

Introduction

The Kurds and the Kurdish Question in the Middle East

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In the past decade, the Kurdish question has re-established itself at the heart of the regional political debates at a time when the Middle East is once again engulfed in conflict and violence. On numerous occasions during the second half of the twentieth century, Kurdish nationalism has managed to generate and maintain strong appeal amongst Kurdish populations in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria, but these states have perceived Kurdish ambitions as a threat to their national security and regional stability. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Kurdish political activism has reached a new height with Kurdish movements in Iraq, Turkey and Syria establishing themselves as important political actors in the domestic politics of these states. The consolidation of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq in 2005 and the establishment of a Kurdish de facto autonomous region within Syria in 2012 have turned the Kurds into actors capable of influencing regional political developments, and consequently enabled them to forge stronger relations with the international forces involved in the region. The rise of the pro-Kurdish movement in Turkish politics in the past two decades, especially its strong electoral performance in a number of elections since 2015, has placed the Kurds at the heart of the political developments in Turkey, too.

This volume examines the Kurdish question as a deep-rooted and complex transnational issue. It brings together chapters that analyse the Kurds and Kurdistan from the medieval period to the present and takes a broad and multidisciplinary approach to events in the Kurdish regions in the Middle East. The multidisciplinary approach enables us to delineate and elaborate on the complexities of the social, political, economic and cultural forces and features pertaining to Kurds and Kurdistan and examine these forces and features from a number of innovative and critical perspectives. A brief

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discussion of the evolution of the Kurdish question is needed to highlight the main issues and developments that the volume addresses.

The Kurds and Kurdistan in the Age of Empires

In the eleventh century, Mahmud al-Kashgari – a geographer from Kashgar in the Kara-Khanid Khanate – produced a stylized map of what he titled ‘States of the East’, which built-in, along with all the ‘races’ acknowledged in the East, the land of the Kurds. This perhaps is the first map to include Kurdistan (O’Shea, 2004). During the tenth and eleventh centuries, whilst part of the Arab caliphate (seventh to eleventh centuries), a number of Kurdish dynasties – the Shaddadids (951–1174, Transcaucasia), Hasanwaydhids (959–1095, Dinawar), Marwanids (990–1096, Diyarbakir) and Annazids (991–1117, Hulwan) – took control of their local matters, but were wiped out by the invasions of the Seljuk Turks in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Hassanpour, 1992). In the year 1150, the Seljuk sultan Sanjar created the province of Kurdistan, with the town of Bahar as its capital, and it comprised areas that are located in the Kurdish regions of contemporary Iraq and Iran (Kendal, 1996). Yet it was not until the sixteenth century that the geographical expression Kurdistan came into common usage to denote a system of Kurdish fiefs generally, and not merely the Seljuk-designated province.

After the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, except for Kelhor, Erdelan, Baban, Şehrizar and Mukri, which had either opted to stay independent of both the Safavid and the Ottoman empires or continued to recognise the former’s suzerainty, the rest of the existing Kurdish principalities were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. The newly conquered province of Diyarbekir (1515) hosted all of the acquired Kurdish chiefdoms in return for their acknowledgement of Ottoman sovereignty. Since then, a double dynamic pushing simultaneously towards fragmentation and unification began to determine the evolution of Kurdish space and the fate of Kurdish society. This dual process is certainly not new. As Boris James (2014) has suggested in his research, Kurds found themselves trapped by inter-imperial conflicts already during the medieval period, but their survival as a distinct group has also been guaranteed by their inter-imperial location. As one can feel it through Ehmed-ê Xani’s epopee *Mem û Zîn*, published in 1695, the division of Kurdistan between the Persian and Ottoman empires has certainly created frustration among some segments of the Kurdish elite; however, one should also recognize that it did not hinder fluid trans-border relations among the Kurds. The Kurdish prince (*mir*) Sharaf Khan (1543–1603), for instance, had

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a problem with having a dual allegiance towards the power-holders in Istanbul and in Tehran in order to exert a cross-border influence on 'his' subjects.

The formalization of the Kurdish principalities occurred as a result of Sultan Selim I (1470–1520) consenting to the support of the predominantly Sunni Kurdish chiefs and integrating the Kurdish principalities in eastern Anatolia. The Battle of Chaldiran also determined the boundary between the Ottoman and Persian empires and it was officially recognized with the signing of the Treaty of Zuhab (1693) and – despite disputes and invasions – it formally persisted until 1914. Between the early sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the two Ottoman provinces that encompassed almost all of Kurdistan, Diyarbekir and Erzurum were economically burgeoning areas and constituted important sources of income for the Ottoman central treasury (Yadirgi, 2017).

The nineteenth century was a time of massive change in Kurdistan. In the first half of this century, the age-old Kurdish administrative structures established in the early sixteenth century were abolished as a result of the centralization and Westernization policies unleashed by the reforms of Sultan Mahmut II and continued by subsequent Ottoman reformers. The successor of Sultan Selim III (1761–1808), Mahmut II (r. 1789–1807), recognized that in order to rescue the ramshackle empire from further demise or collapse, he would have to reform its institutions. The centralist reforms implemented by Mahmut II and the succeeding Ottoman rulers entailed the suppression of the local notables all over the empire and occasioned the destruction of the Kurdish emirates. Local Kurdish hereditary rulers were removed, and the Kurdish territories were brought under direct Ottoman control. In other words, the toppling of the Kurdish polities and the suppression of the fiscal and landed power of the Kurdish notables went hand in hand. With the dissolution of Kurdish emirates, their constituent parts, tribal confederations and tribes (*aşirets*) became the most important political and social components in Kurdistan.

During the centralization and Westernization period, the Ottoman Empire felt one of the greatest threats from its ambitious northern neighbour, Russia, which penetrated eastern Anatolia as far as Erzurum in 1829. Kars, Erzurum and Bayazid were all returned to the Ottomans under the terms of the Treaty of Edirne (1829), but the war had struck an entirely new note of danger as not only had the Ottoman Armenians assisted the Russian capture of Kars, but Muslim Kurdish tribes had also provided a regiment against the sultan. Such threats from Russia and the novel alliances between

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the Kurds and the Russians had also been influential in informing the policies of the Hamidian period.

The politically integrated Kurdish rulers were neither autonomous nor did they request autonomy from the central state, because the nature and the maintenance of their power and wealth were grounded in the support provided by the Ottoman state. This helps explain why, in contrast to the Kurds in the Ottoman metropolis who were largely in support of the 1908 Revolution, the clientele Kurdish elite in Kurdistan were very hostile to it (McDowall, 2004: 95–6). Following the First World War, when the map of the Middle East was being redrawn, these schisms within the Kurdish society prevented the emergence of a leadership that could fill a role akin to that held by the Hashemite emirs in the Hejaz in the emergence of the Arab national movement and the development of Arab nationalism during and after the Great War.

The Fragmentation of Kurdistan and Kurdish Responses in the 1920s and 1930s

The political settlement in the Middle East after the First World War resulted in the division of Kurdistan between the states of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. The Kurds did not accept the new status quo, and several Kurdish revolts took place during the 1920s but despite mobilizing a significant section of Kurdish society, they did not succeed in reversing the settlement that left Kurds as marginalized minorities in these states. In comparison with this inter-imperial past, the second division of Kurdistan after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire had much more disruptive effects. Moreover, the tearing apart of Kurdish regions between Turkey and newly created Syria and Iraq coincided with a period during which Reza Khan ascended to power in Iran (1921). Henceforth, the Kurds had to face not only exclusive nationalisms and repressive states but also militarized inter-state borders. While previously they were submitted to only two central authorities, now they depended on four distinct capitals, were obliged to learn one of the exclusive national languages and, more importantly, evolve in sharply contrasting political cultures, with different official ideologies, national narratives or regional and international alignments. The preservation of the Arabic scripts in Iran, Iraq and Syria, the so-called Linguistic Revolution of 1928 which Latinized the Turkish scripts and Stalin's decision to impose the Cyrillic alphabet to the national groups that did not have their own

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historical alphabet, had also tremendously hindered intra-Kurdish communication in the subsequent decades.

Remarkably, however, this fragmentation has also radicalized Kurdish consciousness and motivated them to form one single entity, distinct from the Arabs, Persians and Turks. The trans-border affiliations have maintained themselves despite the heavy repression of states and many of the Kurdish uprisings gained a regional dimension. From the 1920s onwards, a common cartographic imaginary, which has been studied by the late Maria O'Shea (2004), symbolically unified the divided nation. A commonly accepted national flag was adopted by different Kurdish organizations and intellectuals, before the common national anthem, *Ey Reqib* ('You! Adversary!'), which became the official anthem of the Mahabad Republic (1946, Iran). Similarly, a largely shared historical narrative tracing the origins of the Kurds to the Median Empire, presenting the nineteenth-century Kurdish revolts as genuine expressions of Kurdish nationalist ambitions and describing the second division of Kurdistan as the darkest period of the nation to be overcome, has emerged and spread itself among the Kurdish intelligentsia. This self-awareness did of course not mean that the Kurdish elites held back from integrating into the Iranian, Turkish, Iraqi or Syrian political and administrative bodies or refused to take any opportunity of co-optation that could appear. But a cross-border national 'reservoir' of myths, symbols and plea was there, ready-made for the future mobilization process.

Pan-Kurdish political and cultural activities during the 1920s and 1930s were mainly carried out in Syria and Lebanon and organized by the Kurdish intellectuals exiled from Turkey. These Kurdish intellectuals were involved in the establishment of the Kurdish nationalist organization Xoybûn (Being Oneself) in 1927, which led the Ararat Rebellion (McDowall, 2004: 203–5). Important work on the grammatical development and standardization of the Kurmanji Kurdish was also produced during the 1930s and 1940s. In 1943 in Iraq, Mustafa Barzani organized a revolt that lasted until 1945 and was suppressed with the help of the British air force. In the mid-1940s, Iran became the centre of Kurdish political developments, which were led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (PDK-Iran), established on 16 August 1945 (Vali, 2011: 25). One of the main developments that the PDK-Iran initiated was the formation of a Kurdish republic in Mahabad on 22 January 1946. It came about as a result of the Soviet occupation of northern Iran during World War II and continued its existence for almost a year. On 15 December 1946, Iranian troops entered Mahabad and recaptured the city from the Kurdish forces.

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Kurdistan after World War II

In Iraq during the 1950s, Kurdish nationalist activities continued underground but there was an instant revival soon after the overthrow of the monarchy by General Abd al-Karim Qasim in a coup d'état on 14 July 1958. Mustafa Barzani returned to Iraq and subsequently established himself as a key figure in Kurdish struggle and became the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK). The early years of Qasim's rule witnessed growing Kurdish cultural and political activism but in 1961 he adopted repressive policies towards political activities of the Kurdish movement. On 9 September 1961, armed conflict broke out between the Iraqi army and the Kurdish forces. In February 1964 a ceasefire was agreed that lasted until 1965 when the second round of armed conflict began. After the Ba'athist coup in 1968, the conflict between the Kurdish forces and the Iraqi army continued until secret negotiations resulted in an autonomy agreement on 11 March 1970.

The implementation of the agreement was attempted but the Iraqi government opposed the key Kurdish demand of the inclusion of the Kirkuk governorate within the Kurdish autonomous region. A new autonomy agreement with reduced terms was proposed on 11 March 1974, which was refused by the Kurdish side, leading to the resumption of armed conflict soon after. The Kurdish forces were unable to prevent the advance of the Iraqi army and the Kurdish position was further weakened by Iran's sudden end of its military support following the signing of the Algiers Agreement between Iraq and Iran. On 18 March 1975, the PDK decided to end the insurgency and retreat its forces to Iran.

The defeat of the Kurdish rebellion spelt disaster for the Kurdish movement in Iraq, with its fragmentation resulting in intra-Kurdish conflict. The section of the PDK's leadership in favour of the continuation of resistance severed their ties with the party and established new political organizations, including the leftist Komala (Organization), led by Nawshirwan Mustafa, and the Kurdistan Socialist Movement (KSM), led by Ali Askari. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which was established on 1 June 1975 in Damascus under the leadership of Jalal Talabani, united these groups that broke away from the PDK. From May 1976 onwards, the PDK began to re-establish its presence in Iraqi Kurdistan under PDK-Provisional Leadership. The initial tense relations that existed between the PDK and the PUK soon led to the outbreak of violence in the summer of 1976.

The liberalization of Turkey's political system during the late 1940s and 1950s, the rise of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq and the emergence

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of a new generation of politically active Kurdish activists influenced the politicization of the Kurds in Turkey during the 1960s. The second half of the 1960s is characterized by the evolution of Kurdish activism towards a more organized form. The reinvigoration of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq had a direct bearing on this development. This is evidenced by the establishment of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey (TKDP), which advocated a similar program as the PDK in Iraq and marked 'a new stage in the autonomisation of the Kurdish movement in terms of the worker and student movements' (Bozarslan, 1992: 98–9). In 1967 and 1968, during the 'meetings of the East' (*Doğu Mitingleri*), Kurdish political demands were publicly expressed, and these meetings culminated in the emergence of the Revolutionary Cultural Hearths of the East (DDKO) in 1969 (Gunes, 2012: 66–71). During the mid-1970s numerous Kurdish left-wing groups or political parties were established.

The new generation of Kurdish intelligentsia that began to dominate Kurdish politics after the Second World War had a very different sociological profile than the Kurdish intelligentsia of the 1920s. The 1920s Kurdish non-religious elite had basically the same education as the Arab or Turkish Ottoman intelligentsia, advocated a Western-oriented nationalism and presented the Kurdish struggle as the struggle of the Kurds for civilization. In contrast, the post-WWII intelligentsia was drawn from the broad masses and except for the few, had mainly plebian origins. It was not a surprise therefore that the new Kurdish militancy adopted left-wing discourses and symbols. It used Marxism–Leninism to explain the conditions in which Kurds found themselves and to conceptualize Kurdish self-determination in a way that did not deviate from internationalism and attempts at ending the class oppression that the rule of the oppressor Iranian, Turkish, Iraqi and Syrian nation-states also entailed.

An attempt to revive the Kurdish movement in Iran was made during the mid-1960s but without much success. However, as the protests in Iran intensified in 1978, Kurdish forces established control in the main towns of the region. Kurdish resistance continued, but in the summer of 1982, the Iranian army began a large-scale assault against the Kurdish-held territories and by the end of 1983 almost all of them had been captured. In total 10,000 Kurds died in the conflict during the late 1970s and early 1980s as a result of the fighting between the Kurdish forces and Iranian army and as a result of the latter's summary executions of Kurdish civilians and political activists.

The Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) offered Iraqi Kurdish parties more room for manoeuvre and provided the impetus in their attempts to re-establish

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their presence in Iraqi Kurdistan. The PDK leadership was based in Iran and began to receive military aid and logistical support from the Iranian state. During the 1980s, the PUK managed to establish a strong support base in the Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk governorates. The PDK continued to receive military support and money from Iran during 1979 and the early 1980s. The PUK was initially allied with Syria, then signed a ceasefire agreement with the Iraqi government in October 1983. In October 1986, the PUK began to form an alliance with Iran and develop closer ties with the PDK.

However, during the mid-1980s, the Iraqi state intensified its campaign to bring Kurdish-held areas under its control and adopted an Arabization policy and initiated the Anfal campaign, which was implemented between February and September 1988 and involved chemical attacks targeting Kurdish civilians, destruction of the traditional rural economy and infrastructure, forced displacement of rural Kurdish communities and summary executions and forced disappearances. In total 4,000 villages were destroyed, and 182,000 people killed, according to Kurdish sources. According to the estimates of Human Rights Watch, as many as 100,000 people, many of them women and children, lost their lives, with the chemical attack on the town of Halabja on 16 March 1988 alone killing 5,000 Kurdish civilians (Human Rights Watch, 1993: xiv).

Hence, the 1980s seemed like the 'darkest period' in Kurdish history. In addition to the tens of thousands of victims, the suppression of the Kurdish movements in Iran and Turkey cost the lives of tens of thousands of other Kurdish fighters and civilians during this decade. At that moment in history, one could arguably doubt the very chances of the Kurds surviving as a national community. Remarkably, however, since this period of Kurdish history, there has been a marked improvement in the fortunes of the Kurdish communities.

The Revival of the Kurdish National Movements

The process of almost uninterrupted radicalization that began with the Barzani uprising in 1961 took a new dimension with the launching of a second rebellion in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1975, the formation of the Kurdish national movement in Turkey during the mid-1970s and the mass-mobilizations and guerrilla warfare in the Iranian Kurdistan in 1978–9. With these developments, Kurdistan entered a highly militarized process and integrated into a broader Middle Eastern environment marked by inter-

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state or civil wars. The Syrian Kurds have also been engaged in this process since the mid-1970s through their mobilization for different Kurdish movements. This overall militarization allowed the Kurdish movements to access the resources of violence such as arms and shelter in one of the regional countries but also provoked internal conflicts which remained particularly traumatic throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Iraq's unexpected invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the international condemnation and the Gulf War that followed it brought further instability to the region. After the US forces succeeded in expelling the Iraqi army from Kuwait in February 1991, Kurds in the north and Shias in the south were encouraged to rise against Saddam's rule. An uprising on 1 March 1991 in Iraq's south soon spread to central and northern Iraq. On 5 March 1991, a popular uprising (*raparin* in Sorani Kurdish) in the town of Ranya, Sulaymaniyah Governorate, took place and culminated in Kurdish peshmerga ('those who face death') fighters taking control of the town. In the following day, this popular uprising spread to the main cities of the region, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. However, shortly afterwards, Iraqi military regrouped and began suppressing the uprising, which resulted in a massive exodus of Kurds in March/April 1991. Turkey refused to take in the Kurdish civilians and in order to prevent a humanitarian disaster on 5 April 1991, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 688 and a 'no-fly zone' in Iraq's north and south began to be enforced by the US and the UK. This action proved to be a significant development in the history of the Kurds of Iraq and enabled them to establish their de facto autonomy in 1991. The subsequent consolidation of Kurdish autonomy was not straightforward and the mid-1990s witnessed a violent conflict between PDK and PUK military forces, and two separate Kurdish administrations came into being, with the PDK controlling the Dohuk and Erbil governorates, and the PUK controlling the Sulaymaniyah governorate.

The 1980s and 1990s were a highly intense period of Kurdish political activities in Turkey. On 15 August 1984, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) embarked on its guerrilla war and during the late 1980s and early 1990s, it managed to gather popular support from the Kurds and increased its influence in Kurdish communities significantly. At the height of its power in the early 1990s, it had supporters and sympathizers numbering several million drawn from all parts of Kurdish-majority regions and among the Kurdish diaspora communities in Europe (Gunes, 2012: 101). Popular support for the PKK began to be demonstrated in the spring of 1991 and 1992 when large numbers of Kurds took part in popular uprisings, known as *serhildan*, across

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Kurdish towns and cities in the south-east of Turkey. The PKK-led Kurdish rebellion is the longest in the history of the Kurds in Turkey. In addition to the PKK, Kurdish political demands have also been articulated through legal channels in Turkey by political parties that have a predominant Kurdish base and advocate a pro-Kurdish political line. This movement came into existence with the establishment of the People's Labour Party (HEP) in 1990 and while many of these parties were closed down by Turkey's constitutional court, the movement managed to grow throughout the 2000s and 2010s.

After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the occupation of Afghanistan by the Red Army in the same year, the transformation of the Iraqi and Syrian Ba'athist regimes into brutal dictatorships and the failure of Nasserism in Egypt, the regional political climate changed radically and Islamism imposed itself as the hegemonic ideology in many countries of the Middle East. Remarkably, however, Kurdish politics remained widely secular and left-wing oriented, at least within the framework of ideological division lines of the Middle East of the 2000s. While the PDK and broadly speaking the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) promote a liberal political discourse (and neo-liberal economic policies), the PKK and its allies in Iran, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), and in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), adhere to a broadly left-wing political agenda, and articulate various calls for equality within the Kurdish demands for self-government in Turkey, Iran and Syria.

One of the most important effects of this evolution can be seen in youth and women participation in politics. There is no doubt that as other societies of the Middle East, the Kurdish society, too, has come under the influence of social conservatism during the last decades. However, the continuing process of politicization since the beginning of the 1960s has also pushed forward a new political generation every decade or so, with each generation emerging on the historical scene with its own experiences and worldviews. This explains why the generation which has been already active in the 1960s and the one born at the beginning of 2000s coexist and interact. It also creates a complex and yet extremely original political landscape characterized by both intergenerational transmissions and conflicts. This process of constant renewal also allowed a much wider participation by women in Kurdish politics, namely, in Turkey and Syria. Gendered violence and discrimination certainly did not disappear from Kurdistan (indeed the Iraqi Kurdish authorities took a series of juridical measures to fight them), but women's engagement in the 'national struggle' has allowed them to enjoy a much higher legitimacy than that imposed by patrimonial structures. It is true that a rigid moral code is imposed upon the