling parties is futile but the need to resort to even more blatant electoral fraud suggests that it is very low. These elections also had a profound impact on Gorran. Gorran's control of the provincial council of Sulaymaniyah and their participation in the regional government in 2014-2015 already showed the narrow margins for change even when its members were in executive positions. The widespread disillusionment that followed the 2017 referendum heavily affected Gorran especially as the KDP and PUK blocked the electoral path to change. With the death of Gorran's

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can vote both before the elections and during the elections. It means 30 seats!". Interview with Abbas Mustafa Abbas (Sulaymaniyah, 2018).

<sup>408</sup> Renad Mansour and Christine Van Den Toorn, *The 2018 Iraqi Elections: A Population in Transition?*, (LSE Middle East Centre and IRIS, July 2018) <[http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89698/7/MEC\\_Iraqi-elections\\_Report\\_2018.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89698/7/MEC_Iraqi-elections_Report_2018.pdf)> 16.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>410</sup> Kristina Bogos, *Analysis: Looking Back on the 2018 Kurdish Elections* (IRIS, March 2019) <[https://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/Analysis\\_Looking\\_Back\\_on\\_the\\_2018\\_Kurdish\\_Elections\\_March\\_2019.pdf](https://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/Analysis_Looking_Back_on_the_2018_Kurdish_Elections_March_2019.pdf)>.

founder Nawshirwan Mustafa in May 2017, the party visibly fell under the influence of his sons Nma and Cheya, a dynamic that generated great opposition within the party, with cadres accusing the leadership of turning the party into a family business like the KDP and PUK.<sup>411</sup> While much of the youth, as well as veteran peshmerga commanders and early followers of Nawshirwan Mustafa, left the party,<sup>412</sup> the so-called 'pragmatist wing' gained strength. The argument put forward by the now-dominant figures in Gorran is that the elections showed that the only way for the party to be competitive is to be in power where they can distribute jobs and handouts among their followers and build a solid support base similar to those of the KDP and PUK.<sup>413</sup> These considerations reflect the widespread belief that the space for a mode of politics alternative to that of the KDP and PUK was closed. In the year that followed the regional elections of September 2018, the KDP led the negotiation to form a government with both the PUK and Gorran until an agreement was found in May 2019. Gorran joined the cabinet and voted with the KDP to elect Nechirvan Barzani as President of the region and Masrour Barzani as the Prime Minister.

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<sup>411</sup> Gorran's Hoshyar Omar explains that the party properties were registered under Nawshirwan Mustafa's name – and are now controlled by his sons – to avoid the risk of having them seized in case Gorran's licence was revoked. "For that purely legal requirement this [Zargata] hill was not transferred to the party." Interview with Hoshyar Omar (Sulaymaniyah, 2018).

<sup>412</sup> One of them was Qadir Haji Ali, a well-respected veteran of the liberation war and early follower of Nawshirwan Mustafa. Interview Qadir Haji Ali (Sulaymaniyah, 2019). For the flight of activists and cadres, see Fazel Hawramy, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's Movement for Change Faces Rebellion from Within', *Al-Monitor*, 9 July 2018 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/change-movement-nawshirwan-mustafa-kurdistan-iraq.html>>

<sup>413</sup> Independent journalist Kamal Chomani attributes Gorran's shift to the opportunistic tendency expressed largely by the parliamentary factions and the upper cadres that fear that are ones likely to gain ministerial posts and cabinet positions when Gorran joins the government. Interview with Kamal Chomani (personal communication, 2019). For the debate within Gorran, see Zmkan Ali Saleem and Mac Skelton, 'Protests and Power: Lessons from Iraqi Kurdistan's Opposition Movement | Middle East Centre', *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 10 November 2019 <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2019/11/10/protests-and-power-lessons-from-iraqi-kurdistans-opposition-movement/>>.

The co-optation of Gorran into the political establishment marked the end of the hopes for a political change within the framework of the KRG. The collapse of the electoral turnout shows that the appeal to the nationalist feeling is no longer effective. In the meantime, political opposition was more and more expressed by public demonstrations. Interestingly enough, Shaswar Abdulwahid's New Generation Movement – the biggest opposition party since Gorran joined the government – radically shifted away from nationalism and blamed the KRG's lack of cooperation with Baghdad for the problems of the region. New Generation's Aram Saeed explains:

it's very important to have partners in Iraq. [...] We can help Basra, Basra can help us... we think the nationalism of the KDP and PUK is a very bad tradition. We discussed with [Muqtada al-]Sadr and [Haider al-]Abadi, we don't want to make a coalition of one nationality against other nationalities, or Shi'as against Sunnis. We need to pass this kind of thinking.<sup>414</sup>

Before establishing his highly personalistic and self-funded party, Shaswar rose to political prominence at the time of the referendum when he launched a *No, for Now* campaign heavily pushed by his own TV channel NRT.

Moreover, the crisis of legitimacy of the ruling parties went hand in hand with the rising popular sympathy, particularly among the youth, towards the more militant PKK and its Syrian-sister party the *Democratic Union Party* (PYD) due to their emphasis on “social justice, freedom, and women's liberation”.<sup>415</sup> The PKK is particularly effective at conveying the image of the guerrillas' frugal life in the mountains in stark contrast with the opulence of the Iraqi Kurdish politicians.<sup>416</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The KRG elections of September 2018 and the solid victory of the KDP and PUK suggest that the Kurdish elite has been able to survive the economic

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<sup>414</sup> Interview with Aram Saeed (Sulaymaniyah, 2018).

<sup>415</sup> Interview with Kamal Chomani (personal communication, 2019).

<sup>416</sup> Interview with Kamal Chomani (personal communication, 2019).

and political crisis that started in 2014 and that triggered the greatest threat to their power since the liberation of the region in 1991. Despite their size and frequency, popular protests have not been able to evolve into a political alternative to the ruling party. Both the ferocity of the KRG-led repression and the weakness of the opposition parties contributed to this failure. The KDP and PUK are still in control of the KRG institutions and its security forces while their greatest political challenger Gorran has been weakened and co-opted. In March 2019, as his last act as Prime Minister, Nechirvan Barzani announced the end of the austerity measures imposed after 2014.<sup>417</sup> The current relations of power in the region seem to allow the Kurdish ruling class to continue its strategy of accumulation based on corruption and misappropriation of public resources. The political elite that organises the interests of and mediates within the ruling class defused the challenge coming from the parliamentary opposition through repression and cooptation ensuring the survival of the system. However, the crisis and the referendum have changed the economic picture of the region. The crisis left the KRG with a huge debt towards foreign corporations including \$3 billion owed to oil companies.<sup>418</sup> The pre-crisis plans to build a strong oil sector independent from Baghdad has been dashed by Turkey's opposition to the referendum and its cooperation with the Iraqi government. The KRG has to send its oil to Baghdad and to rely again on the constitutional budget transfer, now reduced from 17 per cent to just 12.5 per cent, with the addition of the oil that the Kurds manage to smuggle beyond the border.<sup>419</sup>

All these conditions raise doubts about the KRG's ability to rebuild the rentier system that was in place until 2014. With less cash available for

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<sup>417</sup> Kosar Nawzad, 'Kurdistan Ends Unpopular Austerity Measure, Will Pay Public Salaries "in Full"', *Kurdistan 24*, 8 March 2019 <<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/34b6f15b-f457-4a18-a76f-01531dab5475>>.

<sup>418</sup> Lawk Ghafari, 'Before Sending Oil, Kurds Want Baghdad to Clear Their Debts', *Rudaw*, 23 September 2019 <<https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/230920193>>.

<sup>419</sup> Omar Sattar, 'New Pipeline in Works to Transport Iraqi Oil to Turkey', *Al-Monitor*, 18 September 2019 <<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/09/iraq-turkey-pipeline-kirkuk-ceyhan.html>>.

redistribution and the same needed to keep the power structure of the region intact, the KRG will struggle to recover a degree of political stability especially since the strategies deployed by the KDP and PUK have heavily undermined their legitimacy to rule in the eyes of the wider Kurdish public. A long-term victim of the crisis seems to be Kurdish nationalism itself as the ideological source of political legitimacy in the Iraqi Kurdistan.

**Map 4 - The Kurdish Insurgency in Turkey**



# **Chapter 7**

## **Underdevelopment and the Kurdish Question in Cold-War Turkey (1946-1987)**

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### **Introduction**

After the defeat of the Kurdish feudal revolts of the interwar period, the political dynamics and class structure of the Kurdish regions of Turkey and Iraq diversified substantially as they were shaped by the different nation-building projects promoted by the two countries. This chapter discusses the development of the Kurdish movement in the Turkish republic from the suppression of the interwar-period revolts to the rise of the PKK in the 1980s. After the defeat of the feudal revolts of the 1920s and 1930s, Kurdish nationalism in Turkey was brought to silence while the Turkish state worked to erase any expression of Kurdish identity. With the beginning of multi-party democracy in 1950, the traditional elite of the Kurdish region was gradually re-integrated into Turkey's political system. Their authority over rural areas allowed them to control the vote of vast peasant and tribal constituencies, making their contribution precious to nationwide conservative parties. In these years, the economic subordination of the Kurdish region to the more developed western Anatolia, combined with the mechanisation of agriculture, transformed Kurdish society, increasing landlessness and rural migration.

The alliance between the Kurdish aghas and the Turkish state via the dominant conservative parties was the principal reason why Kurdish political identity re-emerged within the Turkish left in the 1960s and 1970s. Kurdish activists started framing the relationship between Turkey and its Kurdish

region in terms of colonialism and the Kurdish elite as the agent class of Turkish colonialism. This was the decisive step towards the development of an autonomous Kurdish left with the PKK as its most successful expression. Unlike its competitors, the PKK developed a strategy aimed specifically at winning the support of the Kurdish peasantry through violent actions directed against both the Kurdish landowners and the Turkish security forces. After the 1980 military coup swept away most of the Turkish and Kurdish left, the PKK started an insurgency that had a strong base of support among the peasantry and turned into the biggest military challenge faced by the Turkish republic since its foundation.

### **The Kurds in the Early Kemalist Republic**

In the years between the proclamation of the Republic in 1923 and the first democratic elections of 1950, Turkey was ruled by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's *Republican People's Party* (CHP) and underwent a process of authoritarian modernisation. As Chapter 3 showed, the suppression of the feudal revolts of the 1920s and 1930s became the occasion for Ankara to impose a form of tight military control over the Kurdish areas of south-eastern Turkey<sup>420</sup> allegedly to liberate the region from feudalism and tribalism. This brutal repression was accompanied by a project of demographic engineering aimed at diluting and *Turkifying* the Kurdish population defined by the Kemalist regime as 'tribal populace that do not speak the Turkish language'.<sup>421</sup> In the 1930s, over 25.000 Kurds were deported to western Turkey and replaced by several thousand non-Kurdish settlers.<sup>422</sup> With the aim of destroying the tribal structures of Kurdish society, many of the aghas and shaykhs involved in the revolts were deported. Obsessed by the threat

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<sup>420</sup> As explained in the introduction of this thesis, defining the predominantly Kurdish provinces with precision is an impossible task. Map 4 shows a rough correspondence between Kurdish presence and Turkish administrative divisions.

<sup>421</sup> Cited in Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 181.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, 180-185.

of separatism, Ankara was resolute to erase Kurdish identity and, in 1924, the public use of the Kurdish language was prohibited.

Repression and deportations took place in a region already devastated by war. Eastern Anatolia had been the frontline of the war against Russia, a theatre of the First World War that had especially heavy repercussions for the civilian population. The perception of the Christian element as an internal enemy pushed the Ottoman government to undertake a systematic campaign of massacres and deportation of the local Christians which developed into the genocide of one to two million Armenians and other Ottoman Christians. The effect of wartime devastation and depopulation on the economy and social fabric of the region were aggravated by the fact that the autochthonous Christian population who had been deported and massacred represented a significant proportion of the artisans and traders of Eastern Anatolia.

Underpopulated and ruled by martial law, the Kurdish region of Turkey – home in 1927 to roughly two million people –<sup>423</sup> was unable to benefit from the country's post-war economic recovery. As explained by Veli Yadirgi, in the years of Kemalist single-party rule (1923-1950), the gap between western and eastern Turkey increased enormously. The policy of industrialisation promoted by Ankara was largely directed at the west of the country and the share of manufactures located in the south-east dropped from 17.8 per cent in 1927 to only 7.7 per cent in 1955 while agricultural production was heavily affected by the lack of machinery and infrastructure and the scarcity of labour. In 1943 – when Turkish agriculture was booming – the income for a hectare of land in south-eastern Turkey was half of the national average.<sup>424</sup>

The yawning east-west gap was not only due to the uneven distribution of state resources but also to the effects of the same economic policies applied to two different contexts. The rural structure of western and central

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 188-191.

Anatolia was based on small independent farmers and agriculture had been commercialised since the nineteenth century thanks to a relatively high degree of infrastructural development. In eastern Anatolia, the underdeveloped infrastructure and the roughness of the terrain rarely allowed for agricultural products to be exported outside the region. Ownership patterns were not uniform, with the least productive – generally mountainous – areas characterised by small farms hardly able to produce beyond subsistence and the most fertile lands – such as the Diyarbakır plains – often dominated by large estates.<sup>425</sup>

The violent quelling of the Dersim rebellion in 1938 marked the end of the political agitations of the interwar period in the Kurdish region and the beginning of a period characterised by the virtual absence of expressions of Kurdish political identity that lasted until the early 1960s. Historian Hamit Bozarslan offers three reasons for the beginning of this ‘period of silence’ of Kurdish nationalism. First, the Kemalist repression of the early Kurdish revolts had been violent enough to discourage open dissent. Second, the sudden end of the Iranian Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in 1946 showed that no regional or global power was willing to support Kurdish separatism. However, the most important reason given by Bozarslan is the partial opening of the Turkish political system from the mid-1940s. In particular, the rise of the *Democrat Party* (DP) and its electoral victory in 1950 allowed the aghas and shaykhs – the Kurdish tribal elite – to be integrated into the Turkish political system.<sup>426</sup>

### **The ‘Agha-State’ Alliance and the Incorporation of the Kurdish Elite**

Turkish sociologist İsmail Beşikçi, who spent cumulatively seventeen years in prison for his research on Kurdish society, explains that:

once all the focal points of rebellion in Kurdistan had been done away with, the state presented the “Kurdish ruling classes” with two alternatives: they were either to take the side of the state, or they

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<sup>425</sup> Çağlar Keyder, *State and Class in Turkey* (London: Verso, 1987).

<sup>426</sup> Bozarslan, *Kurds and the Turkish State*, 343-344.

would be sent to the gallows like Sheikh Said and Seyid Rıza.<sup>427</sup> Under these circumstances, the sheikhs, landlords, and tribal chiefs, in other words, the “Kurdish ruling classes” turned into agents for the Turkish government.<sup>428</sup>

This passage from Beşikçi’s *International Colony Kurdistan* is a vivid summary of the process of the incorporation of the traditional elite of the Kurdish region into the Turkish state that took place in the 1940s and 1950s. The dominant class of the Kurdish region described by Beşikçi had gone through a process of transformation in the turbulent previous decades and assumed more defined characteristics at the moment of its integration into the Turkish political system in the early 1950s.

Most often, large landowners still belonged to the traditional ruling class of Kurdish tribal society: aghas and shaykhs who did not participate in the feudal revolts of the interwar period due to individual inclinations, local rivalries, or geographical distance from the centres of the revolts. The Kemalist state’s repression was fierce and at times indiscriminate but it by no means hit all Kurds in the same way. While many aghas and shaykhs were executed and exiled, many other powerful individuals in the regions were rewarded for their loyalty to Ankara. One of these individuals mentioned by Beşikçi was Shaykh Ibrahim Arvas, a member of a prominent Kurdish family from Van and parliamentarian for the entire single-party period (1920-1950).<sup>429</sup> Beside these representatives of the traditional elite, there were also Kurds of peasant extraction who had been able to take advantage of both the deportation of the Armenians and the repression of the Kurdish revolt to acquire properties left behind and become large landowners

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<sup>427</sup> The leaders of, respectively, the Shaykh Said revolt (1925) and the Dersim rebellion (1938). See Chapter 3 for the background and outcome of the interwar-period Kurdish revolt.

<sup>428</sup> İsmail Beşikçi, *International Colony Kurdistan* (London: Gomidas Institute, 2015), 56.

<sup>429</sup> Volkan Tunç, ‘Van Milletvekili İbrahim Arvas’ın Biyografisi ve Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi’ndeki Faaliyetleri’, *Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi*, 6.2 (2019), 388–432. See also, Beşikçi, *International Colony*, 77.

themselves.<sup>430</sup> Nevertheless, the authoritarian nature of the single-party rule and the militarisation of the south-east did not allow for the full integration of the Kurdish elite into the political system, except for the appointment of high-profile personalities like Arvas to parliament. The real turning point was in 1950 when the establishment of a multi-party system made the south-east electorally attractive to Turkish parties.

In 1950, forced by domestic and international pressure to hold free elections, the CHP was defeated by the DP that largely represented the interests of Turkish farmers gradually alienated by the CHP's industrial policies. Adnan Menderes, the leader of the party and the new Prime Minister was himself a large landowner.<sup>431</sup> Without fully breaking with the secularist tradition of the Republic, the DP appealed to the most conservative sectors of Turkish society by promising a more liberal religious policy.<sup>432</sup> The new government intuited the electoral significance of the Kurdish region where tribal structures, as well as the ownership of the land, gave the local elite the power to control sizable packages of votes. Several Kurdish tribal leaders like Mustafa Remzi Bucak, Halis Öztürk, Edip Altınakar, Yusuf Azizoğlu, Ziya Serefhanoğlu were elected with the DP in 1950. Moreover, the Kurdish agha and shaykhs who had been exiled after their participation in the interwar-period revolts were allowed to return to the south-east and re-claim their properties, quickly regained their power and status. In 1957, the DP elected to parliament Abdülmelik Fırat, the grandson of Shaykh Said of Palu, the leader of the Kurdish revolt of 1925.<sup>433</sup> This policy

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<sup>430</sup> Examples of these self-made landowners are present in several accounts written at the time. See Nur Yalman, 'On Land Disputes in Eastern Turkey', in *Islam and Its Cultural Divergence: Studies in Honor of Gustave E. von Grunebaum*, ed. by Girdhari Tikku (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 180-217 and Vanly, *Survey*, 36.

<sup>431</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey*, 212.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 210-218.

<sup>433</sup> Abdülmelik Fırat was to be elected again in 1991 in the ranks of the *True Path Party* (DYP), another conservative force. However, he later adopted an open position in favour of Kurdish rights that cost him the expulsion from the DYP and even a brief period in prison in 1996. Abdülmelik Fırat, *Fırat Mahzun Akar* (Istanbul: Avesta Kitabevi, 2006).

marked the beginning of a de-facto alliance between the Turkish state and the Kurdish elite that was to last far beyond the period of DP rule. From the 1950s onwards, prominent Kurdish families provided most of the members of parliament elected from the Kurdish provinces and supported the various conservative majorities that dominated Turkish politics since then. From this position, the Kurdish elite was able to have their say on Ankara's policies towards the south-east and control the flow of state funding and contracts. This power was used not only to prevent social change – including an effective land reform – but also to revitalise the traditional social structure that sustained their power.

A major price to pay for the Kurdish elite to enjoy the benefit of the alliance with the state was to renounce to any public – not to mention political – expression of Kurdish identity.<sup>434</sup> South-eastern politicians had to be extremely careful: The accusation of pursuing a secret pro-Kurdish agenda, even without any evidence, could end a successful political career, as in the cases of Health Minister Yusuf Azizoğlu in the early 1960s and Kamran İnan in the 1970s.<sup>435</sup>

In Beşikçi's work since the late 1960s, this class is defined as an 'agent class' due to its relationship with the Turkish state. The Kurdish elite – not only composed of landowners but also of the big merchants and high-ranked civil servants of the region – was not a ruling class of its own but rather an *agent class*: unable to determine the wider economic policies that affected Turkey's south-east, their role was that of implementing it and they were rewarded by the state through "various types of credit, as well as licenses to distribute consumer goods, open petrol stations and so forth, so that these agents may increase their influence in the respective areas."<sup>436</sup> Beşikçi's idea, influenced by dependency theory, was decisive in the development of the approach within the political left that identified

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<sup>434</sup> Vanly, *Survey*, 36.

<sup>435</sup> Güneş Murat Tezcür, 'Kurdish Nationalism and Identity in Turkey: A Conceptual Reinterpretation', *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 10 (2009), 10.

<sup>436</sup> Beşikçi, *International Colony*, 56.

Kurdistan as an internal colony of Turkey. The Kurdish region then constituted a periphery of the Turkish economy supplying agricultural products, raw materials, and cheap labour to the growing industry of western Anatolia. In *The Order of the East*,<sup>437</sup> first published in 1969, Beşikçi rejected the official Kemalist narrative that presented the ‘feudal structure’ of eastern Turkey as the cause of its underdevelopment. On the contrary, Beşikçi’s sociological work showed that it was precisely the policy of the Turkish state that systematically strengthened the traditional social structures of the region with the multiple purposes of preventing the emergence of Kurdish separatism, serving the economic interests of the Turkish core, and providing electoral support to the ruling conservative parties.

Despite the strengths of this argument, describing the Kurdish elite as an ‘agent class’ – in dependency-theory terms a ‘comprador’ class – is problematic. Rather than the agent of a foreign colonial power, the Kurdish elite was incorporated in the ruling social bloc dominated by the industrial bourgeoisie of western Turkey and the Kemalist bureaucracy.<sup>438</sup> Even if the Turkish state was primarily organised around the interests of those groups, the ruling class of the Kurdish region benefitted from its position as part of the ruling bloc. They guaranteed the subordinate position of the south-east within the country’s political economy and provided flocks of conservative MPs. In exchange, they enjoyed the protection of the state apparatus which was willing to turn a blind eye on the violence exercised over the subaltern classes. This is why the ‘State-Agha’ alliance survived well beyond the 1960 coup that removed the DP from power.

Beşikçi’s early work was decisive in exposing the role of the Turkish state in maintaining the south-east underdeveloped: a state that, while preaching modernisation, actively empowered the reactionary elite of its Kurdish

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<sup>437</sup> İsmail Beşikçi, *Doğu Anadolu’nun Düzeni: Sosyo-Ekonomik ve Etnik Temeller* (Ankara: Yurt Kitap-Yayın, 1992).

<sup>438</sup> For the reconfiguration of Turkey’s ruling bloc in the DP era see Keyder, *State and Class*, 117-140.

periphery. This approach to the political economy of the Kurdish region as an *internal colony* of Turkey was to be widely popularised by the Turkish and Kurdish left in the 1970s.

### **The Underdevelopment of the Kurdish Region**

The alliance between the central government and the local elite had deep transformative consequences on the relations of power of the Kurdish provinces. When the Democrat Party took office in 1950, most Kurdish peasant families still owned small plots of land and lived off subsistence agriculture. However, where the land was more productive, such as in the Diyarbakır plains, more than a third of the peasant families were landless and worked as sharecroppers (*yarıcı*) or agricultural labourers in large estates.<sup>439</sup> The DP government had an ambitious programme for agricultural development based on the provision of credit to large farmers, the distribution of state-owned land and the maintenance of high prices for agricultural products.<sup>440</sup> These policies paid off: from 1947 to 1953, the country's agricultural output more than doubled.<sup>441</sup> However, the DP's agricultural policies were explicitly aimed at rewarding large, highly-productive, and export-oriented farms. The previous – hardly enforced – landownership limit of 500 dunums (50 hectares) was increased in 1950 to 5000 dunums (500 hectares) which allowed the Kurdish elite to expand their estates significantly while limiting the amount of productive land available for redistribution.<sup>442</sup>

Within this context of growing production and gradual commercialisation of agriculture, the introduction of the tractor had a great impact on the Kurdish countryside. In the 1950s, the government used Marshall Plan aid to

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<sup>439</sup> Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 22-23.

<sup>440</sup> Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 194. See Resat Aktan, 'Problems of Land Reform in Turkey', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 20.3 (1966), 317-34.

<sup>441</sup> Sevkət Pamuk, 'Economic Change in Twentieth Century Turkey: Is the Glass More than Half Full?', *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, ed. by Kasaba, 266-300.

<sup>442</sup> Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 195.

subsidise the purchase of tractors by farmers: there were 2,014 tractors in the Kurdish region in 1963 and 47,861 by 1982.<sup>443</sup> The mechanisation of Kurdish agriculture was a greatly disruptive process. While almost exclusively large landowners were able to afford a tractor, most small farmers were forced to hire the machine and – overwhelmed by its hiring cost – eventually to sell their lands. In addition to this new wave of landless peasants, the tractor-owning landowners needed much less labour to run their farms as a single tractor could replace over fifty peasants working with oxen and ploughs.<sup>444</sup> Expiring sharecropping contracts were not renewed, and a large portion of rural labourers found themselves unemployed.<sup>445</sup> Throughout Turkey, the share of peasant families who did not own land increased from less than 6 per cent to over thirty per cent between 1950 and 1962.

This process was even more devastating in the Kurdish provinces where the land was already less evenly distributed while lower infrastructural development made it more difficult for small farmers to commercialise their products. By the end of the DP era, each of the south-eastern provinces had a higher share of landless peasants than the national average with peaks of 55 per cent in Şanlıurfa and 47 per cent in Diyarbakır.<sup>446</sup> As late as 1983, an *Agence France-Presse* journalist described the life of a poor Kurdish hamlet in the Mardin province. Located twenty kilometres away from the nearest road, “the inhabitants are cut off from the world, without a school, without electricity, without a road, without even a transistor”. The village had no contact whatsoever with the Turkish administration and the only visible source of authority was that of the landowning agha. The entire active population of this and the neighbouring hamlets worked eleven hours a day

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<sup>443</sup> Very low numbers compared to the national total of 51,781 in 1964 and 491,004 in 1982. Cemal Aladağ, *Milli Mesele ve Kürdistan’da Feodalite Aşiret* (Frankfurt: Komkar Yayınları, 1981), 138.

<sup>444</sup> Yalman, *On Land Disputes*, 198.

<sup>445</sup> Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 194.

<sup>446</sup> Mustafa Sönmez, *Kürtler: Ekonomik ve Sosyal Tarih, Doğu Anadolu’nun Hikayesi* (İstanbul: Arkadaş Yayınevi, 1992), 144.

for \$1-2 in the cotton fields of the 1,600-hectares estate owned by the agha.<sup>447</sup>

The transformation of the country's rural life triggered a tumultuous process of urbanisation. Turkey's urban population overall grew from around 18 per cent in 1950 to 40 per cent in 1980. The eastern provinces present a similar picture (from less than 15 per cent to over 40 per cent) but, due to their higher birth rates, also greatly contributed to the urbanisation of western Turkey.<sup>448</sup> In the large cities of the Marmara and Aegean coast, these waves of Turkish and Kurdish rural migrants constituted a new class of urban poor and provided cheap labour to their growing industry.

In the 1950s, despite the growth of the agricultural output, the Kurdish region remained largely underdeveloped and lagged far behind the rest of the country. During the 1960s and 1970s, when following Turkish governments promoted import-substitution industrialisation, a large part of the state investments and nearly all private investments were directed to other regions of the country. In the Kurdish region, most investments were directed towards the mining sector and the construction of hydroelectric power plants even though the raw materials extracted and the energy produced were largely exported overseas or to western Turkey. The share of national income of the seventeen eastern and south-eastern provinces – including non-Kurdish areas – dropped from 10.39 per cent in 1965 to 8.17 per cent in 1979.<sup>449</sup>

The underdevelopment of the Kurdish region in the 1960s and 1970s was partly a consequence of the alliance between the central state and the Kurdish ruling class initiated in the 1950s and continued by all successive

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<sup>447</sup> Jean-Jacques Cazeaux, 'Turquie: La Grande Misère Des Kurdes', *Le Monde*, 16 June 1983 <[https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1983/06/16/turquie-la-grande-misere-des-kurdes\\_3076818\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1983/06/16/turquie-la-grande-misere-des-kurdes_3076818_1819218.html)>. Cited also in McDowall, *A Modern History*, 421.

<sup>448</sup> Yeşim Arat and Sevket Pamuk, *Turkey between Democracy and Authoritarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 28-54.

<sup>449</sup> For a description of the process of 'de-development' of the Kurdish provinces in the 1960s and 1970s see Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 205-213.

governments. The growing concentration of land and the mechanisation of agriculture increased the frequency and violence of rural conflicts in the region. However, the attempts by the landless peasantry to occupy lands and prevent the introduction of tractors were systematically frustrated by the landowners' hired thugs and the Turkish gendarmerie.<sup>450</sup>

### **Kurdish Nationalism and Turkish Socialism**

In the 1950s and 1960s, the transformation of Turkey in terms of capitalist development, urbanisation – but also mass schooling and political pluralism – led to a gradual re-emergence of the 'Kurdish question'. Explicit references to Kurdistan or the Kurds were still a taboo in mainstream Turkish politics and the political elite violently reacted even to the softest expressions of Kurdish identity. In response to the poor performance of the economy in the late 1950s and Adnan Menderes' authoritarian turn, the Turkish military overthrew the government in 1960, inaugurating its role as the self-appointed guardian of the Kemalist tradition. The constitution approved in 1961 – when the *junta* allowed for new elections – introduced an unprecedented level of civil liberties. With Menderes and his party gone, most of the Kurdish elite migrated to other mainstream parties and in particular to Süleyman Demirel's *Justice Party* (AP), the conservative successor of the DP.

The debates on the state of the Kurds within the Turkish republic took place outside the framework of mainstream Turkish politics and in two different political spaces on the right and the left. On the one hand, a minority of the Kurdish elite was inspired by the development of the Iraqi Kurdish movement led by a traditional figure such as Mullah Mustafa Barzani and framed the Kurdish issue in exclusively nationalist terms. On the other hand,

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<sup>450</sup> Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 204. Numerous examples of land conflicts in this period are provided by van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 313-315; Yalman, *On Land Disputes*, 199-213; Kendal Nezan, 'Kurdistan in Turkey', in *A People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, ed. by Gerard Chaliand (London: Zed Books, 1993), 91.

the emergence of a Turkish socialist left created a space for a new generation of Kurds to link the state's anti-Kurdish policies to the reactionary forces that ruled the Kurdish region.

With the repression of the Kurdish revolts of the interwar period, many of the Kurdish 'feudal' nationalists that had animated the first Kurdist organisations went into exile. Within *Khoybûn* (independence), an organisation founded in Lebanon in 1927, exiled Kurdish aristocrats like the Bedirkhan brothers, Nuri Dersimi, and İshan Nuri found a space to write about and 'to imagine' the Kurdish nation. Despite the limited political relevance of these figures, their writings created the canon of modern Kurdish nationalism including "a map; a unified historical narration; a flag; an idea of martyrdom and glorification of martyrs; the myth of Kawa, liberator of the Kurds; the notion of Mesopotamia as the cradle of the Kurdishness".<sup>451</sup> Influenced by the primordialist approach of contemporary Turkish nationalist literature,<sup>452</sup> these writers in exile naturalised the Kurdish nation creating an intellectual legacy that was to influence the development of the Kurdish national movement.

It was in continuity with this tradition that the years of relative liberalisation that followed the 1960 coup saw the blossoming of Turkish-language publications on Kurdish history, literature, and poetry – but also more timidly on politics and society – such as in the liberal Turkish magazine *Barış Dünyası* (World Peace) in 1962. Attempts to publish journals in Kurdish were however frustrated by state censorship as shown by the short life of the bilingual monthly *Dicle-Fırat* (Tigris-Euphrates) and the newspaper in Kurdish *Deng* (Voice) and *Riya Newe* (New Path). Despite state repression, these attempts showed a widespread renewed interests in Kurdish culture. As Kendal Nezan, at the time a student in Ankara, recalls

From time to time there were cultural evenings, like 'Bitlis Cultural Evening', people would go, listen to the music and to some

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<sup>451</sup> Bozarıslan, *Kurds and the Turkish State*, 344.

<sup>452</sup> An influence evident in Celadet BedirKhan's choice to follow the footsteps of Atatürk's Turkish language reform and create a Kurmanji Latin alphabet.

speeches, they were playing Kurdish songs and it was a way to bring people coming from the same places together.<sup>453</sup>

It was within this intellectual context that the first explicitly – and yet clandestine – Kurdish nationalist party of modern Turkey was established in 1965. Inspired by the Iraqi Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani and his KDP, Faik Bucak established the *Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey* (PDKT). Bucak was an agha from Siverek – whose brother Mehmet Tevfik Bucak had been a member of parliament for the DP – and the new party aimed at the traditional Kurdish elite. For Derwich Ferho, whose brother was the founder of the PDKT in Mardin, “the PDKT was the expression of the class of the aghas and they had many followers among the mullahs and imams.”<sup>454</sup> However, despite its conservative nature, the PDKT served as a training ground for more radical Kurds especially after the assassination, under unclear circumstances, of Faik Bucak in 1966.<sup>455</sup> The leader of the left-wing of the PDKT, Dr Şivan moved to Iraqi Kurdistan in a very early attempt to organise a guerrilla movement but was killed in 1971.

Dr Şivan’s attempt must be understood in relations to the wider development of the political left. The 1961 constitution authorised the creation of independent trade unions and the first socialist party, the *Workers’ Party of Turkey* (TİP). At the 1965 elections, the TİP won 15 seats mostly from the industrial areas in the west but three of them also from the Kurdish south-east. Without explicitly referring to the Kurds, the TİP emphasized the so-called ‘Eastern Question’ (*Doğu Sorunu*) and the oppression faced by the people living in the east of Turkey.<sup>456</sup> This position won the sympathy of leftist-minded Kurds that were critical of the Kurdish

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<sup>453</sup> Interview with Kendal Nezan (Paris, 2019).

<sup>454</sup> Interview with Derwich Ferho (Brussels, 2019). According to Bozarlan, the PDKT “essentially brought together some urban notables, craftsmen and Kurdish *ulama*” Hamit Bozarlan, ‘Political Aspects of the Kurdish Problem in Contemporary Turkey’, in *The Kurds*, ed. by Kreyenbroek and Sperl, 98.

<sup>455</sup> Michael Gunter, *The Kurds in Turkey: A Political Dilemma* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 16.

<sup>456</sup> In its first congress in 1964, the party recognised that the people living in the east “who speak Kurdish or Arabic” were discriminated. Cited in Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 59.

nationalism promoted by the PDKT. The active presence of Kurds within the TİP – known as ‘Easterners’ (*Doğulular*) – gradually pushed the party to adopt an even more advanced position. In their 1970 congress documents, the TİP stated that “there is a Kurdish people in the East of Turkey” that “the fascist authorities representing the ruling classes have subjected [...] to a policy of assimilation and intimidation which has often become a bloody repression.”<sup>457</sup> This resolution cost the party dearly and in 1971 the TİP was accused of supporting separatism and banned by a Turkish court.

Both sides of this emerging interest in the Kurdish question in Turkey participated in the mass movement that developed in the Kurdish region in the late 1960s. In 1967, a series of demonstrations called the Eastern Meetings (*Doğu Mitingleri*) took place in Diyarbakır and other Kurdish cities in which the themes of underdevelopment and ethnic oppression welded together. In 1969, following this first phase of mass mobilisation, Kurdish students in Ankara and Istanbul established the radical *Revolutionary Cultural Societies of the East* (DDKO), the first ‘easterner’ organisation with the aim of a socialist revolution, and that soon opened branches across the south-east. The DDKO seems to have been composed of a wide range of people including cadet members of the landowning class who had turned leftist during their university years.<sup>458</sup> In their publications, they denounced the poverty of the south-east, the oppression of the peasantry by the traditional Kurdish elite and the violence of the Turkish state in the region.<sup>459</sup>

All of these developments were temporarily interrupted by a new military intervention in 1971. With the alleged aim of restoring order, state repression heavily targeted the political left – banning both TİP and DDKO – and the trade unions. The growing and more explicit interest of Turkey’s left in the

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<sup>457</sup> Vanly, *Survey*, 53-54.

<sup>458</sup> “Many of the people who were influential in the democratic and revolutionary movement developing in Northern Kurdistan in the 1960s were the younger generation of the landowning classes [...] who were definitely opposed to the kinds of relationships their fathers and grandfathers had formed with the Turkish state.” Beşikçi, *International Colony*, 84.

<sup>459</sup> Gunter, *The Kurds in Turkey*, 18.

Kurdish question had the effect of combining the traditional anti-communism of the Kemalist elite with the fear of ethnic separatism. This attitude was visible in the far more indulgent treatment accorded to the violent Turkish nationalist groups that were assertively imposing their presence on the streets.<sup>460</sup> The 1971 intervention was, thus, the moment in which the rightward orientation of the military – in the form of chauvinism and anti-separatist paranoia – came to coincide with the interest of an emerging industrial capital in western Turkey determined to put down a growing and emboldened labour movement.<sup>461</sup> The most significant consequence of these events was the realisation, by many Turkish and Kurdish leftists, that no solution to their problems could come from the Kemalist and capitalist state.

### **The Kurdish Left in the 1970s**

The military intervention of 1971 was mostly directed against the rising street violence and political instability and was successful in limiting the civil liberties granted by the 1961 constitution and in breaking the labour movement. Nevertheless, rather than a return to political stability, 1970s Turkey experienced a much more intense wave of street violence and an economic crisis that the twelve weak coalition governments that took office between 1971 and 1980 were unable to address. The policy of import-substitution industrialisation generated a chronic lack of foreign currency reserves that was aggravated by the spike in the oil price after 1973. The government responded by imposing import restrictions while inflation and unemployment were on the rise for the entire decade. The process of mass urbanisation accelerated in the 1970s increasing the number of urban poor often living in shantytowns – called *gecekondu* – at the outskirts of the main

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<sup>460</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey*, 258-260.

<sup>461</sup> Membership to unions in Turkey increased from 296,000 in 1963 to 1.2 million in 1971, while the number of working days lost for strikes rose from 12.255 to 295.950. *Sosyalizm ve Toplumsal Mücadeleler Ansiklopedisi*, Volume 5 (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1988), 2147.

cities. These informal settlements became an ideal recruiting ground for the radical organisations of the left as well as for the rising Islamist and far-right nationalist groups. At the same time, mass education allowed more and more Turks with a working-class background to access high-school and university degrees and to seek public employment.

The suppression of the TİP and the strongest unions strengthened the radical character of the student and labour movement that was now even more proactive in trying to violently win the control of the streets and the campuses. Turkey's new left "was characterised foremost by its fecund parthenogenesis and the resulting sectarianism" that in the 1970s led to the multiplication of groups with virtually identical – Leninist, Maoist, Guevarist – ideological orientations.<sup>462</sup> Their radicalism was fuelled by the admiration for the revolutions taking place in the Global South and particularly by "the Palestinian struggle [which] exercised a magnetic appeal to all revolutionary groups."<sup>463</sup> This radicalism, however, prevented their interactions with the established political system. The left was opposed by a much less fragmented far-right youth organised around Alparslan Türkeş' pseudo-fascist *Nationalist Action Party* (MHP) and the Islamist *National Salvation Party* led by Necmettin Erbakan. Unlike the radical left that lacked any interlocutor in institutional politics, the parties of the extreme right joined Süleyman Demirel's AP in several coalition governments and used their ministerial posts to pack the civil service with their youth. The colonisation of the security forces by the ultra-nationalist MHP made the police passive or even complicit in neo-fascist street violence.<sup>464</sup> Along with the Turkish left, Kurdish activists and religious minorities were natural targets.<sup>465</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the 1971 military intervention exposed the democratic limits of the Kemalist state and thus had a radicalising effect on the Kurdish

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<sup>462</sup> Keyder, *State and Class*, 210.

<sup>463</sup> Interview with Cengiz Çandar (personal communication, 2020).

<sup>464</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey*, 262-263.

<sup>465</sup> In 1978, more than one hundred Alevis – Turkey's Shia minority – were killed by neo-fascists and Islamists militants in a pogrom in Kahramanmaraş.

youth. The establishment of the DDKO in 1969 had already represented a decisive step in the process of 'autonomisation' of the Kurdish movement.<sup>466</sup> Socialist Kurds were less and less satisfied with the position of the Turkish left that, though acknowledging the oppression of the Kurds, subordinated their liberation to the socialist transformation of Turkey. While maintaining a Marxist framework, the Kurdish leftist groups of the 1970s identified in the 'colonial condition' of the Kurdish region a specific form of oppression to which the Kurds in Turkey were subject and the Turkish working class and peasantry were not. As Kemal Burkay, founder of the *Kurdistan Socialist Party* (PSK), wrote in the early 1970s, "in Kurdistan, the feudal relations have not been defeated and a bourgeois democratic revolution has not occurred. Therefore, the main contradiction for the Kurdish people is national."<sup>467</sup> Burkay rejected the idea – dominant among Turkish leftists – that Kurdish nationalism could only be the expression of the Kurdish feudal class and proposed an anti-colonial nationalism as a progressive and democratic force.<sup>468</sup>

This line of thought became the dominant discourse among Kurdish leftist after the suppression of the TİP and the DDKO in 1971. Burkay's PSK was still trying to move within the margins of official politics and, at the 1977 Diyarbakır mayoral elections, helped the tailor Mehdi Zana defeat all the notables running for the Turkish mainstream parties.<sup>469</sup> However, very much like the Turkish left, more radical Kurdish groups multiplied in the mid-1970s despite sharing a similar understanding of the colonial condition of Kurdistan, inspiration in the anti-colonial struggles, and sympathy for Maoism. Among these groups, *Rizgari* (liberation) evolved from a pro-

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<sup>466</sup> Marlies Casier and Olivier Grojean, 'Between Integration, Autonomization and Radicalization. Hamit Bozarslan on the Kurdish Movement and the Turkish Left', *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 14 (2012), 6.

<sup>467</sup> Cited in Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 72.

<sup>468</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this ideological shift, see Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 66-74.

<sup>469</sup> Gilles Dorronsoro and Nicole F. Watts, 'Toward Kurdish Distinctiveness in Electoral Politics: The 1977 Local Elections in Diyarbakir', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41.3 (2009), 457-78.

Kurdish publishing house in 1975. The *Democratic Cultural Association* founded in 1974 established discussion groups throughout Turkey out of which *Kawa* (1976) and the *National Liberators of Kurdistan* (KUK) emerged. Active in both Turkey's major cities and the Kurdish region, by the second half of the 1970s, some of these groups started planning guerrilla activities against the Turkish state.

The proliferation of far-leftist Kurdish groups was the breeding ground for the establishment of the *Kurdistan Workers' Party* (PKK), the organisation that ultimately became hegemonic within the Kurdish movement in Turkey.<sup>470</sup> The group gathered in the early 1970s in Ankara around university drop-out Abdullah Öcalan. In 1975, Öcalan and his followers established their presence in the Kurdish region to create a network of support in preparation of the liberation war but it was only in April 1979 that they officially adopted the name PKK.<sup>471</sup> By then, Öcalan's followers had already been involved in some low-key military actions that were symptomatic of the broader characteristics of this pre-uprising phase. First, already in 1977, they were involved in a feud with another revolutionary group named *Tekoşin* which speaks to the clannish attitude of these organisations.

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<sup>470</sup> The group was initially known as *Apocular*, 'the followers of Apo', Öcalan's Kurdish nickname. Ahmed Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, in their writings on the origins of the PKK, claim that Öcalan's group was 'born from the left' in the sense that they were less the product of the Kurdish movement than they were of the Turkish left. In the early to mid-1970s –before the establishment of the PKK in 1978-1979 – Öcalan and his followers were part of the *Ankara Democratic Higher Education Association* (ADYÖD) rather than in the numerous radical Kurdish groups active at the time. Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Akkaya, 'Born from the Left: The making of the PKK', in *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, ed. by Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 123-142.

<sup>471</sup> Mehmet Ali Birand, *APO ve PKK* (Istanbul: Milliyet Yayinlari, 1992), 85-96. The long gestation of the PKK is explained by Jongerden as motivated by the need to overcome the ideological and organizational weakness of the Turkish and Kurdish left and to go through a long period of preparation before starting the insurgency. Joost Jongerden, 'A Spatial Perspective on Political Group Formation in Turkey after the 1971 Coup: The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)', *Kurdish Studies*, 5.2 (2017), 134-56.

Öcalan – who at the time could count on 250-300 followers –<sup>472</sup> became increasingly known among other groups for his brutal treatment of his rivals.<sup>473</sup> The elimination of rival Kurdish groups was part of the strategy to become the only point of reference for the Kurdish masses. But to win a popular base, the PKK had to direct its attention towards the exploitative components of Kurdish society. In 1978, Öcalan’s followers successfully mobilised people from the town of Hilvan against their landowners belonging to the pro-government aghas of the Süleymanlar tribe. The success of this action convinced the leadership to insist on this strategy. To announce the foundation of the party, the PKK decided to perform a highly spectacular action, in July 1979, attempting to kill Mehmet Celal Bucak, a powerful landowning agha from Siverek famous for his brutality against the peasants and the local leftists. Bucak survived the attack but the action resonated widely among the Kurdish peasantry.<sup>474</sup>

Like the other leftist Kurdish groups, the PKK adopted the ‘colonial thesis’ as a starting point for their analysis and the development of their revolutionary strategy. The pre-capitalist feudal structure of Kurdish society was described as functional to Turkish colonialism as “tribal-feudal interests are being watched and forced to live to deepen social fragmentation” and prevent the development of Kurdish identity.<sup>475</sup> As the agha class was complicit with the Turkish state and a structural component of colonial domination, the Kurdish working class and peasantry were the only actors able to conduct a revolution that was at the same time national and

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<sup>472</sup> Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 38-39.

<sup>473</sup> Aliza Marcus particularly insist on this aspect and supports her argument with numerous interviews. *Ibid.*, 40-42.

<sup>474</sup> The Bucak family already appeared twice in this chapter and it is a well-known example of leading tribal family that could express members of both pro-state aghas like Mustafa Remzi Bucak, DP parliamentarian in the 1950s, or Faik Bucak, a Kurdish nationalism, though of conservative orientation. This position in between the state and the nationalists is very similar to that of the Barzanji in Iraqi Kurdistan, as discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>475</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, *Kürdistan Devriminin Yolu* (Cologne: Weşanen Serxwebun, 1993), 63-64.

socialist.<sup>476</sup> This approach was strengthened through the ‘lesson learned’ by the failure of the Barzani revolution in Iraq in 1975.<sup>477</sup> In Öcalan’s reading of these events, the Kurdish traditional elite had only been able to formulate an autonomist project and, unable to mobilise the subordinate classes, became dependent on the support of imperialist powers.<sup>478</sup> However, in his approach to colonialism, Öcalan went further due to the influence of Antillean philosopher Frantz Fanon. The struggle against the coloniser becomes, as in Fanon, also a struggle against oneself as a colonised subject.<sup>479</sup> After a long digression on Kurdish history, the 1978 PKK Manifesto argued that violence was the only way through which the Kurdish people could free themselves from their history of enslavement by foreign rulers.<sup>480</sup>

The radicality of Öcalan’s Fanonian approach was not the only specific feature of the PKK. Derwich Ferho, a member of a prestigious tribal family and a student in Midyat (Mardin) when the PKK started operating in the area, claims that the PKK was unique among the Kurdish organizations:

The PDKT was the expression of the class of the Aghas and they had many followers among the Mullahs and Imams. But you can say that all the [Kurdish] organizations had the same problem. The DDKO, DDKD, the KUK... all of them! The leaders of all these groups were from the upper classes. Except for the PKK who were university students but - like a friend of mine from Midyat who could never go to university - also just simple people.<sup>481</sup>

Öcalan and his followers were characterized by a particularly humble background. Observing the development of the movement in the mid-1980s, anthropologist Martin van Bruinessen noticed that the PKK was “the only organisation whose members were drawn almost exclusively from the lowest social classes — the uprooted, half-educated village and small-town

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<sup>476</sup> Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 86-91.

<sup>477</sup> For the 1961-1975 Barzani revolution, see Chapter 3.

<sup>478</sup> Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 89.

<sup>479</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1991).

<sup>480</sup> Öcalan, *Kürdistan*, 20-29.

<sup>481</sup> Interview with Derwich Ferho (Brussels, 2019).

youth who knew what it felt like to be oppressed, and who wanted action, not ideological sophistication."<sup>482</sup> Öcalan was born to a peasant family in Ömerli, a village in the Şanlıurfa province, an hour away from the closest school. He managed to attend a vocational school in Ankara, in 1966, that allowed him to graduate high school, work for the civil service, and even enter Ankara University in 1971. That, in the 1970s, Öcalan's followers had largely a similar background is confirmed by both Aliza Marcus' book, based on a wealth of interview material, and by Güneş Murat Tezcür who has collected biographical information of PKK fighters from the obituaries published on the party's magazine *Serxwebûn*. The 142 'martyrs' of the early stages of the PKK – up to 1980 – paint the picture of an organisation largely reflecting the class location of its leader. Like Öcalan, most of the killed militants share a plebeian or rural background and yet held high-school or college degrees.<sup>483</sup> Öcalan attracted a group of young Kurds of peasant origins who had the chance to partly lift themselves through education and were largely "university and teacher's school students or drop-outs."<sup>484</sup>

The specificity of their background in the peasantry distinguished the PKK from the rest of the Kurdish movement in Turkey. The left-ward turn of Kurdish activists since the 1960s had allowed them to win vast popular support in the Kurdish towns and cities as evidenced by Mehdi Zana's victory in Diyarbakır in 1977. The leaders of these groups were either cadets of the Kurdish elite or members of the urban working classes – Zana was a tailor. However, the Kurdish countryside remained the realm of feudal landowners, where the local agha controlled the votes of the peasants living in the villages he literally owned. The peasant origins of Öcalan and the early PKK cadres provided them with a specific sensitivity absent in the rest of the movement as well as the language to speak with the peasantry. The language was not solely the Kurdish language to win the villagers to the

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<sup>482</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, 'Between Guerrilla War and Political Murder: The Workers' Party of Kurdistan', *MERIP Middle East Report*, 153 (1988), 41.

<sup>483</sup> Güneş Murat Tezcür, 'Violence and Nationalist Mobilization: The Onset of the Kurdish Insurgency in Turkey', *Nationalities Papers*, 43.2 (2015), 256-257.

<sup>484</sup> Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 37.

national cause but more importantly the language of performative anti-landlord violence. The decision to celebrate the establishment of the PKK with the highly-visible attack on Bucak was intended to speak directly to the peasantry, showing them that, besides the sophisticated theories on colonialism and nationalism, the PKK was willing and able to act against the people directly responsible for their misery.

In the same days of the Bucak attack, in July 1979, the PKK decided to relocate to Syria to organise for a long-term and large-scale insurgency in Turkey. Öcalan was in Damascus when the Turkish military, in September 1980, carried out another *coup d'état* that swept away anything resembling leftist politics in the country. The violence of the repression against the Turkish and Kurdish left eliminated most of PKK's rivals. As Remzi Kartal, who had been a member of Dr Şivan's PDKT, explains "the coup was like a bulldozer: it eliminated all the political organisations, only the PKK survived. After that, we started looking at the PKK."<sup>485</sup>

### **Preparing the Kurdish Revolution**

The military coup of September 1980 marks a watershed moment in Turkish history. The Turkish military's declared purpose was to end street violence and political instability as well as to ostensibly rescue the Kemalist republic from the combined threats of communism, Islamism, and Kurdish separatism. As the next chapter will show, the 1980 coup also had the function of implementing austerity measures deemed indispensable to overcome the crisis that Turkey's economy faced in the 1970s. The military showed their clear intention to break with the previous political system, disbanding the political parties and arresting the leading politicians. In the twelve months following the coup, 122,600 people were arrested, and street violence decreased to a negligible level.<sup>486</sup> Even if, like in the 1971 coup, the

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<sup>485</sup> Interview with Remzi Kartal (Brussels, 2019).

<sup>486</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey*, 279.

political left was by far the biggest target,<sup>487</sup> the Kemalist elite tended to present the coup as a last-resort defence of the secular republic against the Islamist threat that had just overwhelmed Iran. However, while the Turkish left and labour movement were to never fully recover from the 1980 coup, both the Islamists and the ultra-nationalists re-emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s with the same leaders – Erbakan and Türkeş – and the comparable electoral strength of the 1970s.

Alongside the Turkish left, the other principal target of the military repression was the Kurdish movement. The military took unprecedented – even for Turkish standards – measures to repress Kurdish identity: the public and private use of the Kurdish language was banned and thousands of topographic names of Kurdish origins were changed.<sup>488</sup> The military influence over education even allowed them to give new life to the old Kemalist theory that the Kurds were, rather than a people on their own, just ‘Mountain Turks’ (dağ Türkler).<sup>489</sup>

The PKK had relocated to Syria in 1979 and after the military coup, most Turkish and Kurdish leftist groups followed suit. At the time, Hafez al-Assad’s Ba’athist regime acted as a patron to leftist and nationalist organisations active against Syria’s neighbours, and particularly to the Palestinian resistance.<sup>490</sup> Most of the leftist groups from Turkey were

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<sup>487</sup> Ibid., 269-270.

<sup>488</sup> See: Senem Aslan, ‘Incoherent State: The Controversy over Kurdish Naming in Turkey’, *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 10 (2009).

<sup>489</sup> For example, Şükrü Seferoğlu’s 1982 book titled: ‘The first Turkish inhabitants of Anatolia: the Kurds’. See Şükrü Kaya Seferoğlu, *Anadolu’nun İlk Türk Sakinleri: Kürtler* (Ankara: Ayyıldız Matbaası, 1982). See also: Şükrü Kaya Seferoğlu and Halil Kemal Türközü, *101 Soruda Türklerin Kürt Boyu* (Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1982); Bayram Kodoman, *Sultan II. Abdülhamit’in Doğu Anadolu Politikası* (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Basımevi, 1987).

<sup>490</sup> In 1975, the Iraqi-Kurdish PUK was established in Damascus (see Chapter 4). Asad also allowed Syrian Kurds to join foreign organisations with the purpose of ridding the country of potential troublemakers. Polad Jan, from the Syrian Kurdish movement explains that “the Syrian regime approved that active and smart Kurds went to the mountains. [...] Syria and Turkey were enemies and the Syrians wanted Turkey to have problems and conflicts. The youth who could create conflicts and troubles [in Syria] could go to the mountains [in Turkey] and get killed there.” Interview with Polad Jan (Sulaymaniyah, 2019).

extremely demoralised by the complete lack of resistance to the military coup and showed little interest in preparing for an insurgency. One by one, the PKK's competitors left Syria, generally to Europe. Öcalan's determination to build up the PKK's military prowess allowed the party to attract militants from the other declining organisations and was decisive to establish a strong bond with the Syrian regime and the Palestinian resistance. Already in early 1980, Öcalan convinced left-wing Palestinian groups to train PKK members in their camps in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, at the time under Syrian occupation.<sup>491</sup> In 1986, as the number of PKK recruits increased the PKK opened its own training camp in the Beqaa, the *Mahsum Korkmaz Academy*.<sup>492</sup> Several of the first post-1980 PKK 'martyrs' died alongside the Palestinians in the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.<sup>493</sup> While the Palestinian connection enriched the PKK with invaluable guerrilla training, a deal struck between Öcalan and Barzani's KDP allowed the PKK to freely move through the KDP-controlled areas of northern Iraq. Unlike the flat Syrian-Turkish border, the mountainous nature of the Iraqi-Turkish border made it an ideal location from which to start guerrilla activities, and in 1983 the PKK sent its first reconnaissance to enemy territory.<sup>494</sup>

At the time of the coup, the PKK was already emerging as the strongest Kurdish leftist organisation. After the 1980 coup, three-quarters of all people tried for secessionism – virtually all Kurdish activists – belonged to the PKK and the PKK had the second-highest number of militants under trial, second only to the *People's Liberation Party-Front of Turkey* (THKP-C).<sup>495</sup> In the following year, the PKK's growth in Syria and Lebanon was reflected in the increasing visibility of the organisation among the Kurds in Turkey partly due

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<sup>491</sup> Interviewed by Aliza Marcus Palestinian leader Abu Layla remembers: "we had met other Turkish Kurds and they didn't seem to be very reliable. [...] We thought that [the PKK] was the most serious group in Turkish Kurdistan. This is why we kept them." Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 54-58.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>493</sup> van Bruinessen, *Between Guerrilla War and Political Murder*, 44.

<sup>494</sup> Gunter, *The Kurds*, 72-74.

<sup>495</sup> Feryal Matbaacılık, *State of Anarchy and Terror in Turkey* (Ankara, 1983).

to the complete disappearance of the rival organisations. The PKK inmates in the Diyarbakır prison organised highly performative actions of resistance against the regime of torture to which they were subject.<sup>496</sup> After one of the PKK founders, Mazloun Doğan killed himself on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1982, eight more senior cadres self-immolated in a 'death fast' in the following months.<sup>497</sup> The PKK propaganda was very effective in spreading information about these events and in linking heroic acts of resistance to the myth of Kawa the blacksmith and the celebration of *Newroz*. March 21<sup>st</sup> – the day of Doğan's suicide – is the first of the Persian calendar and is celebrated by the Kurds as well as in the wider Iranic world and central Asia. One of the myths on the origins of *Newroz* is based on the figure of Kawa the blacksmith, who led the Medes – the putative ancestors of the Kurds –<sup>498</sup> to revolt against their Assyrian overlords and celebrated the victory by lighting a bonfire on a hill. Kurdish nationalists politicised the myth of Kawa and the celebration of *Newroz* – with bonfires – as symbols of the Kurdish resistance.<sup>499</sup>

As in its first performative actions in the late 1970s, the PKK continued to deploy symbolic politics to build its hegemony over the Kurdish movement and wider Kurdish society. After this long period of preparation, the PKK's liberation war officially started, on August 15, 1984, with two coordinated attacks in the towns of Eruh and Şemdinli, almost 400 kilometres apart. The Kurdish guerrillas took over the towns for about an hour to announce the beginning of the insurgency.

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<sup>496</sup> For a description of the regime of torture in the Diyarbakır prison, see *Torture in the Eighties* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1984), 217-220.

<sup>497</sup> Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 98-99.

<sup>498</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>499</sup> See Cengiz Güneş, 'Mobilization of Kurds in Turkey during the 1980s and 1990s', in *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, ed. by Stansfield and Shareef, 187-198; Delal Aydın, 'Mobilizing the Kurds in Turkey: *Newroz* as a Myth' in *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspective on Violence, Representation, and Reconciliation*, ed. by Cengiz Güneş and Welat Zeydanlıoğlu (London: Routledge, 2014), 68-88.

## The PKK Insurgency and the Kurdish Peasantry

After the August 1984 attacks, the PKK insurgency proceeded slowly due to the militants' inexperience as well as Turkey's increased military presence in the region. However, in the years 1984-1986, PKK fighters started to become a known presence to the local peasants. The PKK propaganda specifically targeted the villagers presenting the organisation as a force that opposed the Turkish security forces as well as the exploitative landowners.

In the first period of the insurgency, the PKK expanded its base of support among the Kurdish peasantry, although it is impossible to measure its extent. Güneş Murat Tezcür's database of killed PKK militants paints a picture – though incomplete – of the background of the first wave of PKK 'martyrs'. In the period between 1984 and 1989, 31 per cent of the killed PKK militants were peasants prior to recruitment, while 38 per cent were low-skilled workers, and 24 per cent were students. However, 99 per cent of them were born in a village.<sup>500</sup> Considering that village-born students constituted the biggest group of PKK members before 1984, it seems that, after the beginning of the insurgency, the PKK largely recruited peasants and rural labourers. Another indication of the class background of the early PKK is a survey conducted by Turkish police among the 262 PKK-affiliated inmates in Ankara in 1996 – thus including people captured throughout the 1980s – indicating that 21 per cent of the militants were illiterate or semi-literate and 39 per cent only finished primary school.<sup>501</sup>

The PKK's increasing ability to recruit the Kurdish peasantry and to use the villages as shelter and logistical support for its guerrilla activity is also suggested by the response of the Turkish state. In 1985, the Turkish government established the Village Guards (*Köy Korucuları*), a paramilitary militia recruited among the pro-government Kurdish tribes. In a way very similar to the one employed by Baghdad against the Kurdish insurgency,<sup>502</sup>

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<sup>500</sup> Güneş Murat Tezcür, 'Ordinary People, Extraordinary Risks: Participation in an Ethnic Rebellion', *American Political Science Review*, 110.2 (2016), 247–64.

<sup>501</sup> Cited in Bal and Laçiner, *Ethnic Terrorism in Turkey*, 29–30.

<sup>502</sup> See Chapter 4.

the Turkish government and military authorities negotiated directly with tribal chiefs and landowners who received the funding to pay the guards' salary, strengthening their power over their fellow tribesmen and the peasants of the villages they owned.<sup>503</sup> For example, McDowall reports that, in 1992, the head of the Alan tribe in Van Sadun Şeylan raised 500 guards from his 26 villages receiving \$115,000 monthly from the government.<sup>504</sup> Lightly armed, the military function of the Village Guards was to prevent the guerrilla from finding shelter in isolated hamlets where the Turkish army had hardly any access. Moreover, the village guards served the purpose of countering the PKK recruitment activity, by arming pro-government villages but also to retaliate against the villagers and families with known sympathy for the guerrillas. Like in Iraq, the system left wide room for abuses: as the guards' commanders were subject to little supervision and even less accountability, the Village Guards became an instrument to settle pre-existing disputes and to serve the private interests of the commanders. The institution of the Village Guards increased the civil war (Kurds versus Kurds) dimension of the PKK insurgency and divided Kurdish rural society forcing peasants to pick a side while massacres of civilians became more frequent. This dynamic ultimately favoured the PKK, vindicating Öcalan's opposition to the Kurdish elite as a collaborationist class.

In the second half of the 1980s, the PKK insurgency intensified exponentially and, with it, Turkish repression. In 1986, a report drafted by a group of opposition parliamentarians who visited the Kurdish region described the south-east as an open-air concentration camp ruled through torture and brutality.<sup>505</sup> In 1987, in a move that publicly acknowledged the condition of war in the Kurdish south-east, the Turkish government imposed the state of emergency over the Kurdish provinces of Bingöl, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Hakkari, Mardin, Siirt, Tunceli and Van. The area took the name of *Governorship of*

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<sup>503</sup> According to Marcus, the monthly salary of the village guards amounted to 35,000 lira (about \$70). Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 97.

<sup>504</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History*, 424.

<sup>505</sup> 'SHP'li Canver'in Güneydoğu İzlenimleri: İskence Ayibi Hepimiziniz', *Cumhuriyet*, 12 February 1986.

*the Region in State of Emergency* (OHAL) ruled by a military super-governor based in Diyarbakır and entrusted with martial law powers. Within this legal framework, the military had the authority to relocate entire communities anywhere they could serve as sanctuaries for the PKK guerrillas. By 1989, around 400 Kurdish villages had been evacuated.<sup>506</sup> As the next chapter will discuss in length, the evacuation of Kurdish villages was to be pursued on a massive scale in the early 1990s triggering a process of forced urbanisation that transformed the Kurdish region of Turkey.

## **Conclusion**

The chapter discussed the economic transformation of the Kurdish region of Turkey since its integration into the newly-established Turkish Republic and the re-emergence of a Kurdish national movement. After the feudal revolts of the interwar period were crushed, a large part of the Kurdish landowning elite and tribal aristocracy was incorporated into the Turkish political system in the 1950s. Ruling conservative parties nurtured the Kurdish elite which, in exchange, provided electoral support thanks to the power they held over the peasantry. Unlike the Kurdish elite in Iraq that, from 1958, felt its position threatened by the post-revolutionary regime, Kurdish landowners in Turkey had no interest in challenging the central government. The re-emergence of a Kurdish political identity took place among urbanised Kurds – both in the Kurdish region and in the rest of Turkey – and found its natural breeding ground and interlocutor in the Turkish left. However, most of the Turkish and Kurdish left was swept away by the 1980 military coup.

Abdullah Öcalan's PKK not only managed to survive the coup but was also able to start, in 1984, a Kurdish insurgency in Turkey that, in just a few years, assumed a massive scale. This chapter showed that the success of the PKK was largely due to its ability to mobilise the Kurdish peasantry against both their Kurdish landowners and the Turkish state. The development of the

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<sup>506</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History*, 426.

uprising in the second half of the 1980s drove large parts of the Kurdish countryside into a state of civil war. The Turkish government responded to the increasing involvement of the peasantry with the institution of the Village Guards, mobilising pro-government tribal chiefs and landowners. This process led to a higher involvement of the civilian population but also legitimised the discourse of the PKK that presented the Kurdish landowning elite as a collaborationist class. The next chapter describes the deep transformation of the class structure of the Kurdish region driven by both Turkey's neoliberal turn and by a counterinsurgency strategy aimed at depopulating the Kurdish countryside. The virtual destruction of Kurdish rural society severely affected the class bases of the uprisings but also contributed to extending the hegemony of the PKK far beyond the countryside.

# **Chapter 8**

## **The PKK Insurgency and the Transformation of Turkish Kurdistan (1987-1999)**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the transformation of the Kurdish movement in Turkey in the 1990s, highlighting the profound interaction between the political events and the structural transformation that occurred in the country and its Kurdish region. In the 1980s, Turkey was politically dominated by the military which initiated far-reaching neoliberal reforms while the Kurdish south-east saw the rise of the PKK-led insurgency centred around the mobilisation of the peasantry. In the early 1990s, Ankara deployed a strategy of depopulation of the Kurdish countryside by removing the peasant population with the aim of destroying the breeding ground of the Kurdish insurgency. This counterinsurgency strategy had profound consequences for the social structure of the region and turned a large part of its peasant population into a class of urban poor. As the character of the region shifted from predominantly rural to predominantly urban, so did the Kurdish movement. In the 1990s, the PKK vastly expanded its social base beyond the peasantry to the urban working and middle classes and became the hegemonic force of a much wider Kurdish movement. Over the course of the decade, this process allowed pro-Kurdish parties to win a large part of the local administrations of the region. In tracing these processes, this chapter emphasises the interaction between the political events and the structural transformation taking place in the Kurdish region. Turkey's counterinsurgency policy and economic reforms changed the class structure of the Kurdish region which in turn led to a deep ideological

renovation of the PKK. The outcome of this effort was the creation of a new – and wider – class coalition that allowed the Kurdish movement to gain a hegemonic position in the region.

### **Military Rule and Neoliberal Reforms in Turkey**

The transformation of the socio-economic structure of the Kurdish region and the growing influence of the Kurdish movement in the 1990s must be understood against the backdrop of the military rule and neoliberal reforms that characterised Turkey in the 1980s.

The 1980 military coup was not only a response to the instability and political violence of the previous decade but also to the worrying condition of the country's economy. The import-substitution industrialisation strategy promoted by Ankara since the 1960s – as by much of the developing world – was based on the protection of national industry to foster local production and the domestic market. This model allowed Turkey to enjoy an average annual GDP growth of over 3 per cent and to double the size of its economy between 1950 and 1980.<sup>507</sup> As capital accumulation was ensured by state subsidies and by the state-induced oligopolistic structure of the market, the large industrialists of western Turkey were willing to grant concessions to the trade unions. Their factory workers – a small minority of the Turkish working class – enjoyed relatively high salaries. The rest of the country – particularly the Kurdish south-east – was largely excluded from these developments except for its function as a source of migrant labour.

The main shortcoming of import-substitution industrialisation was the constant balance of payment deficit – due to the subsidised imports – that was severely aggravated by the four-fold increase of Turkey's energy bill following the 1973 oil crisis. Trying to address the endemic shortage of foreign currency reserve, the government imposed severe import controls

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<sup>507</sup> Şevket Pamuk, *Uneven Centuries: Economic Development of Turkey since 1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 222-226.

causing, for instance, continuous power cuts even in mid-winter.<sup>508</sup> In 1979, inflation was running at a 90 per cent rate while the country's public debt had increased five times from the beginning of the decade.<sup>509</sup> The continuous growth in size and militancy of the labour movement – from one million workdays lost to strikes in 1973-1976, to 3.7 million in 1976-1980 –<sup>510</sup> combined with the poor performance of the economy, started to significantly affect the rate of profit and created the consensus among the Turkish ruling class for abandoning import-substitution industrialisation and for an authoritarian solution to the economic crisis.<sup>511</sup> In July 1979, the Turkish government reached an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for a \$1.8 billion loan dependent on severe austerity measures.<sup>512</sup> The unpopularity of these measures and a new wave of strikes and factory occupations made the implementation of the package impossible for Süleyman Demirel's minority government.

The economic crisis of the late 1970s – along with the threats to the established order coming from socialists, Islamists, and Kurdish separatists –<sup>513</sup> led to the military coup of the 12 September 1980, the third in twenty years. Turgut Özal, a conservative technocrat and former World Bank employee,<sup>514</sup> was appointed deputy Prime Minister in the military-led cabinet and was entrusted with the implementation of the IMF-led stabilisation programme. Özal went beyond these early measures and, as Prime Minister from 1983 to 1989, contributed to the dramatic transformation of Turkey

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<sup>508</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey*, 267.

<sup>509</sup> Cited in Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 215.

<sup>510</sup> Cited in Caglar Keyder, *State and Class in Turkey* (London: Verso, 1987), 192.

<sup>511</sup> For an account of the class dimension of the import-substitution industrialisation strategy and of its crisis, see Caglar Keyder, *State and Class in Turkey* (London: Verso, 1987), 165-196.

<sup>512</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey*, 268.

<sup>513</sup> For the political instability leading to the coup, see Chapter 7.

<sup>514</sup> Özal had ties with the conservative Naqshbandi order and, in 1977, unsuccessfully run in the list of the Islamist National Salvation Party. His time at the World Bank (1971-1973) made him familiar with the emerging Washington Consensus policies.

into a neoliberal export-oriented economy. Under military rule – with the unions banned and most labour activists in jail – Özal greatly devaluated the Turkish Lira, liberalised the trade regime, eliminated subsidies and price controls, and promoted foreign capital.<sup>515</sup> These reforms – that turned Turkey into a model country for the IMF – led to a radical restructuring of the country's class structure in favour of capital. The share of wages in the national income dropped from 35 per cent in 1978 to 20 per cent in 1986 and wage suppression favoured the export-oriented shift of the country's economy.<sup>516</sup>

After imposing a new constitution in 1982, the military allowed for a return of power to civilian hands and Özal's new *Motherland Party* (ANAP) won a landslide in the 1983 elections. In the decade in which Özal dominated Turkish politics,<sup>517</sup> the exports' share of the GDP rose from 2.3 per cent in 1979 to 8.6 per cent in 1990. In 1989, Özal further liberalised the exchange rate and removed restrictions on capital movement, making Turkey's economy significantly more susceptible to external shocks. Even if Özal was elected President of the Republic in 1989, the ANAP lost its majority in the 1991 elections and the return to unruly coalition governments marked the end of fiscal discipline. Turkey's economy in the 1990s, vulnerable to sudden outflows of foreign capital, became increasingly dominated by financial instability and hyperinflation.<sup>518</sup>

As described in Chapter 7, the Turkish economy was characterised by extremely uneven development and by the subordination of the predominantly Kurdish south-east. The import-substitution industrialisation period had only a marginal impact on central and eastern Anatolia, as state subsidies were directed towards the large industries based in western Turkey. Manufacture in the rest of the country remained marginal, small-

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<sup>515</sup> Pamuk, *Uneven Centuries*, 248-249.

<sup>516</sup> Cited in Keyder, *State and Class*, 225.

<sup>517</sup> In 1980-1983 as the Deputy Prime Minister entrusted with the economic reforms, and in 1983-1989 as the Prime Minister.

<sup>518</sup> See Pamuk, *Uneven Centuries*, 249-257.

sized, and heavily labour-intensive.<sup>519</sup> Turgut Özal's reforms hit agriculture which in the Kurdish region represented the source of livelihood for most of the population. The 1980s were the beginning of a long process of transformation that will see the share of agriculture in Turkey's labour force decreased from 50 per cent in 1980 to 25 per cent in 2015 and the sector's output drop from 25 to 8 per cent of the GDP.<sup>520</sup> As Özal ended agricultural subsidies and price control, subsistence agriculture virtually disappeared, forcing many small farmers to sell their land and increasing the unequal distribution of land ownership. In 1990, more than half of the agricultural land of south-eastern Turkey was owned by only 8 per cent of the farming families, while 38 per cent owned smallholdings between 10 and 50 dönüms (1-5 hectares), and 38 per cent were landless peasants.<sup>521</sup>

Officially, the Turkish government and military identified the region's underdevelopment as the main cause of the PKK uprising. However, this underdevelopment was attributed – rather than to Ankara's policies – to the backward landownership structure and survival of tribalism.<sup>522</sup> As Turkish general İlker Başbuğ later explained

The PKK is essentially a 'peasant movement'. [its] energy comes from the fact that the PKK has mobilised hundreds of years of anger of the Kurdish peasants against their emirs, aghas, and beys. This enormous peasant energy represented by the PKK [was not generated by] Turkish state, it had rather accumulated over the centuries against its own rural structures. In fact, the first armed actions of the PKK started in Siverek, against the head of the Bucak tribe.<sup>523</sup>

Yet, Turkey's neoliberal reforms only increased the concentration of land ownership and worsened the condition of the peasantry. But, even more consequentially, the counterinsurgency policies deployed by Ankara

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<sup>519</sup> Keyder, *State and Class*, 175.

<sup>520</sup> Pamuk, *Uneven Centuries*, 280.

<sup>521</sup> Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 257-258.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>523</sup> Cited in Cengiz Çandar, *Mezopotamya Ekspresi: Bir Tarih Yolculuğu* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2012), 38.

strengthened the grip of the traditional landowning elite over their peasants. The Turkish military and government showed that maintaining the support of the Kurdish landowners remained a priority in the fight against the PKK, in particular given their capacity to contribute to the military effort by setting up their own semi-private Village Guards battalion.<sup>524</sup> With the complicity of the military authority that ensured their impunity and generously rewarded for the contribution to the anti-PKK operations, these tribal landowners turned warlords thrived.

### **The Destruction of Kurdish Rural Society**

The neoliberal reforms described in the previous section were not the only reason for the structural transformation of the Kurdish region of Turkey. From 1984 onwards, Turkey's south-east was the theatre of the war between the Turkish army and the PKK that, by the end of the 1980s, had assumed a mass character in the rural areas. Military rule was re-imposed in 1987 over nine Kurdish provinces in the form of the OHAL regime, that gave exceptional powers to a military super-governor based in Diyarbakır. The further empowerment of the tribal and landowning elite was by no means the only repercussions of the war on the social structure of the region. As discussed in the previous chapter, the intensification of the PKK insurgency in the late 1980s was due to the growing popularity enjoyed by the organisation among the Kurdish peasantry that provided manpower and logistical support. It was becoming impossible for the Turkish army to maintain a permanent presence in the mountain areas, especially at night. In response to this challenge, the military imposed curfews and food embargos over communities suspected of aiding the PKK but also started to evacuate villages by physically removing their inhabitants and preventing their return.<sup>525</sup> This practice, made possible by the OHAL legal framework

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<sup>524</sup> See Chapter 6.

<sup>525</sup> Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue*, 78.

was initially used as a form of collective punishment against communities seen as siding with the guerrilla.

By 1990, the evacuation of villages increased and assumed the character of a counterinsurgency strategy aimed at depopulating the countryside. In his comprehensive study of the spatial dimension of Turkey's anti-PKK strategy, Joost Jongerden explains that the evacuation of villages "constituted a concerted attempt by the Turkish military to bring about a conclusive transformation of the regional settlement structure" and the "destruction of rural society was simply considered part of the solution."<sup>526</sup> The figures of evacuated villages and villagers remain highly contested as the military rulers of Turkey's south-east were well aware to be acting in violation of the Geneva Convention. Not only did journalists have little access to the region, but the military also prevented Prime Minister Tansu Çiller and Deputy Prime Minister Murat Karayalçın from visiting the region in 1993.<sup>527</sup> Jongerden compared the contradictory figures coming from Turkish official sources with those provided by non-governmental organisations. While there is general agreement that the settlements evacuated in the course of the 1990s were around 3,000, the estimates on the number of displaced people vary: 384,000 according to official sources while independent sources claim 1-1.5 million and some even 3-4 million.<sup>528</sup> The available data shows that the evacuation and destruction of Kurdish villages became systematic only from 1991 onwards when this strategy was implemented in 109 villages. The number rose in 1992 (295) and 1993 (874) to culminate in 1994 when 1,531 rural communities were destroyed, and their inhabitants displaced.<sup>529</sup>

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<sup>526</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>528</sup> Ibid. Veli Yadirgi compares the same sources arguing that "because of such discrepancies, it is reasonable to assume that at least 1 million people were removed from their homelands." Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 224-225.

<sup>529</sup> Cited in Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue*, 82.

The military's objective of permanently depopulating the Kurdish countryside was implemented through the material devastation that accompanied the evacuation of villages and that prevented a future return of the villagers. Houses were destroyed and livestock was slaughtered up to an estimated loss of \$2.3 billion in the 1990s.<sup>530</sup> A large portion of the region's forest was burned. A 2007 study based on satellite images shows that 7.5 per cent of all the forested areas in the province of Tunceli – the Kurdish Dersim – were destroyed.<sup>531</sup> Forests surrounding villages were heavily targeted to affect more directly the livelihood of the local population and of destroying orchards and crops.<sup>532</sup> The construction of dams also contributed to mass displacement forcing 200-350,000 people to leave their homes between the 1980s and the early 2000s.<sup>533</sup> Presented as a developmental solution to the Kurdish issue, hydroelectric plants also served the same purpose as village evacuations and forest burning: depopulate the countryside and resettle allegedly (actual or potential) pro-PKK peasants to a more easily controllable urban environment.

The result of Turkey's counter-insurgency strategy was a rapid and disorderly process of urbanisation. Between 1990 and 1997, the rural population in the region under the OHAL regime decreased from 54.2 per cent to 41.9.<sup>534</sup> This 12 per cent drop is particularly striking when compared to the data from the rest of Turkey (non-OHAL provinces) where the rural population decreased only by 5.4 per cent. Moreover, the latter figure does not only show Turkey's structural urbanisation process but also includes the many displaced Kurds who moved to cities outside the OHAL region, in central and western Anatolia and thus increased the urban population of

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<sup>530</sup> This massive loss contributed to Turkey's shift from a meat-exporting country to a net importer in the 1990s. Ibid.

<sup>531</sup> Joost Jongerden, Hugo de Vos, and Jacob van Etten, 'Forest Burning as Counterinsurgency in Turkish-Kurdistan: An Analysis from Space', *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, 21.1&2 (2007).

<sup>532</sup> Ibid.11-12.

<sup>533</sup> Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 256.

<sup>534</sup> Matthew A. Kocher, 'Human Ecology and Civil War' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Chicago, 2004), cited in Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue*, 86.

these provinces. The population of the major towns and cities of the Kurdish region increased exponentially in the 1990s. According to independent estimates, between 1991 and 1996, Diyarbakır's population increased almost four times: from 380,000 to 1.3 million people.<sup>535</sup> Displaced Kurds swelled Turkey's shantytowns joining the already existing underclass of urban poor. They also provided cheap labour to export-oriented and hyper-exploitative industries in central Turkish cities – the so-called Anatolian Tigers (*Anadolu Kaplanları*) – that had been booming since the 1980s. This process of forced urbanisation had dramatic political consequences that were contrary to the intention of the Turkish government and military. As observed by Martin van Bruinessen, these “large urban Kurdish population concentrations with a strengthened sense of ethnic identity [...] proved more easy to politically mobilize [...] than villagers”<sup>536</sup> and the PKK took advantage of the new situation to expand its geographical and social reach.

### **The Kurdish Insurgency in the 1990s**

The shift in Turkey's counterinsurgency strategy was the result of the PKK's increasing ability to move freely across vast areas of the Kurdish region. Even if the guerrilla presence was still largely limited to the rural and mountainous areas, the PKK started to make inroads into the Kurdish towns and cities and the Kurdish communities in non-Kurdish areas. Information about the insurgency would easily spread from the villages where the PKK operated to the towns. Most small Kurdish towns existed in symbiosis with the surrounding rural environment as markets for agricultural products that villagers would visit frequently and in which they often had family ties. In the larger urban centres of the south-east and among the Kurdish diaspora in western Turkey, Kurdish leftist nationalism had been a powerful force since

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<sup>535</sup> Hakkari from 35,000 to 80,000, Batman from 150,000 to 250,000, Van from 153,000 to 500,000. David McDowall, *The Destruction of Villages in South-East Turkey: A Report by Medico International and the Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP)* (London: Medico International and KHRP, 1996), 19.

<sup>536</sup> Van Bruinessen, *Kurds and the City*.

the 1970s and especially among the working and lower-middle classes.<sup>537</sup> While underdevelopment, cultural oppression, police brutality – the grievances that motivated the radical Kurdish politics of the 1970s – were even more accentuated after the 1980 coup, the military had eliminated all the alternatives to the PKK making it the only possible outlet for Kurdish discontent. Moreover, the brutal post-coup repression of the movement, that evenly hit all Kurdish groups regardless of their militancy, validated Öcalan's especially uncompromising stance in the eyes of many Kurds. From 1989 onwards, the PKK received a wave of recruits from urban areas, including many university students.<sup>538</sup>

Due to the limited information that filtered through the region, the Turkish public became aware of the extent of the PKK's popularity only in 1990. In March, in the small town of Nusaybin, the funeral procession for a PKK activist turned into a mass protests where thousands of locals opposed the security forces and one protestor was killed. As the news of the revolt spread, protests broke out in Cizre, another small Kurdish town, leaving five dead. Signs of solidarity with the protests were visible throughout the south-east where shops were shut down for days. These mass demonstrations that turned into riots took the name of *serhildan* – literally 'raising one's head' – and made explicit references to the First Palestinian Intifada (1987-1993). The serhildans became more frequent in 1991 and 1992 and tended to coincide with *Newroz*, the Kurdish new year on March 21<sup>st</sup>, or the anniversary of the establishment of the PKK on November 10<sup>th</sup>.<sup>539</sup>

These often spontaneous revolts convinced the PKK leadership that the time was ripe to move beyond guerrilla tactics and towards forms of conventional warfare that would show the PKK's capability to hold

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<sup>537</sup> See Chapter 7.

<sup>538</sup> Alize Marcus goes a great length to describe the efforts of these urban recruits to adapt to a guerrilla's lifestyle. Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 134-139.

<sup>539</sup> For more on the serhildans, see Paul White, 'The March 1990 Uprising in Turkish Kurdistan & Its Effects on Turkish Politics', *Kurdish Times*, 4.1/2 (1991), 97-106; Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 134-140;

conquered ground and encourage a widespread popular uprising. In August 1991, when Turkey attacked the guerrilla camps in northern Iraq, the PKK fighters maintained their positions and – despite heavy losses – repelled the Turkish army.<sup>540</sup> In August 1992, the town of Şirnak became the theatre of an urban battle that displaced virtually its entire population – 20,000 out of 25,000 – and left 40 gendarmes, 85 PKK fighters, and 22 civilians dead.<sup>541</sup> These displays of strength by the PKK were meant to signal the shift to a phase of mass popular uprising allowing the PKK to deploy its forces into the open and to challenge a demoralised Turkish army. With the liberation wars of Algeria and Vietnam in mind, Öcalan hoped that the Turkish military would eventually lose public support and be forced to withdraw from the region.<sup>542</sup> However, this shift never materialised. Rather than withdrawing, by 1993, the Turkish army had deployed roughly half of its land forces to the region – 185,000 soldiers – that combined with the gendarmerie and the village guards amounted to more than 300,000 men. This was a force that could not be challenged in terms of conventional warfare.<sup>543</sup>

If Öcalan had underestimated the determination of the Turkish military, his intuition about the growing gap between the military and the civilian authorities proved to be partially correct. As mentioned before, the military allowed little civilian supervision over the Kurdish war and maintained firm control over the public narrative. Yet, some Turkish politicians made timid attempts to challenge the military's monopoly over the Kurdish issue and signs of this new attitude became more frequent in the early 1990s. In February 1991, the government lifted the ban on using the Kurdish language, and in December, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel announced that Turkey “acknowledged the Kurdish reality.” Turgut Özal – who had become President in 1989 – spoke favourably about the need to find a political

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<sup>540</sup> Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue*, 61-63.

<sup>541</sup> *The Kurds of Turkey: Killings, Disappearances and Torture* (New York: Human Rights Watch, March 1993) <<https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/TURKEY933.PDF>>

<sup>542</sup> Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue*, 61-63.

<sup>543</sup> Cited in Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue*, 64.

solution.<sup>544</sup> In the meantime, Öcalan appeared on a series of public interviews to improve the PKK's image among the Turkish public.<sup>545</sup> Interviewed by Turkish journalist Doğu Perinçek, in 1990, Öcalan announced that the PKK was no longer demanding independence and was willing to negotiate on a platform of regional autonomy.<sup>546</sup>

The conditions for negotiations briefly materialised in spring 1993. Between February and early March, the Iraqi-Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani acted as a mediator meeting both Öcalan in Damascus and Turgut Özal in Ankara. Encouraged by this climate, on March 17<sup>th</sup>, Öcalan proclaimed a unilateral ceasefire ordering his followers to keep Newroz quiet and his commanders to suspend their military operations. However, no official response arrived from the Turkish government. While Özal was lobbying the state apparatus to create the conditions for a political response, the military took Öcalan's move as a sign of weakness. In early April 1993, the Army launched a massive operation in the countryside of Diyarbakır with indiscriminate bombings. While many PKK cadres were increasingly critical, the remaining hope for a political solution was shattered by Özal's sudden death on April 17<sup>th</sup>. According to Cengiz Çandar, at the time special advisor to Özal, the conditions for peace were simply not there, regardless of the president's "goodwill" or his sudden death:

He was a lonely President encircled by many opponents, including the Prime Minister. [...] Secondly, the military [...] was totally against a political and peaceful resolution to the Kurdish issue. They wanted to go on in the conventional way and suppress them as bandits and terrorists. [...] Ideologically, the PKK was also not enough mature to reach a settlement. It was Öcalan's fantasy. We are talking about the year 1993, they were still more or less a pro-independence Marxist movement. When we look back, conditions were not mature to bring

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<sup>544</sup> Michael Gunter, 'Turgut Özal and the Kurdish question', in *Nationalisms and Politics*, ed. by Casier and Jongerden, 85-100.

<sup>545</sup> Popular journalist Mehmet Ali Birand's 1988 interview to Öcalan – later published as a book – contributed significantly to 'humanise' the PKK leader. See Birand, *APO ve PKK*.

<sup>546</sup> Doğu Perinçek, *Abdullah Öcalan ile Görüşmeler* (Istanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 1990).

about a resolution. I can attest how much Özal was committed [...]. But in politics, that's not sufficient.<sup>547</sup>

Turkey's official response to the PKK ceasefire arrived on May 25<sup>th</sup>, when the National Security Council refused negotiations and offered a partial amnesty in exchange for unconditional surrender. On the same day, a PKK unit captured a military bus and executed 33 unarmed recruits, an action that horrified and angered the Turkish public.<sup>548</sup> Two weeks later Öcalan abandoned the ceasefire.

### **The 'Urbanisation' and Ideological Transformation of the PKK**

Even if the intensity of the war continued to grow in the mid-1990s, the PKK remained committed to a political solution and, both in 1995 and 1998, Öcalan proclaimed new unilateral ceasefires that received no answer from the Turkish side. On the part of the PKK, there was a degree of war fatigue and a growing awareness that the disproportion of means made a continuous escalation of the conflict unviable. However, the ceasefires were also the result of a gradual ideological transformation of the organisation. The crisis and collapse of Soviet communism made the PKK's project of establishing a socialist Kurdistan look anachronistic and less appealing while liberal democracy was increasingly perceived as the only legitimate form of politics. Moreover, the fall of the South African Apartheid regime (1991), the Oslo Accords between Israelis and Palestinians (1993 and 1995) and the peace process in Northern Ireland (1994-1998) created a widespread optimism that the end of the Cold War provided the conditions for the resolution of decades-old conflicts. In the mid-1990s, Öcalan was explicitly taking distance from communism and re-defined the PKK's programme as "humanistic in essence":

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<sup>547</sup> Interview with Cengiz Çandar (personal communication, 2020). For a more detailed account of these events see Cengiz Çandar, *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds* (Lanham: Lexington Books).

<sup>548</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism versus Nation-Building States: Collected Articles* (Istanbul: ISIS, 2000), 33-37.

We are dedicated to a philosophy that is based on democracy and pluralism, not on the power of the state. We favour the synthesis of capitalism and socialism, an economic structure in which individuals will freely develop to their fullest potential. We are against all ideologies that defend absolute authority for the state at the expense of individual freedom.<sup>549</sup>

These positions were officially adopted by the PKK in its Fifth Congress in 1995, where the hammer and sickle were removed from the party flag. This transition was not particularly dramatic. Despite its allegiance to Marxism-Leninism, class politics was never a particularly central element of the PKK's discourse that was instead largely based on the issue of 'Turkish colonialism'. In these terms, the PKK was really an heir of the Turkish New Left and the student movement of the 1970s. In the cultural context where the PKK was originally established, the working class – partly incorporated by the state within the import-substitution industrialisation compromise – was absent and mostly evoked out of theoretical necessity.<sup>550</sup> Even in its most 'rural' phase, in the mid-1980s, when the main constituency of the PKK was – by far – the Kurdish peasantry, the socialisation of land was not a central aspect of its programme.<sup>551</sup> More than promising land, the PKK won a large part of the peasantry by targeting oppressive landowners and tribal chiefs, 'collaborationist aghas', that the PKK considered agents of Turkish colonialism. As Remzi Kartal explains

the PKK did not carry out actions against those aghas who were *national aghas*, who were patriotic, who stood by the cause of the Kurdish people. They acted against those aghas who were regime collaborators.<sup>552</sup>

This distinction between patriotic and collaborationist aghas reflects the classical distinction of Marxist anti-colonial thought between the 'national

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<sup>549</sup> *PKK: Program ve Tüzüğü* (Cologne: Weşanên Serxwebûn, 1995).

<sup>550</sup> Keyder, *State and Class*, 209.

<sup>551</sup> Interview with Hamit Bozarslan (Paris, 2019).

<sup>552</sup> Interview with Remzi Kartal (Brussels, 2019).

bourgeoisie' – with which the working class and peasantry should be allied – and the native 'comprador bourgeoisie' working for the colonisers.<sup>553</sup>

Moreover, in the 1990s the PKK expanded its presence in the urban contexts, thanks to its military successes and its effective propaganda that exponentially increased its appeal on urbanised Kurds of diverse class background. The ideological transformation of the PKK was parallel to and mutually reinforced by its growing strength among social groups other than the Kurdish peasantry. Precisely when the PKK was winning sections of the Kurdish working and middle classes, millions of Kurdish peasants – many of whom from PKK-supporting communities – were moving into the cities as a result of the evacuation of villages and other war-related reasons but also the damming of valleys and the country's structural urbanisation. These parallel processes gave the PKK unprecedented presence and popularity in both the urban centres of the Kurdish region and among the Kurdish communities in central and western Turkey and the European diaspora. An indication of the expansion of the PKK's class base can be found in the rapid growth of pro-Kurdish legal parties and their links to the Kurdish insurgency.

### **The Kurdish pro-Democracy Movement and its Social Basis**

The 1980 military coup was particularly ruthless in the repression of Kurdish leftist forces including the ones that, in the 1970s, had tried the path of electoral politics rather than armed struggle. The socialist and Kurdish nationalist mayor of Diyarbakır Mehdi Zana, elected in 1977, was arrested and tortured by the putschist generals and jailed until 1991.<sup>554</sup> Turkey's legislation forbade the establishment of parties with an explicit ethnic or regional identity, and, during the 1980s, the south-east again became a

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<sup>553</sup> For a classical example, possibly known to Öcalan himself, see Mao Zedong, *On the Question of the National Bourgeoisie and the Enlightened Gentry (March 1, 1948)*, (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1969).

<sup>554</sup> His memoirs, translated into English and French, significantly contributed to the increasing awareness in Europe of the Turkish Kurds' plight. Mehdi Zana, *Prison No.5: Eleven Years in Turkish Jails* (Watertown: Blue Crane Books, 1997).

terrain of competition for nation-wide mainstream parties. In the 1987 elections, the *Social Democratic Populist Party* (SHP) became the main opposition party with 24 per cent and performed particularly well in the Kurdish areas thanks to its commitment to undoing the political legacy of the 1980 coup. In 1989, however, the party leadership came under increasing pressure and eventually expelled several Kurdish MPs that had publicly spoken about the oppression of the Kurds in international venues.<sup>555</sup> The expulsion pushed six more Kurdish MPs and the chairs of twelve south-eastern SHP branches to resign.

The Kurdish MPs were joined by a number of non-Kurdish socialists to establish the *People's Labour Party* (HEP) in June 1990. This new party proposed a civilian constitution for Turkey as well as a resolution of the Kurdish issue through the democratisation of the country. The HEP located itself on the left aspiring to be the party of

the workers, the unemployed, the rural people, the civil servants, the teachers, democrats, the intellectuals of social democratic and socialist persuasion, the small businesses and artisans, the masses who have been subjected to oppression and exploitation and above all everyone who supports democracy.<sup>556</sup>

The HEP was unable to run for the snap elections of October 1991 due to technicalities but managed to strike a deal with SHP that was fearing an electoral collapse in the south-east. Thanks to this arrangement, 22 HEP members were elected in the SHP list. The HEP was becoming a political space in which Kurdish activists felt free to express their identity unapologetically. At the same time, the Turkish centrist and right-wing forces, as well as the media, led an incessant campaign to depict the HEP as the political wing of the PKK. Under these conditions, the non-Kurdish

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<sup>555</sup> In early 1989, Ibrahim Aksoy, parliamentarian for Malatya, was expelled by the SHP for a speech he delivered at the European Parliament. In October, seven SHP parliamentarians were expelled by the party for attending an international conference organized by the Kurdish Institute in Paris. At the conference, Aksoy harshly criticised the SHP calling it "racist and chauvinistic". For Aksoy's full speech, see *International Paris Conference 14-15 October 1989. The Kurds: Human Rights and Cultural Identity* (Paris: Institut Kurde de Paris, 1992), 53-60.

<sup>556</sup> Cited in Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 157.

HEP members were increasingly uneasy with the composition of the party and many of them resigned, in turn accelerating the 'Kurdification' of the party.<sup>557</sup>

The alleged links to the PKK and the accusation of separatism haunted the HEP until the Constitutional Court shut down the party in 1993. This act inaugurated a pattern whereby every time a pro-Kurdish party was banned, it was immediately re-opened under a different name. The HEP was replaced by the *Democracy Party* (DEP) (1993-1994), in turn, closed down and replaced by the *People's Democracy Party* (HADEP) (1994-2003). These parties became increasingly 'more Kurdish', as Nicole Watts observes in her book on pro-Kurdish legal activism, "police harassment and state coercion radicalised the party and its leadership, which isolated it from mainstream parties and promoted the politics of polarization and difference."<sup>558</sup> On its part, the PKK was certainly interested in influencing electoral politics especially since the HEP was established roughly at the time in which Abdullah Öcalan started calling for negotiations with the state. This can be noticed in the shift from the 1987 to the 1991 elections: In 1987, the SHP performed well in the south-east but was nowhere close to being the strongest party. In the 1991 elections, when the Kurdish candidates on the SHP lists were largely HEP members and the PKK was openly supportive, the SHP boomed in the Kurdish region. Despite its nation-wide 6 per cent decline – a loss of almost one million voters – the SHP/HEP experienced a spectacular increase in areas of strong PKK presence: From 16 to 71.7 per cent in the Diyarbakır 2 constituency, from 27.8 to 54 per cent in Mardin, from 17.4 to 39.7 in Siirt.<sup>559</sup> These results show the overwhelming popularity reached by the PKK in significant parts of the Kurdish region but also

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid., 162-163.

<sup>558</sup> Nicole F. Watts, *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2010), 65.

<sup>559</sup> 'Seçim Arşivi', *T.C. Yüksek Seçim Kurulu* <<http://www.ysk.gov.tr/tr/secim-arsivi/2612>>.

contributed to the Turkish public's perception of the HEP as a mere political extension of the PKK.

Watts explains that, despite not being a creation of the PKK, "the parties' most active rank-and-file membership and much of its voter base supported pro-Kurdish parties because they viewed them as sympathetic to or as a surrogate of the PKK." Within the HEP, DEP, and HADEP, there was always a degree of tension between "those who maintained close communication with the PKK leadership and indeed viewed the party as an unofficial front for the PKK" and "those who sought to maintain some distance and autonomy from the guerrilla organization."<sup>560</sup> The creation of these parties at a time in which the PKK had reached a level of popularity and strength that was unprecedented in Turkey's Kurdish movement meant that the room for an alternative Kurdish politics was very limited. The gradual breakaway of Turkish leftists was, according to Hamit Bozarslan, virtually inevitable, as the success of the PKK insurgency triggered "a total reconfiguration of the Kurdish political space, as a distinct space from the Turkish political space."<sup>561</sup> In earlier stages of the insurgency, Kurdish nationalists and leftists could still maintain critical positions on the PKK's ideology and strategy. By the early 1990s, the PKK had become so powerful that it was increasingly able to determine the boundaries of 'legitimate' Kurdish politics. Within this context, the HEP and its successors had little room to escape the PKK's narrative that each Kurd could only be either with the PKK or with the Turkish state.

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<sup>560</sup> Watts, *Activists in Office*, 14.

<sup>561</sup> Cited in Casier and Grojean, *Between Integration, Autonomization and Radicalization*, 11.

<b>Party name</b>	<b>Established</b>	<b>Dissolved</b>
People's Labour Party (HEP)	7 June 1990	14 July 1993 - <i>banned</i>
Freedom and Democracy Party (ÖZDEP)	19 October 1992	23 November 1993 - <i>banned</i>
Democracy Party (DEP)	7 May 1993	16 June 1994 - <i>banned</i>
People's Democracy Party (HADEP)	11 May 1994	13 March 2003 - <i>banned</i>
Democratic People's Party (DEHAP)	24 October 1997	17 August 2005 – <i>becomes DTP</i>
Democratic Society Party (DTP)	17 August 2005	12 December 2009 - <i>banned</i>
<i>Peace and Democracy Party (BDP); from 11 July 2014, Democratic Regions Party (DBP)</i>	3 May 2008	
<i>Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP)</i>	15 October 2012	

The PKK's involvement provided these parties with wide support among the landless peasantry and the urban poor, especially in the mid-1990s, when a large part of the former was becoming the latter. Since this was the social base that allowed the pro-Kurdish parties to obtain such spectacular results in the Kurdish south-east, the party programme remained quite radical: "land reform and redistribution, programs to eradicate regional economic disparities, continued public ownership of state-owned economic enterprises, and greatly expanded services to aid the poor and unemployed."<sup>562</sup> The party leadership, however, was largely filled by the urban middle classes and in particular professionals – lawyers, teachers, engineers – and people who had gained prominence through civil society activism.<sup>563</sup> Relying on this wide class base, by the mid-1990s, the pro-Kurdish parties had largely displaced the Turkish mainstream parties and were the dominant electoral force in the south-east. The main challenge to their electoral hegemony came from the rising Turkish Islamist movement. The Islamist *Welfare Party* (RP) provided conservative Kurds with an alternative to the 'opposed nationalisms' and emphasised Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood under the banners of (Sunni) Islam. During the 1990s, the Kurdish south-east became the arena for the competition between the Islamists and the pro-Kurdish forces while the other Turkish parties became marginal in the region. The RP, however, shadowed its rivals among both

<sup>562</sup> Watts *Activists in Office*, 70.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

Turkish and Kurdish slum dwellers in cities such as Istanbul, where the Islamists' network of charity organisations won them vast support.<sup>564</sup>

The pro-Kurdish parties faced a hostile judicial and political system. The 1982 military constitution imposed a nation-wide 10 per cent – the world's highest – electoral threshold, designed to ensure strong parliamentary majorities but also to make it difficult for 'regional' – read 'Kurdish' – parties to enter parliament. For these reasons, the pro-Kurdish parties had to opt for an electoral alliance – like in 1991 – or to run their candidates as independents. The success of the pro-Kurdish parties made them a target of the wave of extra-judicial violence that, in the 1990s, hit Kurds as well as Alevi, leftists, liberals, and secular intellectuals. The hundreds of murders that took place in this decade revealed the links between far-right organisations – like the *Grey Wolves*<sup>565</sup> and Turkish *Hizbullah*<sup>566</sup> – the Turkish mafia, and the Turkish 'deep state'.<sup>567</sup> Between 1991 and 1994, more than fifty DEP/HEP activists were murdered including two parliamentarians.<sup>568</sup> These crimes largely remained unpunished and took place in a context in which the political mainstream publicly painted elected Kurdish officials as terrorists and traitors. After the DEP was banned in 1994, five MPs were given sentences up to 15 years for their alleged ties with the PKK while six more went into exile before their trials began.

### **Kurdish Diaspora and Exile in Europe**

One of the reasons behind the PKK's growing strength between the 1980s and the 1990s was its ability to mobilise the Kurdish diaspora in Europe.

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<sup>564</sup> Henri Barkey, 'The People's Democracy Party (HADEP): The Travails of a Legal Kurdish Party in Turkey', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 18.1 (1998), 129–38.

<sup>565</sup> The Gray Wolves (*Bozkurtlar*) is a violent neofascist group affiliated to the MHP.

<sup>566</sup> Known also as 'Kurdish' Hizbullah, due to its strength in the south-east, this Sunni organisation is unrelated to the more famous Lebanese Hizbollah.

<sup>567</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey*, 321–323.

<sup>568</sup> Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 163–164; Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 208.

Germany hosted the biggest Kurdish community in Europe, roughly 20 per cent of the 650.000 Turkish nationals who emigrated there as guest workers since the 1960s.<sup>569</sup> With the waves of Kurdish refugees escaping Turkey, Iran, and Iraq in the 1980s, by the mid-1990s, the Kurdish population in Europe amounted, to approximately 850.000 individuals, half a million of whom in Germany.<sup>570</sup> Up to the 1970s, the Kurdish population in Germany was overwhelmingly made up of migrant workers with a low degree of politicisation.<sup>571</sup> It was the great influx of Kurdish political refugees after the 1980 coup – roughly 30.000 – that helped rapidly politicise the Kurdish community.<sup>572</sup> Activist Devris Çimen left Turkey with his family in 1978, escaping anti-Alevi persecution in southern Turkey and developed his Kurdish identity in Europe:

I was a child basically when they sent us to Switzerland... I was asking 'why am I here?'. I didn't like it, my roots were in Maraş. [...] The Kurdish movement was active in Switzerland. As a child, I thought 'why would I fight for Kurdistan? I'm from Elbistan<sup>573</sup>!'. We were suppressed to such a degree that we didn't even know that we were Kurds. And when we arrived in Switzerland we realised that the issue was much broader than we ever thought.<sup>574</sup>

In the early 1980s, the PKK sent cadres to Europe with the specific purpose of organising the Kurdish communities and, by the end of the decade, the diaspora had become a major source of funding and recruitment. The PKK set up the *Weşanên Serxwebûn* publishing house in Cologne and organised community life through sectoral organisations – for women, workers, youth, but also religious groups (Sunnis, Alevis, Yazidis).<sup>575</sup> These groups organised

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<sup>569</sup> Birgit Ammann, 'Kurds in Germany', in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas*, ed. by Melvin Ember, Ian A. Skoggard (Boston, MA: Springer, 2005), 1011.

<sup>570</sup> Osten Wahlbeck, *Kurdish Diasporas: A Comparative Study of Kurdish Refugee Communities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

<sup>571</sup> Ammann, *Kurds in Germany*, 1011 .

<sup>572</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, 'Shifting National and Ethnic Identities: The Kurds in Turkey and the European Diaspora', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 18.1 (1998), 45.

<sup>573</sup> A district in Kahramanmaraş Province.

<sup>574</sup> Interview with Devris Çimen (Brussels, 2019).

<sup>575</sup> Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 109-111.

rallies and protests in solidarity with the insurgency in Turkey but also music festivals, dance contests, the *Newroz* celebrations with the aim of politicising Kurdish culture. According to police reports, in the mid-1990s, the PKK-affiliated organisations in Germany could count on approximately 7,500 activists and were able to mobilise up to 50,000 German Kurds for protests and cultural events.<sup>576</sup> In 1995, The pro-PKK MED-TV started broadcasting from Europe and, in just a few months, was being viewed by millions of people around the world.<sup>577</sup> The successful organisation and mobilisation of Europe's Kurds were aimed at creating a new pool of recruits for the insurgency but, even more importantly, a reliable flow of revenues. This topic is highly contested because of Turkey's incessant campaign to present the PKK's financing as based on extortion and the control of major drug trafficking routes.<sup>578</sup> Even if the idea that the PKK exercises direct control on the flow of drugs to Europe has no actual foundation, the PKK certainly 'taxes'<sup>579</sup> legal and illegal commercial activities in areas under its influence.<sup>580</sup> The PKK's social control over Kurdish diaspora communities is manifested in both the large extent of voluntary donations but also in the

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<sup>576</sup> Van Bruinessen, *Shifting National and Ethnic Identities*, 51.

<sup>577</sup> Amir Hassanpour, 'Satellite Footprints as National Borders: Med-tv and the Extraterritoriality of State Sovereignty', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 18.1 (1998), 53–72; Bilgin Ayata, 'Kurdish Transnational Politics and Turkey's Changing Kurdish Policy: The Journey of Kurdish Broadcasting from Europe to Turkey', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 19.4 (2011), 523–33.

<sup>578</sup> Despite the poverty and dubious origin of the available sources, this narrative often makes it into academic and pseudo-academic literature, especially in the field of Terrorism Studies. See for example Roth and Sever, *The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK)*; Ahmet Pek and Behsat Ekici, 'Narcoterrorism in Turkey: The Financing of PKK-KONGRA GEL from Illicit Drug Business', in *Understanding and Responding to the Terrorism Phenomenon: A Multi-Dimensional Perspective*, ed. by Ozgur Nibbay and Suleyman Hancerli (Washington: IOS Press, 2007), 140–52.

<sup>579</sup> Voluntary donations resembling taxes – regular and somehow proportionate to the donor's income – are an almost universal characteristic of diaspora support to liberation struggles in the home country: from the Irish to the Tamils or the Basques.

<sup>580</sup> For a critical discussion on the alleged criminal activities of the PKK, see Paul White, *Primitive Rebels or Revolutionary Modernizers?: The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2000), 191–200.

use coercion to persuade more reluctant members of the Kurdish communities to contribute to the cause.

The PKK's presence in Europe also served the purpose of internationalising Turkey's Kurdish question. Since the failure of the 1993 ceasefire attempt, Öcalan started planning to establish a wider Kurdish national assembly in exile to gain a degree of international legitimacy that the PKK alone was unable to achieve. The *Kurdistan Parliament in Exile* held its first session in The Hague in April 1995, soon after the DEP was banned in Turkey. Öcalan was unable to convince any major party or organisation from the other Kurdish regions to join and the Kurdish parliament was largely composed by current and former DEP deputies, civil society activists, and some independent personalities. As Remzi Kartal, one of the exiled DEP parliamentarian and founder of the Parliament in Exile, explains

we came to Europe in 1994 because we had escaped [Turkey]. Then, as a delegation of the [DEP] MPs in exile, we went to Damascus and met Öcalan. Öcalan said that the most important thing for us now was to establish a national congress to bring all these political parties together. And then we worked for that, we spoke with everybody, but the [Iraqi-Kurdish] KDP and PUK said that they had interests with Turkey and, for that reason, they did not come. So we established the Kurdish parliament in exile that was limited to northern [Turkish] Kurdistan. It wasn't a national parliament. But we worked in that direction.<sup>581</sup>

The inability to convince other major groups weakened the parliament and in 1999 it transformed into the slightly more representative *Kurdistan National Congress*.<sup>582</sup>

However, that severe limits to Kurdish political activism existed also in Europe became clear already in the early 1990s. In June 1993, after Kurdish activists had attacked the Turkish consulate in Munich, German authorities complied with Turkey's request to outlaw the PKK, and France followed suit

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<sup>581</sup> Interview with Remzi Kartal (Brussels, 2019).

<sup>582</sup> Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society*, 219-221.

by the end of the same year.<sup>583</sup> Even if these bans have not been consistently enforced, they create a sense of precariousness as pro-Kurdish organisations and events are occasionally shut down and convey the message that the US and European government are ultimately always going to side with Turkey.

### **The Capture of Abdullah Öcalan**

The Kurdish insurgency in Turkey was suddenly interrupted by the capture of the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan in February 1999. Since 1979, Öcalan had been based in Damascus as a guest of the Ba'athist regime of Hafez al-Asad. In the 1970s and 1980s, Asad offered safe haven to leftist revolutionary and separatist groups active in neighbouring and hostile countries such as leftist Palestinians, the insurgency-aspiring Turkish New Left, Kurdish nationalists from Iraq, or Armenian militants. This policy was aimed at destabilising neighbouring Turkey, Israel, and Iraq – each of them stronger than and hostile to Syria.<sup>584</sup> The reason why Damascus was able to provoke these countries without facing retaliation was that, from the 1970s, Syria enjoyed the protection of the Soviet Union as its most stable Middle Eastern ally. Syria's support to the PKK was also specifically aimed at destabilising Turkey's south-east and delaying the construction of large infrastructural projects in the upper Euphrates valley that could seriously affect the volume of water reaching eastern Syria.<sup>585</sup> Rather than direct military and logistical assistance, Syria mostly offered the PKK the freedom to move and organise inside its territory.

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<sup>583</sup> Alynna J. Lyon and Emek M. Uçarer, 'Mobilizing Ethnic Conflict: Kurdish Separatism in Germany and the PKK', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24.6 (2001), 938-939.

<sup>584</sup> This policy certainly had also an ideological dimension and the organizations supported by Syria were largely socialist in orientation. However, in the 1980s, with the decline of leftist forces throughout the Middle East, Asad pragmatically started to support rising Islamist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine or Hezbollah in Lebanon.

<sup>585</sup> See Mark Dohrmann and Robert Hatem, 'The Impact of Hydro-Politics on the Relations of Turkey, Iraq and Syria', *The Middle East Journal*, 68.4 (2014), 567-83.

With the end of the Cold War, the balance of power shifted in favour of Turkey. In just a few years, the end of Soviet military aid to Syria as well as the increasing military cooperation between Turkey and Israel made Ankara's threat of military invasion much more credible.<sup>586</sup> In October 1998, Syria expelled Öcalan and shut down the PKK's offices and training facilities. Öcalan fled first to Athens and then Moscow but both countries refused him asylum. In November, Öcalan made it to Italy. Under Turkish and American pressure, the Italian government did not grant Öcalan refugee status, and yet it refused extradition on the grounds that Turkey could apply the death penalty.<sup>587</sup> There would have probably been safer choices for Öcalan – such as Libya or North Korea – than Italy, a NATO member with strong economic ties to Turkey. The PKK leader explained the move as a political choice:

To explain the reality of [the Kurds], and if possible to find a political solution, I found it inevitable that I should go to Rome [...] to explain the merciless truth to European public opinion and to seek the chance to create a political opening.<sup>588</sup>

As observed by Paul White, Öcalan's choice was aimed at breaking the political isolation of "a guerrilla chief hiding away in a so-called 'pariah state'" and at bringing the Kurdish issue directly to the core of Europe.<sup>589</sup> His hope was not well placed. In February, Öcalan was pressured to leave Italy for Greece where he was eventually flown to Nairobi in the hope that he could apply for asylum in South Africa thanks to the long-standing ties between the PKK and the ruling African National Congress. Once in Nairobi, Öcalan was captured by Turkish special forces aided by American and Israeli intelligence.

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<sup>586</sup> For an analysis of the 1998 Turkish-Syrian crisis in terms of geopolitical and military development, see Meliha B. Altunışık and Özlem Tür, 'From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations', *Security Dialogue*, 37.2 (2006), 229–48.

<sup>587</sup> Alessandra Stanley, 'Italy Rejects Turkey's Bid For the Extradition of Kurd', *The New York Times*, 21 November 1998 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/21/world/italy-rejects-turkey-s-bid-for-the-extradition-of-kurd.html>>.

<sup>588</sup> Cited in Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society*, 235.

<sup>589</sup> White, *Primitive Rebels*, 183.

Öcalan's capture led to an explosion of public rage in Turkey's south-east but also in Iraqi Kurdistan and among the Kurdish diaspora. In Europe, PKK sympathizers attacked Greek and Israeli embassies and, in Germany, clashes between Turks and Kurds took place. Held two months after Öcalan's capture, the local and legislative elections of April 1999 turned out to be a show of strength by the pro-Kurdish HADEP that won Diyarbakır and six other provincial capitals. With nearly 5 per cent, the HADEP was far from passing the 10 per cent threshold and yet it came first in eleven of Turkey's 81 provinces. In June 1999, Öcalan was sentenced to death by a military tribunal although the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment after Turkey abolished the capital punishment in 2002.<sup>590</sup>

## **Conclusion**

From the early 1990s, the PKK became the only significant Kurdish national force in Turkey and the unavoidable point for reference of the Kurdish left, including the legal pro-Kurdish parties. Chapter 7 showed the immediate consequences of the 1980 coup and particularly how the elimination of the PKK's political rivals by the putschist military contributed to the unforeseeable success of the early PKK insurgency (1984-1990). This chapter described the long-term consequences of the 1980 military coup. Through political repression and neoliberal reforms, the military regime profoundly altered the class structure and political landscape of the country. Banning the unions and forbidding strikes, the military laid the conditions for Turkey's transformation into an export-oriented industrial country whose competitiveness was based on the contraction of salaries and workplace discipline. By creating a docile and fragmented working class, this strategy disarmed the political left eliminating the historical Turkish interlocutor for

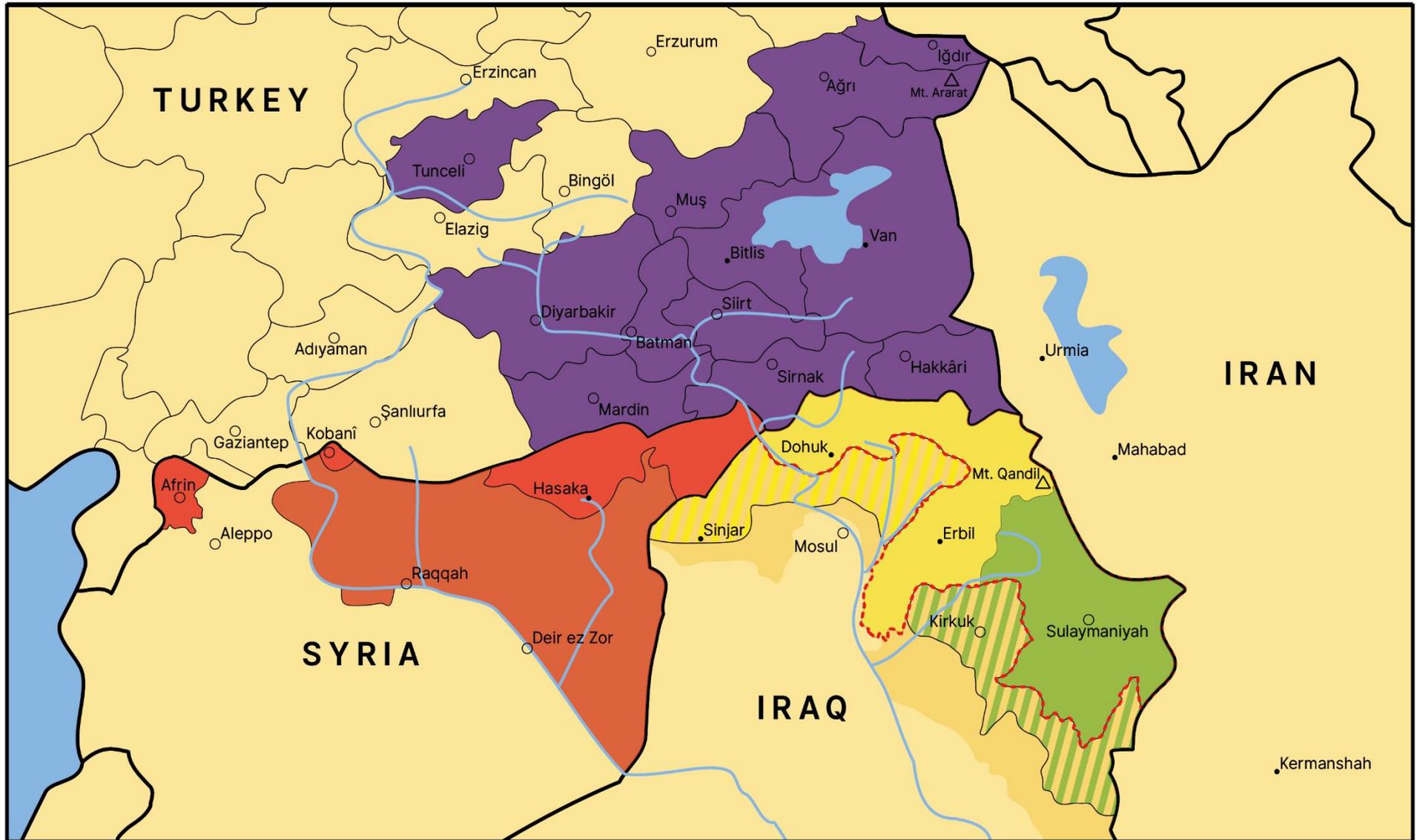
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<sup>590</sup> In 2005, the *European Court of Human Rights* (ECHR) declared that Öcalan's trial had not been fair and that he had not been granted his right to appeal. 'CASE OF ÖCALAN v. TURKEY (Application No. 46221/99)', *ECHR*, 12 May 2005 <[https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:\[%22001-69022%22\]%7D](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:[%22001-69022%22]%7D)>.

Kurdish activists and created an unbridgeable gap between Turkish and Kurdish politics in Turkey.

In the Kurdish region, this transformation went parallel, in the mid-1990s, to the coercive depopulation of the countryside through the forced displacement of millions of Kurdish villagers – the social base of the PKK – that were turned into urban poor. In this context of social fragmentation, the PKK had to rearticulate its political project abandoning the idea of a socialist and independent Kurdistan. As class mobilisation was made impossible by the authoritarian and neoliberal reforms and socialist politics had been discredited worldwide by the fall of the Soviet Union, the PKK and the pro-Kurdish parties re-oriented their political project towards the resolution of the Kurdish issue through the democratisation of Turkey. Without abandoning social demands and a clear leftist stance, the re-framing of the Kurdish issue in terms of democratic representation allowed for the building of a wide social coalition in support of the PKK and the pro-Kurdish parties. Chapter 9 will show how this re-orientation of the PKK continued after the capture of Öcalan in 1999, developing into an alternative political project for the Kurds.

**Map 5 - Kurdish Politics in the 2010s**



# **Chapter 9**

## **The Political Economy of the New Kurdish Movement (2000-2019)**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the expansion of the social basis of Turkey's Kurdish movement in relation to the process of ideological and organisational transformation that followed the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. The transition of the PKK from Leninism and nationalism to radical democracy, the growth of the Kurdish women's movement, and the experience of Kurdish self-government in Rojava have attracted an unprecedented degree of scholarly and media interest in the Kurds. Also due to the nearly complete abandonment of Marxist language by the movement itself, discussions of Kurdish politics are centred on issues of democratic representation, minority rights, and women's liberation. The political-economic context in which the new Kurdish movement operates as well as the conflictual class dynamics existing within the movement itself are most often not part of the discussion.

After discussing the new ideological paradigm developed by Öcalan and centred around the critique of nationalism, this chapter explores the three most significant aspects of the new movement in the 2000s and 2010s: the Kurdish women's movement; the growth of legal pro-Kurdish parties in Turkey; and the establishment of Kurdish-controlled political entity in Syria. Each section touches upon relevant issues of political economy that affected these developments as well as the class dynamics at play, while the final section draws broader considerations on the political economy of the movement. While the movement's strategy seems to be oriented towards building a wide social coalition with the inclusion of the middle and

even upper classes, its electoral and military strength remains rooted in the mass support the movement enjoys among the subaltern classes.

### **From the PKK to the New Kurdish Movement**

In August 1999, from the island prison of İmralı and with a pending death sentence, Öcalan ordered his guerrillas to withdraw from Turkey and proclaimed another unilateral ceasefire. The PKK fighters retreated under Turkish fire to their bases in the northern Iraqi Qandil Mountains. The decision to suspend the war and the highly conciliatory statements by Öcalan to the Turkish government and public in these years drove many militants to abandon the organization.<sup>591</sup> However, the PKK largely complied with the instructions, passed on by Öcalan through his lawyers, proving that the leader was still in control.

The years following Öcalan's capture were a period of transition for the PKK. The organisation changed its name twice: into *Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress* (KADEK) in April 2002 and again into *Kurdistan People's Congress* (Kongra-Gel) in late 2003. These were attempts to renovate the public image of the PKK and to avert the consequences of being designated terrorist.<sup>592</sup> However, the name changes were not purely cosmetic operations. On the contrary, in the early 2000s, the PKK was going through intense ideological debates that had been triggered by the defeat of 1999. The congress documents of these years are increasingly focused on the critique of nationalism as the main source of the Kurdish Question:

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<sup>591</sup> Around 1,500 militants according to White. Paul White, *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 31.

<sup>592</sup> The PKK had been banned as a terrorist organisation by Germany and France in 1993 and by the US State Department in 1997. That adding the PKK to terrorist lists was a political decision which had little to do with the PKK's actions became clear to all Kurds in the early 2000s, when both the United Kingdom (2000) and the EU (2002) banned the PKK despite the latter had withdrawn from Turkey and was calling for a political solution to the conflict. On the PKK's response to the listing, see Marlies Casier, 'Designated Terrorists: The Kurdistan Workers' Party and Its Struggle to (Re)Gain Political Legitimacy', *Mediterranean Politics*, 15.3 (2010), 393–413.

“the system of the 20th Century which is based on nationalism, division, denial and destruction is not the right solution but in fact the reason behind the problem.”<sup>593</sup> These discussions were triggered and encouraged by the intellectual inputs coming from Öcalan’s prison cell. At his numerous trials,<sup>594</sup> the Kurdish leader opted for a political rather than a legalistic defence and used his court appearances as a platform to propose a new political project. His defence texts, presented before Turkish and international courts, were later published and officially adopted by the PKK and constituted the basis for a paradigm shift. At its 9<sup>th</sup> Congress, in spring 2005, the organisation reformed its structure and officially adopted Öcalan’s new paradigm.

Öcalan turned his own imprisonment into the opportunity to accelerate the process of transformation that the PKK had started in the 1990s.<sup>595</sup> By the late 2000s, the PKK had developed a new radical democratic project and rejected the nation-state as the political trajectory for the Kurdish movement. At the same time, the Kurdish movement that openly refers to Öcalan’s thought grew much wider than the PKK itself, both in terms of geographical reach and diversification of activities. From this transformation onwards, describing the complex of organisations following Öcalan’s thought as ‘the PKK’ is not only empirically incorrect as it is politically problematic. Even if the PKK leadership’s influence over the wider movement is stronger than they admit, it would be impossible for a guerrilla group to directly control the galaxy of Öcalan-inspired organisations in every field of society and spread around Turkey, the Middle East, and Europe. Moreover, describing the wider movement as PKK-affiliated legitimises the narrative of the Turkish government aimed at criminalising every expression of Kurdish politics by labelling it as terrorism.

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<sup>593</sup> ‘Final Resolution on the 8th Congress of the PKK’, *Management Committee of KADEK*, 15 April 2002. See also, *Final Declaration of the Foundation Conference of the People’s Congress of Kurdistan*, 17 November 2003, (Cologne: International Initiative Freedom for Ocalan).

<sup>594</sup> The Imrali court that sentenced him to death and the Court of Appeals in Ankara in 1999, a local court in Şanlıurfa and the ECHR in 2001, a court in Athens in 2003, and the Grand Chamber of the ECHR in 2004.

<sup>595</sup> See Chapter 8.

With Marxism, the movement also abandoned the language of class politics, and the ideological transformation was accompanied – and arguably mutually reinforced – by the expansion and diversification of the movement’s class base. The next section describes the PKK’s ideological and organisational transformation in more detail to introduce the discussion of the political-economic programme and class basis of the new Kurdish movement.

### **Öcalan’s New Ideological Paradigm**

This section summarises the main features of *Democratic Confederalism*, the PKK’s new paradigm, as a coherent political project as it appears in the 2010s. However, it must be noted that Öcalan’s capture did not constitute a clear cut-off point between the PKK’s Leninist and nationalist past and its democratic and autonomist present. Even if the leader’s arrest in 1999 became the occasion to accelerate the shift, the PKK’s transformation is doubtlessly in continuity with its evolution in the 1990s and particularly with Öcalan’s developing critique of the nation-state and the patriarchal society. As supporters proudly claim, the PKK’s resilience throughout the decades is the result of its capacity to continuously evolve. In the words of Remzi Kartal:

The desire for change never dies in the PKK. We change continuously and according to the needs, not only of the Kurds but of the people of the Middle East and of humanity. We have to change to meet the demands and needs of the people. [...] the dogmas that have damaged the international left and that block the development of the Middle East [...] have to be broken to make change possible<sup>596</sup>

Öcalan’s analysis, drawing heavily on the writings of American anarchist Murray Bookchin, starts from a critique of the nation-state as a source of oppression.<sup>597</sup> The early democratic thinking of the European enlightenment

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<sup>596</sup> Interview with Remzi Kartal (Brussels, 2019).

<sup>597</sup> Within academia, Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Akkaya are the authors of the most comprehensive and thorough work of interpretation of Öcalan’s writings and of the PKK’s new paradigm and this section largely relies on their publications on the topic. See Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Akkaya, ‘The PKK in the 2000s:

was defeated by the rise of nationalism that translated into the pursuit of culturally homogenous states – like the Turkish Republic – where all minority groups had to be suppressed and forcefully assimilated. The democratic solution for the Kurdish question cannot, therefore, be found in the establishment of a Kurdish nation-state, which would be as oppressive as the existing nation-states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria where the Kurds were denied their freedom. A Kurdish nation-state would need to create a homogenous Kurdish people and to erase the regional, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the land of Kurdistan. As an alternative, Öcalan proposed the establishment of a ‘truly’ *Democratic Republic* in Turkey:

I offer the Turkish society a simple solution. We demand a democratic nation. We are not opposed to the unitary state and republic. We accept the republic, its unitary structure and laicism. However, we believe that it must be redefined as a democratic state respecting peoples, cultures and rights. On this basis, the Kurds must be free to organize in a way that they can live their culture and language and can develop economically and ecologically. This would allow Kurds, Turks and other cultures to come together under the roof of a democratic nation in Turkey.<sup>598</sup>

With continuous reference to Atatürk’s early speeches, Öcalan claimed that granting Kurdish rights in Turkey would not undermine the founding principles of the republic but strengthen its democracy.<sup>599</sup> The PKK would, therefore, support political parties that not only defend the Kurds but also

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Continuity through breaks?’ in *Nationalisms and Politics*, ed. by Casier and Jongerden, 143-162; Ahmet Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, ‘Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the Project of Radical Democracy’, *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 14 (2012); Ahmet Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, ‘Democratic Confederalism as a Kurdish Spring: The PKK and the Quest for Radical Democracy’, in *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds*, ed. by Michael Gunter and Mohammed Ahmed (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2013), 163–86; Ahmet Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, ‘Confederalism and Autonomy in Turkey: The Kurdistan Workers’ Party and the Reinvention of Democracy’, in *The Kurdish Question in Turkey*, ed. by Güneş and Zeydanlıoğlu, 186-204; Joost Jongerden, ‘The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK): Radical Democracy and the Right to Self-Determination Beyond the Nation-State’ in *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, ed. by Stansfield and Shareef, 245-257.

<sup>598</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, *War and Peace in Kurdistan* (Cologne: International Initiative “Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan – Peace in Kurdistan”, 2008), 39.

<sup>599</sup> Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement*, 137.

promote the recognition of the cultural rights of all ethnic and religious groups in Turkey as well as the secularists and other discriminated groups such as the LGBT+ community.

The project of *Democratic Confederalism* goes even beyond that. Aware that changing the current Middle East borders – in order to create a Kurdish state – could only lead to bloodshed and displacement, the Öcalan proposes to build democracy by *ignoring*, rather than dismantling, state borders. Communities would autonomously organise on the basis of democratic councils in a confederal relation to each other. In such a system, the need to establish a Kurdish state would simply disappear. When framed in these terms, the status of the Kurds as the world's 'largest stateless nation' is turned into the opportunity for an alternative political project and a true democratisation of the region. In Öcalan's project, a "Middle Eastern democratic Confederalism [...] will reunite those whose free lives were destroyed by the nation-state wars imposed on the former mosaic of the Middle Eastern peoples".<sup>600</sup>

Following these ideological premises, the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of the PKK in 2005 restructured the whole organisational framework of the group rejecting its previous "state-like hierarchical structure" now deemed in "dialectic contradiction to the principles of democracy, freedom and equality".<sup>601</sup> The PKK itself became – at least formally – just a component of a wider confederal body called the *Kurdistan Communities Union* (KCK). The KCK, a confederation of local councils and organisations, was constructed as a direct alternative to the nation-state to collect all political forces that support the project of Democratic Confederalism under the same coordinating body. Within this framework, democracy takes the form of people's power, rather than that of representative politics. The PKK became then the KCK-affiliated party representing the Kurds of Turkey and was

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<sup>600</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 1, Civilization: The Age of Masked Gods and Disguised Kings* (Porsgrunn, Norway: New Compass Press, 2015), 39.

<sup>601</sup> Öcalan, *War and Peace*, 28.

joined by a sister party for each of the Kurdish regions: the *Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party* (PÇDK) in Iraq, the *Democratic Union Party* (PYD) in Syria, and the *Kurdistan Free Life Party* (PJAK) in Iran.<sup>602</sup> Moreover, the KCK included the military wings, the women's branches, as well as Kurdish diaspora associations. After 2005, what used to be known as the PKK became, rather than a party, a *party-complex*,<sup>603</sup> organised in a less centralised structure.

This transformation did not necessarily imply a significant change of the leadership and most of the powerful positions in the KCK, the PKK, and the military wings were taken by PKK veterans and members of Öcalan's inner circle.<sup>604</sup> However, the new structure created a plenitude of organisations, committees, and councils, empowering a generation of cadres who had joined the Kurdish struggle during the mass growth of the PKK in the 1990s. As described later in this chapter, the growth in strength and political significance of other formally and informally affiliated organisations, such as the women's movement, the legal pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey or the Syria-based PYD, inevitably created alternative centres of power which can only partly be subject to the acting leadership in Qandil. It is probably not coincidental that this more polycentric structure of the PKK/KCK party-complex suits the interest of a jailed leader unable to run the day-to-day life

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<sup>602</sup> While the PÇDK only had very marginal role in the crowded Iraqi-Kurdish political environment, the PJAK has become an important competitors to the declining Iranian Kurdish parties. The PYD is discussed more in details later in this chapter.

<sup>603</sup> Jongerden and Akkaya, *The PKK in the 2000s*, 147;

<sup>604</sup> In particular, Murat Karayılan and Cemil Bayık, two founding members of the PKK, have maintained leading positions throughout this period. In 2013, Karayılan left the leadership of the KCK to Bayık and became the head of the PKK's military unit. 'Interview with Hozat, Karayılan and Bayık', *Peace in Kurdistan*, 18 July 2013 <<https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/2013/07/18/interview-with-hozat-karayilan-and-bayik/>>. The fact that senior commanders freely switch freely switch positions between formally-independent organisation applies also to the PYD and PJAK whose leaders were chosen among Syrian and Iranian PKK officials. Mazloum Kobani, that in the late 2010s became an internationally-renown symbol of the PYD-led Kurdish struggle in Syria was previously PKK representative to Europe and guerrilla commander in Turkey. Interview with Cengiz Çandar (personal communication, 2020).

of the organisation and worried to be sidelined by his own acting commanders.

In his writings, Öcalan dedicated very little time to issues of class and political economy. Whereas capitalism is at the centre of Öcalan's critique of Western modernity, this critique is historically oriented and driven by moral considerations on individualism and oppression. The analysis of the political economy of the Kurdish regions, of Turkey's neoliberal transformation, of the role of oil in Iraqi Kurdistan do not feature in Öcalan's writings, nor does the analysis of the evolving class structure of these societies.<sup>605</sup> Political economy was never the main focus of Öcalan's intellectual attention and certainly, after his capture, he could no longer access the sources required for its study. The following sections of this chapter cover the most important aspects of the PKK's new paradigm as well as the attempts at its practical implementation in Turkey and Syria centring the analysis on the way they are shaped by the class structure and political economy of the region.

### **Gender, Class and the Kurdish Women's Movement**

One of the most important aspects of the PKK/KCK's new paradigm – and certainly the one that has resonated most among non-Kurds – is its critique of patriarchy and its emphasis on women's liberation. Rather than attributing this transformation solely to Öcalan's prison writings, feminist scholars showed that the centrality of women within the Kurdish movement is largely the result of women activists and militants organising to offset the patriarchal tendencies of the movement itself.

The PKK was founded in the 1970s as a Leninist organisation that supported gender equality but subordinated women's emancipation to national liberation and socialism. In the late 1980s, Öcalan started to gradually revise

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<sup>605</sup> Michiel Leezenberg, 'The Ambiguities of Democratic Autonomy: The Kurdish Movement in Turkey and Rojava', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16.4 (2016), 676.

the PKK's stance on women that was previously informed by classical Marxist writings.<sup>606</sup> Hamdan Çağlayan explains that Öcalan was particularly successful at shifting the meaning of the concept of *namus*, honour, from the male's guarantee over the female body and its chastity to the defence of the motherland violated by Turkish colonialism. The shift had the double purpose of calling on men to defend their honour by joining the revolution but also of removing "the *namus* barrier preventing women's participation in the same fight."<sup>607</sup> This revised attitude also led Öcalan to make a strong call for the establishment of women-only military units and organisations. The left-wing ideological framework of the PKK and Öcalan's attention to the so-called 'woman question' allowed for the inclusion of Kurdish women within a masculinist project of nation-building "keeping in mind that they were primarily invited by the leader."<sup>608</sup> However, it was only after his capture that Öcalan placed the oppression of women at the origin of the history of civilisation, as the first act of enslavement, and their liberation at the centre of his revolutionary strategy:

State and power centres gave the father-man within the family a copy of their own authority and had them play that role. Thus, the family became [...] the fountainhead of slaves, serfs, labourers, soldiers and providers of all other services needed by the ruling and capitalist rings. That is why they set such importance to family, why they sanctified it.<sup>609</sup>

Within these premises, "[l]iberating life is impossible without a radical women's revolution which would change man's mentality and life".<sup>610</sup>

Çağlayan makes a point to explain that these theoretical discussions served as "the preliminary steps for enabling gender egalitarian environments" but

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<sup>606</sup> Öcalan's 1980s writings on the topic were collected in Abdullah Öcalan, *Kadın ve Aile Sorunu* (Istanbul: Melsa Yayınları, 1992).

<sup>607</sup> Hamdan Çağlayan, 'From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess: Gender Constructions in Ideological-Political Discourses of the Kurdish Movement in Post-1980 Turkey', *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 14 (2012), 10-11.

<sup>608</sup> Çağlayan, *From Kawa the Blacksmith*, 18.

<sup>609</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (Cologne: International Initiative 'Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan – Peace in Kurdistan', 2013), 37.

<sup>610</sup> Öcalan, *Liberating Life*, 51.

that the women's experience was decisive in turning theory to practice.<sup>611</sup> A similar argument is central to the work of Nadjé al-Ali and Latif Tas who claim that Öcalan's intellectual input "was as much inspired by the actual experiences and struggles of Kurdish women's rights activists as by outside political philosophers" and only translated into gender-based equality thanks to the continued struggle of Kurdish women within the wider movement.<sup>612</sup> It is important to properly historicise these theoretical discussions. It is not by chance that Öcalan's call for women participation in the late 1980s and early 1990s coincides with the PKK's entering the phase of the people's war that necessitated mass mobilisation. The growing involvement of the civilian population in the Kurdish insurgency and Ankara's counterinsurgency campaigns, combined with a surge in women recruits for the PKK, made women much more visible and present at every level of the Kurdish movement.<sup>613</sup>

The need for separate women's organisations was recognised by the PKK in 1995, first at a women-only conference in March and then at the organisation's fifth congress in May which sanctioned the establishment of women-only guerrilla units and the *Kurdistan Women's Freedom Movement*.<sup>614</sup> In these years, women-only organisations combined with gender quotas in the non-women organisations started playing a central role in the strategy of the Kurdish women movement. As women members of decision-making bodies were elected exclusively by women-only organisations, they were accountable to their women-only constituency and thus maintained their autonomy from the male-dominated leadership. The principle of *transitivity* – as Çağlayan refers to it – "between women working in the political parties' women's units and those with positions in decision-making bodies" informed the strategy of both the women in the PKK and of

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<sup>611</sup> Handan Çağlayan, *Women in the Kurdish Movement: Mothers, Comrades, Goddesses* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 77.

<sup>612</sup> Nadjé Al-Ali and Latif Tas, 'Reconsidering Nationalism and Feminism: The Kurdish Political Movement in Turkey', *Nations and Nationalism*, 24.2 (2018), 462.

<sup>613</sup> For these events, see Chapter 8.

<sup>614</sup> White, *Coming Down*, 121-123.

those in the pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey.<sup>615</sup> That the principle of transitivity was strengthening women's power within the PKK is made evident by the reactions it triggered. In the immediate aftermath of Öcalan's capture, the male-dominated leadership of the PKK tried to curtail the autonomy of the women's divisions but was forced to backtrack by the strong reactions of PKK women who also cut their hair in protest.<sup>616</sup>

The creation of a space for autonomous feminist politics in the pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey took more time. In the 1992 programme of the HEP, gender issues took up a single paragraph in the 64-page document. In 1994, the only woman elected to the 30-member party assembly of the HADEP was the sister of one of the founders of the PKK.<sup>617</sup> The great visibility earned by Kurdish MP Leyla Zana was not itself the sign of a deeper shift, as explained by former Diyarbakır co-mayor Gültan Kışanak:

we had Leyla Zana as an example of an MP in 1991, but her role and power did not come from women's organisations or representation. She was the wife of a famous Kurdish politician, Mehdi Zana [...] When Leyla Zana was first elected, her social status and her being the wife of somebody famous was the main reason for her to be elected.<sup>618</sup>

Kurdish women activists challenged these practices by claiming spaces through the creation of women-only branches and by demanding change in the party's structure. The HADEP adopted a women's quotas of 25 per cent in 2000 and its successor raised the quotas to 35 per cent in 2003 and 40 per cent in 2005.

From 2004, the Kurdish movement in Turkey adopted the so-called 'co-chair system' that became a worldwide known symbol of the achievements

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<sup>615</sup> Çağlayan, *Women in the Kurdish Movement*, 126.

<sup>616</sup> Cited in Joost Jongerden, 'Learning from Defeat: Development and Contestation of the "New Paradigm" Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)', *Kurdish Studies*, 7.1 (2019), 85.

<sup>617</sup> Çağlayan, *Women in the Kurdish Movement*, 101-102.

<sup>618</sup> Latif Tas, Nadje Al-Ali, and Gültan Kışanak, 'Kurdish Women's Battle Continues against State and Patriarchy, Says First Female Co-Mayor of Diyarbakir. Interview', *OpenDemocracy*, 12 August 2016 <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/kurdish-women-s-battle-continues-against-state-and-patriarchy-/>>.

of the Kurdish women's movement. All the single-person positions in the Kurdish movement were 'doubled', to include both a man and a woman. The system was then extended to the local administration and the pro-Kurdish parties appointed co-mayors in the cities they won. Moreover, the growing strength of women within the parties gradually changed the profile of the Kurdish female politicians. As long as elected women were used as tokens, female politicians tended to be either famous women or wives of famous men. As the women's movement grew stronger, women from more diverse "economic, social, ethnic and religious backgrounds" were elected to party positions or public offices.<sup>619</sup> As Kışanak – a co-mayor herself – explains, female co-mayors were initially perceived "as assistants" to their male colleagues. Yet, with time and political labour, their role was gradually acknowledged by the movement's base.<sup>620</sup>

The achievements of the Kurdish women since the early 2000s is often attributed to Öcalan's prison writings and especially to his reconceptualization of Kurdish feminism into a 'science of women'. The term *Jineology*, coined by Öcalan, defines a "new science" that "criticizes the connection of hegemony, oppression and science" and "the hegemony of men on history."<sup>621</sup> As Al-Ali and Tas observe, Öcalan – normally an avid reader of critical theory – fails to acknowledge that, long before him, critical feminist scholars of different theoretical strands have denounced the patriarchal nature of the social sciences as well as the links between liberal and white feminisms and imperialism.<sup>622</sup> This remark on the dubious originality of Öcalan's feminist writings is particularly relevant because the imprisoned leader is often the only theoretical reference explicitly mentioned by Kurdish women's activists, at times, in a rather dogmatic

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<sup>619</sup> Tas and others, *Kurdish Women's Battle*.

<sup>620</sup> Tas and others, *Kurdish Women's Battle*.

<sup>621</sup> 'Jineoloji', *International Vrije Vrouwen Stichting*, 2019 <<https://www.ifwf.nl/2019/03/15/jineoloji/>>.

<sup>622</sup> Al-Ali and Tas, *Reconsidering Nationalism and Feminism*, 467.

way.<sup>623</sup> This is problematic because it erases the role of the Kurdish women's movement and attributes its success to the intellect of the male leader. Moreover, Jineology *ethnicises* Kurdish feminism, reinforcing an idea of Kurdish exceptionalism that negatively affects its capacity to create alliances with non-Kurdish feminists across the region. If Öcalan's overarching presence as a symbol and theoretical presence seems to deny women's authorship over their own achievements, it can also be the result of a patriarchal bargain made by the Kurdish women.<sup>624</sup> The appeal to the (male) supreme leader's intellectual authority would be, in these terms, an indispensable device employed by the women activists to give legitimacy to feminist ideas and practices across a male-dominated Kurdish movement.

As observed above, the autonomisation of women's politics within the Kurdish movement through the establishment of separate women's organisation expanded the social basis of Kurdish female politicians. Especially since the mid-2000s, elected Kurdish women reflected the more diverse class base of the movement that set them apart from the profile of the female politician in Turkey, most often middle or upper class and highly educated.<sup>625</sup> If before, women were handpicked by the male leadership to serve as tokens, the creation of the women-only organisations 'democratised' the women's movement giving a more powerful voice to the largely working-class base of the Kurdish movement. This change can be observed in the social policies implemented by Kurdish-controlled municipalities in south-eastern Turkey hiring women in public administration – including male-dominated jobs like bus drivers – setting up free laundry services and supporting the establishment of women's co-operatives.<sup>626</sup>

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<sup>623</sup> Al-Ali and Tas, *Reconsidering Nationalism and Feminism*, 470.

<sup>624</sup> As women's strategizing "within a set of concrete constraints" imposed by patriarchy. Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy', *Gender & Society*, 2.3 (1988), 274–90.

<sup>625</sup> Çağlayan, *Women in the Kurdish Movement*, 121–122.

<sup>626</sup> See the report written by the German solidarity organisation TATORT *Kurdistan Kampagne* after the observation tour in the region in 2011. TATORT Kurdistan, *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan* (Porsgrunn, Norway: New Compass Press, 2013).

These initiatives, aimed at tackling women's unemployment and poverty, are clearly aimed at the movement's working-class constituency and shows the capability of women-only bodies to reflect the social need of inner-city women. However, this attention is not necessarily reflected in the political discourse which more often associates womanhood with Kurdishness – as in Öcalan's writings – as two interlocked sources of oppression leaving little theoretical room for the structural role of class hierarchies. In the movement's theoretical analysis, class is more often conflated with gender,<sup>627</sup> and, by treating women as a class, class difference and inequality *between* women inevitably lose political significance.

### **Hegemonic Struggle in Turkish Kurdistan**

Öcalan's prison writings had a great impact on the pro-Kurdish legal parties in Turkey which were receptive to a less militant approach. In the 2000s, pro-Kurdish parties took advantage of a relatively less oppressive political environment that allowed for their sustained electoral growth. On the one hand, the PKK had withdrawn from Turkey in 1999 and, even when fighting resumed in 2004, the intensity of the insurgency did not reach the level of the 1990s and left more room for electoral politics.<sup>628</sup> On the other hand, the 2002 elections brought the Islamist *Justice and Development Party* (AKP) led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to power. In the 2000s, especially thanks to the country's sustained economic growth, the AKP was able to absorb a large part of the centre-right vote with their moderate and liberal platform of reform. The AKP's commitment to the accession of Turkey to the EU led to a partial liberalisation of the political system and a slightly more open debate on the Kurdish issue. Moreover, the AKP inherited the strength in the

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<sup>627</sup> Çağlayan, *Women in the Kurdish Movement*, 4, 120; Al-Ali and Tas, *Reconsidering Nationalism and Feminism*, 468.

<sup>628</sup> While in the mid-1990s the conflict cost thousands of life each year, casualties throughout the 2000s were in order of hundreds. 'Turkey: Kurdistan', *Uppsala Conflict Data Program, Conflict Encyclopedia, Uppsala University* <<https://ucdp.uu.se/additionalinfo/354/1>>.

Kurdish region of its Islamist predecessor, the Welfare Party,<sup>629</sup> and became the main competitor of the pro-Kurdish parties. While these conditions allowed for a more relaxed political environment relative to the 1990s, the pro-Kurdish parties continued to face the heavy hand of the (largely) Kemalist Turkish bureaucracy as “provincial governors, prosecutors, security forces, and other central authorities retained considerable capacity to circumscribe their activities through bureaucratic and legal procedures.”<sup>630</sup> Turkish courts continued to ban pro-Kurdish parties just a few years after their establishment. The HADEP, banned in 2003, was replaced by *Democratic People's Party* (DEHAP) itself banned in 2005 and succeeded by the *Democratic Society Party* (DTP). The DTP was shut down in 2009 and the *Peace and Democracy Party* (BDP) took its place.<sup>631</sup>

In the local elections of 1999, held only a few months after Öcalan's capture, the HADEP achieved quite a spectacular result winning seven provincial capitals (Diyarbakır, Van, Batman, Mardin, Hakkari, Siirt, Ağrı) and thirty more municipalities across the south-east. However, in 2004, the DEHAP faced a much stronger advance of the AKP. Despite winning some additional seats across municipalities, the DEHAP lost Siirt, Van, Bingöl, and Ağrı to the AKP. Breaking the traditional taboo of denying the existence of the Kurds in Turkey, Erdoğan made continuous reference to Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood especially in terms of shared religion and history. Moreover, the AKP heavily invested in a narrative that depicted pious Turks and Kurds as fellow victims of secularist oppression imposed by both the Kemalist elite and the PKK terrorists.<sup>632</sup> The fact itself that, in the 2000s, the AKP was often in conflict with the Turkish military and Kemalist establishment made

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<sup>629</sup> As shown in Chapter 8, in the 1990s pro-Kurdish and Islamist forces largely displaced Turkish mainstream parties in the south-east becoming the main competitors for the electoral control of the region.

<sup>630</sup> Watts, *Activists in Office*, 143.

<sup>631</sup> See Table 3.

<sup>632</sup> Ioannis N. Grigoriadis and Esra Dilek, 'Struggling for the Kurdish Vote: Religion, Ethnicity and Victimhood in AKP and BDP/HDP Rally Speeches', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 54.2 (2018), 293-295.

it easier for Kurds to sympathise with the new government.<sup>633</sup> At the time, the AKP could also count on the support of the *Hizmet* movement, led by the Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen, that built a massive network of charity and educational institutions in Turkey's south-east.<sup>634</sup>

However, the strength of the AKP in the Kurdish region cannot be exclusively attributed to its ideology and discourse. The AKP's success in the south-east was also the result of its capacity to replace previous centrist Turkish parties as the point of reference for the Kurdish traditional elite. In the least urbanised provinces – as shown by Feryaz Ocaklı in his study on Muş and Bingöl – where tribal ties maintained a strong social value, the AKP inherited the network of support of the previous ruling parties among pro-government tribal leaders.<sup>635</sup> Regardless of the ideological positions expressed by the AKP, siding with the ruling party was, for much of the Kurdish ruling class, indispensable to maintain their social power over their constituencies. The 'state-Agha alliance' – that sustained power relationships in the south-east for a good half of the previous century –<sup>636</sup> remained in place in the AKP era as economic growth, and particularly the construction boom multiplied the opportunity for enrichment for local notables – of tribal and non-tribal extraction –<sup>637</sup> supportive of the AKP. In the rural areas, the alliance continued to rest heavily on the existence of the

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<sup>633</sup> For example, in occasion of the 2007 presidential elections.

<sup>634</sup> See Mustafa Gürbüz, *Rival Kurdish Movements in Turkey: Transforming Ethnic Conflict* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

<sup>635</sup> Feryaz Ocaklı, 'Politics in the Kurdish Periphery: Clan Networks and Local Party Strategies in a Comparative Perspective', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 53.4 (2017), 571–84.

<sup>636</sup> See Chapter 7.

<sup>637</sup> As already discussed in Chapter 7, the ruling class of the Kurdish region only partly coincides with the tribal elite. In many areas, especially where urbanisation weakened tribal ties, the local ruling class is more likely composed by non-tribal landowners, entrepreneurs owning factories and construction companies, and rich professionals, and resembles more closely that of the rest of Turkey. However, in rural areas, tribal leaders often continue to be powerholders allied to the state and the ruling party. For example, Chapter 7 mentioned Sadun Şeylan as the head of the Alan tribe and pro-state warlord in the 1990s. In 2019, his son and successor Abdurrahman Şeylan was elected mayor of Çatak, the ancestral homeland of the Alan tribe, for the AKP.

Village Guards that allowed pro-government tribal leaders to maintain their semi-private petty armies at the expense of the state.<sup>638</sup> The DEHAP's setback at the 2004 local elections was therefore not only the result of the Islamists' appealing discourse but also of the migration of the local elite from the previous ruling parties to the now dominant AKP that restructured power relations in the region.

Since 1999 and for most electoral challenges of the 2000s and early 2010s, the pro-Kurdish parties increased their share of municipalities and parliamentary seats. The parties' control of municipalities across the country's south-east was used to challenge the Turkish state over issues such as the language taboo, introducing the provision of municipal services in Kurdish and other minority languages.<sup>639</sup> But the pro-Kurdish parties and municipalities embarked on a wider project, using their growing power and popular support to implement the concept of *Democratic Autonomy* as developed by Öcalan's prison writings. In October 2007, the Kurdish movement organized its parties, municipalities, and civil society organizations into the *Democratic Society Congress* (DTK) with the purpose of building a stateless democracy without directly challenging the existence and borders of the Turkish state.<sup>640</sup> The Kurdish movement promoted the establishment of citizen councils which worked alongside public institutions and took the form of neighbourhood assemblies based on direct democracy anywhere pro-Kurdish politics was strongest.<sup>641</sup>

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<sup>638</sup> Despite the AKP government's promise to abolish it as a part of the EU-accession reforms, the Village Guards system remained in place. See 'Turkey's Village Guard System – Still in Place, Still an Obstacle', Kurdish Human Rights Project, *Briefing Paper*, 22 March 2011 <<http://www.khrp.org/latest-news/646-turkeys-village-guard-system-still-in-place-still-an-obstacle.html>>

<sup>639</sup> Watts, *Activists in Office*, 152-153. Particular emphasis on minority languages was given by the 2005 DTP charter. See *Demokratik Toplum Partisi: Program ve Tüzüğü*, 2005.

<sup>640</sup> 'Democratic Society Congress', *Demokratik Toplum Kongresi* <<https://www.kcd-dtk.org/english-2/>>.

<sup>641</sup> TATORT, *Democratic Autonomy*, 25-28.

As the pro-Kurdish parties became the dominant force in many Kurdish provinces – even though never across the entire region – they also tended to become more inclusive. At the 2011 elections, the BDP led a coalition of small Turkish left-wing groups but was also able to add to their list and elect to parliament veteran Kurdish politicians coming from a conservative and Islamic background such as Şerafettin Elçi and Altan Tan. The fact that such personalities ran as independent candidates for the BDP was the sign that the Kurdish movement was winning its hegemonic bid over the region as political rivals were persuaded to cooperate from a position of subordination. In cities like Diyarbakır where pro-Kurdish parties had been continuously in power since 1999, a wider section of the affluent middle and upper classes was increasingly orbiting around the movement. As pro-Kurdish parties were now (locally) in power, expressing sympathy for the movement for businessmen and professionals was not only less ‘socially costly’, it could even open the doors to public contracts and high-level positions in the local administration. This process, however, was limited to certain areas and never threatened the alliance between the local ruling class and the AKP especially because state repression continued to hit the pro-Kurdish parties and the Kurdish-controlled administrations.

The growing strength of the Kurdish movement was, in fact, bound to generate the reaction of the state both in terms of repression and political opening. In 2009, Turkish security forces launched an operation to arrest thousands and convict hundreds of Kurdish activists and elected officials on charges of terrorism. The so-called ‘KCK trials’, that took place between 2010 and 2012, directly targeted the legal expression of the Kurdish movement but also became the opportunity to hit sympathetic Turkish left-wingers and trade unionists.<sup>642</sup> While the state apparatus deployed a repressive strategy, the AKP government made the first serious attempt to

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<sup>642</sup> Systematic information on the trials was published on the bulletin of the *Human Rights Foundation of Turkey* collected and translated by their German support group, the *Democratic Turkey Forum*. See ‘Backgrounder on the Union of Communities in Kurdistan, KCK’, *Democratic Turkey Forum*, <[http://www.tuerkeiforum.net/enw/index.php/Backgrounder\\_on\\_the\\_Union\\_of\\_Communities\\_in\\_Kurdistan,\\_KCK#cite\\_note-bia201110-9](http://www.tuerkeiforum.net/enw/index.php/Backgrounder_on_the_Union_of_Communities_in_Kurdistan,_KCK#cite_note-bia201110-9)>.

offer a political solution to the Kurdish issue. Between 2009 and 2011, the government held secret negotiations with the PKK in Oslo. The failure of this first round of talks led to a new wave of violence in 2011 and 2012, the bloodiest years since fighting had resumed in 2004.<sup>643</sup> However, in December 2012, Erdoğan officially announced that Ankara was negotiating with the PKK's jailed leader and, in March 2013, Öcalan ordered the PKK to end the armed struggle and to withdraw from Turkey. Even if the peace process was short-lived and unsuccessful, it yet gave a boost of democratic legitimacy to the Kurdish movement. As advised by Öcalan, in late 2013, Kurdish activists launched the *Peoples' Democratic Party* (HDP) as a coalition of the Kurdish BDP and minor socialist, environmentalist, feminist, LGBT+, and ethnic and religious minorities groups.<sup>644</sup> The growth of the HDP was partly led by a section of the Turkish millennial generation who had their first political experience in the anti-AKP 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul. The charismatic HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş was particularly successful in presenting the HDP as the only real alternative to the AKP and its project of a radical pluralist democracy as the political antithesis of Erdoğan's AKP.<sup>645</sup> The HDP's narrative was strengthened by the fact that the years of the peace process coincided with Erdoğan's gradual authoritarian and conservative turn.

In 2015, as the peace negotiations in Turkey reached a standstill, the advance of the PKK-linked PYD in the Syrian Kurdish region and along the Turkish border increased tensions in Turkey and Erdoğan's increasingly anti-Kurdish rhetoric was matched by a surge in extrajudicial violence against Kurdish and leftist activists, as well as HDP offices.<sup>646</sup> At the June

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<sup>643</sup> 'Turkey: Kurdistan', *Uppsala Conflict Data Program*.

<sup>644</sup> After the 2014 local elections, the BDP was replaced by the by *Democratic Regions Party* (DBP) which is now complementary to the HDP. The HDP runs for parliamentary and presidential elections and is concerned with national politics while the DBP exclusively works on the local administrations in the Kurdish south-east.

<sup>645</sup> Zeynep Kaya and Matthew Whiting, 'The HDP, the AKP and the Battle for Turkish Democracy', *Ethnopolitics*, 18.1 (2019), 92–106.

<sup>646</sup> See Francis O'Connor and Bahar Başer, 'Communal Violence and Ethnic Polarization before and after the 2015 Elections in Turkey: Attacks against the HDP

2015 elections, the HDP reached a surprising result – 13 per cent – that cost the AKP its parliamentary majority. In July 2015, the peace process collapsed and the fighting between the PKK and the army resumed. As the AKP recovered its majority with the November 2015 snap elections, Erdoğan's move to the right was sealed by the alliance with the fascistoid and violently anti-Kurdish MHP. From summer 2015, the HDP faced an unprecedented level of repression. In November 2016, HDP co-chairs Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ were imprisoned. Dozens of HDP/BDP mayors elected in 2014 were removed by the government, replaced by trustees, and removed again after being re-elected in 2019. Despite this degree of repression, the HDP has maintained quite significant support. Thanks to the alliance with progressive Turkish groups “in the main cities in Turkey's west, [...] the HDP is also quite popular among the university students and urban intelligentsia from the more affluent districts and neighbourhoods.”<sup>647</sup> However, the HDP's project of building a wider progressive coalition including larger sections of the non-Kurdish electorate has been heavily undermined by the government's criminalisation of the whole of the Kurdish movement as well as by the reluctance of the mainstream Turkish opposition to co-operate with them.

The war threatened the HDP/BDP also in its Kurdish heartland. The state violence deployed in the Kurdish region has been directed at systematically dismantling the social power built up by the Kurdish movement in the previous decades. The vast social coalition set up to support the Kurdish municipalities has been under strain and the party had to find a difficult balance between the “conservative and increasingly affluent strata that would otherwise vote AKP as they had done before and the impoverished youths [...] who showed a permanent potential for more radical political

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and the Kurdish Population', *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea*, 18.1 (2018), 53–72.

<sup>647</sup> Cengiz Güneş, 'The rise of the pro-Kurdish democratic movement in Turkey', in *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*, ed. by Michael Gunter, 263.

action.”<sup>648</sup> The new phase of the conflict from autumn 2015 was marked by semi-spontaneous uprisings in the small towns of the PKK heartland on the Turkish border with Syria and Iraq. These armed revolts, largely led by poor and unemployed youth, revealed a degree of dissatisfaction with the movement’s moderate and legalistic stance.<sup>649</sup>

### **The Rojava Experiment**

The democratic revolution that began in Syria in 2011 in the wider context of the Arab uprisings became an unexpected opportunity to establish a Kurdish autonomous entity in the country and to experiment with Öcalan’s project on a larger scale. The roughly two million Kurds, who live in the north of Syria and the major cities, have a deep historical relation to the Kurds of Turkey with whom they share the Kurmanji dialect. The establishment of the Syrian-Turkish border in 1923 separated tribes, clans, and families affecting especially the nomadic Kurds that moved across the area. Thousands of Kurds from Turkey migrated to Syria in the 1920s and 1930s after the failure of the early Kurdish revolts.<sup>650</sup> These movements provided a recurrent excuse for Syrian Arab nationalists to present the Kurds as alien and, in 1962, 120.000 Syrian Kurds were stripped of their citizenship.<sup>651</sup>

While many Kurds, in the 1930s and 1940s, were involved in anti-landlord struggles and in the workers’ movement up to the point of dominating the *Syrian Communist Party* (SCP), the first Kurdish nationalist party was the *Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria* (KDPS) established in 1957 under the

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<sup>648</sup> Michiel Leezenberg, ‘The Rise of the White Kurds – An Essay in Regional Political Economy’, in *The Kurds in a Changing Middle East*, ed. by Jabar and Mansour, 107.

<sup>649</sup> Metin Gürcan, ‘PKK Looks to the Future with Creation of Youth Militias’, *Al-Monitor*, 31 August 2015 <<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/turkey-kurds-pkk-armed-young-militias.html>>.

<sup>650</sup> The feudal revolts of the interwar period (see Chapter 3).

<sup>651</sup> Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 1-7, 50-51. According to Alan Semo, by the 2000s, “the number of stateless Kurds in Syria reached half a million.” Interview with Alan Semo (personal communication, 2020).

influence of the Iraqi KDP.<sup>652</sup> Like its Iraqi-Kurdish model, the KDPS was ravaged by the very same “tensions between its left-wing (ex-SCP members, young students, teachers and manual laborers) and its right-wing (notables, religious leaders and landowners).” Since the 1960s, the KDPS faced numerous splits that over time were characterised less by ideological differences than by personal rivalries and, on the eve of the 2011 uprisings, a dozen parties were claiming its legacy.<sup>653</sup>

The PKK was allowed to establish itself in Syria after the 1980 Turkish military coup and to use the country for training, logistics, and recruitment.<sup>654</sup> Attracted by the militancy of the PKK and with the tacit consent of Damascus, the number of Syrian Kurds in the PKK ranks grew to the point that, in the late 1990s, nearly twenty per cent of PKK ‘martyrs’ were Syrian.<sup>655</sup> As Alam Semo a Syrian Kurdish student at the time explains

[The PKK] came with a new idea and a new project, a vision and a clearer position for an independent and united Kurdistan. Syrian Kurdistan was open to these ideas [...]. The elite was linked to the KDP in Iraq and at that time they had lost their bases and their argument. [...] Most of them were landowners and tribal leaders. The PKK took advantage of the weakness of the classical nationalist parties.<sup>656</sup>

After the expulsion of the PKK from Syria in 1998, its followers and sympathisers reorganised and in 2003 established the PYD which grew a strong clandestine network. Its organisational strength and links to the PKK placed the PYD in the best position to take advantage of the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. When, in summer 2012, the Syrian regime withdrew from the Kurdish region in order to defend more vital areas, the PYD took control. The PYD could also rely on a pre-existing political infrastructure

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<sup>652</sup> Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 39-42.

<sup>653</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-88.

<sup>654</sup> See Chapter 7.

<sup>655</sup> According to Güneş Murat Tezcür's martyrs data, 529 out of the 2,919 PKK military casualties between 1995 and 1999 were Syrian. Güneş Murat Tezcür, 'Ordinary People, Extraordinary Risks: Participation in an Ethnic Rebellion', *American Political Science Review*, 110.2 (2016), 247-64.

<sup>656</sup> Interview with Alan Semo (personal communication, 2020).

constituted by a clandestine network of local councils dating back to 2007 and organised along the lines of Öcalan's democratic confederalist project.<sup>657</sup> With the beginning of the uprisings, these councils emerged and took "responsibility of organizing social life" including the provision of basic services and security.<sup>658</sup>

The PYD established an autonomous administration in north-eastern Syria widely known as *Rojava*.<sup>659</sup> In late 2014, the Rojava administration repelled the offensive of the ISIL in the city of Kobani and, with American support, gained control of virtually all of Syria east of the Euphrates by 2017. The role of the Kurdish-led *Syrian Democratic Forces* (SDF) in the fight against ISIL in north-eastern Syria triggered a great deal of international sympathy and grassroots solidarity though little material support from state actors. The important presence of female combatants' units contrasted sharply with ISIL's misogynist brutality.

The system of government established in Rojava is based on a *Social Contract* that was adopted by the councils in 2014 and amended in 2016 and that works as a constitution for the regional administration.<sup>660</sup> The diffusion of the council system and of forms of direct democracy greatly expanded popular participation in the governance of the region in strong contrast to the authoritarian nature of the Syrian regime. Despite this emphasis on council democracy, many observers denounced the lack of pluralism of the PYD rule and the repression of rival Kurdish parties.<sup>661</sup> The greatest and most widely recognised achievement of the Rojava

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<sup>657</sup> Interview with Khawla Mustafa (Sulaymaniyah, 2019).

<sup>658</sup> Cited in Akkaya and Jongerden, *Democratic Confederalism*, 173.

<sup>659</sup> The name *Rojava*, the Kurdish for 'West', is a common way for Kurds to refer to the Syrian Kurdish region as the western part of Kurdistan.

<sup>660</sup> *Reader #5: Stateless Democracy, realized with Kurdish Women's Movement*, New World Academy, 19 May 2015, <<https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/29509/new-world-academy-reader-5-stateless-democracy-realized-with-kurdish-women-s-movement/>>, 130-157.

<sup>661</sup> See, for example, Fred Abrahams and Lama Fakih, *Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria* (Human Rights Watch, 2014) <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria>>.

administration has been in the direction of women's liberation. The introduction of the co-chair system and of separate women's bodies is having a deep impact on established gender relations in the region.<sup>662</sup>

The PYD has placed particular emphasis on the *Mesopotamian* or *Kurdistani* – rather than *Kurdish* – identity of Rojava with an inclusive attitude towards the ethnic and religious minorities living in Kurdish-majority areas such as Arabs, Turkmens, Yazidis, and various Christian groups. Minorities have been given highly visible positions in the region's decision-making bodies and were encouraged to establish their own political organisations and military units. It remains, however, to be seen the extent to which council democracy was extended to the Arab-majority areas of the governorates of Raqqah and Deir Ez-Zor. In the Syrian desert local power was partly delegated to tribal leaders who had opposed ISIL allowing for the reproduction of authoritarian and patriarchal modes of politics in direct contradiction with Rojava's proclaimed democratic aspirations. The success – or lack thereof – of the Rojava model in Arab-majority areas will be critical to understanding whether Öcalan's political project can be completely dissociated from Kurdish ethnonationalism and implemented in a non-Kurdish context. As of mid-2020, the Rojava administration has guaranteed relatively peaceful coexistence in a very diverse region especially when considering the extreme levels of sectarian violence reached within the context of the Syrian Civil War.

### **The Political Economy of the Kurdish Movement**

The Kurdish movement inspired by Öcalan's thought moved away from its initial socialist positions and adopted a new political project. The critique of capitalism has remained part of the PKK/KCK's ideology but is by no means a central aspect and its intellectual foundations can be found, rather than in Marxian analysis, in Murray Bookchin's anarchism and anti-materialism. The

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<sup>662</sup> See Michael Knapp, Anja Flach, and Ercan Ayboğa, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

social and economic programme of the movement is indeed heavily influenced by Öcalan's reading of Bookchin and by the latter's idea of the *organic society* as the primordial form of human organisation.<sup>663</sup> The construction of a confederation of municipalities based on direct democracy from the local level is, for Bookchin, an indispensable way to return to an organic society which is interdependent, cooperative, and ecologically sustainable. Very much like democracy, the economy needs to be localised and decentralised.<sup>664</sup> These ideas translated into an economic project that is alternative to capitalism but also to both Soviet-style and Keynesian centralised planning and that aims at building a decentralised and sustainable 'social economy'.

Even if economic transformation as a path for popular emancipation is marginal in Öcalan's writings, the idea of the organic society inspired the anti-capitalist practices and policies enacted by the Kurdish movement. Naturally, the very limited space for governance available to the Kurdish movement in Turkey and the state of war in which the Rojava experiment has taken place relegated discussions of social and economic policies to a marginal place. In the case of Rojava, it is particularly difficult to distinguish socialist policies from war-economy policies – as in the case of food distribution and price control. However, the Kurdish movement in both Turkey and Syria has maintained strong popular bases – among the peasantry, the working class, and the urban poor – that shaped its programme in the direction of redistribution and even collective ownership in the form of cooperative enterprises. An academic study funded by the Turkish police in 2014 shows that, despite its ideological transformation, the PKK is still overwhelmingly composed of Kurds with a lower-class background. According to their findings, 72 per cent of the militants only

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<sup>663</sup> Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto: Cheshire Books, 1982).

<sup>664</sup> Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 344.

have an elementary school diploma and 78 per cent were unemployed before joining the guerrilla.<sup>665</sup>

The establishment of cooperatives has become the most popular economic policy promoted by the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Syria. In south-eastern Turkey, cooperatives were set up in a very diverse set of fields, from agriculture to housing to carpet production.<sup>666</sup> In Rojava, cooperatives dominate agriculture – the region’s dominant sector – but have also mushroomed in urban contexts “for bread-baking, textile production, sewing and alterations, cheese-making and other dairy production, growing peanuts and lentils, and selling cleaning materials”.<sup>667</sup> These cooperatives are not allowed to be independent enterprises and, even if their leadership is elected, they remain dependent on the democratic control of the local councils which ensure that production meets the needs of society.<sup>668</sup> The local authority receives 20 per cent of the cooperative profit, while 50 per cent is divided among the workers and the remaining 30 per cent is re-invested in production.<sup>669</sup> The creation of this model of a cooperative economy, in combination with the state of war, brought the economy of Rojava largely under council control leaving only a marginal and subordinated role to profit-led enterprises.

The Kurdish cooperative movement has been particularly successful in the field of agriculture which holds a central ideological role in the idea of the organic society and in the movement’s critique of the city. With the ambition to reach food self-sufficiency, the Rojava autonomous administration

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<sup>665</sup> This study does not use PKK ‘martyr’ data like others cited earlier but is largely based on police records. Süleyman Özeren, Murat Sever, Kamil Yılmaz, and Alper Sözer, ‘Whom Do They Recruit? Profiling and Recruitment in the PKK/KCK’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 37.4 (2014), 322–47.

<sup>666</sup> The TATORT report dedicate ample spaces for examples supported by interviews with cooperative workers. See TATORT, *Democratic Autonomy*, 34-35, 44, 82-86, 101, 109.

<sup>667</sup> Knapp and others, *Revolution in Rojava*, 200.

<sup>668</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-205.

<sup>669</sup> ‘The Experience of Co-operative Societies in Rojava’, TEV DEM Economic Committee, 19 January 2016, 4.

moved towards crop diversification as opposed to the Ba'athist policy of centrally-planned monocrop production.<sup>670</sup> Given that the Syrian state owned more than 80 per cent of the land, the Rojava authority did not have to collectivise privately-owned land – which often remains in the hands of large landowners –<sup>671</sup> and instead built rural cooperatives on state land.<sup>672</sup> By early 2016, 330.000 acres of land was farmed by cooperatives.<sup>673</sup> In Turkish Kurdistan, land distribution remained extremely uneven. In 2001, the 2.7 per cent largest landowners owning more than 33.2 per cent of the land while 56 per cent Kurdish peasants own less than 50 hectares accounting for only 9.7 per cent of the land.<sup>674</sup> The economic unviability of the smallest farms pushed some Kurdish peasants to support the establishment of rural cooperatives whereby they self-collectivised their own small plots of land.<sup>675</sup> The critique towards the city as the centre and propagator of capitalist modernity that underpins the Kurdish movement's push for a return to the 'organic' life of the village, is directly inspired by Bookchin's thought. However, it is also extremely relevant to the life experience of a large part of the movement's base in Turkey which is effectively composed of peasants violently uprooted from their villages and deported into city slums in the 1990s.<sup>676</sup> As a Kurdish activist in Turkey recalled in 2015:

Our villages were razed, forcing us to move into the cities. We don't know what city life is like or how you're supposed to live here. [...] Due to the forced relocation into the cities and modern capitalism, an extreme individualism prevails here. And we have to deal with it.<sup>677</sup>

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<sup>670</sup> Knapp and others, *Revolution in Rojava*, 192-194.

<sup>671</sup> Interview with Alan Semo (personal communication, 2020).

<sup>672</sup> Knapp and others, *Revolution in Rojava*, 199.

<sup>673</sup> *The Experience of Co-operative Societies*, 1.

<sup>674</sup> Yadirgi, *The Political Economy*, 258.

<sup>675</sup> For example, in the Van province. Eliza Egret and Tom Anderson, *Struggles for Autonomy in Kurdistan & Corporate Complicity in the Repression of Social Movements in Rojava and Bakur* (London: Corporate Watch Cooperative, 2016) <<https://corporatewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Struggles-for-autonomy-in-Kurdistan.pdf>>.

<sup>676</sup> See Chapter 8.

<sup>677</sup> TATORT, *Democratic Autonomy*, 40.

The relevance of the environmental turn of the movement to the life experience of millions of its supporters is quite a significant example of the way the new paradigm of the PKK/KCK speaks directly to much of the Kurdish masses. In these terms, the emphasis on the organic society and the critique of the city are truly ideological expressions of the forcibly-urbanised peasantry that represents the core of the class basis of the movement – in terms of electoral support for the pro-Kurdish parties and manpower for the insurgency.

As largely confined to the moral level, this critique of capitalism tends to neglect the analysis of the material conditions of the Kurdish regions and thus ends up concealing class conflicts and social hierarchies. In reference to the Kurdish women's movement, feminist scholar and activist Handan Çağlayan observes that

The neoliberal transformation worsened the situation of poor Kurds, both in rural areas and in the cities. [...] in Istanbul, we saw that in poor [Kurdish] families almost all the young women were working at textile workshops with no social rights and social security. Their wages were under minimum wage level. Among seasonal agriculture workers who have been working under the worst working conditions, there have been hundreds thousand of Kurdish women. Still, it is difficult to state that social issues go beyond the rhetorical level in the political discourse, political agenda and practices of Kurdish women. [...] One of [the reasons], I think, is the assumed strict connection between class-based exploitation and deprivation of Kurds from rights.<sup>678</sup>

By conflating exploitation with cultural oppression, social conflicts within Kurdish society fade away. The virtual absence of class analysis in the elaboration of the new Kurdish movement can be explained by the worldwide advance of identity politics in the 1990s and 2000s that coincide with the period of deepest transformation of the PKK. Those decades were also characterised by a great expansion of the class basis of the PKK, particularly towards the urban middle classes. As discussed earlier in this chapter, activists with a middle-class background – and particularly

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<sup>678</sup> Interview with Handan Çağlayan (personal communication, 2020).

professionals – are more likely to gain prominent positions in the Kurdish women’s movement and the legal parties. Middle-class cadres, due to their individual class position, are more likely to be politicised by forms of oppressions that they personally experienced, such as patriarchy and anti-Kurdish racism, rather than economic exploitation.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the political economy of the wide Kurdish movement that follows Abdullah Öcalan’s new ideological paradigm. After Öcalan’s capture in 1999, the PKK evolved into a complex confederation that goes way beyond its military dimension and completed a long process of ideological transformation that saw the organisation abandoning both Kurdish nationalism and Marxism and replace them with a post-nationalist and radical democratic project. This transformation can only be properly explained if located in its historical context. The 1990s and 2000s were decades of deep crisis for the political left when socialism and class politics were erased by the political debate. Crushed by the fall of the Soviet Union and the defeat of labour movements worldwide, the left developed along fragmented lines and around environmentalist struggles, the anarchist-led anti-globalisation movement, and identity politics. All these influences can be spotted in Öcalan’s prison writings and the PKK/KCK’s new paradigm. The ideological shift was accompanied and mutually reinforced by the great expansion of the movement’s class basis especially towards the urban middle classes.

In the new paradigm of the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Syria, the critique of capitalism is based on the idealistic assumptions of Murray Bookchin and his critique of the city and the industrial civilisation. Despite the lack of discussion about the political economy of the Kurdish regions, this line of critique resonates among the popular basis of the Kurdish movement. The call for an ecologically sustainable society and the critique of the city and the industrial society are extremely relevant to a great number of supporters in Turkey who were deported from their villages to

city slums in the 1990s and who often had to accept exploitative conditions in Turkey's most labour-intensive industries. In this context, the most significant expression of the popular basis of the new Kurdish movement is the burgeoning cooperative movement for its particular attention towards agriculture and, more generally, for its push towards collective ownership.

Even though this dimension directly reflects the interests and demands of the forcibly-urbanised peasantry that supports the PKK/KCK, the movement's programme places little or no emphasis on social conflicts and class hierarchies within Kurdish society. This aspect is particularly significant because the most powerful element of the PKK's rise in the 1980s was its capacity to combine the struggle for the national liberation of the Kurds with a frontal attack against the Kurdish landowning class that was presented as both exploitative and supportive of Turkish colonialism. The erasure of a critique of the class structure of the Kurdish region from the new Kurdish movement's discourse inevitably conceals any other social conflict. Paradoxically, the 'old' nationalist PKK (up to the 1990s) – by acknowledging and intellectually elaborating upon conflictual dynamics within Kurdish society – was more capable to problematise Kurdish national identity than the current post-nationalist PKK.

The contradictions of the new Kurdish movement are the inevitable manifestations of its great expansion from the self-proclaimed revolutionary vanguard that started the PKK insurgency in 1984 into a wide and plural movement involving several million people. The transformation of this movement was, as this and the previous two chapters showed, also the result of its evolution from a peasant-based and led insurgency into a pro-democracy multi-class coalition.

# Chapter 10

## Conclusion

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### Introduction

The concluding chapters of each of the two case studies (Chapters 6 and 9) present a picture of Kurdish nationalism in the 2010s. As Map 5 illustrates, the fragmentation and weakening of Iraq and Syria as well as Turkey's authoritarian turn and regional ambitions significantly accelerated the pace of Kurdish politics and assigned Kurdish forces an unprecedented centrality in Middle East regional dynamics. For the first time in modern history, two Kurdish-controlled political entities exist in Iraq and Syria, and pro-Kurdish forces have been in power in almost one hundred municipalities in south-eastern Turkey. Yet, the widespread revival of Kurdish national feelings in all of the Kurdish regions did not translate into a unity of intent or action. On the contrary, Kurdish actors are pursuing radically different social and political projects and their relationship is conflictual to the point that they often side with 'foreign' powers against each other. The ideological differences between the Kurdish movements in Iraq – conservative and ethnonationalist – and in Turkey and Syria – radical and post-nationalist – seem to be far greater than the feelings of solidarity among Kurdish groups. These considerations were the starting point for the formulation of a number of empirical and theoretical research questions: *What determines the political divides within a national movement? What is the origin of conflicts among Kurdish nationalists and why are they so resilient? What is the origin of the alternative and competing nation-building project they pursue? What is nationalism if it can be associated with the most diverse set of ideological propositions? What determines the political content of nationalist movements?* The thesis covers over a century of Kurdish history and identifies the origins of the present divide in class politics. The politically

significant and successful Kurdish nationalist organisations that emerged in this long period were those that were capable of giving voice and incorporating the interests, demands, and values of broad sections of Kurdish society. Descending from abstract theorising to empirical investigation reveals the historical manifestations of nationalism as expressions of the struggle for state power between conflicting social actors. Far from being an autonomous force, Kurdish nationalism developed in different forms all embedded in social conflicts and each expressing the bid for power of Kurdish historical classes and class coalitions. These findings confirm the critique of nationalism theory formulated in Chapter 2, showing that the ideological content – such as social values, or ideas regarding the form of state and economic organisation – of a nationalist movement cannot be autonomous from its class basis.

While the thesis reconstructs these developments in Iraq and Turkey in two parts of three chapters each, this concluding chapter highlights the elements of comparison across the two countries. First, this chapter runs through the comparison chronologically, outlining how the integration into the nation-states of Turkey and Iraq, characterised by different political and class structures and geopolitical location, contributed to the diversification of the Kurdish national movement allowing different class actors to emerge. Second, these developments are analysed class-by-class, reconnecting Kurdish nationalism to the theoretical discussion introduced in Chapter 2 and comparing the political posture and form of nationalism developed by the same classes in each context. Finally, the chapter ends with concluding remarks assessing the contribution to the field and the generalisability of the findings, as well as identifying potential new avenues for research.

### **Comparing Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq and Turkey**

This section summarises the findings of this thesis highlighting the elements of comparison that emerged by the discussion of the two cases of Iraq (Chapters 4-6) and Turkey (Chapters 7-9). It shows how a focus on class

politics significantly improves our understanding of certain crucial moments of the history of Kurdish nationalism.

In both Turkey and Iraq, the first significant expression of Kurdish nationalism occurred in the interwar period, when Ottoman Kurdistan was divided into the newly-established states of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. The Kurdish revolts of the interwar period had a number of shared characteristics that allowed us to treat them as part of a single phenomenon defined as feudal nationalism. They largely involved the Kurdish tribal aristocracy, the *aghas*, and were led by shaykhs whose religious role gave them a degree of inter-tribal authority. The Kurdish tribal elite revolted against the intrusiveness – enforcement of taxes and territorial control – of the newly-established states of Turkey and Iraq and to preserve their traditional power. The programme and discourse of these revolts mixed Kurdish nationalist themes – borrowed by the early *Kurdist* organisations – with religious and traditionalist demands. As Chapter 3 discussed in detail, these revolts followed a traditional pattern of state-tribe relationship: tribal agitations were typical of periods of transition when the tribal periphery could seek to take advantage of instability at the centre to re-negotiate its local power vis-à-vis the state. This was a pattern that the old decentralised empires were more willing to accommodate than the newly-established nation-states. Despite these shared characteristics, the size and significance of these revolts in Turkey and Iraq were not even. The modernising and secular zeal of the Kemalist government in Turkey triggered both larger tribal revolts and a much more violent state-led repression. On the contrary, the conservative Iraqi monarchy and its British colonial patron were more accommodating towards tribal power and the Kurdish revolts in Iraq were militarily less significant and more easily forgiven. The different approach of the respective central states was decisive in shaping the diversification of the trajectories of Kurdish nationalism in the two countries.

These different approaches to the early feudal revolts were not simply the result of the ideological positions of the two central governments but also

of the different location of Turkey and Iraq in the international system and world economy. After resisting colonial encroachment in the early 1920s, Turkey became a fully independent state and was welcomed into the US-led Western block of the Cold War as a full member of NATO in 1952 and a bulwark against communism. This geopolitical positioning allowed Ankara to initiate a state-led programme of development, even though in a rather uneven way, that industrialised western Turkey and left the predominantly Kurdish east underdeveloped as a subordinate source of raw material and cheap labour. After the harsh repression of the Kurdish revolts of the interwar period, the Kurdish traditional elite had to abjure Kurdish identity and, in the 1950s, was allowed to re-take its economic and social position, entrusted with the task of maintaining order in the Kurdish countryside and of providing large packages of votes to the successive conservative coalitions in power in Ankara. This 'state-gha' alliance contributed to the increasing impoverishment of the peasantry. Unlike Turkey, Iraq was created as a British colony and remained substantially so until 1958. The Kurdish tribal elite and their Arab counterpart highly benefitted from the openly pro-tribal British policy that turned tribal leaders into a class of large landowners who controlled the domestic politics of Iraq and provided an indispensable social basis for the British-imposed Hashemite monarchy. The land-grabbing and exploitative practices of the landowning elite generated, in the 1940s and 1950s, a wave of rural struggles that affected the entire country but that were particularly intense in the Kurdish north. The power of the organised peasantry was decisive for the success of the republican and anti-colonial Iraqi revolution of 1958. This differentiation in the class structures that developed in the two Kurdish regions is key to understanding the different trajectories taken by Kurdish nationalism in Iraq and Turkey when it re-emerged in the early 1960s.

In Iraq, Kurdish nationalism survived in the KDP that, established in 1946, was led by leftist professionals and intellectuals but was a marginal force in a context dominated by landlord-peasant conflicts. The Kurdish revolt of 1961 started as the spontaneous uprising of tribal landowners against the

plan by the post-revolutionary government to redistribute and tax land as well as a reaction against the general empowerment of the peasantry. The revolting landowners legitimised their actions in nationalist terms, and the progressive KDP, after its initial reluctance, was forced to join the revolt in a position of subordination due to the far superior military means of the tribal elite and to accept the leadership of the tribal Barzani family. While providing ideological cover to the revolt, the KDP remained militarily marginal until the contradiction between its socialist ideology and the class interests that led the revolt exploded and the leftist leadership of the party was expelled in 1966. The relations of power between the tribal and the urban components of Iraqi-Kurdish nationalism only changed in the following decade due to the rapid process of urbanisation and to the establishment of the PUK. The KDP and PUK fought a parallel war against Baghdad in the 1980s until they joined forces and took control of the Kurdish region in 1991 after the withdrawal of the Iraqi army. In a conflict led by different social classes, the demands of the Iraqi Kurdish peasantry disappeared from the political landscape.

In Turkey, the absence of a revolutionary break allowed for the consolidation of the state-*agha* alliance. Kurdish nationalism re-emerged in the 1960s in a middle-class and radical form – the *Eastern Meetings* movement – that can be compared to the urban strand of Iraqi-Kurdish nationalism but that was virtually swept away by the 1971 military coup. It was only in the 1970s that a new form of Kurdish nationalism branched out of the Turkish New Left. By the mid-1970s, a generation of Kurdish intellectuals of peasant and working-class extraction broke with the Turkish left – perceived as too compromised with the Kemalist tradition – and sought to replicate the experience of Third-World liberation struggles against what they identified as Turkish colonialism. The PKK emerged as the most successful of these new groups by pursuing a strategy that targeted exploitative Kurdish landowners even before turning against Turkish security forces. By playing on the existing rural conflicts, the PKK won, by the mid-1980s, large sectors of the Kurdish peasantry and working classes to the point of constituting an unprecedented military challenge to the Turkish state.

To counter the respective Kurdish uprisings, the governments of Iraq and Turkey deployed similar and highly consequential counter-insurgency policies. Both governments made wide use of loyalist tribal chiefs in setting up Kurdish anti-guerrilla battalions. These irregulars were semi-private armies that, besides their immediate military function, greatly enriched and strengthened the social power of loyalist tribal leaders. Even more significantly, the Iraqi and Turkish armies – respectively in the late 1980s and early 1990s – engaged in the systematic cleansing of the Kurdish countryside with the purpose of destroying the sources of supply and recruitment of the insurgencies. Several million Kurdish peasants were forced to leave their villages while their return was prevented by the systematic destruction of their sources of subsistence – houses, cattle, crops, woods, and wells. The virtual destruction of the peasantry permanently changed the class structure of both Kurdish regions but also their demographic and ecological outlook, depopulating the countryside and creating a vast class of urban poor. Kurdish towns doubled or tripled their population, mixed cities became predominantly Kurdish, and large Kurdish communities appeared in non-Kurdish cities. In Turkey, displaced Kurdish peasants constituted an immense ‘reserve army of labour’ that fed the industrialisation of the 2000s largely based on labour-intensive production. In Iraq, they constituted the dependent class of the burgeoning rentier system.

These deep structural transformations had different political consequences in the Kurdish regions of Iraq and Turkey. In Iraq, the US-led interventions of 1991 and 2003 allowed first for the establishment of a Kurdish regional administration – the KRG – controlled by the KDP and PUK and then for its official recognition within post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. Due to the absence of industry and the destruction of agriculture, the region survived on several sources of rent, namely the control of smuggling routes and the management of international aid in the 1990s, and the export of oil since the mid-2000s. Locked in a competition that even led to a period of civil war (1994-1998), the KDP and PUK strove to co-opt former regime collaborators

to expand their own constituencies. This process led to the creation of a new ruling class made up of two components. First, the PUK and KDP commanders of the liberation war turned politicians whose power came from their control of the party militias regardless of their class background. Second, the part of the Kurdish ruling class that had remained loyal to Baghdad and fought against the Kurdish insurgency and that, with the transformation of the Iraqi economy in the 1970s and 1980s, had turned from landowners into regime-sponsored entrepreneurs. This new ruling class used its military control of the region to appropriate the streams of rent and to impose, since 1998, a KDP-PUK political duopoly. The vast majority of the Kurdish population was forced into a position of dependence on the patronage network of the two parties which dispensed public employment, most often the only source of income available. In Turkey, where Kurdish forces never gained control of the region, the destruction of the PKK's rural basis of support contributed to the gradual 'urbanisation' of the Kurdish movement. In the 1990s, displaced peasants turned urban poor became a political force that could be easily mobilised in support of the PKK struggle. On the one hand, Kurdish poor and unemployed youth took over towns and neighbourhoods in many occasions and for days. On the other hand, displaced peasants socialised in the nationalist and socialist discourse of the PKK became the electoral backbone of the rising pro-Kurdish parties that – even if only partly associated with the PKK – took control of many Kurdish municipalities.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the trajectories of Kurdish politics in Iraq and Turkey diversified even further but also increased their degree of interaction in terms of regional rivalry over a more and more interconnected transnational Kurdish space. In the KRG, the stabilisation of an authoritarian form of politics and oligarchic control over the economy led to the growth of popular and parliamentary opposition. In the mid-2010s, the collapse of the oil price brought the KRG rentier system to its knees and triggered sustained popular protests. The response of the Iraqi-Kurdish elite was, on the one hand, to violently crack down on dissent, and, on the other hand, to

invest in an increasingly aggressive nationalist rhetoric to regain political legitimacy with the result of exacerbating tensions with Baghdad but also with the neighbouring Turkey and Iran. In Turkey, the growing strength of the PKK in the urban contexts and control by pro-Kurdish parties of the local administrations contributed to a great expansion of the social basis of the Kurdish movement, especially among the urban middle classes. Parallel to this process – and mutually reinforcing – the PKK adopted a radical-democratic and post-nationalist political project and increased its presence in the other Kurdish regions. In the context of the Syrian Civil War, local Kurdish forces linked to the PKK took over the Kurdish region of Syria and established the *Rojava* autonomous administration that attempted to implement the new PKK ideology on a regional scale. The war on ISIL (2014-2017) was fought on both the Iraqi-Kurdish and Syrian-Kurdish fronts and saw the involvements of Kurdish groups from all four regions, strengthening popular feelings of pan-Kurdish solidarity. However, it also contributed to an increasingly virulent rivalry between the two competing national projects for the Kurds expressed by the Iraqi-Kurdish leadership and the PKK-Rojava movement.

This thesis reconstructed the social origins of these projects highlighting the role of class conflict and alliance building in the history of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq and Turkey. The next section compares the nationalist projects developed by the same classes in the two different contexts showing common patterns but also the context-based differentiation.

### **Social Classes and Kurdish Nationalism**

After building up the theoretical framework of this thesis, Chapter 2 ends by outlining historical patterns and tendencies for the approach to nationalism taken by different classes. Acknowledging the importance of the context-specific genesis of each nationalist movement means ultimately leaving the study of its class basis to the realm of the empirical investigation. Yet, social classes do not develop infinitely variable forms of politics. Historical patterns exist and are rooted in objective material interests that

characterise social classes as such. The following sections present the findings of this thesis by comparing the historical posture taken towards nationalism by the main Kurdish social classes in Iraq and Turkey against the background of the theoretical considerations outlined in Chapter 2 in reference to the same social classes. The purpose of this section is to highlight common patterns and especially contextual differences in the posture of the same classes showing the value of comparative analysis, but also how the study of these two Kurdish cases can tell us something of theoretical relevance.

The end of Chapter 2 sketched the forms of nationalism that have been historically developed by four social classes in terms. The following survey neither starts with nor includes the classical form of 'bourgeois' nationalism that played such a pivotal role in nineteenth century Europe. In Kurdistan, a class interested primarily in unifying the national market, rationalising societal institutions, and fully separating the political and economic spheres with the aim of promoting private capital, simply did not exist. On the contrary, this section covers the other three forms of nationalism sketched in Chapter 2 – feudal, middle-class, and subaltern nationalisms – as the historical expressions of the three 'social protagonists' of the past century of Kurdish history: the tribal and landowning elite, the urban middle classes, and the peasantry.

### *Feudal Nationalism*

The subject of Chapter 3 was the first historical expression of Kurdish nationalism developed by the traditional ruling class of Kurdish tribal society. The power of aghas and shaykhs rested on traditional – religious, tribal, dynastic – sources of legitimacy that were no longer recognised by the states that succeeded the Ottoman Empire. In the 1920s and 1930s, the sudden adoption of Kurdish nationalist discourse by members of this class and the outbreak of the Kurdish revolts were a response to the threat posed by the centralising tendencies of the new states to the power traditionally held by this class. All of the revolts that took place in Kurdistan in those

decades were harshly crushed by the newly-established Turkey and Iraq. In different ways – depending on specific paths of state formation – the traditional Kurdish elite largely renounced Kurdish nationalism and found a comfortable place in the power structure of both countries. In Iraq, as an integral part of the country's ruling class created by British colonialism. In Turkey, as a dependent elite entrusted by the central state with the maintenance of order and social hierarchies in the Kurdish periphery.

In socio-economic terms, this class had been going through a long process of transformation and, by the mid-twentieth century, its power rested on large estates based on what Barrington Moore calls 'labour-repressive agriculture'.<sup>679</sup> Rather than increasing productivity by investing in improvements and technology, this class tended to secure higher surplus through the hyper-exploitation of the peasantry and to rely on extra-economic coercive means to prevent peasant organisation. In both Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan in the 1950s, the aghas, rather than employing villagers, *owned villages*. In Moore's account on the social origins of democracy, labour-repressive landowners are the most strenuous opponents of political democracy as the emancipation of the peasantry would inevitably lead to the collapse of the form of appropriation of surplus they rely on. Their approach to Kurdish nationalism was driven by similar concerns. Since its incorporation into the new state, the Kurdish landowning class of Iraq 'rediscovered' Kurdish nationalism only when the post-revolutionary government allied with the organised peasantry and directly threatened their interests. The dominance of this class determined the historically conservative character of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq, marginalising progressive middle-class nationalism until the late 1970s, and blocking the autonomous political organisation of the subaltern classes. In Turkey, in the absence of a revolutionary break, the 'state-gha' alliance was confirmed by all governments representing the conservative blocs that ruled Turkey since the 1950s, including the Islamist government that came to power in 2002. This is why the ruling class of Turkish Kurdistan – unlike its Iraqi-

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<sup>679</sup> Moore, *Social Origins*.

Kurdish counterpart – largely opposed Kurdish nationalism and also why the only significant expressions of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey developed out of the political left.

It is important to notice that in neither of the cases the Kurdish ruling class acted as a united class actor. The central states were always – except for Turkey in the Kemalist period – willing to provide strong incentives for the members of the traditional elite to remain loyal. In Iraq, many tribes remained loyal to Baghdad throughout the conflict providing the government with the counter-insurgency irregular forces, the *jash*, as Kurdish nationalists called them. This position was often driven by historical tribal rivalries but also by the fact that the anti-landlord zeal of the 1958 revolution was soon forgotten and Baghdad generously rewarded tribal loyalism. In Turkey, where most of the tribal elite sided with the government, there were always ‘patriotic aghas’ who let the Kurdish guerrillas operate in their territories or even supported them out of nationalist sympathy – though more likely with the intent of weakening a neighbouring loyalist tribe or reducing state control over their own land. Prestigious tribal families also hedged their bets by keeping members on both sides. In this regard, I explored the cases of the Barzanji in Iraq and the Bucak in Turkey. Mahmud Barzanji, a powerful shaykh in Sulaymaniyah province, led the feudal nationalist revolt that intermittently lasted from 1919 to 1932. His son Shaykh Latif became the vice-chairman of the KDP while being at the same time the target of a major peasant revolt in 1947. His brother Baba Ali was a loyalist politician and ‘a man for all seasons’, appointed minister first under the King, then under Abd al-Karim Qasim, and once again under the Ba’athists. In Turkey, the powerful Bucak family from Siverek represented a similar trend. Mustafa Tevfik Bucak was a conservative DP parliamentarian in the 1950s while his brother Faik was the founder of the ‘feudal nationalist’ PDKT. This could be the result of a strategic choice or conflicting individual choices, yet in both cases, it signalled that the tribal landowning elite was confident to keep their social position regardless of the forces in power and the historical record proves that they most often did.

### *Middle-Class Nationalism*

Kurdish nationalism was never exclusively the expression of the Kurdish feudal class. There was always a significant middle-class component and, in the course of the twentieth century, several forms of middle-class nationalism developed among the Kurds. The first politicised form of Kurdish national identity developed in the early twentieth century among Ottoman bureaucrats and army officers. As Chapter 3 explained, even if the Kurds working for the Ottoman Empire often hailed from the Kurdish feudal class, they had long rescinded their ties to the Kurdish provinces and were part of the Ottoman state class. The first *Kurdist* organisations emphasised the cultural specificity of the Kurds, demanded decentralisation and administrative autonomy for the Kurdish provinces and were characterised by a modernist and developmentalist ideology. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed, these demands were re-articulated in terms of national independence. In both cases, these demands reflected the ambition of becoming the ruling elite of a Kurdish autonomous entity within the empire or a Kurdish independent state. In the new nation-states of Iraq and Turkey, the principle of ethnic exclusivity made it hard for the Kurds to attain public offices and middle-class nationalism directly reflected the ambition to replace Arabs and Turks – or Arabised and Turkified Kurds – in the public offices. From the 1940s, Kurdish nationalist activism and organising were largely expressed by professionals from the major towns. By the same token, the re-birth of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey in the 1960s was a largely urban and middle-class phenomenon.

Middle-class nationalism in the Kurdish case suffered from a structural weakness due to the predominantly rural character of Kurdish society. Kurdish towns were, up to the 1970s, small and largely dependent on their rural surroundings as agricultural marketplaces. Even if intellectually prolific and ideologically sophisticated, urban-based nationalists proved to be utterly unable to challenge the state by their own means or to lead wider social coalitions. Thus, they most often had to follow the lead of different

class actors. In the feudal revolts of the interwar period as well as the Barzani Revolution in Iraq (1961-1975), urban and progressive nationalists had to surrender the leadership of the national struggle to the traditional tribal elite due to the latter's superior military means and, in both contexts, they provided nationalist legitimacy to the reactionary demands of the traditional landowning class. In other cases, middle-class nationalists allied from a subordinate position with mass-based movements. This was the case in Iraq in the 1940s and 1950s when landlord-peasant struggles dominated the political landscape of the Kurdish region and the progressive leadership of the KDP worked in coordination with the stronger Iraqi Communist Party. Even more significantly, this was the case in Turkey in the 1980s where the decimated Kurdish leftist groups of middle-class extractions gradually lent their support to a PKK-led insurgency centred on the mobilised peasantry.

In the 1970s, the rapid process of urbanisation changed the relative importance of the towns vis-à-vis the rural areas and allowed for a degree of autonomous action for middle-class nationalists. In Turkey, this process manifested in the proliferation of Kurdish leftist organisations and an intensification of the political struggle. However, the 1980 Turkish military coup dealt a mortal blow to these groups. In Iraq, middle-class and progressive nationalists gained their autonomy of action only in 1975 with the establishment of the PUK. If observed from a purely class-based perspective, the urban middle-class base of the PUK reached its objective and, since 1991, has constituted an integral part of the ruling class of the Kurdish region, or at least of the PUK-controlled part of the region. It must be noted, however, that the power of the PUK rested, since 1991, on a ruling-class pact with the KDP and the traditional elite that cost Talabani's party its ideological peculiarity and made it barely distinguishable from its historical rival. In Turkey, the growth of pro-Kurdish parties, especially at the local level, created a space for the participation of the urban middle classes which gained a prominent position in the non-military wings – civil society and electoral politics – of the Kurdish movement.

### *Nationalism and the Subaltern Classes*

One of the objectives of this work was to paint a fuller picture of the history of Kurdish nationalism that goes beyond intra-ruling class politics – the struggle between competing elites – and account for the role and participation of the subaltern classes. One of the consequences of treating nationalism as an autonomous force disconnected from social struggle is that subaltern groups tend to fade away and be relegated to the background of history. In the Kurdish context, the rural character of the region combined with the late development (in Turkey) or virtual absence (in Iraq) of industrialisation meant that the peasantry constituted by far the largest subaltern group, the class producing the surplus that sustained the landowning elite but also the urban classes. Between the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, the Kurdish countryside went through a process of concentration of land ownership and proletarianization of tribesmen initiated by the Ottoman government and continued by the successor states, particularly colonial Iraq, a process that Lisa Anderson would call ‘the creation of a peasantry’.<sup>680</sup>

Peasants were by no means passive victims of this process. On the contrary, Iraq’s 1940s and 1950s were characterised by intense rural struggles and peasants organising – in both Arab and Kurdish areas – that fuelled the growing political role of the ICP and the trade unions. The peasant movement, despite being even stronger in the Kurdish region, did not develop a Kurdish national project and is thus absent in scholarly accounts of Kurdish nationalism. However, the Kurdish peasantry, along with the Arab peasantry and the small but increasingly militant industrial working class, formulated a powerful national project for Iraq condensed in the ICP’s programme for a multi-national and socialist nation. Rather than sympathising with their fellow Kurdish landowners, the Kurdish peasantry

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<sup>680</sup> Lisa Anderson, *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 28-29.

had a clear understanding of its commonality of interests with the Iraqi workers' movement beyond the linguistic divide. Iraq's subaltern classes did not only show their political agency through their autonomous action. They also highlighted the indissoluble link between British colonialism and the landowning class forcing reluctant Iraqi nationalists to acknowledge the importance of the struggles at the point of production. It was not a coincidence that, after more than a decade of struggles, the successful revolution of 1958 occurred only after the inclusion of the ICP in the National Front in 1956. The revolution led to a few years of unprecedented empowerment of the peasantry in which their autonomous organising was no longer violently obstructed by state authorities. It is in this pivotal period that Chapter 4 identified the origins of the Kurdish revolt of 1961 in the reaction of Kurdish landowners against the emancipating peasantry and a state that was no longer on their side. In the long conflict that followed (1961-1975), the Kurdish peasantry lost its political agency crushed between their ancient exploiters and the scorched-earth strategy deployed by an increasingly authoritarian and chauvinistic Iraqi government. Moreover, in the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the peasantry lost its centrality in the Iraqi economy as the increasing significance of oil exports made agriculture a rather marginal sector. In the 1980s, the Iraqi-Kurdish peasantry was virtually destroyed as a social class by the genocidal counter-insurgency strategy deployed by Baghdad and aimed at depopulating the Kurdish countryside. Dispossessed peasants became a class of urban poor dependent on public handouts distributed by the Kurdish forces that came to rule the region in 1991. As Chapter 5 and 6 emphasised, this position of subordination into the burgeoning Kurdish rentier system was not passively accepted. Since the mid-2000s, several waves of protests hit the Kurdish region of Iraq combining demands for political freedom and more equitable distribution of the rent.

Contrary to Iraq, Turkey never experienced a countrywide peasant movement due to a different rural structure dominated, especially in the non-Kurdish areas, by small independent farmers. As Chapter 7 showed, in

Turkey's Kurdish region, a much less even distribution of land and the predatory practices of the landowning elite, led to an increase of rural conflicts in the 1960s and 1970s, especially since the mechanisation of agriculture significantly worsened the conditions of small farmers and landless peasants. In the course of the 1970s, leftist Kurdish groups had some degree of success at mobilising the popular classes in the Kurdish towns but were unable to link their action to that of the rural masses. Only the PKK, whose leadership largely hailed from the peasantry, deployed a rural strategy based on military actions against the Kurdish landowning elite and started building a support base among the peasantry. After the 1980 military coup eliminated most of its competition, the PKK emerged as the dominant Kurdish group in Turkey. In the mid-1980s, the PKK was successful at incorporating anti-landlord struggles in a project of national liberation, creating the first Kurdish nationalist movement largely based on the mobilisation of the peasantry. The extent of this support is suggested by the overwhelming peasant background of the militants recruited by the PKK in these years but, even more significantly, by the counter-insurgency strategy deployed by Ankara. In the early 1990s, Turkey's response to the increasing strength of the insurgency was to forcibly evacuate thousands of villages to destroy the base of supply and recruitment of the guerrillas. Displaced peasants formed a vast class of urban poor and many Kurdish towns doubled and tripled their population. The near-destruction of Kurdish rural society had deep consequences on the development of the uprising and Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. The urbanisation of hundreds of thousands of peasants often already politicised by the PKK transferred the centre of the Kurdish struggle to the urban areas and, in just a few years, allowed pro-Kurdish forces – directly or indirectly linked to the PKK – to win a large part of the local administrations of the Kurdish region. These transformations led to a gradual expansion of the PKK's base of support among the urban working and middle classes, a process that had already started between the late 1980s and early 1990s in the wake of the PKK's military successes. This class differentiation of the PKK led to a process of deep ideological transformation from Marxism-Leninism to radical

democracy with less and less emphasis on class struggle. The PKK-led Kurdish movement became much wider and, even though peasants and urban poor kept constituting the strongest base of guerrilla recruitment, the middle-class component gained a prominent role in the electoral and civil-society organisations. As Chapter 9 showed, even if the movement maintained a high degree of internal cohesion, tensions emerged at pivotal moments between the part of the movement oriented towards electoral politics and coalition building and the unemployed or under-employed urban youth hailing from the displaced peasantry and more oriented towards radical action.

### **Concluding Remarks**

For reasons explained earlier, the story of Rojava, the Kurdish-controlled region in north-eastern Syria established in 2012, is only briefly told in relations to the developments of the Kurdish movement in Turkey. This approach, imposed by the ‘economy’ of this thesis, runs the risk of reproducing the idea that the Kurds of Syria have only recently come “out of nowhere”<sup>681</sup> and that their politics is a mere extension of that of the Kurds of Turkey. In the same way, the rich history of the Kurds of Iran did not have the space it deserves and only entered the story when it interweaved with that of the Iraqi Kurds. However, Kurdish politics in Syria and Iran always was and still is highly contested. A brief survey on the – much more limited – literature, as well as the interviews conducted for this thesis with Syrian and Iranian Kurdish activists, gave me the strong impression that Kurdish politics in Syria and Iran was traversed by tensions similar to those that shaped it in Iraq and Turkey and that conflicts and alliances between the peasantry, the traditional landowning elite, and the middle classes were decisive to the development of competing forms of Kurdish nationalism. Primary research can provide the data we need to study the evolution of the

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<sup>681</sup> The title of Michael Gunter’s book on Syrian Kurdish history. Michael Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014).

class basis of the Kurdish movement in Iran and Syria and particularly on the extent of class conflicts that inevitably occur within trans-class movements. The relationship between class politics and Kurdish nationalism in Iran and Syria are thus fruitful avenues for future research.

However, this thesis aimed at providing a framework to study nationalist movements beyond the Kurdish experience. Among the original motivations for choosing this topic, my initial 'empirical curiosity' for the diverse expressions of Kurdish nationalism and their historical roots were always accompanied by a deep dissatisfaction for the way nationalist politics is dismissed, especially in liberal academic environments, as the unsophisticated outburst of an anachronistic identity. Violent and racist nationalist projects have resurged in recent times in countries as far as the United States and Turkey, Brazil and Israel, Italy and India. As these movements threaten democratic institutions and collective values of solidarity and peace, they cannot be rejected only on the ground of the moral superiority of liberal multiculturalism or the post-political ideology of technocracy and expertise. To counter the resurgence of nationalism, we must investigate the social conflicts in which they are embedded, to discern the legitimate grievances they represent from the violence they voice. Distinguishing the anger generated by an unjust economic system from the mere defence of entrenched racial and social privilege is the only way to build an inclusive and just society and save the humanistic values of freedom and solidarity.

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