The Kurdish Question: Assessing the Plausibility of Statehood

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Introduction

The state is the most important political entity on the global stage today. There are over two hundred states in the world today, most whom are members of the United Nations. They come in all shapes and sizes of populations and territories, as well as different forms of government. Statehood grants a country legitimacy under international law, the capacity to enter into diplomatic and economic relations with foreign states, and the ability to participate in the global economy and other institutions. Even so, statehood is an exclusive privilege: who has the right to statehood is a constant subject of debate.

From the East fringe of the Taurus Mountains in Turkey to the western peaks of the Zagros, spanning the borderlands of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, lies the land of the Kurds. Today, the Kurdish people number between 25 to 30 million, making them the largest nation without a state to call their own. For the better part of a century, they have been denied their ethnic identity, treated as outsiders by their Arab countrymen and heretics in spite being predominantly Sunni Muslims. They have been persecuted, played as pawns against their states by outside powers, and then left for dead once their strategic and politic utility expired. There is no country that looks out for the welfare of the Kurds, and so they have made dozens of calls for secession. Though a Kurdish state would protect the integrity of the Kurdish people and their human rights, the creation of a Kurdish state brings with it as many challenges as solutions.

Definitions

To understand the Kurdish situation one must first understand the importance of nations and states on the global stage. A state is the governing body of a people in a defined territory. A nation is political term denoting a large population of people united by a common identity. This identity can be formed in a common, language, ethnicity, tradition, religion,

history and more. It is a step above ethnic group since not all nations are ethnically homogenous (Americans are an excellent example of a heterogenous nation), but the most important aspect of nationhood is its political context: in the current global climate, the concept of nationhood is heavily intertwined with statehood.

The modern concept of statehood emerges from the Peace of Westphalia in the 17th Century, which ended the Thirty Years War, a religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the Holy Roman Empire. The resulting peace agreement laid the foundation for preliminary concepts of sovereignty and self-determination: all people had the right to choose how they were governed (in this case, ruling powers could choose what religion their state would practice), and no outside power could impose their laws (their religion) upon the state. This concept expanded over the following 18th and 19th century through the anti-colonial revolutions of the Americas, shifting from religious self-determination to political governance as well.

The right to self-determination was codified by the Atlantic Charter of 1941, which was Roosevelt's and Churchill's joint declaration outlining the Allied Powers' plans for a post-WWII international system; in the third point, the two leaders outlined their desire to "respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of Government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government being restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them."[1] These ideals then became the basis for the later United Nations Charter.

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[1] "Official Text: 'The Atlantic Charter'," *NATO* (accessed April 6th, 2017), <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_16912.htm>.

Since the end of World War II and the creation of the United Nations, there has been

an explosion of new nation states on the global stage. There were 50 countries that signed the

United Nations Charter in 1945; there are 193 now, quasi-states and permanent observers

(e.g., Palestine) notwithstanding. This is a crucial change in global political dynamics, this

shift in international system away from empires to smaller states. In this new environment,

nationhood is linked with the right to self-determination and eventual statehood with the right

to sovereignty, and all the other benefits states have on the international stage. This has made

statehood a more accessible and political aspiration for many peoples. So now, the question

of concern is defining who is a nation and who is not. For the Kurds, that national identity is

born out of centuries of shared suffering.

Kurdish History
Anthropological Origins

Tracing Kurdish roots is no simple task; the Kurds themselves only began chronicling

their history and origin stories in the latter half of the 16th century,[2] and external sources were

more concerned with political relations with the Kurds as opposed to the Kurdish culture or

history. In fact, the first references to the Kurds as a collective group come from documents

in the 7th century regarding an uprising of Kurds near modern day Mosul, Iraq. References to

Kurdistan as a region first appeared in texts written by Seljuk Turks in the 1200s, describing

an expanse of land stretching from Azerbaijan in the north to Luristan –a western province in

modern day Iran– in the south.[3] But while the first documentation of the Kurds began in the

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[2] Ofra Bengio, *the Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner Publishers, Inc., 2012), 1.
[3] Bengio, 2.

medieval period, scholars have estimated that the Kurds originally arrived in Persia, around 1000 B.C.E, though other estimates date back as early as 2000 B.C.E.

The origin of the term 'Kurd' is just as obscure. It may come from the ancient word, *Karduchi*, referring to a group of people inhabiting the mountainous region of northern Mesopotamia; or perhaps *Gurd,* which is the ancient Persian word for 'hero.'[4] First appearances of the term *kwrt* in literature were used to denote highway men, nomads, and specifically 'tent-dwellers'; however, the connotation is vague enough to refer to any nomadic ethnic population within the Persian Empire rather than the modern conceptualization of "Kurds".[5]

The term is fitting nonetheless; the Kurdish people are a conglomerate of tribes spread out across the mountainous regions of modern day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, who speak several different dialects of the Kurdish language. The two most common dialects in modern Kurdish are Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish, spoken in Turkey, Syria, and northern Iraq) and Sorani (Southern Kurdish, spoken in Iraq and Iran), though several other dialects exist.[6] The variation between dialects is vast enough that a Kurd who speaks one may not be able to understand the words of another. Linguists have argued that Kurmanji and Sorani are too different to even constitute dialects of the same language.[7] As such, the Kurds are viewed

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[4] Hakan Özoğlu, "State- tribe Relations: Kurdish Tribalism in the 16th- and 17th- century Ottoman Empire," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies,* 23:1 (1996): 5-27, http://www.jstor.org/stable/195817 (accessed Apr 20, 2016), 8-9.

[5] Garnik Asatrian, "Prologemena to the Study of Kurds," *Iran and the Caucasus* 13 (2009, accessed November 23, 2016): 1-58, <https://archive.org/details/ProlegomenaToTheStudyOfTheKurds>, 22-24.

[6] Amir Hassanpour, "The indivisibility of the nation and its linguistic divisions," *International Journal of The Sociology of Language* 217 (2012): 49-73, *Communication & Mass Media Complete, EBSCOhost*, (accessed November 14, 2016), 51.

[7] Hassanpour, 52.

as an ethnolinguistic group rather than a single nation by some anthropologists, and politicians seeking to dismiss Kurdish nationalism often cite this reasoning to justify their opposition.[8]

Historical precedence for Kurdish autonomy is as much a controversy as their anthropological classification. The first written history of the Kurds was created by Şeref Xan, a member of the Rojkî tribe, the ruling house of Kurdish principality of Bitlis in the 16th Century. The book, titled *Sharafnama*, chronicles the history of several Kurdish dynasties, including his own Rojkî tribe. However, while Kurdish principalities existed and enjoyed centuries of self-governance, they lacked independence: The Kurdish tribes' principalities were ultimately split between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, caught between two great powers in the no-man's land in the Zagros Mountains.[9] All attempts to obtain full autonomy did not emerge until decades later, with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, the *Sharafnama* played a critical role in establishing the earliest base concept of a trans-tribal Kurdish ethnic identity. Although Şeref Xan's writings long precede the modern concept of a nation-state, his writings are the earliest testament to a unified Kurdish identity-- as unified as a conglomerate of tribes can be. Even though the text lays the foundation of a trans-tribal identity, Şeref Xan talks as often of tribal disunity in his account as he does of tribal legacies and dynasties; at one point Xan tells the myth of Prophet Muhammad's meeting with a Kurdish noble named Buğduz. Disgusted by Buğduz's crude behavior, the Prophet cursed him and the rest of his people, "entreating God not to let that community be successful in

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[8] Bengio, 4.
[9] Djene Rhys Bajalan, "Şeref Xan's Sharafnama: Kurdish Ethno-Politics in the Early Modern World, Its Meaning and Its Legacy," *Iranian Studies* 45:6 (2012), 795-818, (accessed Nov 16, 2016), 802. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2012.737726>

uniting, lest they 'destroy the world with their own hands.'"[10] Though the tale is myth,

disunity has haunted Kurdish nationalism from its origins to the modern day.

Early Kurdish Identities in the Late Ottoman Empire

At the turn of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire was on the verge of collapse. An

attempt by the Ottoman rulers to restructure the empire and consolidate power in the central

government's hands resulted in the dissolution of the Kurdish principalities in the mid-1800s

and the establishment of an over-arching provincial government instead of authority

exercised by tribal leaders. The effect was immediate: Kurdish revolts and uprisings rose

drastically in the aftermath of the Ottoman decision. [11] Resentment over the dissolution and

rising tensions with the Ottoman Empire, in tandem with external pressures from neighboring

Iran soon led to the rise of Kurdish nationalists. One nationalist, Sheikh Sayyid Ubeydullah,

quickly rose to infamy after leading an uprising of thousands of Kurds to reestablish Kurdish

autonomy in the borderlands between the Ottomans and Iranians. Known first for his

mediating role between both the Ottoman and Iranian states, Sheikh Ubeydullah converted

his diplomatic power into political strength, uniting between 10,000 and 30,000 Kurdish

cavalrymen in an armed revolt in 1880. [12]

This unity was short-lived: Sayyid Ubeydullah's attempts to galvanize the Kurds

under the banner of Sunni Islam were a mixed bag of successes: fellow Kurdish religious

leaders denounced the persecution of the Armenians, Jews, and Shi'a as against the

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[10] Bajalan, 809.

[11] Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties and Shifting Boundaries,* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004), 65-68.

[12] Sabri Ateş, "In the Name of the Caliph and the Nation: The Sheikh Ubeidullah Rebellion of 1880–81," *Iranian Studies* 47.5: 735-798, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 21, 2016), 747.

principles of the holy Qu'ran. Additionally, Ubeydullah's army failed to recruit the lowland

Kurdish tribes, whose lands were far more vulnerable to retaliation than their highland

counterparts. Gulabi Agha of the lowland Debokri tribe critiqued the revolt, stating: "You

people are tribal (nomads) living on mountains, faced with difficulty you can go back to the

high mountains, leaving others at the enemy's mercy."[13] Ultimately, the revolt was put down

by the Iranian Qajars in 1880, and Sheikh Ubeydullah was forced to surrender to the

Ottomans in 1881. Sheikh Ubeydullah failed to create a truly unifying platform; tribal

relations were too dynamic and fragmented to maintain a united front. Several Kurdish tribes

(including the Debokri) even sided with Iranian and Ottoman forces against fellow Kurds.[14]

The only unifying sentiment across the rebel army was a sentiment of *us vs. them;* the

nascent Kurdish identity built up by Sheikh Ubeydullah's movement was defined more by

what it was not (Shi'a, Armenian, Persian) than what "kurdishness" itself was.[15] This identity

crisis is a recurring issue that Kurdish nationalist movements have faced ever since.

Even though open rebellion failed, the idea of Kurdish nationalism spread in the form

of political parties. The early 20th century gave rise to the Kurdish Society for Mutual Aid

and Progress (KTTC), a proto-nationalist organization of Kurdish intellectuals based in

Istanbul.[16] Though not a separatist movement, the KTTC promoted the elevation of Kurdish

society within the Ottoman Empire, the use of the Kurdish language in schools and,

surprisingly enough, the reinstated Constitution 1876, which created a constitutional

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[13] Ates, 759.

[14] Ates, 761.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Janet Klein, "Kurdish nationalists and non-nationalist Kurdists: rethinking minority nationalism and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1909," *Nations & Nationalism* 13, no. 1 (January 2007): 135-153, *Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost* (accessed April 18, 2017), 137.

monarchy in the Empire. It is important to note that the initial efforts made by the KTTC to establish a Kurdish identity were all within the context of the Ottoman Empire.[17] In the years that followed, additional Kurdish cultural clubs emerged, including but not limited to Kürdistan Muhibban Cemiyeti (Society for the Friends of Kurdistan), Kürdistan Nesri Maarif Cemiyeti (Society for the Propagation of Kurdish Education), and Kürt Hevi Talebe Cemiyeti (Kurdish Hope Student Organization).[18] While these Kurdish societies and clubs promoted Kurdish identity and culture, they didn't explicitly promote an independent Kurdistan; rather, those sentiments would rise at the end of World War I.

The Ottoman Empire's Fall and the Treaty of Sevres

In the final hours of the Ottoman Empire, after the signage of the Mudros Armistice, the Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan (SAK) was born. Founded by a dozen Kurdish intellectuals, including Sayyid Abdulkadir, son of Sheikh Sayyid Ubeydullah, the society worked "towards the advancement of Kurdistan and the Kurdish people." The intentions behind the vague mission statement soon became clear; within a year the SAK began acting as a pro-nationalist organization, seeking external support from the French, British and Americans in preparation for the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after the war.[19] At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Abdulkadir himself spoke in favor of an independent Kurdish state and, although unable to find sympathy from the American delegation, earned British support, whose delegation promised him recognition of Kurdish national rights.[20] It is important to note, however, that while Abdulkadir favored an independent Kurdistan, he was willing to accept Kurdish semi-autonomy and equal participation and rights within a Turkish-

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[17] Klein, 139.
[18] Özoğlu, Hakan, *Kurdish Notables*, 80.
[19] Özoğlu, Hakan, *Kurdish Notables*, 82-83.
[20] Özoğlu, Hakan, *Kurdish Notables*, 91.

run state.[21] Once Abdulkadir made this apparent in February 1920, it created a rift between

the secessionists and the autonomists of the SAK.[22] Now not only were there splits among

the Kurds at a tribal level, but also within their "united" group for an independent Kurdistan.

Despite the lobbying efforts made by the SAK, the final say was left in the hands of

higher powers. When the Ottoman Empire crumbled, it was the victors of World War I who

decided the separation of the spoils: The Triple Entente Powers and theirs allies.

Representatives from the Great Britain, France, the United States, and Italy all met with the

Ottomans to discuss the division plans for the empire. The establishment of a Turkish state

was guaranteed; however, the fate of the smaller nations within the failing empire, such as

the Kurds, was left undecided.

The Treaty of Sevrès was the ultimate result of the Paris Peace Conference. The

proposed treaty would dissolve the Ottoman Empire, creating a Turkish state in Anatolia,

give the British and French control over Iraq, Transjordan, and Syria, establish an Armenian

state, and most importantly, grant autonomy and the right of self-determination to the

Kurds.[23] For a fleeting moment, it seemed, the SAK had achieved its goal, but that success

was short-lived. Although accepted by Sultan Muhammad VI, the last Ottoman emperor, the

Treaty was firmly rejected by his soon to be successor, Kemal Atatürk at Ankara. Upon

rising to power after overthrowing the Sultan, Atatürk blatantly refused to acknowledge the

Treaty, arguing that it was made with the Ottomans, not with the Turks, and was thereby

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[21] Hakan Özoğlu, ""Nationalism" and Kurdish Notables in the Late Ottoman–Early Republican Era," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33, no. 3 (2001): 383-409, (accessed Nov 20, 2016), 394. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/259457>
[22] Özoğlu, Hakan, *Kurdish Notables*, 92-93.
[23] "Sèvres, Treaty of," *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th Ed. (April 2016): 1, *History Reference Center, EBSCOhost* (accessed November 23, 2016).

invalid. A new pact was formed in its place, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which cut

Kurdistan entirely out of the equation.[24] With no say in their future, hopes for an independent

Kurdistan were pushed back to square one.

Nationalism and Ethnic Denial in the 20th Century

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire left a power vacuum in its place. Without the

Treaty of Sevrès to guarantee their right to self-determination, the Kurds were left adrift

amidst the tides of change, carved up between Syria, Iraq and Turkey. Though new boundary

lines were drawn for Turkey, Syria and Iraq to become internationally recognized states over

the course of the following decades, but then struggled to consolidate and legitimize their

power. To do so, they sought to recreate their national identities, often at the expense of the

Kurds. The history of the Kurds ever since has been a cycle of violence, repression, and

retaliation against states who seek to deny their identity and national rights. But despite being

repressed and rejected time and again, Kurdish nationalism emerged over the course of the

20th century, creating an identity out of collective suffering.

Turkey

In October of 1923, a few short months after the Treaty of Lausanne was signed, the

Republic was officially declared. Before that, there was the transitional Ankara government,

the Grand National Assembly (GNA). The GNA had inherited its predecessor's burdens and

troubles of the failing Ottoman Empire: economic strife, external pressure from Triple

Entente powers and their allies, and internal dissent between Christians and Muslims, as well

as between Armenians, Kurds and Turks.[25] Amid the chaos, the GNA's president, Mustafa

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[24] "Lausanne, Treaty of." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th Ed. (April 2016): 1, *History Reference Center, EBSCOhost* (accessed November 23, 2016).
[25] Denise Natali, *The Kurds And the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, And Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 70.

Kemal Pasha, sought an unlikely, but crucial ally in the Kurds. It was a strategic move: "[the Kurds] represented about 20% of the population, while Kurdish territories made up 30% of the country's total landmass and 32% agricultural lands.[26] Kurdish support was vital in the years between the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal courted Kurdish support while vying for the creation of a new Turkish state, "advancing the idea of a unified Sunni Muslim community in which both Kurds and Turks were both a part."[27] Kemal met with Kurdish tribal chiefs, dressed in their attire, and promised a sisterhood between Turks and Kurds; but when the Republic was born and the treaties were signed, there was no political space spared for the Kurds after 1923, or for any ethnic minority, for that manner; Kemal's vision for Turkey was of a unified Turkish people, unhindered by the identity politics of ethnicity or religion. As such, the tribes Kemal once treated as allies were now threats to the vision of a secular and uniform Turkish identity, known under the ideology of Kemalism.

Soon after its creation, the Turkish government pushed aggressively for homogenization within the nascent state. Denying the Kurds their ethnic identity, Kemal announced a total ban on public use of the Kurdish language in March of 1924.[28] Maps of Turkey were redrawn, replacing the Kurdish names for cities with Turkish ones. The Kurdish culture clubs in Diyarbakir were promptly closed.[29] While constructing a new Turkish national identity, Kemalists rewrote the history of the Kurds, claiming them to be "mountain

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[26] Natali, 71.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Bengio, 3.
[29] Natali, 73.

Turks who somehow forgot their mother tongue."[30] In denying their lands, their language, their ancestral and tribal identities, the process of "Turkification" began.

Turkification policies quickly took on a bloody and violent tone as Ataturk sought to destroy all Kurdish nationalist threats. "After 1924," Natali states, "Turkish officials arrested, deported and killed Kurdish nationalist leaders."[31] Kurdish deputies and provincial leaders were replaced by Turkish military officials, and military observation posts were built throughout Kurdish cities.[32] The militarization of Kurdistan limited all political options for the Kurds; those who attempted to rebel were met with bloody and brutal annihilation. From 1936 to 1939, Turkish forces razed the city of Dersim (renamed Tunceli by the Turks), home to the Zaza Kurds, to the ground. What had started as a Kurdish rebellion ended after three years of bloodshed, 13,800 slain Kurds, and 11,600 displaced civilians.[33] The draconian treatment of the Kurdish tribes under Ataturk was beyond cruel and inhumane, but with no means to retaliate against the repressive regime, there were no opportunities for Kurdish identity politics to resurge until the liberalization of Turkey's political system began in the 1960s.

In 1961, a new constitution was drafted in Turkey, providing protections and liberties for political parties, a new legislative system, and expanding economic rights for workers. While Turkey was rapidly liberalizing, however, little room was left in the new changes for the Kurds: The Kurdish language was still prohibited in public, and ethno-nationalist

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[30] Senem Aslan, *Nation Building in Turkey and Morocco* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 63.
[31] Natali, 79.
[32] Natali, 85.
[33] "Turkey PM Erdogan apologises for 1930s Kurdish killings," *BBC* (November 23, 2011, accessed Feb 20, 2017). < http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-15857429>

organizations like the KDPT were still prohibited.[34] Kurdish society remained as fragmented as ever, with identities splintered across regional boundaries and local identities, rather than a unified Kurdish identity. The vast majority of Kurds remained illiterate in rural settings, limiting the spread of identity politics even further. But in the cities, urban Kurdish populations began to develop new, ethnic identities and took part in the burgeoning political system.[35] Though pro-ethnic parties were prohibited, many younger Kurds found a home in Marxist-Leninist parties like the Turkish Workers Party (TIP), which supported Kurdish human rights, but not rights to self-determination (this would change in the latter half of the 1960s to a more nationalistic approach to the Kurdish question).[36] Older, more traditional Kurds were drawn to the underground KDPT movement, the Turkish branch of Iraq's KDP. Other parties and cultural organizations (such as the Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları, or DDKO) sprang forth as well during the decade; Turkey's new multiparty system created a climate where a multitude of niche parties could form rather than a bipolar or unipolar movement as seen in other states with Kurdish demographics.[37]

It wasn't long before Turkish authority came crashing down upon the growing nationalistic movements: the Turkish government responded quickly to the development of this KDPT. By1968 most KDPT leaders were imprisoned, assassinated, or in exile. Soon after, in 1971, the TIP and DDKO were banned as well.[38] This did little to dissuade rising nationalistic sentiments; the development of new political movements continued amongst the

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[34] Natali, 96.
[35] Natali, 97-98.
[36] Natali, 101.
[37] Natali, 100.
[38]Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2007), 22.

Kurds. This time, however, they shifted away from co-opting preexisting Turkish parties and

began to create distinctly Kurdish ones. By the 1970s there were over nine illegal Kurdish

nationalist movements growing inside Turkey, each of which had its own unique platform:

some were Maoist, some pro-Soviet, some were neither, some were both. Only one, the

Kurdish Socialist Party (PSK) was pacifistic; the rest were aggressive.[39] On that far end of

the violent spectrum lay the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK), established in 1978 by Abdullah

Ocalan. Drawing its support from the uneducated ranks of Kurdish society, the PKK pushed

for total Kurdish independence and secession, by whatever means necessary, including

attacking fellow Kurdish nationalist groups to try and coerce them into allegiance.[40]

Conflicts between the PKK and Turkey came to a head in the early 1980s. In 1984,

the PKK began its armed rebellion against the Turkish state, kidnapping and assassinating

government officials, bombing government sites, and skirmishing with police and the

Turkish military.[41] "As Kurdish nationalist mobilizations led by the PKK destabilized the

border regions and terrorized civilians, the Turkish military establishment was given carte

blanche in Kurdistan."[42] What followed was an unprecedented level of state violence against

the Kurds: scorched earth tactics were used to raze farmlands and slaughter civilians.[43] The

PKK's leadership promptly fled across the border to Syria, where it continued its insurgent

attacks from across the border, but the Kurds remaining in Turkey suffered the violent

repercussions in the cross-fire.[44] Southeastern Turkey became a warzone; in the thirty years

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[39] Marcus, 38.
[40] Marcus, 40.
[41] Natali, 107-108.
[42] Natali, 107
[43] Natali, 108.
[44] Marcus, 52-53.

that PKK began its conflict, 40,000 lives were lost (both Turkish and Kurdish combined), and approximately 400 billion dollars in damage were done to Turkish infrastructure.[45] In 1993, the PKK declared its first unilateral cease-fire in hopes of peace negotiations between both sides; the Turkish militia, however, adamantly refused.[46] Only in 1999 was a permanent cease-fire declared by the PKK's leader, Abdullah Ocalan, after his own capture and imprisonment by Turkish forces.

Iraq

Though the British were the strongest advocates for Kurdish national rights at the Paris Peace Conference, their concern for their welfare fizzled once they gained control of the Iraq Mandate. For a time, the British seemed to uphold their promise, acknowledging in 1922 the right of the Kurds to form their own government as an autonomous region within Iraq. A League of Nations declaration in 1925 re-emphasized these rights, calling for Kurdish authority and language to be preserved in the region around Mosul. Soon after, Britain and the Iraqi administration began cracking down upon Kurdish nationalists: Kurdish political groups were disbanded in 1926 and 1927 and the Anglo-Iraq Treaty of 1930, the first step towards an independent Iraq, made no mention of the Kurds.[47] Outrage erupted amongst the Kurds, who cited the League's 1925 call for their protection, and protests turned to violence as the government retaliated with military force. In 1930, troops in Sulaimaniya open fired on protesting crowds, killing dozens of civilians.[48] And conditions only worsened after Iraq

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[45] "Turkish forces kill 32 Kurdish militants in bloody weekend as conflict escalates," *The Guardian* (Jan 10, 2016, accessed Apr 20, 2017).
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/11/turkish-forces-kill-32-kurdish-militants-in-bloody-weekend-as-conflict-escalates>
[46] Marcus, 212.
[47] Yildiz, Kerim. Kurds in Iraq : The Past, Present and Future (2). London, GB: Pluto Press, 2007. Accessed April 17, 2017. ProQuest ebrary. 12-13.
[48] Yildez, 14.

became an independent state in 1932. Cycles of revolt and violent repression continued throughout the initial decades of the Iraq's development.

Out of this chaos rose Kurdish nationalism, and one of the most prominent political figures in the region: Mullah Mustafa Barzani. He began his ascent in Kurdish politics by leading a string of revolts in Iraqi Kurdistan during the 1940s, leading to his arrest and later retreat to the Republic of Mahabad Iran in 1945. In exile, he formed the Kurdish Democratic Party, which soon spread to all corners of the Kurdish world, creating off-shoots in Syria, Turkey and Iran as well. When Mahabad fell, Barzani was forced to flee to the USSR, but the KDP did not die out in exile.

Hope for change came with the 1958 revolution, which overthrew the monarchy imposed by the British during the mandate period. Kurds in exile were permitted to reenter the state, including Barzani. A Kurd was even allowed onto the sovereignty council created to replace the monarchy.[49] But these steps towards a brighter future did not last; the Ba'ath party overthrew the regime in 1963. Over the following decades, the Kurds and the Baathist regime repeatedly argued over Kurdish autonomy, especially over Kurdish claims to incorporate Mosul and Kirkuk -two prominent cities in the north of Iraq with vast oil resources- into the autonomous region. Over the following years, peace talks began and crumbled repeatedly, never making head way between the Kurdish militants and the state government until the March Manifesto of 1970 under Saddam Hussein.[50] The document sought to appease Kurdish militants, promising all their political demands, from the right to speak their language, to form Kurdish schools to full participation in all aspects of the

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[49] Yildez, 17.
[50] Yildez, 19

government. But negotiations fell apart after the Kurds accused Hussein's regime of imposing Arab settlers in the border region to alter the borderline.[51] Once more, negotiations failed.

Meanwhile, as disputes between the KDP and Iraq continued, internal conflicts arose within the Kurdish party. A rift was forming between the organization's hierarchy and its base. Barzani's KDP ran along authoritarian tribal ties; as Bengio explains, "many of the senior positions in the party were selected not because of their intellectual abilities and ideological weight, but because of their loyalty to Barzani."[52] This system of patronage disenfranchised the intelligentsia of the party. In 1975, the party split into two, the KDP under Barzani the PUK under Jalal Talabani. Under Talabani's control, the PUK pursued Kurdish autonomy through politics rather than violence.[53] Though the Kurds were divided politically, both parties continued to pursue independence by their own means.

The bloodiest atrocities committed against the Kurds were at the hands of Saddam Hussein's regime a decade later, in the spring of 1987. Since 1980, Iran and Iraq had been embroiled in war. In an effort to weaken the Iraqi force, Iran provide Barzani's Kurds with weapons to rebel against Iraq. In retaliation, Saddam Hussein's regime began its al-Anfal campaign. The name *anfal* hearkens back to the eighth surah of Islam, regarding military conduct, the infidels, and the spoils of war.[54] In the eyes of the Baathist regime, not only were the Kurds non-Arabs, they were non-Muslims as well.

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[51] Yildez,19
[52] Bengio, 32.
[53] Bengio, 33.
[54] Bengio, 178.

The point was driven home in official government documents: "The Peshmerga are infidels and they shall be treated as such. You shall take any Peshmerga's property that you may seize while fighting them. Their wives are lawfully yours, as are their sheep and cattle."[55] To put an end to the Kurdish saboteurs, Iraq's army swarmed the mountainous northern regions of Iraq, bombarding villages that they deemed Peshmerga strongholds with artillery fire, air strikes, and chemical weapons. The campaign was the deadliest use of chemical warfare since the banning of their usage in the 1925 Geneva Protocol.[56] Survivors of the onslaughts were rounded up, and males between the ages of 15 and 70 were executed by firing squad.[57]

Outside the targeted villages, the families of Kurdish deserters were "divested of their Iraqi nationality and of their movable and immovable property."[58] The attacks ramped up through the spring and into the summer. As the Iran-Iraq war ended, the Baath party began redirecting its war effort from repelling the Iranians to crushing internal strife, and subsequently flooding northern Iraq with 30,000-60,000 troops.[59] An estimated 100,000 Kurds perished during the *al-Anfal* campaign.[60] Surviving Kurds scattered, fleeing to Turkey or to safer parts of Iraq as their homeland was razed by the military. Though verbally condemned by the United States for violating international law with its use of chemical

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[55] Bengio, 178.
[56] Kurt Burch, "Iran-Iraq War," *Salem Press Encyclopedia* (January 2017): *Research Starters, EBSCOhost* (accessed April 23, 2017).
[57] Bengio, 179.
[58] Bengio, 180.
[59] Bengio, 182.
[60] Robert Kaplan, *Revenge of Geography* (New York, NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2013), xiv.

weapons, Saddam Hussein's regime was never sanctioned or otherwise punished for its actions.

Syria

Like Iraq, Syria was placed under a mandate in the aftermath of WWI; until 1946 it remained under French supervision. Unlike Iraq, the French did not violently repress Kurdish revolts the way the British did. Rather, the French held an ambivalent, even permissive attitude towards their Kurdish minority. Kurds living under the French Mandate occupied Jazira, Jarablus and Kurd Dagh, "narrow zones isolated from one another, all along the Turkish Frontier."[61] Syria's Kurds at the time remained segmented in tribal groupings, some nomadic, some sedentary, all lacking a unifying identity.[62] Unsurprisingly, French presence in the regions was met with mixed responses from the indigenous Kurds: some tribes like the Millis and Kitkan gladly cooperated with the French, others supported Pan-Islamic movements against the French.[63] But this ambiguity was not exclusive to Kurdish tribes; the political climate of Syria was fragmented and ambiguous upon the arrival of French forces. Between this ambiguity and their own divided population, Kurdish nationalism was not a prominent feature of the early phases of the mandate era.

When nationalism came to the Syrian Kurds, it was imported from Turkey; sharp crackdowns on Kurdish tribes and Kurdish clubs in Istanbul after the failed Said rebellion (1925), many Kurdish intellectuals and revolutionaries fled across the border to Syria, where they created the Khoybun League. The League sought to create a single national front and

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[61] Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 8.
[62] Tejel, 9.
[63] Tejel, 12.

foster diplomatic ties with foreign powers and regional actors.[64] To achieve this goal, the

league promoted modernization and westernization of the Kurdish people and their culture,

attempting to reverse the image propagated by the Turks that Kurds were barbarous savages

who catered to major world powers like Britain and France.[65] Additionally, the Khoybun

League helped to found several Kurdish committees within the northern region of Syria,

laying the foundation for nationalism within the state. Newspapers like *Hawar*, created by

the Badirkan brothers of the league, attempted to breach internal divides between Kurds by

disseminating Kurdish literature, history and politics in their publications.[66] Even though

they adamantly and repeatedly supported calls for independence, the Khoybun League

favored diplomatic and intellectual pleas for recognition and rights, pushing for protection of

their language and heritage rather than violence as the means to their end.[67] In addition,

relations between Arabs and Kurds were tense, but tolerant under the mandates; Kurdish

nationalism in Syria was not inherently anti-Arab. Only later, in the post-mandate era, would

relations between the two ethnic groups turn antagonistic.

The French, for the most part, tolerated Kurdish nationalism, but made little effort to

encourage it. When the Kurds made a bid for local autonomy in 1928, calling for Kurdish

schools, a Kurdish regiment in the northern frontier, and for government posts in the region

to be filled with Kurds, offering in exchange support for the mandate and greater

participation of Kurds in the French army, it was promptly rejected.[68] The signing of the

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[64] Tejel, 17
[65] Tejel, 19.
[66] Tejel, 22.
[67] Tejel, 26.
[68] Tejel, 28.

Franco-Syrian treaty in 1936 signified another step away from permissiveness and a step towards a definitive Syrian State. Calls for Kurdish autonomy went unheeded.

In 1946, the French exited Syria, leaving behind a power vacuum. With the absence of the French, a new identity and new political space had to be built. For the Kurds, diplomatic bids for statehood failed: "Without any political sponsors among the members of the United Nations and powerless to influence the agenda created by international bodies, the Kurds were excluded from the United Nations' debates for decades."[69] A coup in 1949 brought to power Husni al-Za'im, a Kurdish military leader. However, in spite of his heritage, Za'im did not favor Kurdish autonomy, but rather unified Syrian nationalism. [70] His successor, a fellow Kurd named Adib Bin Hassan Al-Shishakli, shared this sentiment: Shishakli strongly supported the integration of minorities into the state, by any means necessary. He condoned violent coercion and the stigmatization of Druze, Alawites, and other minority populations within the state to control them.[71] Though some politicians have pointed to the Kurdish dictators as proof of Kurdish integration in society, their lack of pro-Kurdish identity or sympathetic ethnic sentiments imply that they were an exception, rather than the norm of Syrian society.

Around the same time, Pan-Arabism was taking root in the Middle East and North Africa; under its banner, the Ba'ath political party would eventually take control in both Iraq and Syria in 1963. Even before the government transitioned to reflect Pan-Arab sentiments, the movement was shaping policy in both states. The rise in Arab nationalism in the 1950s

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[69] Tejel, 42.
[70] Tejel, 45.
[71] Tejel, 41.

brought with it a growing hostility towards minorities, exacerbated by Syria's inclusion in the short-lived United Arab Republic. Viewed as a threat to Arab nationalism, the Kurds were promptly repressed, their language forbidden, their music banned, and teachers replaced with pro-Arab Egyptians in their schools. Amid rising repression, the Syrian Kurds received Jalal Talabani, a prominent member of Iraq's KDP. Talabani, who had fled persecution in Iraq, became a crucial asset in the development of Syria's own KDPS.[72] Like its counterparts in Iran, Iraq and Turkey, the KDPS sought to bring the issues of the Kurds to public and international awareness. And like its counterparts in neighboring states, the KDPS was observed with suspicion by governing powers and eventually condemned. In August of 1960, executive members were arrested, tortured, and ultimately imprisoned for separatism. Over 5,000 people were arrested in affiliation with the organization soon after.[73]

Life did not improve for Kurdish nationalists in the aftermath of the UAR. Dissatisfied with Egyptian domination of the UAR, Syria seceded, reforming the Syrian Arab Republic. A year later, in November 1962, a special census of the Kurdish-dominated Jazira region conducted by the Syrian government stripped approximately 120,000 Kurdish civilians of their citizenship (20% of the Kurdish population in the state). Nobody was immune to the census's repercussions; the measures impacted Kurds of all social strata, from peasants to families of officers and generals. Those who avoided the census went unregistered, making them stateless as well. All who lost their nationality lost their right to property, their rights to education, employment, marriage and political participation.[74] Whereas the Al-Anfal campaign in Iraq was the most brutal campaign against the Kurds

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[72] Tejel, 48.
[73] Tejel, 49.
[74] Tejel, 51.

across all states, the Jazira census was arguably the most significant act of systematic political repression.

Another coup in 1963 put the Ba'ath party in charge of Syria, with Hafez al-Assad as the new president. The repression and abuses of Syrian Kurds continued under this new party just as they had for the past years. Like its predecessors, the Ba'ath regime promoted an exclusive, Arab only nationalism; integration with the Arab identity was the only acceptable approach for minorities living in the State. In fact, for most Syrian politicians and philosophers, it was the only logical decision on the table. As Syrian philosopher Michael Aflaq claimed;

> Since the Kurds, as with the other members of non-Arab ethnic groups, wanted nothing more than to live a dignified life, they would "naturally" want to remain within the Arab fold because then they would not be a small group, but would be part of a vast nation that which would guarantee their power and happiness.[75]

According to these claims, the Kurdish bids for independence were ignorant and short-sighted, easy to dismiss for their foolishness. But in spite of the dismissive mentality towards the Kurds, the government aggressively sought to undermine and expunge Kurdish identity, particularly in Jazira, the hotbed of Kurdish politics.[76] The Hilal plan, based off the report of Lt. Muhammad Talab al-Hilal, called for a multitude of repressive tactics, many of which carried over from the previous regimes (denial of education, employment and citizenship) but the deportation of Kurds to Turkey and the expulsion of the ulama (clerics) were suggested as well.[77] Ultimately, the regime chose a resettlement plan, attempting to oust the Kurds from

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[75] Tejel, 57.
[76] Tejel, 60.
[77] Tejel, 61.

the borderlands by placing armed settlers on the property confiscated from the Kurds. The plan called for the mass deportation of over 140,000 Kurds, but was slowed by infrastructure problems; the construction of the Waqda dam to provide irrigation took until 1973 to implement.[78] In the meantime, the Kurds suffered other rules and regulations to delegitimize them: police harassment, raids and arrests became commonplace abuses in the frontiers.[79]

A shift in dynamic came in 1976, when rising anti-Assad sentiments forced new allegiances within the Syrian political sphere. Suddenly, Assad's regime went from vehemently oppressing the Kurds to catering to them. In exchange for Kurdish loyalty, the regime ended the forced transfers from Jazira and reintegrating them into society: Kurds were offered military positions in the Ministry of Defense and Defense Brigades, both branches that were commanded by Assad's brother and directly responsible to the presidency.[80] The brigades were promptly used to quell uprisings within Aleppo and Hama in 1982. Though their status seemingly improved, the Kurds were still expendable to the regime; tools to pit against the majority Arab population.

Iran

As the only state of the four that wasn't a part of the Ottoman Empire, Iran's relationship with its Kurdish population lacks many of the common underlying themes of the other states. Perhaps this is because, unlike Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, Iran was not charged with building a state from the ground up and recreating a national identity: its Persian ethnic identity has persisted throughout Iranian history, from empire to constitutional monarchy, to Islamic republic. Its borders never changed dramatically between transitions. Unlike its

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[78] Tejel, 61.
[79] Tejel, 61.
[80] Tejel, 67.

counterparts Iraq and Turkey, Iran never attempted to ethnically erase Kurdistan. Though

Iran often restricted the political rights of the Kurds, as well as the use of their language, it

never offered enough of a hostile environment to incite Kurdish separatism.

In 1925, the last Qajar king was overthrown, and Iran became a constitutional

monarchy under Reza Shah. To consolidate the fragmented state, the Shah propagated

nationalism based on Persian ethnic identity, much like how Iraq and Syria turned to Pan-

Arabism, and Turkey to Turkification to shape their new identities. But while the latter three

states sought to delegitimize the Kurds and other ethnic minorities, Iran took no steps to do

the same. On the contrary, this new Persian identity intertwined with that of the Kurds: one

of the central aspects of this strategy was to cite a shared history and culture with the

Kurds,[81] Additionally, while Kemalist Turkey excluded the Kurds from politics, Iran

permitted Kurds to participate in the political arena, maintaining local authority.[82] Relatively

speaking, Iran gave its Kurdish population few justifications to actively push for autonomy.

That does not mean that Kurdish separatist movements never occurred within Iran.

Perhaps the most infamous attempt at separation came from Mahabad, a city in the

westernmost province of Iran. On January 22, 1946, Kurdish leaders (including Qazi

Muhammad of Iran and Mustafa Barzani of Iraq) declared their autonomy, forming the

Republic of Mahabad with USSR support. The Soviets, who had taken control over the

northern corner of Iran during World War II, wanted to maintain influence in the region, and

so they provided financial aid and international recognition for the Kurdish. The attempt was

short-lived; pressure from the international community forced the USSR to pull out of Iran,

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[81] Natali, 120.
[82] Natali, 125

and the city was promptly overrun in December of 1946 by Iranian forces, 11 months after its

inception. Qazi Muhammad was hung alongside most of the remaining leaders (Barzani fled

to the USSR for asylum).[83] The KDPI was outlawed as well.[84] The ill-fated reign of the

Republic of Mahabad was over.

The later decades of the monarchy period in Iran saw a tightening of restrictions on

the Kurds. In the years leading up to the Islamic revolution: as the state grew increasingly

authoritarian, opportunities for Kurdish political expression vanished. Their political space

opened once more after the Revolution; once again, the Kurds were catered to by political

elites, with Ayatollah Khomeini promising opportunities for self-determination and

government participation. As always, such promises fell short: the KDPI was repressed by

the state, forbidden from establishing bureaus in cities, and positions of high power in

government were given to Shi'a Persians over Kurds.[85] Government policies grew

increasingly repressive as Khomeini severed ties with the Kurds, expelled their political

leaders, and placed Kurdish dominated regions under military rule.[86] Even so, Kurdish

nationalism never managed to galvanize as a united opposition force against the Iranian state.

As Natali states, "although the Iranian elite repressed Kurdish nationalism and failed to draw

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[83] David McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2004), *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 21, 2017).
[84] Natali, 130.
[85] Natali, 143.
[86] Natali, 149.

the Kurds into the political center, it did not counterproductively ethnicize the political space

enough to create an ethnonational sentiment that was highly representative across Kurdish

society."[87] With no existential threat to unite them, the Kurds in Iran remain divided.

Changing dynamics of the 21st century

Though the 20th century Kurdish narrative is one of bloodshed, the 21st century turned

a new page, bringing with it hopes for change. Fighting between the PKK and Turks

continued sporadically throughout the 2000s, though far more muted than before amid

attempted ceasefires.[88] In Iraq, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime brought new

opportunities for Kurdish political involvement in the newly democratized state. But even as

new opportunities arose, new threats expanded.

Political expansion

Despite the countless crimes against humanity suffered, the greatest triumph of

Kurdish self-governance lies in the country that fought the hardest for their annihilation. In

the aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the United States established a democratic

government in Baghdad, with Jalal Talabani, the leader of the PUK, as its President. The

success of the war was short-lived, however; insurgency broke out soon after the fall of

Saddam Hussein, and within a few short years, Iraq began to destabilize further. Yet as the

rest of the country crumbled to pieces, the Kurdistan region persevered. The abolishment of

the Iraqi army led to dissent in the south, but in the North, it swelled the ranks of the

Peshmerga's security forces.

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[87] Natali, 158.

[88] Gokhan Bacik, and Bezen Balamir Coskun, "The PKK Problem: Explaining Turkey's Failure to Develop a Political Solution," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no 3 (2011): 248-65, Web, 251.

> As death squads terrorized Arab Iraqis into silent complicity, Kurdish civilians flooded their security forces with telephone tips about any suspicious activity. As the count of American soldiers killed in action approached four thousand, not a single one of them had been killed inside the Kurds' three provinces… Kurdistan inaugurated its own parliament, selected a cabinet, and ratified a regional constitution… while my colleagues and I were chronicling the destruction of Iraq, we were witnessing the creation of Kurdistan. [89]

Though the United States' nation-building effort failed for Iraq as a whole, it succeeded in Kurdistan. It is, to quote Quil Lawrence, "everything the Bush administration promised for Iraq. It is a Muslim state that is pro-democracy, pro-America, and even pro-Israel." While Iraq's economy collapsed in the years following the war, Kurdistan survives off its petroleum industry.[90] Furthermore the Peshmerga has played an integral role in the campaign against the Islamic State as well, assisting the United States and Iraq in the recapture of Mosul. But while Iraqi Kurdistan has proven its capacity for self-governance, no other country has recognized this region as its own state.

Meanwhile in Turkey, hope for renewed and long term peace sparked during Prime Minister Erdogan's term, with the relaxation of laws barring the use of the Kurdish and the promise of disarmament.[91] Erdogan was also the first Turkish leader to apologize for the massacre in Dersim.[92] Around the same time, a new, moderate Kurdish organization, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) began calling for the Kurds to fight with ballots rather than

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[89]Quil Lawrence, *Invisible Nation* (New York, NY: Walker & Company, 2008), 6.
[90] Lawrence, 6.
[91] "Turkey and the Kurds," *New York Times* (Nov 23, 2009, accessed Feb 20, 2017), <*http*://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/24/opinion/24tue2.html>
[92] "Turkey PM Erdogan apologises for 1930s Kurdish killings."

bullets."[93] Quickly gaining political influence, the HDP began negotiating a lasting peace

between the Kurds and the Turkish state. But despite the hopeful promises, little remains to

show for them. The fruit of the HDP's efforts, a ceasefire beginning back in 2013, ended

only two years after its inception due to rising tensions between Kurds and Turkish officials

over the Syrian civil war.[94] Since then, the Turkish government has renewed its campaign

against the Kurds, and the violence has escalated to warlike conditions, with airstrikes

against PKK strongholds.[95] Crackdowns against the HDP had led to widespread arrests of

party officials based on the claim they've collaborated with the PKK.[96] With increasing

pressure and fear of spillover from the Syrian Civil War, and Erdogan's increasing

consolidation of power since the failed coup in July, the risk of outright civil war seems to be

on the rise.

Syrian Civil War: Collaboration and Competition
        For centuries, Kurdish society has been fragmented by arbitrary borders, tribal

politics, religion and more, but that may be changing. In the wake of the Syrian Civil war, the

political and social dynamics in the region have drastically shifted. As the Islamic State

overran Syria and Iraq, the Kurds in both states have been the targeted by the terrorist group.

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[93] Owen Matthews, "Turkey's Hidden War. (cover story)," *Newsweek Global* 165, no. 15 (October 23, 2015): 34-43. *Business Source Premier, EBSCOhost* (accessed April 17, 2017).
[94] Lucy Kafanov, "End of Turkey-PKK ceasefire puts HDP in a tough spot," *Al-Jazeera* (Aug 10, 2015, accessed Mar 13, 2017). <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/turkey-pkk-ceasefire-puts-hdp-tough-spot-150806110231827.html>
[95] "Turkey air strikes: PKK targeted by air force jets," *BBC* (Aug 11, 2015, accessed Mar 10, 2017). <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33859991>
[96] David Kenner, "Turkey's Kurdish Obama is Now in Jail," *Foreign Policy* (Nov 4, 2016, accessed Mar 11, 2017). <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/04/turkeys-kurdish-obama-is-now-in-jail/>

This transnational threat has resulted in greater transnational unity between Kurdish factions. The Iraqi Peshmerga has shouldered most of the burden of fending off ISIS within the state, receiving some limited assistance from the US and other western powers in the process; now they are playing an integral role in the ongoing operation to recapture Mosul. But other militias are lending their aid as well: when the Islamic State cornered the Kurdish-speaking Yazidi population on Mount Sinjar, the Turkish PKK and Syrian YPG came to their defense.[97] In Syria, the joint efforts of the US backed YPG and their PKK allies have retaken large swathes of land in Syria, routed the Islamic State in Kobani and expanded beyond Kurdish strongholds and into predominantly Arab areas.[98] It seems that the borders for a new Kurdish state are being drawn with every victory achieved.

The changing dynamic in Kurdistan has brought about changes in the way the nearby states respond to them. Over the past century, neither Iraq, Iran, Syria, nor Turkey have viewed the Kurdish threat as anything but an internal problem; the countries have had no qualms assisting Kurds in neighboring states, playing them as pawns against rival states:

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[97] Ishaan Tharoor, "A U.S.-designated terrorist group is saving Yazidis and battling the Islamic State," *Washington Post* (August 11, 2014, accessed Mar 13, 2017). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/08/11/a-u-s-designated-terrorist-group-is-saving-yazidis-and-battling-the-islamic-state/?utm_term=.3e9417b73f2c>
[98] Elias Groor, "Mapped: The Islamic State's Territorial Losses and the Beginning of a United Kurdistan," *Foreign Policy* (Jul 7, 2015, accessed Mar 21, 2017). <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/07/mapped-the-islamic-states-territorial-losses-and-the-beginning-of-a-united-kurdistan/>

Syria harbored PKK fugitives to spite Turkey over territorial disputes, refusing to extradite

suspected terrorists and offering fake IDs to members.[99] During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran

provided weapons to support the Kurdish Iraqi insurgency.[100] Iraqi Kurds sell oil to Turkey.

But in the wake of a more united Kurdish front, Turkey has broken tradition and bombed

Kurdish YPG forces in Syria. These recent airstrikes are telling; they prove that the Kurds

can no longer be dismissed as a regional risk. Turkey, Syria, and Iraq especially must now

view the Kurdish bids for autonomy and self-determination beyond their own borders.

Whether anything will come of this new Kurdish unity remains to be seen. While the

Kurds have reaped military success in the region, these allegiances are fleeting. There is no

guarantee that the Kurds can overcome stark political and religious differences to fully

consolidate their power into one organization. Rivalries between organizations like Iraq's

PUK and KDP persist. If a Kurdish state is formed, the first and foremost question will be

who speaks for the Kurds.

The Paths to Statehood

The Kurds are a divided people, separated by tribal identities, dialect differences,

religious practices and more. Their national identity is born out of a history of collective

suffering and hostility by their neighbors. It may not be the most durable national identity,

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[99] Marcus, 60.
[100] Bengio, 173-175.

but it is a compelling argument for their independence nevertheless. Time and again the

Kurds have had their human rights violated by their parent states'. If these states are

unwilling to uphold the rights of the Kurds, then the Kurds must find a way to ensure their

own safety. It is not a matter of statehood alone, but one of justice. Ethicists such as Dr.

Allen Buchanan have argued for a justice-based perspective of state-legitimacy, claims that

nations have a right to secession when the parent state inflicts gross violations against them.

"Large scale and persistent violations of basic human rights, unjust taking of a legitimate

state's territory, and serious and persistent violations of intrastate autonomy agreements by

the State" are all grounds on which it is morally acceptable to secede.[101]

From an ethical perspective, therefore, there is no doubt that the Kurds deserve a

state: they have been denied their heritage, their language, their citizenship, even their lives

for decades by oppressive governments. The acts of ethnic cleansing committed by Iraq

under Saddam Hussein, the outright warfare between Turkey and its Kurdish populations,

and the persecution by ISIL in the failing states of Syria and Iraq build a strong case for

Kurdish statehood as a human rights issue. If the Kurds are not being protected by their

states, but rather are being actively harmed by them, they have legitimate cause to secede.

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[101] John Tasioulas, "Review of Justice, Legitimacy and Self-determination: Moral
Foundations for International Law," *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly* vol
55, 1 (Cambridge University Press: 237–40), 239. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3663320>

The Lockean social contract is null and void the moment the state fails to uphold its most

basic responsibilities of protection of life, liberty and property.

Statehood qualifiers: Empirical and Juridical prerequisites.

But what does it mean to become a state? According to Article 1 of the Montevideo

Convention, the state is "a person in international law if it meets the following criteria: 1) a

defined territory, 2) a permanent population, 3) a government and 4) a capacity to enter into

relations with other states."[102] Before the Kurds can even hope to achieve statehood, these

four aspects must be defined.

Territory

Kurdistan as a region is well defined; the Zagros Mountains form a natural border for

the region. But a Kurdish State might not necessarily follow these boundaries. If Kurdistan

were to declare its independence based off this natural border, it would challenge four

existing countries' sovereign claims. It would be the most ambitious redrawing of the map in

modern history; the vast majority of new states created in the 20th and 21st centuries came

about by splitting one state into two (or more, in the case of the Balkans), rather than fusing

several states together. Seceding from one state is difficult, but if the entire region secedes,

the Kurds will face opposition on four different fronts.

Population

Approximately 25 to 35 million Kurds live within the Kurdistan region. About 20%

of Turkey's population, 7-10% of Syria's population, and 15-20% of Iraq's population are

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[102] Jan Klabbers, "D. Raicˇ, Statehood and the Law of Self-Determination," *International Journal On Minority & Group Rights* 10, no. 2 (June 2003): 163-169. *Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost* (accessed April 18, 2017).

Kurdish according to BBC estimates.[103] Though some nomadic tribes remain, most Kurds live sedentary lives within defined tribal territory or in urban areas. Given that the largest Kurdish populations are found in Turkey and Iraq, secession would be most successful out of these states: a larger population offers more human power and resources for a nascent state.

Government

Without a government, there is no state, only lawlessness. Though there is no interregional Kurdish government, the Kurds of Iraq have successfully formed their own quasi-state, complete with a parliamentary government, a constitution, a military, and an economy. The Kurds in neighboring states have their respective political parties and paramilitary organizations (the YPG and PKK, for instance), but lack regional jurisdiction. It would be easiest, in theory, to expand upon what already exists, transposing the constitution and structure of Iraqi Kurdistan's government across the entirety of a new Kurdish state. But theory and actuality are rarely aligned; Iraqi Kurdistan's government has slowly slid away from its democratic roots over the past years, becoming increasingly insular and based in familial ties: Mustafa Barzani has always played favoritism with tribal allies and family members with the KDP's hierarchy, which caused the initial schism between the KDP and PUK.[104] The KDP's consolidated power and undemocratic tendencies will surely be an obstacle to regional collaboration; No Syrian, Turkish, or Iranian Kurd would want an Iraqi tribe to dictate their decisions. The greatest question to Kurdish statehood, "who speaks for the Kurds?", remains unanswered.

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[103] "Who are the Kurds?," *BBC* (Mar 14, 2016, accessed Apr 18, 2017). <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29702440>

[104] "Iraq's Kurds focus on autonomy," *BBC* (Sept 21, 2013, accessed Mar 27, 2017). <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24181951>

Nevertheless, when considering these three points, it seems that Iraqi Kurdistan would be the most effective location to create a new state. With the second largest Kurdish population and an already established government, Iraqi Kurdistan has functioned as its own state within the failing country for years. However, though meets the minimal empirical requirements for statehood, there is a fourth trait, the juridical aspect of statehood that must be taken into consideration.

International recognition

While empirical statehood defines itself based off the logistical requirements of government, territory and population, juridical statehood requires a country to be a participant in the international community and externally recognized to be a state. This juridical prerequisite is summed simply in the Constitutive theory of statehood: "a state is a subject of international law if, and only if, it is recognized as sovereign by other states" and conversely, "recognized nations do not have to respect international law in their dealings with them."[105] International law serves as a deterrent to reconquest: dozens of treatises, resolutions and declarations protect the rights of states.[106] But one must be recognized as a state to enjoy the protections these offer. The laws of the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, the European Union, or any other supranational institution do not apply to outsiders.

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[105] Christoforos Ioannidis, "Are the Conditions of Statehood Sufficient? An Argument in Favour of Popular Sovereignty as an Additional Condition of Statehood," *Jurisprudencija* vol 21, no. 4: 974-987, *Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost,* (accessed April 24, 2016), 975.

[106] Tanisha M. Fazal, and Ryan D. Griffiths, "Membership Has Its Privileges: The Changing Benefits of Statehood," *International Studies Review* 16, no. 1 (March 2014): 79-106, *Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost* (accessed April 18, 2017), 80.

International Precedents

Though the Kurds meet the empirical standards of statehood (at least in Iraq), they lack external recognition. If the Kurds seek statehood, then their path requires international legal intervention. But how can they obtain it? To predict the future for the Kurds, one must examine precedents in international law. Two of the most recent, successful bids for independence came out of Kosovo and South Sudan, in 2008 and 2011 respectively. Like Kurdistan, both cases were born out of ethnic conflict within their parent states, but the ways in which they have achieved statehood, and their degrees of success in governing afterwards vary drastically.

The Case of Kosovo

Formerly an autonomous region within Serbia, Kosovo's bids for independence dates back as early as the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia, where it demanded the right to become republic within the Federation. Though it eventually became an autonomous province within Serbia, it never received full republic status, and its autonomy was later revoked by President Slobodan Milosevic in 1989 due to rising racial tensions between Serbs and Kosovan Albanians.[107] These tensions broke into outright violence in the mid-1990s as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) began attacking Serbian officials and police.[108] As the violence escalated and threatened to spill into neighboring states, the international community was forced to respond, first with a UNSC resolution condemning the violence, then NATO intervention when the fighting worsened in 1999.[109] A UN civil mission was established that same year, the Kosovo Protection Force (KFOR), and UNSC Resolution

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[107] James Ker-Lindsay, *Kosovo: The Path to Contested Statehood in the Balkans*, (London, US: I.B.Tauris, 2009), *ProQuest ebrary* (Accessed March 24, 2017), 10.
[108] Ker-Lindsay, 11.
[109] Ker-Lindsay, 14.

1244 established the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo (UNMIK) to "create the conditions under which the people of Kosovo can enjoy substantial autonomy within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and which will provide transitional administration while establishing and overseeing the development of provisional democratic self-governing institutions to ensure the conditions for a peaceful and normal life for all inhabitants of Kosovo."[110] Though the resolution stated that the ultimate goal of UNMIK was to create a 'final settlement' for the region, it gave no indication what that would mean, nor did it give a deadline to resolve the issue.

Negotiations continued with little success over the course of the 2000s. International interest shifted away from Kosovo to the Middle East; though the UN remained active in Kosovo, reluctance to address the option of statehood dragged out the process. The 'Standards Before States' policy was proposed as a way of appeasing Kosovan separatists while still delaying the decision; under it, Kosovo would have to improve its policies in the following areas before statehood could be broached;

> (1) the existence of effective, representative and functioning democratic institutions; (2) enforcement of the rule of law; (3) freedom of movement; (4) sustainable return of refugees and displaced persons, and respect for the rights of communities; (5) creation of a sound basis for a market economy; (6) fair enforcement of property rights; (7) normalized dialogue with Belgrade; and (8) transformation of the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC) in line with its mandate.[111]

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[110] Ker-Lindsay, 16.
[111] Ker-Lindsay, 19.

The policies were meant to be reviewed in 2005, but riots broke out in March 2004, the worst

ethnic violence since the 1999 agreement. The riots completely undermined KFOR and

UNMIK's authority in the region and reminded the international community that the ethnic

rifts in Kosovo were nowhere near close to mending. A renewed sense of urgency over

Kosovo's final status developed upon realization that the international community could not

forestall indefinitely. And so, despite a lack of progress on the eight standards, the UNSC

approved the process to determine Kosovo's final status in 2005. The Contact Group –

Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Russia and the United States- set the parameters of

negotiation: direct control would not be returned to Belgrade, Kosovo would not be

partitioned nor united to any other state.[112]

Negotiations renewed, with Martti Ahtisaari, the former president of Finland,

directing the agreements. Ahtisaari himself strongly supported Kosovo's independence, and

clearly directed discussions in favor of independence, negotiating borders, minority rights,

and decentralization.[113] "Meanwhile, at a meeting in January 2006, the Contact Group further

clarified their principles by adding a provision that any settlement must be acceptable to the

people of Kosovo – thereby seeming to confirm, in Ahtisaari's view, the inevitability of

independence."[114] However, Belgrade was unwilling to cede anything more than internal

autonomy, and Kosovo would not accept anything less than statehood. For years,

negotiations continued with zero progress, until Kosovo tired of waiting for approval. On

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[112] Ker-Lindsay, 103.
[113] Ker-Lindsay, 103.
[114] Ker-Lindsay, 103.

February 17, 2008, following a referendum, the Republic of Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia.

The decision was made unilaterally, causing an immediate uproar within the region. Serbia, outraged by the move, turned to support from the international community to invalidate the claim, sponsoring resolution 63/3 in the General Assembly to request an advisory opinion from the ICJ on whether the declaration violated international law. Ultimately, ICJ's 2010 ruling was in favor of Kosovo. Unilateral declarations, the ICJ deemed, were permissible under international law, with some exceptions. In preceding cases, the ICJ denied the legitimacy of such declarations when there was a preceding UNSC resolution that ceded the final status determination to the council itself.[115] In the case of Kosovo, resolution 1244 did not include a framework for the province's final status, nor did it reserve the final status for UNSC discussion alone.[116] It was therefore a legitimate claim.

In theory, Kurdistan could follow suit, unilaterally declaring independence. Like Kosovo, there are no resolutions in place reserving their final status for UNSC jurisdiction. However, the odds of any of these states taking their Kurdish separatists to court are slim, considering that all previous calls for Kurdish independence have been met with violence on the part of the states. And even if the ICJ offered an advisory opinion in favor of the Kurds, the court's decision is non-binding. There is no institution to enforce it. Which brings up the inherent challenge for Kurdistan: its bids for independence lack external sympathy. Before

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[115] "Accordance With International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Respect to Kosovo," *International Court of Justice* (Jul 22, 2010, accessed Apr 1 2017), < http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/141/15987.pdf> 38.
[116] "Accordance With International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Respect to Kosovo."

Kosovo ever obtained independence, there was a UN peacekeeping mission, NATO

intervention, and a slew of peace talks. Kosovo was on the international community's radar

long before it became a state. The final status of Kurdistan, however, has been largely

ignored by the international community since the Treaty of Sevres. Though the Kurds are

often discussed in human rights resolutions, condemning their mistreatment, their

independence has never been broached.

Additionally, while Kosovo's break from Serbia was based in ethnic tension, the

Albanians of Kosovo lack the tribal dynamics of the Kurdish people. The Kurds are a

heterogenous group, divided along tribal lines. Kosovo, on the other hand, is relatively

homogenous. There are no tribal lines to divide the Albanians internally: all ethnic tension

was between nations, rather than within nations.

The Case of South Sudan

South Sudan's case brings the question of self-determination to a regional, rather than

international level. Whereas Kosovo's independence was garnered through UN intervention,

permissiveness, and finally ICJ favor, Sudan's was negotiated through an internationally

monitored referendum backed by the African Union's support.[117] Since its creation in 1956,

Sudan has been ethnically and religiously divided between Arab Muslims in the north and

black Christians in the south.[118] Though South Sudan enjoyed a brief autonomous stint

during the 1970s and 80s (after a decades long civil war fighting for the opportunity), it was

entirely revoked during President's Nimeiri's regime in 1983. Since then, political tension

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[117] Douglas H. Johnson, "New Sudan or South Sudan? The Multiple Meanings of Self-Determination in Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement," *Civil Wars* 15, no. 2 (June 2013): 141-156, *History Reference Center, EBSCOhost* (accessed March 27, 2017), 141.
[118] "South Sudan referendum: 99% vote for independence," *BBC* (Jan 30, 2011, accessed Apr 2, 2017). <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-12317927>

escalated into another full-scale civil war between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and the northern government.[119] Though several cease fires were proposed, but never fully implemented, hope for a lasting peace came in 2002 with the Machakos Peace talks, hosted by Kenya between the two factions. The talks eventually led to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 (CPA), which created a power-sharing state, permitted southern autonomy, and reserved the right for the South to have a referendum for independence in six years. Though peace between the two factions remained uneasy throughout the remainder of the decade, interrupted by sporadic violence over borders and control of Sudan's oil resources, the agreement was upheld and South Sudan held its referendum on January 9th.[120] With 99% in favor out of a near perfect voter turnout, the South seceded.

Despite initial successes, South Sudan has since devolved into a state riddled by civil war. The conflict rose out of ethnic divisions exacerbated by political patronage systems, which consolidated and factionalized tribal power bases.[121] Tribal ties also divided the military; many leaders felt a greater attachment to their kin or to militias than to the government itself. Couple this with a centralizing government that drew power away from local and state institutions and into the hands of a handful of leaders, and a presidential system that grants vast control of the executive branch and its composition to a single authority figure, and South Sudan was bound to collapse.[122]

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[119] "South Sudan profile – Timeline," *BBC* (Feb 24, 2017, accessed Apr 3, 2017). <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14019202>
[120] "South Sudan profile – Timeline."
[121] Jenik Radon, and Sarah Logan, "South Sudan: Governance Arrangements, War, and Peace," *Journal Of International Affairs* 68, no. 1 (Fall/Winter2014 2014): 149-167, *Business Source Premier, EBSCOhost* (accessed April 3, 2017), 151.
[122] Radon, 154-155.

Kurdistan faces this same risk; given the importance of tribal politics across the region, the risk of fracturing is high. South Sudan's national unity was driven solely by the desire for independence; once it was obtained, nationalism fragmented and faded. If the Kurds want to create a successful state, they must find a way to extend their nationalistic passion beyond that threshold; it is possible that external hostility would spur the Kurds to remain united against the threats of conquest by their parent states, but they must also work to create strong institutions to circumvent centralizing and factionalizing politics. Creating a stronger, decentralized government, with perhaps a parliamentary system rather than a presidential system (the former limits the executive branch's powers more than the latter), will be important to assure that the mistakes of South Sudan are not repeated.

The lesson to take away from both Kosovo and South Sudan is that neither of these independence movements came to the international community's attention until they became an international concern. Only when violence and unrest threatened to destabilize the Balkan region did the United Nations intervene. Given the ongoing Syrian civil war and the instability wrought by the Islamic State, it is possible that that the chaos in the Middle East will grow too great to ignore. But how far must the suffering go before the crisis is sufficiently severe? The international community turned a blind eye to Saddam Hussein's Al-Anfal campaign, and it has collectively dragged its feet in responding to the Syrian Civil war. It is plausible that Kosovo garnered international support faster than Kurdistan simply because of its geopolitical context: the conflict arose in Europe's backyard. Conflicts arising in the Balkans pose a great concern to the major international players, whereas those in the Middle East are removed. There is no telling what will be the final straw that pushes the

United Nations to action, but if Turkey's politically charged decision to attack the Kurds across the border is any indication, the threat of spillover is on the rise.

Opportunities for Intervention: American and Russian Support

Perhaps the greater challenge for the Kurds is finding regional support. Though both Kosovo and Sudan became international concerns, it was regional parties that intervened, NATO and European states in Kosovo, Kenya and the African Union in Sudan. The Kurds have no sympathetic allies in the Middle East. (Israel, perhaps, but Israel's voice has no influence in the Arab states). So, for the Kurds to gain their independence, they would need recognition from a great power, ideally either Russia or the United States, both of whom have been Kurdish allies in the past and are presently involved in the ongoing Syrian and Iraqi crises.

The United States has been a fair-weather friend to the Kurds throughout their history, supporting Kurdish separatist movements when it benefits U.S. goals in the Middle East. Perhaps the most infamous case was during the First Gulf War, where the United States supported KDP insurrection to weaken Iraq from within. In recent times, the United States has aided the Kurds with air strikes, intelligence and training to bolster the Kurdish line of defense in Iraq against ISIL.

But the United States has never thrown its support wholly behind the Kurds: America abandoned the Kurds once Iraq withdrew from Kuwait, leaving them exposed to Saddam Hussein's Al-Anfal campaign of retaliation. In the present context, the United States must balance its support of the Peshmerga in Iraq and the YPG in Syria with its allegiance to regional allies. Giving weapons to the Kurds would be seen by the Shia-led Iraqi government as a betrayal, especially once those weapons are turned against the Iraqi regime in a

declaration of independence.[123] Additionally, any Kurdish declaration of independence is sure to outrage Turkey, another core ally and fellow NATO Member. Unwilling to tread on the toes of its existing allies, it is unlikely that the United States will recognize a Kurdish state.

A politically unified Iraq, therefore, is the end goal of the United States, to which the United States will continue to favor the Iraqi army over the Kurdish Peshmerga.[124] However, neither the split parliament in Baghdad nor the split warfront in the North are indicative of unity: "fighting against the group [ISIL] has been hindered by a lack of coordination with the competing forces, with Iraqi government forces and their allied militias conducting a separate campaign to the one being carried out by the Peshmerga."[125] Given the gridlock between the two factions, there is little hope for unity or cooperation, in spite of the U.S.'s best wishes. But supporting Kurdistan over Iraq could turn the battlefield division between the two into a two-front war for the Kurds and U.S. against both the Iraqi government and ISIL.

Russian opinion on the Kurds is as mired in conflicting regional goals as the U.S. Though Russia once supported the Kurds in the Republic of Mahabad, the Russians are still allies of the Assad regime in Syria. But at the same time, the Russian military has cooperated with the YPG to secure the border regions between Turkey and Syria, cutting off escape routes for other anti-Assad rebel groups. As Russian bombs fragment rebel lines, the YPG

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[123] Berman, Lazar. "The Status of Western Military Aid to Kurdish Peshmerga Forces." Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Accessed 14 April 2016. < http://jcpa.org/article/the-status-of-western-military-aid-to-kurdish-peshmerga-forces/>
[124] Berman.
[125] Osama Bin Javaid, "Kurds seek help in fight against ISIL in Iraq," *Al Jazeera* (18 Dec 2015, accessed 16 April 2016). < http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/Kurds-seek-fight-isil-iraq-151218142749036.html>

has conquered territory controlled by prior rebel groups.[126] In addition, Russian has

suggested that Kurdish autonomy should be respected in the final solution of the civil war,

even including a provision for it in the draft constitution in January at the Astana talks.[127] But

support for Kurdish rebel forces against a common foe does not mean support for statehood.

Russia's support is clearly for an autonomous region within the state, not an independent

country. Between wanting to support its Syrian ally and not wanting to agitate Chechen

separatists within their own state, the Russians are unlikely to propose anything so bold.

Alternatives to statehood?

Since the international community remains apathetic and reluctant to acknowledge a

Kurdish state, perhaps a more plausible solution for Kurdish independence is autonomy

rather than secession. Both the United States and Russia seem permissive to the idea: the

Russians have openly suggested it at peace talks with the Syrian regime, and supporting

official autonomy in Iraq would balance U.S. relations with both Iraq and its Kurds. Whether

either state is willing to relinquish autonomy to the Kurds is an entirely different matter. Both

states have promised and then backed down from permitting Kurdish autonomy before. And

it remains to be seen if Iraqi Kurdistan is willing to settle for autonomy alone after long

pursuing statehood. A referendum within the region is slated for later in 2017 to determine

whether to pursue total independence.[128] Given their history, an affirmative vote is highly

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[126] Darren Butler, "Kurds' advance in Syria divides U.S. and Turkey as Russia bombs," *Reuters* (Feb 17, 2016, accessed Apr 11, 2017). <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds-idUSKCN0VQ1FR>

[127] "Why did Russia offer autonomy for Syria's Kurds?,"*Al-Monitor* (Jan 29, 2017, accessed Apr 1, 2017). <http://al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/russia-offer-kurds-syria-autonomy-turkey-islamic-state.html>

[128] Maher Chmaytelli, "Kurds 're-energize' independence referendum plan for post-jihadist Iraq," *Reuters* (Apr 6, 2017, accessed Apr 18, 2017). <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-idUSKBN17817Q>

likely. The Kurds have struggled for secession for a century; stopping short of their goal, especially after successful state-building in Iraq, would be a defeat.

Conclusion

The Kurds have a right to their own state, at the very least out of the necessity to protect their own human rights. Their secessionist movements are not just a matter of politics, but a matter of justice; without the protection of state sovereignty, they have no protection for even the most basic human rights. Their nationality is born out of opposition; the Kurds tend to define themselves more\ by what they are not than by what unites them. A century of human rights and political rights violations has only reinforced this mentality. As a people, the Kurds are united by their shared sense of suffering at the hands of their parent states, but if the case of South Sudan is any warning, a common foe is not a strong enough foundation to build a state upon. Tribal politics, patronage systems, language differences, and other divisions amidst the Kurdish people pose a risk to the stability of a future Kurdistan.

Beyond internal differences, the Kurds will also have to face external threats should they attempt to secede. Though the Kurds might have the makings of an empirical state, without the recognition of international community, their claims for independence will be considered illegitimate. Even that might not be enough to protect the Kurds; international law has no hard power to enforce it. And the neighboring states of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran have every reason to prevent Kurdish secession. Even if only one state's Kurds seceded, there would be a fear that Kurdish revolutionary fervor would spread to the Kurds within the other countries as well. This would likely spur the other three states to intervene and stop the separatist movement by any means necessary. The Kurds need an ally to support their bid for independence, but no major actors in the region are willing to back their cause just yet.

"Yet" is the operative word, though. Today is not the day for an independent Kurdistan, but tomorrow might be. Given the instability caused by the Syrian Civil War and Iraq's collapse, the future of the Kurds is uncertain. As outside powers rely more and more heavily on Kurdish forces in the fight against the Islamic State and against other factions in the conflict, the Kurds' power in the region will grow. If they can set aside tribal and political differences and unite under a single banner, an independent Kurdistan may yet rise out of the ashes of these failing states.

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