

THE KURDS AND KURDISTAN: A GENERAL BACKGROUND

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GEOGRAPHY AND POPULATION¹

Kurdistan, or the homeland of the Kurds, is a strategic area located in the geographic heart of the Middle East. Today, it comprises important parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. These parts were created at two different occasions: first, in 1514 when Kurdistan was divided between the Ottoman and Persian empires following the battle of Chaldiran and, second, in 1920-1923 when Britain and France further altered the political contours of Kurdistan by dividing Ottoman Kurdistan among Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Today, estimates of the size of the land where the Kurds constitute the dominant majority range from 230,000 to 300,000 square miles in size, divided as follows: Turkey (43% of the

¹A few sources have been extensively used in this Introduction. Rather than repeatedly citing these sources, they are listed here: Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1992); Gerard Chaliand, ed., *A People Without A Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: Zed Press, 1993); Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Ethnonationalism* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992); Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981); Michael Gunter, *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Michael Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Amir Has-sanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992); *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 11, nos. 1-2 (1997), pp. 251-257; Mehrdad Izady, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook* (Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis, Inc., 1992); David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996); David McDowall, *The Kurds*. 7th ed. (London: Minority Rights Group, 1996); Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1988); and Robert Olson, ed. *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impact on Turkey and the Middle East* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

total area of Kurdistan), Iran (31%), Iraq (18%), Syria (6%), and former USSR (2%). The Kurds in the former USSR (mainly in Armenia and Azerbaijan) had passed into that area when territories were ceded by Persia in 1807-1820, and by the Ottomans in 1878.

As in the case with most Middle Eastern stateless nations, estimates of the total number of Kurds vary widely. Kurdish nationalists are tempted to exaggerate the number, and governments of the region to minimize it. Although there are no official censuses regarding the number of the Kurds, most sources agree that today there are more than 30 million Kurds and at least one-third of them live outside Kurdistan because of war, forced resettlements, or economic deprivation. Slightly more than half of the Kurds live in Turkey, about one-fourth in Iran, and one-sixth in Iraq. The remaining Kurds live in Syria (1.5 million), Europe (over 1 million), former Soviet Union (.5 million), and several other countries. The largest concentrations of Kurds outside Kurdistan are in the major cities of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and former Soviet republics, and in two Kurdish enclaves in central and north-central Anatolia in Turkey and in Khurasan in northeast Iran and southern Turkmenistan. There are also large concentrations of Kurds in Germany (over 600,000),² Israel (over 100,000),³ and Lebanon (75,000-100,000). Australia, Canada, England, Finland, France, Greece, Sweden, and the United States each have a Kurdish population of over 10,000 (see bibliography for relevant sources). It is important to note here that despite all efforts by Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria to downsize the number of Kurds, no one can deny that the Kurds are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, after the Arabs, Persians, and Turks, and that they are one of the largest stateless nations in the world.

Anthropologically, the Kurds are now predominantly of Mediterranean racial stock, resembling southern Europeans and the Levantines in skin, general coloring and physiology. There is yet a persistent recurrence of two racial substrata: a darker aboriginal Palaeo-Caucasian element, and more localized occurrence of blondism of the Alpine type in the heartland of Kurdistan.⁴

KURDISH SOCIETY AND NATIONALISM

Kurdish society is still basically tribal. Accordingly, the loyalty of the Kurds is primarily directed towards the immediate family clan—the cornerstone of the social system—and thence to the tribe—the largest grouping within Kurdish society. The cohesion of the Kurdish tribe, in turn, is based on a mixture of blood ties and territorial allegiances associated with strong religious loyalties.

²Eva Ostergaard-Nielsen, "Trans-state Loyalties and Politics of Turks and Kurds in Western Europe," *SAIS Review* 20, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2000), pp. 23-38.

³Yona Sabar, "Jews of Kurdistan," in *Encyclopedia of World Cultures, Volume IX: Africa and the Middle East*, edited by John Middleton and Amal Rassam (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall and Co., 1995), pp. 144-147.

⁴<http://kurdweb.humanrights.de/kwd/english/society/society-frame.html>.

Until very recently, beyond the tribe, many Kurds, especially those who live in rural areas, only occasionally showed loyalty to a nation, state, or any other entity. This state of affairs continues to be present today but it is in steady decline. The socio-economic and political changes that most Kurds have witnessed since the 1960s—such as the mechanization of agriculture, industrialization, subsequent revolts, rural-urban migration, emigration, political mobilization in party politics, the expansion of public education and mass communications—have weakened the tribal structure of the Kurdish society and provided an impetus for developing larger Kurdish nationalism.

Taking the Kurds in Turkey as an example, more than 25 percent of the total Kurdish population there lives today in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and other major Turkish cities, let alone the Kurds who moved into European countries. Many of these emigrants left Kurdistan either voluntarily (for social and economic purposes) or forcibly (because of political difficulties and state terror which took the forms of mass evacuations, village-raiding, killings, and imprisonment). Becoming aware of the great disparity between their impoverished life in Kurdistan and their new lives in Turkish and European cities, Kurdish emigrants became more socially and politically conscious, and their awareness of their Kurdish identity and ethnic solidarity was strengthened.⁵ Such improvements or developments in the social, economic, and political status of the Kurds have become a vital source for the growth of the Kurdish movement in Turkey. In summary, the social and economic negligence of Kurdistan by the local governments and the protracted cultural and political repression exercised against Kurdish populations were decisive factors in fostering Kurdish nationalism rather than suppressing it as was hoped from the governments' harsh policies.

LANGUAGE

The Kurds speak various dialects of Kurdish that can be divided into two main groups. The Kurmanji group, which is spoken by more than 75 percent of the Kurds and composed of two major branches: Bahdinani (or North Kurmanji)—the most widely spoken dialect⁶—and Sorani (or Central Kurmanji). The Pahlawani group, spoken by the rest of the Kurds, is also composed of two major branches: Dimili (or Zaza or Hawrami) and Gorani (or Kermanshahi or South Kurmanji).⁷ All of these major dialects are further divided into scores of sub-dialects as well, yet, all are members of the north-western division of the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family of languages.

⁵See Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Society, Ethnicity, Nationalism and Refugee Problem," in *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*, edited by Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 48-54.

⁶Most of the Kurds in Turkey, a large portion of the Kurds in Iran and Iraq, and almost the entire Kurdish population in Syria and the former Soviet Union speak the Northern Kurmanji dialect.

⁷See Izady, pp. 172-182.

In their attempts to suppress Kurdish identity and revivalism, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the former Soviet Union have not only used political oppression and economic exploitation, but also targeted cultural oppression as well. The forms in which cultural oppression were implemented are diverse, yet language oppression was perhaps the most important. The following are just brief summaries of state policies towards the Kurdish language.

After the creation of modern Turkey in 1923, Ataturk decided to substitute the alphabet used in Turkish from Arabic to Latin. Consequently, the Kurds of Turkey were forced to do the same and adapt a modified version of the Latin characters for their language that incidentally fitted Kurdish more but inhibited the exchange of literature between the Kurds in Turkey and Syria, on the one hand, and those in Iran and Iraq, on the other. The Kurds in Iran and Iraq continued to use a modified version of the Perso-Arabic alphabet. Less than a year later (i.e., in 1924), new measures were introduced and implemented in Turkey with the aim of suppressing the Kurdish language. These measures took the form of banning both the spoken and written use of Kurdish, and ensuring that education and information are only provided in Turkish or to those people who speak Turkish. Possession of written material in Kurdish also became a serious crime punishable by a long-term prison sentence.

Turkish repressive measures against Kurdish continued since then, with varying degrees of severity: easing during civilian rule and strengthening during military rule. The following excerpt extracted from *Otuken*, a Turkish journal, sums up the attitude of the Turkish government towards the Kurds and their language:

If they [the Kurds] want to carry on speaking a primitive language with vocabularies of only four or five thousand words; if they want to create their own state and publish what they like, let them go and do it somewhere else. We Turks have shed rivers of blood to take possession of these lands; we had to uproot Georgians, Armenians, and Byzantine Greeks... Let them go off wherever they want, to Iran, to Pakistan, to India, or to join Barzani. Let them ask the United Nations to find them a homeland in Africa. The Turkish race is very patient, but when it is really angered it is like a roaring lion and nothing can stop it. Let them ask the Armenians who we are, and let them draw the appropriate conclusions.⁸

In Iran, speaking and writing in Kurdish are absolutely forbidden by law. Only in the 1990s did the Kurds begin to publish material in Kurdish more openly and use the language in many other cultural activities. This was thanks to pressures from Kurdish revolutionaries there rather than an ease on the government part.

In Iraq, Kurdish language, literature, and some other forms of cultural expression were guaranteed by the 1932 Constitution. This situation further progressed after 1958 when the Kurdish language was officially recognized as the

⁸*Otuken* (June 1967). Cited in Kendal, "Kurdistan in Turkey," p. 77.

second language of the country and was used and studied in schools and universities. However, what the Kurds have achieved in Iraq was a result of a long struggle against official animosity rather than granted by a noble government.⁹ Even though the situation in Iraq is by far better than anywhere else in Kurdistan, it is unfortunate that the cultural freedom enjoyed by the Kurds in the country is and has always been under the mercy of the regime's mood: improving when relations between the Kurdish leaders and the government are good, and deteriorating when relations are bad.

In Syria, although 90 percent of the Kurds use Kurdish in their everyday life, the use of the Kurdish language in any form is still against the law. Despite the greater tolerance the Syrian government has been showing in the 1990s towards its Kurdish minority, the government still prohibits the use of Kurdish in schools and forbids broadcasting and publishing in the language.¹⁰

In the former Soviet Union, the situation was relatively good before World War II when Kurdish was in steady promotion. After the war, the assimilation processes (carried out by the resettlement campaigns of Stalin), the discontinuation of the use of Kurdish as a medium of instruction in schools, the cultural isolation of the Soviet Kurds from their brethren across the borders (a consequence of changing the alphabet into Cyrillic), and the recent plight of the Kurds in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia all denied the Kurds an effective development of their language.

Given the current conditions of Kurdish language use in Kurdistan, it is not surprising that only in countries other than those mentioned above Kurdish is used with little or no restrictions. The best example is the Kurds in Europe who use Kurdish for instruction and in printing, publication, and broadcasting, just to mention a few.

RELIGION

At least two thirds of the Kurds are Sunni Muslims of the Shafi'i school of law, in contrast to their Arab and Turkish Sunni neighbors who adhere mostly to the Hanafi school, and their Azeri and Persian neighbors who are Shi'ites.¹¹ There are, however, many Shi'i Kurds concentrated in southern Kurdistan (Iran) and in the districts of Khanaqin and Mandali in Iraqi Kurdistan. Most of the remaining Kurds are adherents of heterodox, syncretistic sects "with beliefs and rituals that are clearly influenced by Islam but owe more to other

⁹Kreyenbroek, p. 76.

¹⁰See David McDowall, *The Kurds of Syria* (London: Kurdish Human Rights Project, 1998); Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Assad Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); and Ismet Cheriff Vanly, "The Kurds in Syria and Lebanon," in *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*, edited by Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹¹Martin van Bruinessen, "Religion in Kurdistan," *Kurdish Times* 4 (Summer-Fall 1991), p. 7.

religions, notably old Iranian religion.”¹² Such sects include the Alevis (or the Qizilbash) with an estimate of more than three millions, the Ahl-i Haqq (‘People of Truth’ or the Kaka’is) and the Yezidis. There are also several thousands of Christian Kurds and more than 150,000 Jewish Kurds most of whom are today residing in Israel. These Christians and Jews became Kurdish by culture and language.

Until the mid-twentieth century, religion among the Kurds played a prominent role in the Kurdish nationalist movement. In fact, most of the Kurdish rebellions which broke out in the period between the 1880s and the 1930s were led by *Sheikhs*. These rebellions, however, were intensely influenced by the religious diversity of the Kurds. Sunnis, for example, divided into two *tariqas* or mystical orders—the Naqshbandi and the Qadiri—never cooperated effectively with each other in any of the rebellions instigated by either side’s leaders.¹³ The Shi’ite Kurds of Iran, on the other hand, never took part in the Kurdish national movement. The Alevi Kurds, fearing Sunni fanaticism, did not support the rebellion of Sheikh Sa’id in 1925; the Alevis, conversely, received no support from Sunni Kurds in their rebellions of 1921 and 1937-1938.¹⁴

OTHER CULTURAL ASPECTS

Often disregarded by many writers, Kurdish national identity is not only manifested in tribe, kinship, language, religion, or history. Other cultural traits, such as literature and folklore and art and music have important primary roles in fostering Kurdish nationalism.¹⁵ For example, despite the supremacy of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, Kurdish literature have retained its originality, developed, and contributed to the consolidation of national feeling. Kurdish literature, be it romantic or realist, written or oral, contemporary or old, was, and still is, a mirror for the Kurdish people through which they recognize the beauty and greatness of their country as well as the poverty and denial that are imposed on them. In Blau’s words: “The new blossoming of Kurdish poets, writers, and intellectuals who belong to the Kurmanji group strikingly illustrates the relationship between cultural development and political freedom.”¹⁶ Another example is the sense of a common past represented in the form of storing up the collective memories and carrying them on to subsequent generations: the Kurds

¹²Ibid, p. 8.

¹³For example, the Naqshbandis did not participate in any of Sheikh Mahmud’s revolts in Iraq in the 1920s. Cited in Sami Shurash, “Tanawwu’ Akrad al-‘Iraq: Madkhal ila al-Siyasa,” *Abwab* [London], no 3 (Winter 1995), p. 49.

¹⁴Van Bruinessen, “Religion in Kurdistan,” pp. 7-14.

¹⁵See Maria T. O’Shea, “Between the Map and the Reality: Some Fundamental Myths of Kurdish Nationalism,” *Peuples Méditerranéens*, no. 68-69 (July-December 1994), pp. 77-94.

¹⁶Joyce Blau, “Kurdish Written Literature,” in *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, edited by Philip Kreyenbroek and Christine Allsion (London: Zed Books, 1996), p. 27.

have a wealth of famous heroes and sacred dates and memorable places and unforgettable events that can fill historical catalogs in many volumes.¹⁷ In such circumstances, Kurdish national feelings are almost impossible to be terminated from the minds and hearts of the Kurds.¹⁸

EDUCATION

The ban on the use of the Kurdish language in most parts of Kurdistan, and the shortage of both schools and teachers in Kurdish villages and towns has severely hindered the improvement of the Kurds' educational level. According to the available sources,¹⁹ the illiteracy rate in Turkish Kurdistan was more than 72 percent in 1975 as opposed to 41 percent in areas populated by Turks. In Iranian Kurdistan, the illiteracy rate was 70 percent. Although in Iran, the illiteracy rate declined to 50 percent by 1986, the Kurds remain to be the second least literate of the major nationalities in the country (the Baluchis are first). Only in Iraq, Syria, and the former Soviet Union (where only 20-25% of all Kurds live) is the situation significantly better.

Urbanization seems to have a positive impact on education as could be suggested from the great increase in published works by Kurds living in the area.²⁰ However, given that more than half of the Kurds live in rural areas, where education receives little local and government attention, the Kurds will continue to lag behind nationally as far as producing a highly literate stratum is concerned. Kurdish nationalists have for long argued that native tongue education is one of the indispensable means by which to protect their ethnic identity from assimilation efforts, but little planned efforts have been seriously considered by them. In other words, Kurdish nationalists need to give more and better attention to education. As Hassanpour has indicated in several of his works, there are various means or methods that can be used to achieve national rights; education is one of them (see bibliography).

¹⁷Kawa and Newruz, Media Empire and the Republic of Mahabad are only a few examples.

¹⁸For further details, see *The Importance of Cultural Elements in the Struggle of the Kurdish People* (Amsterdam: Research Institute of Oppressed People, 1983); Philip Kreyenbroek and Christine Allison, eds., *Kurdish Culture and Identity* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1996); Kendal Nezan, "Kurdish Music and Dance," *World of Music* 21 (1979): 19-32; and O'Shea, "Between the Map and the Reality."

¹⁹Chaliand, *The Kurdish Tragedy* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1994); A. R. Ghassemlou (Abdul Rahman), "Kurdistan in Iran," in *People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, edited by Gerard Chaliand (London: Zed Press, 1993), pp. 99-100; Izady, pp. 179-181; and Kendal (Kendal Nezan), "Kurdistan in Turkey," in *People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, edited by Gerard Chaliand (London: Zed Press, 1993) p. 40.

²⁰For further details, see Amir Hassanpour, "The Creation of Kurdish Media Culture," in *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, edited by Philip Kreyenbroek and Christine Allison (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1996), pp. 48-84.

ECONOMY

Kurdistan is known to be very rich in its natural resources. Not only oil and water, but also copper, chromium, iron, and sulfur are found with abundance in Kurdish soil. Agriculturally, Kurdistan is also affluent in its high-grade pasture lands as well as with its large and fertile mountain valleys (comprising 28 percent of Kurdistan's total surface area). Wheat, barley, and a great variety of cereals, vegetables, fruits and nuts are the common crops grown in Kurdistan. As for the cash crops, the most important are tobacco, cotton, olives, and sugar beets. Animal products are also of great importance in Kurdistan's economy with sheep being the most important.

Despite the huge economic production of Kurdistan, whether from its natural resources or from its agricultural goods, only a small portion of its benefits is geared towards the local population. Moreover, heavy modern industries in Kurdistan are almost non-existent. True that oil is produced with abundance from Kurdish areas (and is refined there), nevertheless, skilled laborers are almost entirely non-Kurds and indeed non-locals. Even in the mining sector, the Kurds constitute the main unskilled workers. Only light industries can be found in Kurdistan and these are mainly related to handicrafts, construction materials, sugar and textiles. Trade is also of growing importance in Kurdistan and represents a good source of income to many Kurds living near the trade routes. All this, along with the local governments' economic negligence of Kurdistan (e.g., limited investment) explains why Kurdish society is still mainly agrarian with most Kurds working on the land.²¹ As a consequence, Kurdistan continues to suffer from a sharp increase in the emigration of its productive population to urban centers where they are in effect "becoming urbanized but not industrialized."²²

HISTORY

There is no doubt that the Kurds are one of the oldest nations in the Middle East. Distinct from their Arab and Turkish neighbors, many scholars agree that the Kurds are descendants of a mixture of peoples formed of indigenous inhabitants and subsequent Indo-European immigrants who settled the region for more than three thousand years. Their ancient history, which stretches

²¹Chaliand, *The Kurdish Tragedy*, pp. 14-15; and Izady, pp. 221-234. Both Chaliand and Izady say that, contrary to what many peoples assume of the Kurds, only a very small number of Kurds (less than 3 percent) still practice a nomadic economy. It was the forced sedentarization policies, introduced in Turkey and Iran as of the 1920s that marked the beginning of the end of nomadism and its traditional modes of economic production. Since then, nomads became farmers, villagers, or even city dwellers.

²²Chaliand, *The Kurdish Tragedy*, p. 41.

from 3000 to 400 BC, was a period of high disturbances between Kurdistan and the neighboring powers. According to the records of those powers, a group of people residing in Kurdistan, known as the Gutis then, were able to establish a ruling dynasty in the region between 2250 and 2120 BC. For the next 1,500 years after the fall of the Gutis, however, Kurdistan was a scene for military invasions, looting, and destruction executed by their neighbors. Those actions which drove the entire region into a social and economic depression led to the transformation of Kurdistan (which was witnessing subsequent Aryan immigration waves) into an Indo-European-speaking society. Indigenous inhabitants along with other Aryan immigrants were able to establish their own empire—the Median Empire—which ruled vast areas of the Middle East between 612 and 549 BC. The establishment of the Median Empire and subsequent dynasties by the newly formed Kurdish people as well as by other peoples kept Kurdistan relatively independent of external rule until the Islamic conquest in the 7th century AD. After three centuries of Islamic rule, the Kurds started to reemerge powerfully again, particularly with the establishment of Kurdish dynasties that ruled large areas of the region. Among those dynasties were the Mamlanids or the Rawwadids (920-1071), the Buwayhid Daylamites (932-1062), the Shaddadids (951-1174), the Hasnawayhids (959-1015), the Marwanids (983-1085), and the Ayyubids (1169-15th century).

From the beginning of the 13th century, however, the Kurds started to experience a steady decline in various aspects of their lives. Several important causes were behind this decline but the most important were: (1) the destructive Mongol and Turkic invasions of Kurdistan; (2) the division of Kurdistan in 1514 among the Persian and the Ottoman empires; and (3) the economic isolation of Kurdistan which resulted from discovering new international trade routes that replaced the old routes that passed through Kurdistan. Sea transportation in particular, denied Kurdistan transit revenues as well as the influx of new technologies, information, and ideas.

Following the defeat of the Persians by the Ottomans at the battle of Chaldiran in 1514, the Kurds and Kurdistan became divided between two empires with the majority in the Ottoman part. Since then, vast portions of Kurdistan were systematically devastated and large numbers of Kurds deported to the far corners of the Safavid and Ottoman empires. The magnitude of death and destruction wrought in Kurdistan for nearly three hundred years resulted in several Kurdish rebellions: the Baban revolt between 1806 and 1808, Prince Mohammed of Soran's revolt between 1833 and 1837, the Badrkhan's revolt of 1847, the Yezdan Sher revolt of 1855, and the 1880 revolt of Sheikh 'Ubaydallah of Nehri. Although led by a religious leader, the revolt of 1880 was the most important of all 19th century Kurdish rebellions for it included both the Kurds of the Ottoman empire and those of Persia, and marked a beginning of modern Kurdish nationalism.²³

²³The Kurdish rebellions of the 19th century are well analyzed in Kendal (Kendal Nezan), "The Kurds Under the Ottoman Empire," in *A People Without A*

After the defeat of Sheikh ‘Ubaydallah by the Ottomans in 1880, Sultan ‘Abdulhamid II, hoping to secure the Ottoman domination of the eastern provinces of the empire, decided to follow a different approach than his predecessors towards the Kurds. He made great efforts to integrate them into the state system by allowing them to share in the advantages of the power. Successfully reflecting good intentions towards Kurdish feudals, and stimulating pan-Islamic propaganda among them, ‘Abdulhamid was able to create a special Kurdish-dominated cavalry force known as the *Hamidiya* Cavalry which he used to smash the Armenians, and later (under different name) to repress the Kurds as well.²⁴

Following the ‘Young Turks’ revolution in 1908 which overthrew the rule of ‘Abdulhamid and promised constitutional reform and representation, the Kurds began to establish their own political organizations. However, the struggle between urban intellectuals and feudalists over leadership denied the Kurds the positive outcomes of political organization and resulted in weakening of the Kurdish movement. Consequently, the Kurds fell into the hands of the Turkish rulers during World War I, and were used by them in fighting Turkish wars.²⁵

As in the case with all other ethnic groups that were subjects to the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman’s defeat in the First World War presented the Kurds with an opportunity to set up their own national state. The Treaty of Sevres (signed on August 10, 1920) anticipated an independent Kurdish state to cover a small portion of the former Ottoman Kurdistan. Unconcerned with the natives’ call for independence, Britain and France divided former Ottoman territories according to their needs, with Kurdistan apportioned to the new states of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. This division was formalized in the Treaty of Lausanne that was signed on July 23, 1923 following the emergence of Ataturk. Since then, the Kurds, “victims of peace settlements,”²⁶ began to face a long series of protracted repressive measures by the subsequent governments of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the Soviet Union and its republics. Although these countries were at most times enemies, they all had one thing in common, that is, suppressing any attempt at Kurdish independence. The following is a brief summary of the history of the Kurds and Kurdistan in each of these countries. A brief discussion on the Kurds in Europe is also presented.

Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan, edited by Gerard Chaliand (London: Zed Press, 1993), pp. 11-37; McDowall, *A Modern History*, pp. 38-86; and Olson, pp. 1-25.

²⁴Kendal (Kendal Nezan), “Ottoman Empire,” pp. 24-26.

²⁵McDowall, *A Nation Denied*, pp. 30-31; and Kendal (Kendal Nezan), “Ottoman Empire,” pp. 26-29. Two good surveys on this period of Kurdish history are Kamal Madhar Ahmad, *Kurdistan During the First World War*, translated from the Arabic by ‘Ali Maher Ibrahim (London: Saqi Books, 1994); and McDowall, *A Modern History*, pp. 87-112.

²⁶Gidon Gottlieb, “Nations Without States,” *Foreign Affairs* 73 (May/June 1994), p. 104.

The Kurds in Turkey

Immediately after the signing of the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, Ataturk began a turkification process that included, among other things, the banning of all Kurdish schools, associations, publications, and other forms of cultural expression. The Kurds also discovered that the Muslim Patrimony they fought for alongside Ataturk, was nothing but a myth. After Ataturk achieved victory against the Greeks, Armenians and Russians, the Kurds were left out. Consequently, the Kurds revolted against Turkey in 1925, 1930 and 1937. These three revolts which were led by Sheikh Sa'id, the *Khoyboun* (Independence) Kurdish National League,²⁷ and Sayyid Reza of Dersim, respectively, were ruthlessly smashed.²⁸ Describing the 1925-1938 period of Kurdish history in Turkey, Nezan wrote:

During these thirteen years of repression, struggle, revolt, and deportation... more than one and a half million Kurds were deported [or] massacred... The entire area beyond the Euphrates... was declared out of bounds to foreigners until 1965 and was kept under a permanent state of siege till 1950. The use of the Kurdish language was banned. The very words 'Kurd' and 'Kurdistan' were crossed out of the dictionaries and history books. The Kurds were never even referred to except as 'Mountain Turks.'²⁹

Since then, all Kurdish attempts to resuscitate their cultural heritage or their identity in Kurdistan have been severely put down by the Turkish army.

Following the fall of Dersim in 1938, Turkey witnessed a wave of general discontent resulting mainly from the economic difficulties and famines that took place during most of World War II years. Such discontent forced the Turkish government to liberalize its political system. This decision which took, among other things, the form of legalizing the formation of new political parties benefitted the Kurds. Though they were not allowed to establish their own parties, many Kurds who were in Istanbul and Ankara became politically involved. While attending universities in the major Turkish cities, many Kurds joined various Turkish political parties, especially the Democratic Party, with many Kurds eventually becoming members of the parliament or even state ministers. This period of liberalization in Turkey, however, was interrupted by a military rule between 1960 and 1961 in which a return to Kemalist orthodoxy took place aiming at "putting everything back in its right place," meaning, repressing the Kurds and other leftist forces.

But the Turkish army failed to suppress the invisible re-emergence of Kurdish nationalism. On the one hand, the Kurds in Turkey were delighted and influenced by the success of Barzani in the Iraqi part of Kurdistan and, on the

²⁷The *Khoyboun* was led by Ihsan Nouri Pasha and the Bedrkhan brothers.

²⁸For details on these three revolts and their aftermaths, see Kendal, "Kurdistan in Turkey," pp. 51-58; and McDowall, *A Modern History*, pp. 184-213.

²⁹Kendal, "Kurdistan in Turkey," p. 58.

other, they became “aware of both the cultural differences between eastern and western Turkey as well as of the highly unequal development of these two areas of the country.”³⁰ The new constitution adopted by Turkey in 1961 (after the withdrawal of the military from office), moreover, created a new opportunity for the Kurds to establish themselves. Many educated Kurds, not allowed to form their own political parties, joined the newly founded Turkish Workers’ Party (TWP) that, among other issues, took up the issue of underdevelopment of eastern and southeastern Turkey (i.e., Kurdistan).³¹ Then in 1965, a group of pro-Barzani Kurds (mostly educated persons) decided to form their own political party that operated clandestinely under the name of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Turkey (KDPT).

Late in the 1960s and early 1970s, Kurdish political parties, more specifically, radical ones, grew in number. Feeling the rise of the Kurdish movement, along with the political disorder that was prevailing in the country, the Turkish army decided to step in power again on March 12, 1973 to restore order. This time it took three years before the army returned power to the civilians, but after making sure that no party would achieve a decisive victory in the government. The army was convinced that stability and powerful governments are the reasons behind the rise of the Kurds. Consequently, throughout most of the 1970s, the country went into a political deadlock and extremism with no party able to win a majority that would enable it to make vital decisions. At the same time, this period witnessed a turning point in the political demands of Kurdish organizations from economic development of Kurdistan and the recognition of elementary cultural rights of the Kurds to independence.

According to van Bruinessen, two major reasons were behind this shift in the Kurdish movement. First, there was widespread dissatisfaction among the Kurds with the Turkish left, which seemed insufficiently responsive to the national dimension of the Kurdish struggle. Second, the weakness of the Turkish government allowed the Kurds considerable freedom thus making them able to organize themselves underground and make propaganda.³² Edmund Ghareeb mentions a third reason, namely, the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 that was associated with, or led to, the rise of the Kurdish national movement in Iran to the forefront.³³

Towards the end of the 1970s, Kurdish organizations were able to control large areas of Kurdistan. However, the ideological differences and, in particular, personal rivalries between their leaders, caused many splits in, and conflicts among, them which counted more than ten by that time. The severe clashes between these organizations on the one hand, and their clashes with

³⁰Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, p. 32.

³¹In its Congress in October 1970, the TWP adopted a resolution which recognized the Kurdish people. It was the first time that an official body in Turkey take such a position. As a consequence of adopting this resolution, the party was banned.

³²Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, p. 33.

³³Ghareeb, p. 9.

other Turkish groups, on the other, caused thousands of victims among both Kurds and Turks and exposed them to the eyes of the Turkish army. Consequently, the military took over power once again on September 12, 1980 in an attempt to “wipe out Kurdish nationalism.”

Immediately after the coup, large scale military operations took place in Kurdistan to crush the Kurdish movement.³⁴ For the first time after more than 45 years, however, the Kurds confronted the Turkish army openly, particularly by the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK), which proved to be the most violent of all Kurdish organizations. This war which is still going on was faced by severe Turkish military campaigns. Describing these campaigns, Laizer wrote:

[The Turkish army campaign] is an all-out military on-slaught to end Kurdish resistance in the most brutal fashion (250,000 soldiers versus 15,000 guerrillas and Kurdish civilians). ... [Its aims are] murder, extra-judicial killings, and silencing of the Kurdish opposition—prominent writers, journalists, MP’s, and even Kurdish businessmen shot, tortured, or imprisoned, and the opposition press forced into closure. The true face of the [campaigns] is in fact the military target of razing all rebellious Kurdish villages, mass deportations and massacres of the villagers themselves, and the arbitrary killing and detention of Kurdish civilians who refuse to become state-paid militia against the PKK. The killings are carried out by military and death squads with the civil governments’ complicity.³⁵

Initially criticized because of its violent attacks on Kurdish collaborators and their families, the extreme nature of PKK’s activities against the Turkish army nevertheless increased its popularity among Kurdish masses. Such activities which were normally associated with Turkish military repression of civilians, resulted in the evacuation and flight of millions of Kurds westwards. Ironically, these displaced persons, now living in major Turkish and European major cities, have made it impossible for Turkish public opinion to ignore the Kurds any longer. The Kurdish population living outside Kurdistan became more of a serious problem than those living inside it. A good indication of this is the role the Kurds play in today’s Turkish national elections as well as their success in exposing their nation’s plight not only to the West but also to the Turks themselves.

The success of the PKK in mobilizing the Kurds in Turkey and fostering Kurdish nationalism there and throughout the world received a serious blow with the capture of the party’s leader Abdullah Ocalan. What made things even worse was the behavior of Ocalan afterwards. According to Kutschera, rather than behaving heroically, Ocalan immediately abandoned the idea of transforming his trial into a trial of the Turkish state, giving up on pleading the cause of the Kurds for whom he had fought for 20 years. Moreover, Ocalan repudiated the cause for which thousands of Kurds had been sent to prison or to

³⁴A short but good account on these campaigns is Martin van Bruinessen, “The Kurds in Turkey,” *MERIP Reports* 14 (February 1984), pp. 6-14.

³⁵Sheri Laizer, “Gerard Chaliand’s The Kurdish Factor,” *Namah* 2 (Fall 1994).

their deaths; he repudiated the armed struggle and repudiated the independence of Kurdistan.³⁶ The capture and trial of Ocalan, a major setback in the Kurdish movement, put an end to his myth; however, it will not end the Kurds' struggle for freedom and national rights. For the war to stop, both Kurds and Turks have to negotiate with each other. Turkey, in addition, must make some political concessions and show willingness to grant Kurds greater freedom.

The Kurds in Iran

Although the Kurds in Iran have not been subjected to the level of brutality as that of their counterparts in Turkey and Iraq, the Iranian government has always been no less vehement in its opposition to any form of a separate Kurdish entity. Iran's opposition stems from its fears of what such a prospect may hold for other ethnic groups within its boundaries (such as Arabs, the Azeris, and the Baluchis) who may be encouraged by any Kurdish gains, and thus demand a similar treatment.³⁷

During the period between 1920 and 1930, Ismail Agha Simko, chief of the Shikak tribe, revolted several times against central authority. Though initially successful in capturing large areas of the Kurdish region, Simko failed in achieving Kurdish independence. After Simko's death, the Kurdish movement in Iran went into oblivion, or at least was not as active as in other parts of Kurdistan. A major turning point, however, was the founding of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iran (KDPI) in 1945, which was soon to proclaim the creation of the independent Democratic Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad. The Mahabad Republic proved to be short-lived, however (January-December 1946). The KDPI was unable to attract local support to the small republic, especially from the tribes who were extremely reluctant to do away with the close relationship they had cultivated with the Tehran government in the years between Simko's death and World War II. As a result, immediately after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iran in December 1946, Tehran proceeded to crush the Mahabad Republic—something it did with relative ease considering the absence of a powerful protector of the Kurds. Thereafter, Kurdish nationalists went underground, only to be effectively suppressed by the SAVAK, the Shah's security service.

³⁶Chris Kutschera, *Kurdistan Observer* (February 4, 2000).

³⁷Perhaps the best authorities on the Kurds in Iran are William Eagleton, *The Kurdish Republic of 1946* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); A. R. Ghassemlou (Abdul Rahman), pp. 95-121; and Archie Roosevelt, Jr., "The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad," *The Middle East Journal* 1 (July 1947), pp. 247-269. Supplements to these works can be found in McDowall, *A Modern History*, pp. 214-283, and Rouhollah K. Ramazani, "The Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan and the Kurdish People's Republic: Their Rise and Fall," in *The Anatomy of Communist Takeovers*, edited by Thomas T. Hammond (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 448-474.

In 1978, Kurdish nationalists joined in the overthrow of the Shah thus creating a real opportunity to negotiate a new relationship with Tehran. Kurdish nationalists, mainly led by KDPI and Komala (The Kurdish Communist Party in Iran), were capable of mobilizing large masses both for the popular uprising that was to ensue, as well as for an autonomous Kurdish entity within Iran. However, the Islamic Revolutionary government was swift in rejecting any Kurdish request for autonomy because of the danger that autonomy for the Kurds could excite similar demands by other minorities, thus threatening to break-up the country. What followed was a gradual deterioration in relations between the Kurds and Tehran government, especially as the Shi'i character of the new regime became increasingly apparent. Tehran's efforts to re-impose central authority over Kurdish regions led to a protracted guerrilla warfare in which the Kurds were no match for the technologically and numerically superior government forces.

Although the Kurds were able to exploit Iraq's surprise attack on Iran to their advantage by capturing large areas of land in Iranian Kurdistan, the balance was soon tilted in Iran's favor. By 1983, not only Iran had regained territories captured by Iraq and Iranian Kurds but had virtually pushed KDPI out of most of the Kurdish regions. By the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Tehran government had successfully crushed the Kurdish resistance movement which by then had become extremely minimal.

Even the KDPI's attempts to seek a compromise with the government ended in failure too. Indeed, the two occasions on which the Islamic Republic had agreed to negotiate with the Kurdish movement were dedicated more by necessity rather than a sincere desire to resolve the Kurdish question. First, in October 1979, when it felt both weak and threatened; and, second, in July 1989, when Tehran's aim was the assassination of the KDPI's leader, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, the party's major thinker, strategist, diplomat and organizer.³⁸ The assassination of Ghassemlou in Vienna, as well as of his successor Sadiq Sharafkandi in Berlin in September 1992, left both the party and the Kurdish movement in Iran in disarray. Although subsequent Kurdish leaders in Iran continue to aspire for Kurdish autonomy, they are as far from achieving their aims as ever before.

The Kurds in Iraq

In World War I, Britain decided to create the state of Iraq. Initially, the plan was to unite the two provinces of Basra and Baghdad and making them fall within the jurisdiction of the British mandatory power under the provisions of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. However, the discovery of oil in the pre-

³⁸Omar Sheikmous, "The Kurdish Question: Conflict Resolution Strategies at the Regional level," in *Building Peace in the Middle East: Challenges for States and Civil Society*, edited by Elise Boulding (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994), p. 149.

dominantly Kurdish province of Mosul made the British change plans. Britain then wanted Mosul to be part of the newly planned state of Iraq. Consequently, it occupied Mosul in November 1918 (still under Ottoman jurisdiction) despite the armistice of Mudros signed on October 31, 1918. Britain was aware that the population of Mosul was mainly Kurdish. Therefore, it planned to set up one or several semi-autonomous Kurdish provinces to be loosely attached to the emergent state of Iraq. The Kurds, however, were against being included in Iraq. Eventually, they came into direct confrontation with the British authorities.³⁹

From 1919 to the mid-1940s, there was a long series of Kurdish rebellions against the British army and Iraqi regime for some form of real autonomy for Kurds in Iraq. All attempts by Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji and the Barzanis (Sheikh Ahmad and Mulla Mustafa), however, failed. Only with the overthrow of the monarchy on July 14, 1958 by General Qassim, did the Kurdish national movement in Iraq re-emerge powerfully. Qassim's coup raised Kurdish expectations for more equal participation in the state. He welcomed Mulla Mustafa back from exile and jointly dealt with many mutual enemies. Hoping to gain some civil and cultural rights to the Kurds, Barzani accepted to assist Qassim in his efforts to eliminate the government's opposition groups. However, Qassim's regime disappointed Kurdish hopes and, eventually, the Kurdish movement erupted again in 1961.

Qassim's efforts to bring Barzani to heel failed and the war between the latter and successive Iraqi governments continued until March 1970 when a peace agreement between the Kurds and the Ba'th regime was concluded which gave significant cultural, political and economic rights to the Kurds. However, although the March agreement was supposed to be implemented within a period of four years, it proved to be no more than a cease-fire agreement. Consequently, fighting resumed between the Kurdish forces and the Iraqi army in which the Kurds were overtly supported by the Iranians and covertly by the United States. In an attempt to defuse the escalating crisis, the Iraqi government resorted to a carrot and stick policy of which it offered Iran a revision of the agreement governing the demarcation of the disputed Shatt al-Arab waterway and in return both Iran and the U.S. withdrew their support of the Kurds. This agreement in effect signaled the death knell of the Kurdish revolt and the outcome was several hundreds of thousand Kurds either dead or refugees on the Iranian border. Less than two years later, both Jalal Talabani and Barzani's children continued the struggle on.⁴⁰

An Iranian-Kurdish rapprochement was once again effected during the Iran-Iraq war, 1980-1988, through which the Kurds seized and controlled large portions of Iraqi Kurdistan. Displeased with the Kurds' military gains, the Iraqi regime could not have been more brutal, as demonstrated by the use of chemical

³⁹Ismet Cheriff Vanly, "Kurdistan in Iraq," in *People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, edited by Gerard Chaliand (London: Zed Press, 1993), p. 143.

⁴⁰See Alexis Heraclides, *The Self-Determination of Minorities in International Politics* (London: Frank Cass, 1991), pp. 129-146; McDowall, *A Modern History*, pp. 368-391; and Vanly, "Kurdistan in Iraq," pp. 153-190.

weapons on the Kurdish town of Halabja in March 1988. Despite evidence of the use of chemical weapons, not a single country in the world condemned such brutal behavior by Iraq. Then, after Iran's acceptance of a cease-fire in August 1988, the Iraqi army directed its attention to squashing the Kurdish movement. In the process, thousands of Kurdish villages were razed to the ground, with the large majority of their inhabitants either executed or resettled in new towns or concentration camps in the south. The army also routinely used chemical weapons. According to various sources, up to 100,000 may have been killed in what was described as military operations tantamount to a full-fledged genocide campaign.⁴¹

As relations deteriorated to a new low between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish population, many Kurds concluded that their situation could only be improved with the removal of Saddam Hussein, under whose reign the abuse of their human rights had become flagrant. By the start of military operations against Iraq in February 1991 a coalition formed by the Kurds, Shi'ites, and other dissenters, declared the removal of Saddam Hussein as its goal. But the outcome of the Kurdish and Shi'i rebellions were grossly miscalculated. As in 1975, the U.S. once again withdrew its support of the Kurds. Only under Allied protection did the Kurds escape much more losses than they did—thousands of victims and over 2 million refugees. The subsequent establishment of a Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq proved to be no more than a limited guarantee of security, and failed to resolve the underlying problems.⁴²

Indeed, some of the major obstacles to a permanent solution of the Kurdish question in Iraq are related to deep internal rivalries between the various Kurdish factions. However, equally important are the reservations entertained by the international community concerning the repercussions of establishing a Kurdish state on regional powers including Iraq itself.

The Kurds in Syria⁴³

During the French mandate, 1918-1945, the Kurds in Syria enjoyed many cultural and political rights as perceived by the existence of Kurdish political and social organizations, publications, use of the Kurdish language, and recruitment into the army and administration. Following Syrian independence, however, these rights began to gradually diminish.

⁴¹Kenneth Anderson, *The Anfal Campaign in Iraqi Kurdistan ...* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993); George Black, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993); Joost Hiltermann, *Bureaucracy of Repression: The Iraqi Government in Its Own Words* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1994); and Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising, and the Arab World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993).

⁴²See McDowall, *A Modern History*, pp. 343-367.

⁴³For more details on the Kurds in Syria, see McDowall, *The Kurds of Syria*.

The rise of hostile Arab nationalist movements (e.g., Ba'athism and Nasserism) and the Union of Syria and Egypt into the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958, marked the first round of oppressive conduct *vis-a-vis* the Kurds. One of the pretexts for starting the oppressive campaigns was the establishment of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS) in 1957. KDPS called for the recognition of the Kurds as an ethnic group and for democracy in Syria. It also unveiled the lack of economic development in Kurdish areas and exposed the discriminatory practices against the Kurds in education and recruitment to the police, military academies, and other civil services. Immediately after the announcement of the Union between Syria and Egypt, Kurdish leaders were arrested and Kurdish publications were outlawed.

Following Syria's secession from the UAR in 1961, political repression against the Kurds intensified and took on a legal dimension in its execution. This culminated in the promulgation of Decree 93 which called for a special census in the Kurdish area of Jezira and resulted in loss of Syrian citizenship by 120,000 Kurds. After the accession of the Ba'ath to power in 1963, the oppression of the Kurds went even farther. An arabization plan was effected that took the form of creating an Arab Belt (*al-Hizam al-Arabi*). It covered most of the Kurdish regions bordering both Iraq and Turkey. This plan aimed to expropriate the Kurds from their lands and push them to emigrate from the border regions to other places in and outside Syria. The evacuated regions and villages were populated by Arabs and were renamed to give them an Arab identity.⁴⁴

Only with the coming of Hafiz Assad into power in 1972, the conditions of the Kurds began to improve although not significantly. Assad needed the Kurds for both external and internal reasons. First, he sought to please them, declaring the end of forced transfers from Jezira (1976). Then he used them to wipe out Arab opposition movements, particularly the Sunni radicals. Assad also used the Kurds to fight Arab wars for him; for example, several thousand Kurds served in the Syrian army and died during the Lebanese civil war.⁴⁵

Unlike the leaders in the neighboring Turkey, Assad allowed the Kurds some cultural freedom. As of the 1980s, the Kurds were allowed to perform and sell tapes of their native songs and speak Kurdish in the streets. On the other hand, however, more than 200,000 Kurds continue to be denied citizenship. Teaching in Kurdish language is still prohibited. The Kurds may celebrate *Newruz* (New Year's Day), however, only in the countryside—away from public attention. Moreover, Kurds are still not allowed to form their own political parties. The success of the Kurds in electing fifteen Kurdish candidates to the Syrian Parliament in 1991 was a necessity rather than a sincere desire to lift the

⁴⁴McDowall, *The Kurds of Syria*; Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked*, pp. 96-98. See also Mustafa Nazdar, pseud., "The Kurds in Syria," in *A People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, edited by Gerard Chaliand (London: Zed Press, 1993), pp. 198-201; and Ismet Cheriff Vanly, "The Kurds in Syria and Lebanon," in *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*, edited by Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 143-170.

⁴⁵Chaliand, *The Kurdish Tragedy*, p. 87.

restrictions on the Kurds. The future of the Kurds in Syria is no less bleak than those of their compatriots elsewhere.

The Kurds in the Former Soviet Union

Today, there are about 500,000 Kurds living in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Tajikistan, Turkmenia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, and different republics or regions of Russia like Krasnodar and Siberia. Like the Kurds in Israel and Lebanon, the Soviet Kurds moved in there in waves with the first apparently taking place in the 1st century BC.⁴⁶ Later in the 10th century AD, some Kurdish tribes moved into the Caucasus to discover new fertile lands. Among these tribes were the Shaddadis who ruled a large part of the area between 951 and 1174 AD. In the 16th century, many Kurdish tribes moved into Central Asia as a result of their use by the Persian Shahs to guard their eastern border, thus marking the third main wave. The fourth phase of Kurdish migration into the Caucasus took place the 19th century. The wars between Russia and Turkey (1804-1813, 1828-1829, 1853-1856, 1877-1878) and the Kurdish revolts throughout the century swelled the number of Yezidi Kurdish population with a flood of refugees seeking safety in the region. A final wave took place at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century when tens of thousands of Kurds moved from the Ottoman empire into Armenia and Georgia fleeing persecution.⁴⁷ Kurdish permanent settlement in the Soviet republics was not final, however.

Soon after the creation of the Soviet state, the two Kurdish-dominated districts of Jewanshir (with its capital Kelbajar) and eastern Zangazur (with its capital Lachin) both in Azerbaijan were joined and officially designated in 1920 as "Kurdistan." After three years, the political status of this Kurdish province was elevated to become the "Kurdish Autonomous Province," better known as "Red Kurdistan" with its capital Lachin. However, the period of Kurdish autonomy was very brief. In 1929, "Red Kurdistan" was no longer an entity and Kurds ceased to be reported in Azeri population censuses. Moreover, beginning in the 1930s, the Kurds, like many other Caucasian nationalities, began to face a series of repressive measures implemented by Stalin. Thousands of Kurds were deported from Armenia in 1937, and from Georgia in 1944 to Central Asia and Kazakhstan. The men were deported to secret places and the women and children were deported shortly afterwards to a different place.⁴⁸ Repressive measures against the Kurds did not stop until the late 1950s, but to be repeated in the

⁴⁶"You Too Armenia," *Kurdish Life*, no. 9 (Winter 1994), p. 1.

⁴⁷For further details on Kurdish immigration into the former Soviet Union, see Ismet Cheriff Vanly, "The Kurds in the Soviet Union," in *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*, edited by Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 193-199.

⁴⁸J. Otto Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 129-136.

1990s, at the hands of the Armenians, Azeris, and Georgians. The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan since 1988 over Nagorno-Karabakh resulted in the complete destruction of the Kurdish areas of "Red Kurdistan" and the deportation of more than 150,000 Kurds from their lands let alone the Muslim Kurds deported from Armenia.⁴⁹ Today, there are no more indigenous Kurdish territories left in the former Soviet Union.

Socio-economically speaking, the Kurds of the former Soviet Union can be divided into two main groups: advantaged and disadvantaged. The former mostly located in Armenia and Georgia (mainly Yezidi Kurds) while the latter in Azerbaijan and other republics (mainly Muslim Kurds). Unlike the Kurds in Azerbaijan, who are facing continuous cultural repression and grim living conditions, under the Soviet auspices, the Kurds of Armenia and Georgia were, until the early 1990s, enjoying a great degree of state assistance. For example, in Armenia, the Kurds were very well treated and given both encouragement and state funds to develop their culture and improve the socio-economic conditions of their communities. Kurds there had their own network of schools, an institute of Kurdish studies at the Academy of Sciences at Yerevan, and a modest national press which includes a bi-weekly Kurdish newspaper *Reiya Taze* (The New Course), published since 1930 in Yerevan with a circulation of 2,500-3,500 copies. Kurds studying in Moscow and Leningrad's universities were also a major source for the development of the socio-economic conditions of the local Kurds. All this resulted in the Kurds' preservation of their national identity and cultural heritage as well as in their social and economic prosperity. Had the situation of the Kurds in Azerbaijan and other republics been the same as it was in Armenia and Georgia, it would have been easier to talk about a real use of the Soviet Kurds as agents or propagandists of Kurdish nationalism: Kurds in Armenia were very few and in Azerbaijan were (and still are) repressed.⁵⁰ As things turned out, it was only a Soviet policy to foster Kurdish culture in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Once the Soviet Union was disintegrated, Armenians and Azerbaijanis almost instantly fell upon the Kurds with vengeance, stripping them of all those privileges. Most of the Kurds who were living in the Caucasus republics fled to Russia or Western Europe.

The Kurds in Europe⁵¹

⁴⁹See Nadir Nadirov, "What Do the Soviet Kurds Want?" *Asia and Africa Today*, no. 1 (January-February 1991), pp. 74-76; Vanly, "The Kurds in the Soviet Union," pp. 211-218; and "You too Armenia?" *Kurdish Life*, pp. 1-5.

⁵⁰See T. F. Arsitova, "Kurds," in *Encyclopedia of World Cultures, vol. VI: Russia and Eurasia/China*, edited by P. Friedrich and N. Diamond (Boston, Mass: G.K. Hall & Co., 1994), pp. 224-227; and Kendal, "The Kurds in the Soviet Union," in *A People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, edited by Gerard Chaliand (London: Zed Press, 1993), pp. 205-209.

⁵¹This section relies largely on the work of Martin van Bruinessen, "Shifting National and Ethnic Identities: The Kurds in Turkey and the European Diaspora," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs (JMMA)* 18, no.1 (April 1998), pp. 39-52.

Kurds have been migrating to Western Europe for over a century; however, this migration gained more intensity in the last four centuries. In the 1960s and 1970s Kurds from Turkey were migrating primarily for economic reasons whereas those from Iraq and Syria were migrating particularly for political reasons. Kurds from Iraq and Syria were either fleeing persecution by their respective governments or leaving for Europe at the request of Mulla Mustafa Barzani for educational purposes and for disseminating news about the Kurdish national movement. Prominent examples of these Kurds are Ismet Cheriff Vanly and Noureddine Zaza.

Most Kurds who migrated from Turkey knew no language other than Turkish and were reluctant to be involved in politics. The 1980 coup in Turkey and its aftermath changed that. This coup led to a great influx of politicized, mostly young Kurds as asylum seekers. Their presence, and the news about the guerrilla war in Turkey that erupted in 1984, worked as a catalyst of the Kurds' ethnic self-awareness. With their growing self-awareness, many Kurds started to discover that they were not Turks but Kurds. As a result, while in the early 1980s estimates were made of approximately 600,000 Kurds in Europe, by the late 1990s estimates reached close to 2 million Kurds, the result of "rediscovery" rather than increased immigration.

The Kurdish diaspora in Europe has acquired central importance for the Kurdish movement in Turkey, the same way as the Kurdish diaspora in Lebanon had in the 1960s and early 1970s for the Kurdish national movement in Iraq and Syria and in the 1980s and early 1990s for the Kurdish movement in Turkey.⁵² Large sums of money were and still are raised in Europe to financially support military and non-military activities in Turkey. As in Kurdistan and other parts of the world, Kurdish young men residing in Europe were and still are recruited either for fighting or as organizers, diplomats, and technicians of various sorts. In addition, the PKK and its support organizations continue to publish a wide range of journals and magazines in Kurdish, Turkish, and the major European languages through which it voices its struggle against Turkey. Perhaps even more important in the long run than the political mobilization in the Kurdish diaspora are the cultural activities by Kurdish intellectuals in Europe which will also have a long-term political impact. Not only Kurmanji became a widely used language in Kurds' writings, but also Kurdish journals and books gradually increased in number and Kurdish cultural institutions were founded almost everywhere in Europe, including Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Sweden, and United Kingdom. According to van Bruinessen: "The Kurdish institutes, Kurdish print media and Kurdish language courses that operate in western Europe, largely impervious to control by the Turkish state, have provided the Kurdish movement with instruments of nation building comparable to those traditionally employed by states." Moreover, Kurds in Europe were able to form their own associations, with little or no harassment from the state. In 1995, a powerful instrument was added to this arsenal, the satellite television

⁵²See Meho, 1995.

station MED-TV, which broadcast to the Middle East and Europe, among other regions.

All of these developments in the Kurdish movement led Bruinessen to conclude: "However one defines what a nation is, by practically every definition the Kurds have over the past two decades become more of one, and have dissociated themselves somewhat from the Iraqi and Turkish 'state-nations'."

The Kurds in Lebanon

There are thousands of studies on the Kurds living in Kurdistan and the countries dividing it. Even the relatively more recent Kurdish communities in Europe and the United States gained more research attention than the older Kurdish community in Lebanon. The reason for this negligence is two fold: First, despite their relatively long stay in Lebanon, the Kurds have failed to establish themselves powerfully, primarily because of the social and political status that was imposed on them by the Lebanese confessional politics. The Kurds in Lebanon never gained public or official attention except at times when Kurdish youngsters were needed to fight a certain battle for a certain party, or at times when Kurdish votes were needed by a local *za'im* (leader) to be successful in a certain election. Furthermore, almost never were the social and political problems of the Muslim, non-Arab Kurds of prime concern to any of the Lebanese successive governments or leaders. Second, at a time when no body was interested in studying the Kurdish community in Lebanon, the Kurds, on the other hand, have failed to produce the necessary cadre or intelligentsia that would be able to do so. Because virtually nothing is published on the Kurds in Lebanon, I will discuss the topic in some detail (see next chapter).

CONCLUSION

As made evident by the twentieth century Kurdish experience, Kurdish national rights has been hindered by three interrelated problem areas: problems of communication (linguistic and religious diversity); problems of common political action (political disunity); and most importantly, problems of external influence, repeated manipulation, and lack of a superpower's support in the midst of such repressive regimes as Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Armenia and Azerbaijan.

It is true that all Kurds realize that they belong to a common entity and all have occasionally taken part in Kurdish nationalist movements, yet, there has never been a united Kurdish movement. Division by personal, tribal, regional, and sect has been the rule rather than the exception. The geopolitical situation moreover has made the Kurds vulnerable to manipulation by outside powers. Throughout their revolts, Kurdish leaders have always hoped to achieve national

rights through foreign support. However, they seldom realized that they were fighting others' wars. The Kurds' limited alternatives and perhaps more importantly the foreign powers' carelessness about their fate, encourage outside powers to exploit the Kurds and leave them to death. The drawing of well-guarded state boundaries dividing Kurdistan has, since 1921, afflicted Kurdish society with such a degree of fragmentation that its impact is tearing apart the Kurds' unity as a nation.⁵³

The future of the Kurds remains uncertain. Kurdish national identity has developed considerably in the last few years and will never disappear despite military pressure. Surrounded from all sides by enemies, however, Kurdish national rights will continue to be denied for a long time to come. This is particularly true given the carelessness of the United States, Russia, the European countries, and the United Nations about the violation of Kurdish human, civil, and national rights by the countries occupying Kurdistan and mistreating its people.

⁵³*International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 11, nos. 1-2 (1997), p. 254.