

# Land and Rebellion:

## Kurdish Separatism in Comparative Perspective

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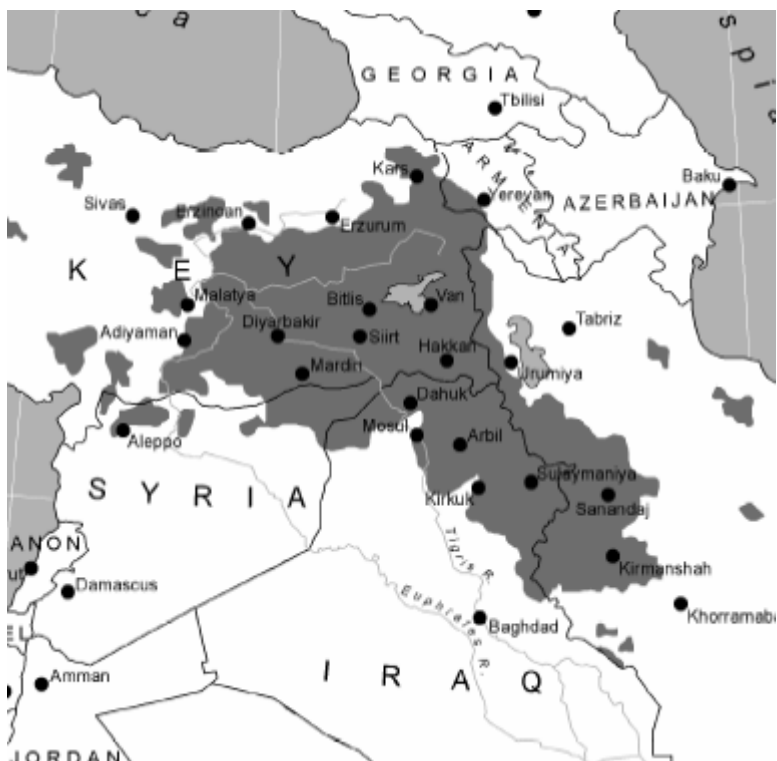


Figure 1. Greater Kurdistan.

Source: Dahlman 2002, 272.

*"There's not much talk about the [Iranian] Kurds because we have never taken any hostages, never hijacked a plane. But I am proud of this."*

- 'Abd al-Rahman Qassemou, leader of Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, assassinated in July 1989 by the Iranian government.

The conventional understanding of Kurdistan and of Kurdish separatism--focused mostly on Iraqi and Turkish Kurds-- is that it is a uniform phenomenon. Missing from this picture, however, are both Iranian and Syrian Kurds, who have respectively been only periodic and nearly absent actors on the Kurdish political scene. What accounts for this variation across Kurdish minorities in these four countries? This essay seeks to explain why Kurdish nationalists have been historically able to sustain rebellion in Iraq and Turkey but have failed in Iran or Syria. I argue that variations in the persistence and success of ethnic mobilization by Kurdish organizations countries are substantially a function of relations between states and rural Kurdish elites. Rulers in Iraq and Turkey, who were much more successful over time in breaking up Kurdish rural social structures (and weakening traditional elites), unwittingly created the foundation for later waves of Kurdish nationalist rebellion in doing so by creating large urban Kurdish populations that could be mobilized (by Kurdish urban radicals).

I draw three central conclusions from this comparative study. First, the formative origins of contemporary Kurdish rebellion have long-term historical roots. Second, states have been central in Kurdistan to the process of ethnic mobilization by virtue of altering the class structure of Kurdish society, thereby shaping the human resources upon which both which traditional Kurdish leaders and then more radical, urban-based organizations could draw. The infrastructural power of the Iraqi and Turkish states helped to make it possible for Kurdish elites to build the social base to challenge those states. Finally, the comparative study of Kurdish nationalist movements has much to tell us about the social origins of successful self-determination movements elsewhere and suggests that we should return our attention to the dynamics of social change in such minority populations.

In this last broader conclusion I argue that if we are to understand why some self-determination movements persist against state repression for long periods of time and achieve their goals, we must situate self-determination movements firmly in the demographic and political structures of the modernization and state building projects that accompanied decolonization. In short, the imposition of direct state rule, the commercialization of agriculture and forceful destruction of traditional rural social power structures, and urban migration have largely shaped the prospects for ethnoregional minorities to make and sustain claims for self-determination.

In the next section I make the case for viewing modern Kurdish politics as a natural experiment and break the four cases of Kurdish-state relations into paired comparisons of ethnonational/homogenizing and Arab socialist state building projects, seeking to set aside a good number of possible alternative explanations. Following that, I present paired comparisons of successful Kurdish mobilization—in Turkey and Iraq—and of failed mobilization in Iran and Syria. In the concluding section, I use the insights afforded by the four Kurdistans to make some speculative propositions about ethnic politics more broadly, looking to a much broader array of cases.

### **Kurds in Four National States: A Natural Experiment**

Genuinely comparative studies of Kurdish rebellion are few: three, to be exact (Entessar 1992, Natali 2000; Romano 2006).<sup>1</sup> This is largely the case because the visibility of Kurdish nationalist movements in Turkey and Iraq has overshadowed the simple observation that four countries straddle greater Kurdistan—Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. However, only Iraq's and Turkey's Kurds have mounted sustained, organized challenges to their central governments. Often described as the largest ethnic group in the world lacking its own national state, the Kurds merit interest simply on the basis of the size of their population. Analytically speaking,

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<sup>1</sup> But see Matthew Kocher's (2004) excellent cross-temporal comparative study of Kurdistan under Ottoman and Turkish rule and in the 19<sup>th</sup> and late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, respectively.

they also offer scholars a rare opportunity to hold constant myriad important factors in comparing Kurdish movements: a natural historical experiment.<sup>2</sup> From a quite similar historical, economic, political, and demographic past, Kurdish minorities became part of four national states following World War I.

Prior to World War I, Ottoman and Persian rule over Kurdistan carried little in the way of serious distinctions in the pattern of state encroachment. As Hassanpour (1994) has noted, social change in greater Kurdistan produced a flourishing urban commercial and intellectual life overseen by more or less autonomous Kurdish principalities until 1639, when the Ottoman and Persian empires negotiated a border that divided Kurds and imposed on them buffer status. During the next 250 years, the drive to maintain sovereignty provided a powerful incentive for allying with one empire or the other, and the frequency of war on Kurdish soil reversed much of the progress that had preceded the border agreement. By the eve of World War I, Kurdistan had been de-urbanized and had largely reverted to agrarian-tribal political structures that would define the early modern legacy inherited by 20<sup>th</sup>-century Kurdish elites.

Another factor that provides a compelling comparison group among these four Kurdish minorities is the variation within the regime types that they confronted. Turkey and Iran were ruled by authoritarian (and later quasi-democratic in Turkey's case) nationalists who sought to homogenize their populaces into "Turks" and "Iranians" by repressing minority expression. The goal here was national integration and was socially conservative in tone since it did not

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<sup>2</sup> For discussions of natural experiments in social science, see Dunning 2005, Freedman 1999, and Posner 2004.

seek egalitarian ends.<sup>3</sup> Iraq and Syria also sought homogenization, but did so with an eye to Arab socialism, nationalist in tone like Iran and Turkey but with an explicit socialist tone that sought to minimize ethnic issues to prioritize class transformation.

Following the first World War, newly independent Turkey embarked on an ethnically homogenizing state project under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk aimed at creating a strong, “modern” Turkey. Across Turkey’s southeast border with Iran, Reza Shah of Iran largely emulated Atatürk’s policies, seeking to build an equally powerful modern Iran. There remained sizeable functional differences in the policies that the two pursued, as I discuss below, but ideologically and in several important state policy arenas—especially language policy and local autonomy vs. central authority—the two regimes largely followed the same trajectory vis-à-vis Kurdish and other minorities. Where they differed, I detail below, is in their success at breaking down rural social structures and inducing urban migration. And, they differed substantially in the degree to which Kurdish parties could sustain rebellions against them.

Much the same could be said of the Ba’athist Republican regimes that took power in Syria and Iraq in 1958. Overthrowing externally installed conservative monarchies, Arab socialist army officers in both countries came to power seeking also to create modern states, but along different lines than in Iran and Turkey. The two Ba’athist regimes were avowedly socialist, and in principle if not in practice dedicated to recognizing the many ethnic groups that made up their respective states. Again, those ideological similarities masked serious differences in the degree to which these states, accomplished real social transformation in the Kurdish

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<sup>3</sup> This did not mean that rulers in Iran and Turkey left class structures as they were. On the contrary, both Atatürk and Reza Shah and their successors attempted to confront landed rural elites in an effort to weaken the “local strongmen” that stood to challenge their infrastructural state building projects. For a general discussion of this problem, see Migdal 1988.

countryside. Iraq succeeded where Syria failed, and again the paradox was that this episode of state penetration of Kurdish society left it less capable later of controlling Kurdish mobilization.

Beyond the within-set controls made possible by pairing the state structures that Kurdish nationalists confronted in Iran and Turkey, and in Iraq and Syria, respectively, the four cases also make it possible to set aside several common explanants of civil war. Terrain and resource wealth are two of the most important structural predictors of civil war (Kocher 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2003; de Soysa 2000; Elbadawi and Sambanis 2002). But, across the four cases, these indicators track poorly with the success of Kurdish movements. Sizeable oil reserves are located in the Kurdish regions of both Iraq and Syria, and all four Kurdish regions are mountainous. In short, would-be Kurdish rebels have similarly favorable terrain in which to launch challenges to their respective central states in all four of these countries, and in Iraq and Syria ought to have had the most compelling resource-capture rationales for doing so, yet Syrian Kurds have failed to mount any sustained challenge while their counterparts in Turkey have done so despite the region's relative lack of resource wealth.

Poverty has also been endemic across the Kurdish regions in all four countries, and has been especially so relative to the dominant Arab, Persian, and Turkish ethnic majorities in them. Both overall national poverty and relative deprivation (regional poverty relative to overall national) are more or less constant factors across all four Kurdish regions.<sup>4</sup> Another very important factor, and one that Sambanis (2004, 270-71) rightly points to as missing from econometric civil war studies, is external intervention. Given the history of great power support

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that, in the cases of Iraq and Syria, this statement is provisional rather than definitive. I have found data reported only for the Kurdish provinces in Iran and Turkey (see Koochi-Kamali 2003 and Kocher 2004, respectively) but most accounts of Iraq and Syria are in accord with this conclusion.

for Kurds at various times in Iran and Iraq, and frequent support by one or more of these four countries for Kurdish movements in others, one might argue that it is simply external support that carries the day. It is important to note, however, the near lack of support for Turkey's Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK), especially relative to the voluminous Soviet support for the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran and long-term American, Iranian, and Israeli support for the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq in the 1960s and early 1970s. While Iraq's Kurds have undoubtedly benefited more from international intervention since 1991 more than any of their counterparts, I would suggest that in most instances, external support arrived only after it became clear that it could make a difference, that is, that the movement was viable enough to warrant the obvious material and potential political costs of aiding separatists in one of these countries.

### **Theorizing Kurdish Rebellion: Social Structural Change and Urbanization**

In short, the usual suspect variables in econometric studies fail to capture the variation across the Kurdish movements in these four states. To my mind, it is in significant part because the logic of these variables' together appears to assume the homogeneity of internal movement viability: that is, *given* ethnic (or, more accurately, ethnoregional) groups with similar mobilization capacity, which external conditions facilitate mobilization? I want to suggest that we take a step back and look at the human resources on which different generations of would be nationalist elites can draw in building movements from small cliques to mass-based resistance. Those human resources change in importance during the process of modernization, which took place during roughly the same time periods in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.



At each state's founding moments, institutions were relatively weak, the economies were largely agricultural, and in Kurdistan, social power lay mostly in the hands of rural elites, whether religious (Shaykhs) or tribal (Aghas). Hence the early rebellions by Shaykh Said in Turkey (1925), Simqu in Iran (1922), Shaykh Mahmud in Iraq (1918-20), and Badr Khan in Syria (1948), all of which drew on traditional power structures as mobilizing resources to construct rebellions manned by rural Kurds. Economic transformation in the Middle East challenged the continued social power of these rural elites, but to varying degrees.

During the 1950s and 1960s, all four countries to varying degrees underwent rapid economic transformation, and that transformation affected each Kurdish minority. By the 1970s, Kurds in all four countries had established Kurdish Democratic Parties to represent the interests of new urban elites as well as traditional rural ones. Moreover, rural Kurdish elites had been decisively weakened or co-opted in each of these countries, leaving the future of Kurdish nationalism in the hands of urban leaders. What differed dramatically was the degree to which these new urban elites had a Kurdish urban population base on which to draw in mobilizing a second-generation resistance movement.

In Iraq and Turkey, land reform and the mechanization of agriculture, respectively, were the key mechanisms linking agrarian commercialization to breaking the power that aghas had over Kurdish peasants. Once that power was broken, both the capacity of aghas to hold peasants on the land *and* the ability of states to stifle Kurdish resistance by focusing on aghas collapsed too. When it did, a new and urbanized form of resistance emerged, led by radicals such as Jalal Talabani in Iraq and Abdullah Öcalan in Turkey. These leaders succeeded, I argue, not just because they came to prominence under demographically propitious conditions, but

also because urban growth in Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan was to *Kurdish* cities. Urban migrants from rural Kurdish areas quickly established Kurdish population dominance.

In Iran, government land reform policies scarcely touched Kurdistan, as I detail below.

As a result, aghas never lost their centrality and Kurdish cities such as Sanandaj and Mahabad never became the loci of mobilizing efforts that Sulaymaniya in Iraq and Diyarbakir in Turkey would. Although the first Kurdish Democratic Party was founded in Iran, and although the most ambitious Kurdish movement (the Mahabad Republic of 1946) emerged there, the stark lack of urban growth in Iranian Kurdistan stifled the chances that the movement would successfully cross generations as its Iraqi and Turkish counterparts did.

In Syria, the same problem of limited urbanization was magnified by the lack of a settled Kurdish homeland. Kurds moved into northeast Syria to settle in large numbers only in the 1940s, giving Syrian Kurds no “start-up” social structures on which a nationalist movement could be viably built. Subsequent Syrian state efforts to resettle Kurds accomplished more politically than in Iraq, Iran and Turkey because Syrian Kurdistan lacked any significant urban centers. As a result, urban migration by Syrian Kurds was to Aleppo and Damascus, two Sunni Arab cities in which Kurds became instantly atomized minorities surrounded by suspicious Arab majorities.

To summarize the argument, Kurds could only sustain nationalist movements through uncertain external support, periodically brutal state repression, and outright war when they could first mobilize using traditional rural social structures and later rely on growing urban Kurdish populations to counter state efforts to pacify the countryside and defeat rural elites. The long-term viability of Kurdish rebellion, in short, is dependent on a particular set of

demographic and social changes. In the next section, I present historical narratives of Kurdish resistance in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey, illustrating how despite similar origins variation in rural social power and later urbanization provided a crucial social base for Iraqi and Turkish Kurdish nationalists but failed to do so in Iran and Syria.

### **The Kurds of Iran: Opportunistic and Failed Resistance, 1918-**

When Iran entered the modern state building period after the First World War, following Reza Shah's ascent to power, Kurdish society was dominated by tribal organization as it was in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. In pursuing state penetration of Iran's social and geographic landscape, Reza Shah failed to obliterate tribes' importance but did succeed in transforming "the context in which they operated" (McDowall 2000, 214). That Iranian Kurds succeeded in resisting the onslaught of Iran's state building project is testament to the strength of rural social organization. Reza Shah prioritized the Iranian army above all other institutions, and this meant that, beginning in about 1920, Kurdish tribes in Iran found themselves battling a newly equipped, organized, and superbly trained force using technologically advanced weaponry that they simply could not match.

Nonetheless, Iranian Kurds did manage to resist Reza Shah. In particular, as took place in Iraq and Turkey as well, tribal rebellion ushered in the modern era of Kurd-state relations in Iran. Ismail Agha Simqu, head of the Abdui Shikak tribe, attempted between 1918 and 1922 to build a tribal alliance in support of independence as post-war chaos left the country with no central rule maker. In 1920 the pre-Reza Shah Iranian army defeated his first run at building a Kurdish militia, but agreed to his proposed settlement. Two months later, Simqu regrouped his forces and sealed alliances with other tribes and, with arms and funding from both Turkey and

the new Bolshevik government in Russia, his alliance captured a sizeable portion of the Iranian Kurdish countryside. His success continued through 1921, and expanded his militia from 1000 to nearly 5000, but his heavy-handed treatment of tribes that were insufficiently supportive of him began to generate opposition within the Kurdish tribal elite. Meanwhile, Reza Shah's government held back while building its armed forces and gradually defeating other political challenges from Soviet- and Turkish-supported subversion (McDowall 2000, 220). In August 1922, the Iranian army finally moved against Simqu, capturing his stronghold and after that quickly securing all the territory he had controlled. By the end of August, Simqu had fled to Turkey. Reza Shah pardoned him in 1924 and he returned to Iran in 1925.

By 1926, Simqu had regained control of his tribe and begun another outright rebellion against the state. When the army engaged him, half of his troops defected to the tribe's previous leader and Simqu fled to Iraq. He returned in 1929, after an offer of amnesty and the governorship of the township of Ushnaviya. This time, the army ambushed and killed him. Following Simqu's death, the Iranian government moved from confronting active Kurdish challenges to seeking to extinguish "latent" ones. Rather than battling tribes one by one, Reza shah sought at first to prevent alliances while periodically co-opting various tribes to serve as auxiliary troops in confrontations with others (McDowall 2000, 223). Only in the late 1920s did his army begin to attempt to disarm the tribes. That effort took place amidst serious state violence and British consular officials remarked in 1931 that official policy appeared to have become a consistent one of "deliberate, open cruelty" toward Kurdish villagers, armed and unarmed alike (cited in McDowall, 2000, 225).

By 1941, when Reza Shah was deposed by the occupying British, his government had had some success in pacifying Kurdish tribes. He had forcibly settled or resettled the most outwardly rebellious tribes and had appropriated the lands of others. Still, two factors contributed to a largely intact Kurdish social structure on the eve of the British occupation and the ascent to power of Reza's son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. First, Reza Shah never really challenged social structures in areas where Kurdish elites did not rebel, in an effort to resist leftist mobilization of peasants. Since fairly limited numbers of tribes resorted to out-and-out rebellion, this left most of the Kurdish countryside stably in the hands of rural landowning elites, preserving the capacity of those elites both to resist the state on occasion and to maintain their hold on the peasants who lived on their lands. Second, land policies that Reza Shah enacted actually served to concentrate rural social power. His new Land Registry Department actively encouraged aghas to register what had long been communal Kurdish lands in their own names, giving legal status to such "acquisitions" (226). Finally, wishing to curry favor with local elites, the British ordered the Iranian government in the aftermath of deposing Reza Shah to reinstate Kurdish lands that had been seized during his rule. Thus, while it is unquestionably true that Kurdish tribes were weaker *relative to the state* by 1941, they remained quite powerful in absolute terms. What changed during the following decades was the decline of the state's power, as I outline below.

It was during the occupation of Iran during World War II that Iranian Kurds had their greatest success in mobilizing against the central government. In September 1942, a group of urban Kurdish nationalists led by Abd al Rahman Zabihi created the Komala-i Jiyani Kurdistan (Committee for the Revival of Kurdistan, hereafter Komala) in the city of Mahabad.

Through 1944, Komala remained a small organization, with only roughly 100 members, and a clandestine-style structure composed of small cells. The group was avowedly opposed to traditional Kurdish power structures and in particular aghas and shaykhs, railing against them in print beginning with the first issue of Komala's newspaper, *Nishtman* (Fatherland). Although it did moderate this radical class language in the party's official handbook, Komala retained its urban radical flavor (McDowall 2000, 237-39).

Despite this, most aghas in the Mahabad hinterland made formal statements of support for the group, simply because it "symbolized independence from central government" (239). This provisional support for Komala from the agha class solidified in April 1945 when Qazi Muhammad, an agha with strong standing among his counterparts and a large militia, became the organization's president. His membership in Komala actually received strong support from the Soviet Union, in whose sphere of interest much of Iranian Kurdistan lay in accordance with the British-Soviet agreement on their joint occupation of Iran. The Soviet Union encouraged separatist movements in Iranian Azerbaijan and in northern Kurdistan in advance of a plan to incorporate the two regions into the USSR itself, and allying itself with such a notable as Qazi Muhammad made political sense.

It is interesting to note that during this period there did take place some substantial urban migration in Kurdish Iran. To look back at the demographic explanation I developed earlier in this essay, the essential argument was that urbanization made possible the social uprooting of Kurdish peasants in Iraq and Turkey, in addition to creating a pool of urban Kurds in the labor force, universities, and commercial classes who could be mobilized by urban Kurdish radicals. So, why did the modest but significant urbanization of Iranian Kurdistan not

generate the same effects over time? The answer is that, where urban migrants had been wholly broken free of both their rural elite patrons and in many cases of their tribal ties altogether, in Iran aghas and shaykhs moved into the cities almost preemptively. When they did, they simply expanded their rural social power into Kurdish cities in Iran and transplanted the structure of Kurdish society in a way that neither Iraqi nor Turkish Kurdish rural leaders were able to do (McDowall 2000, 237). This facet of Kurdish social change does suggest that urbanization may simply be one of a family of phenomena that break the power of rural strongmen rather than the key mechanism itself.

In any case, Qazi Muhammad met in September 1945 with the Soviet consul in Tabriz (the capital of the Iranian province of Azerbaijan), then in Baku with the president of the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, and was advised to skirt Komala and establish a Kurdish Democracy Party of Iran. With substantial encouragement and material support from Soviet officials, Qazi returned to Mahabad and declared the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran. Notable in the party's opening declaration was a complete absence of any language about land reform. And, the movement probably only survived this first appearance because Mulla Mustafa and Shaykh Ahmad Barzani arrived to Mahabad in October fleeing Iraq following their failed rebellion at home. The Soviet Union ordered the Barzanis to place their militias under Qazi Muhammad's control, which they did, and by January 1946 sufficient progress had been made to embolden Qazi Muhammad to declare the independent Republic of Mahabad. The republic, however, faced fragmented local support from the outset. Its dependence on the Barzani militias was the most troubling problem to local chiefs, but not by any means the only one. Dependence on the Soviet Union, a lingering desire not to burn bridges permanently with the Iranian government,

tensions with the parallel Azeri Republic's leadership all prevented a coherent, unified front during the short-lived Kurdish republic.

In April, the republic's fortunes collapsed with the announcement that, after American and British pressure to withdraw entirely from Iran, the Soviet Union agreed to do so. The leadership of the Azeri republic negotiated a deal with the Iranian government that returned all lands to Iranian control, including much of Kurdish Iran. This treaty effectively made Mahabad the last remaining rebel area and, after a series of confrontations between Barzani forces (supported tepidly by fighters loyal to Amr Khan, an Iranian Kurdish agha) and Iranian army troops, the resistance broke down. Intra-Kurdish tensions emerged in force, with most of the conflict cleaving along urban-tribal lines. Soviet support of rural elites exacerbated this tension.

Qazi Muhammad tried to negotiate a favorable agreement with the Iranian government, led by sympathetic Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam, but the latter's position deteriorated as his Kurdish- and left-friendly politicking gradually undercut his support in Tehran. Mahabad's eroding position and steady defection of aghas from the KDP-I led to the republic's defeat and the occupation of the city by Iranian troops in December of 1946. It would be plausible to suggest simply that the withdrawal of external support for Iranian Kurdish nationalists explains the failure of the Mahabad republican experiment. However, it is appropriate here to point to numerous instances in which external support was withdrawn from Iraq's Kurdish movements—in 1974 and again in 1991, to take just two—and in which the movements nonetheless survived. It is also worth noting that Kurdish nationalists in Turkey never acquired anything like the level of outside backing that Iran's did in the mid-1940s. Rather, I want to suggest here that the movement in Iran failed largely because of inauspicious demographics. In



the 1940s the critical mass of social power still lay firmly in the hands of landlords. The Komala leadership's decision to take an avowedly Marxist line in 1941 (see Entessar 1992, 17) wrecked any chance of an alliance with them. Furthermore, even though nationalist rural elites did manage to gain some stature in Mahabad, they never succeeded in building political strongholds in either Sanandaj or Kermanshah, the two largest and politically most important cities in Kurdish Iran. Finally, more broadly speaking, Soviet support for Komala and then for KDP-I alienated a good number of landlords, who recognized that their class interests coincided more with conservative Persians in Tehran than with radical Kurds in their own regions. In short, radical Kurdish nationalism in Iran was well ahead of its time in terms of social change. Peasants were never broken free of their land ties in sufficient numbers to generate a rural mobilization base, and urbanization was too limited to produce an urban one.

In the aftermath of Mahabad's collapse, the KDP-I "effectively ceased to exist" (McDowall 2000, 244). The party's urban supporters essentially disappeared into obscurity and, for the next 15 years, there was virtually no Kurdish political activity. The absence of an indigenous Kurdish armed force in Iran, and the effective absence of a large urban population ready to be mobilized against the central government, left Iran's Kurds waiting for an external shock to provide an opportunity, much as the Second World War had. That shock came in 1961 with a Kurdish rebellion in Iraq following failed attempts by Iraq's new revolutionary government to settle its own Kurdish problem. When the 1958-61 rapprochement collapsed, the KDP-Iran supported Iraqi Kurds; in the process, the leadership and subsequent social orientation of both Iran's and Iraq's Kurdish Democratic Parties turned conservative.

Facing a newly consolidated Iraqi government by 1965, Mulla Mustafa turned against his former military allies and then-current KDP-Iran supporters and came to an agreement with the Shah that called for him to “restrain” KDP-Iran activities against the Iranian government. He went further, “subordinating the struggle in Iran to that in Iraq” and “warn[ing] that KDP-Iran militants would not be tolerated in Iraqi Kurdistan” (McDowall 2000, 253). The result of this was that the conservative leadership of the KDP-Iran was ousted and new, mostly former Iranian Tudeh (Communist) Party leaders took over the party’s leadership. They formed a Revolutionary Committee and declared their support for sporadic peasant uprisings against the National Police between Mahabad and Urumiya. Lacking a significant social base, however, this new leadership found little purchase in Kurdish society, and it was quickly crushed. Within months eight of 11 members of the Revolutionary Committee had been killed by Iranian troops, and the movement lasted less than 18 months. As McDowall notes, “The KDPI at this juncture lacked the skills or *resources* to survive” (253, emphasis added).

As in Iraq, in the 1960s land reform became a significant political issue in Iran. Under the banner of the “White Revolution,”<sup>5</sup> the Shah’s government enacted a land reform program that promised to distribute much of the land held by the wealthiest rural families to the peasants they functionally owned. In practice, these land reforms rarely met their promises (see Hooglund 1982, Najmabadi 1987) and often amounted to targeted land grabs against the royal family’s most threatening or vocal rivals. Since there were few of either in Iranian Kurdistan,

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<sup>5</sup> The Shah named the program “White Revolution” to distinguish his reforms from either “Black” — referring to the Shi’a leadership — or “Red” — referring to the leftist movements that along with the Shi’a hierarchy had been his main ideological nemeses. This chromatic rhetoric was constant under his rule, and in his post-revolution memoirs he consistently blamed an unholy alliance of “red and black” for his downfall.

land reform amounted to little, and accomplished equally little in terms of breaking the coercive social and economic relationship between aghas and peasants.

There were no Kurdish uprisings to speak of between 1965 and the late 1970s, and the demographics of urban and rural areas help to illuminate why this was the case. Central Iran, which experienced the same sort of socioeconomic transformation that Turkey and Iraq did in general, was by 1977 80 percent urban and 20 percent rural; Iranian Kurdistan remained 75 percent rural and, even after two decades of oil-driven state-led industrialization, just 25 percent urban (McDowall 2000, 258). The revolutionary uprisings of 1977-79 provided another opportunity for Iran's Kurdish organizations to try to win something from a state under siege by most important parts of Iranian society, and did manage to take by default some measure of autonomy during the revolution's immediate aftermath.

Hoping for favorable treatment from the new Islamic Republican government, the KDP-Iran requested substantial autonomy within the unitary Iranian state. Khomeini and his supporters, however, envisioned a new Shi'a Muslim Iranian polity in which ethnic identities had no place. To a considerable extent, the Islamic Republic was even more hostile to Kurdish ambitions than either of the Pahlavi Shahs had been, and the first battle between Kurds and partisans of the new regime took place less than a month after Khomeini's return to Iran in February 1979. During the first three years after the revolution, while a more threatening domestic struggle with Iranian leftist forces and a still more threatening war with Iraq preoccupied the Iranian armed forces, KDP-I fighters managed to seize and hold most of rural Iranian Kurdistan, ceding only cities and larger towns to the government's armed forces. During this period, both traditional and radical Kurdish leaders attempted to negotiate with the

regime: Shaykh Izz al Din Husayni and Qassemlou both made offers and both were refused. As a result, fighting went on until 1982.

After consolidating the power struggle in Tehran between Khomeini's Islamic Republicans and leftist supporters of exiled former President Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr and Iranian gains in the war against Iraq, the regime turned again in 1982 to Kurdish nationalists. Sending in Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guard) rather than regular army troops, and dispatching the Ayatollah Sadiq Khalkhali—the “Hanging Judge”—resulted in the deaths of nearly 10,000 Kurds in the 1979-82 period alone, many in mass executions ordered by Khalkhali. In part the brutality with which the Pasdaran fought Kurds took a religious tone as well. Iranian Kurds are predominantly Sunni, and this early in the Islamic Republic Pasdaran units reported not to Tehran but to the Imam Komiteh of their region. The Imam Komiteh were local committees established to run local governments while the regime worked to consolidate its power, and they were generally headed by “Shi'a triumphalists” (McDowall 2000, 264).

There has been almost no Kurdish political activity in Iran since the early 1980s, despite the glowing success to the west of Iraqi Kurds since the 1991 Gulf War. Much of this failure, the evidence suggests, is traceable to the mismatch between Kurdish leadership in Iran since the 1940s—predominantly urban and radical-leftist in orientation—and the basic social demography of Kurdish Iran, which has remained dominantly rural and dominated by rural elites. Those quiescent elites' control over both most Kurdish peasants and whose vast political superiority relative to urban elites has meant that radical Kurdish organizations in Iran, while ideologically and organizationally similar to those in Iraq and Turkey, have always lacked a social base.

### **The Iraqi State and Kurdish Resistance, 1918-2003**

To foreshadow the central argument of the Iraqi Kurdish narrative presented here, it is that Kurdish resistance has survived and flourished despite infighting and harsh repression for two main reasons. First, the bifurcation of social bases made possible by a) urban growth and Kurdish urban migration and b) the emergence in the 1970s of an urban-based Kurdish party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), provided a sustainable base of recruits in addition to the rural base of the Kurdish Democratic party. This diverse recruitment base, even while provoking intra-Kurdish conflict, allowed the movement as a whole to survive numerous attempts by the Iraqi government to decimate it. Second, as I detail below, leftist Kurdish parties could succeed only where a) the founding of those parties followed land reform and b) where land reform had significantly weakened rural Kurdish elites and led to urban migration. Although urban-based, leftist Kurdish elites also founded parties in Iran, Syria, and Turkey, only in Iraq and Turkey were they successful in mobilizing large numbers of recruits. In short, Kurdish peasants had to have been freed from their quasi-feudal relationships to rural elites and large Kurdish urban populations had to develop in order for second-generation, leftist parties to have a viable base of potential recruits.

Iraq gained formal independence in 1932 from the British. King Faysal, the hand-picked monarch chosen by the British to head the state, inherited an uneasy relationship with the country's Kurdish northern regions. While tensions between Kurdish tribes had made a unified front untenable (McDowall 2000, 152-53), the British policy of reliance on local strongmen rather than direct rule left a legacy of both giving new salience to tribal authority (157) and weak state

penetration of Iraqi Kurdistan. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, Shaykh Mahmud began a procession of rural rebellions and wrung an appointment to governor of Sulaymaniya district from the newly arrived British administration. During the 1930s and 1940s, the center of gravity in Kurdish resistance to the Iraqi state remained tribal, in large part because there was only a tiny urban elite in Kurdish cities. One tribal leader—Shaykh Ahmad Barzani—stood out as a result of having extracted taxation rights to the villages he controlled in 1928. He had won those rights during a rebellion the year before over government construction of houses in his region of Barzan (178), gaining a modicum of autonomy, but periodic conflicts with other tribes forestalled wider challenges to the state.

Faysal's death in 1933 opened the political environment to Kurds, among other groups in Iraq, and the decade of the 1930s saw the emergence of urban Kurdish nationalist groups to compliment rural, tribal ones. Shaykh Latif, the son of Shaykh Mahmud who had led the 1918 rebellion, founded the Komala Brayati (Brotherhood Society—KB) and younger urban Kurds the Darkar (Woodcutters) a more radical group with closer ties to Iraq's Communist Party (ICP). In 1938 Hiwa (Hope) was created, and established a broader base than had either KB or Darkar, building networks in most Kurdish cities and, unlike the other two urban groups, ties to rural elites as well by incorporating many aghas, shaykhs, and landlords into the organization.<sup>6</sup> However, the fact that rural social structures had yet to be challenged in any real way meant that the organization had no peasant base, just a collection of rural elite members. Given that, and the lack of a substantial urban population in which to mobilize recruits, Hiwa

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<sup>6</sup> Van Bruinessen (1992) outlines these three primary rural elite titles. Aghas are village headmen, holding some variant of "ownership" of the village and authority over villagers. Shaikhs are Islamic religious leaders who sit outside of tribal power structures and therefore are often called on to mediate tribal conflicts. Landlords are simply those who own rural land of significant quantity. The latter are sometimes aghas as well, but were also often absentees who contracted aghas to care for their land.

remained little more than a small elite organization. Its leadership, however, had close ties to the leaders of the Mahabad Republic in Iran (see below).

The first major post-independence Kurdish rebellion took place between 1943 and 1945, led by Mulla Mustafa Barzani, largely over government treatment of him and his brother Shaikh Ahmad. The “revolt remained intrinsically tribal,” garnered little other tribal support outside of the Barzani clan and its militia and the Iraqi government defeated Barzani in August 1945 (McDowall 2000, 294). The major effect of the Barzani revolt was to catalyze the disintegration of Hiwa, the only Kurdish organization to date to have a truly cross-class membership, in late 1944.

Barzani fled into Iran and, in 1946, supported the Mahabad rebellion in Iran. While there, he proposed an alliance of tribal notables and leftists within a new organization, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq. The creation of the KDP-I was contemporaneous to Rizgari Kurd (Kurdish Liberation), created in 1945 in Baghdad colleges, which spread to students in Kurdish cities and which for a few years was influential in provoking uprisings in Kurdish cities. While Rizgari was committed to a united Kurdistan and to social transformation, the KDP-I was focused on advancing Kurdish interests inside Iraq, and its tribal base generated a socially conservative cast to its politics. The British, hoping to bolster their weak ally in the Iraq central government, tried to rally Kurdish shaikhs against both Rizgari and the new KDP-I, but ironically the British effort after 1918 to weaken shaikhs by encroaching on their major base of social power—authority over arbitration—left them with little remaining clout. This was all the more so among younger Kurds, who increasingly supported leftist movements rather than conservative elites.

Between 1946 and 1953, despite Mulla Mustafa's exile in Iran and then in the Soviet Union, the KDP-I became the predominant Kurdish political organization. It also developed into a more regional than strictly ethnic party (reflecting this symbolically by renaming itself the Kurdistan Democratic party) to represent all people living within Iraqi Kurdistan. Despite efforts to rally mass support, the continued strength of landlords limited the party's ability to mobilize Kurdish peasants during this period. It was also the case that landed elites had grown stronger during the 1930s. The Land Settlement Laws of 1932 and 1938, efforts to bolster the government's social base after Faysal's death, reinforced the social power of landowners as well.

Kurdish fortunes briefly changed for the better in the wake of the 1958 revolution in Iraq. The revolutionary government's new leader \_\_\_\_\_ Qasim left the KDP out of the cabinet, but did include Baba Ali Barzani, one of Shaykh Mahmud's sons. He also invited Mulla Mustafa back to Iraq from his exile in the Soviet Union (McDowall 2000, 302). However, a split emerged at this point in the Kurdish support base: while Mulla Mustafa lacked the support of the KDP's urban elites, he had Qasim's support and that of the KDP rural militias. The September, 1958 Agrarian Reform Law exacerbated this split by pitting Kurdish progressive (largely urban) elites against Mulla Mustafa and other rural landowners. Tension between Mulla Mustafa and Qasim over both land reform and over the former's increasing power led Qasim to side with other Kurdish aghas against him and the KDP by 1960 (306). In 1961 Mulla Mustafa began a revolt against the Qasim government, supported both by anti-regime aghas who opposed agrarian reform and ultimately by the KDP, which supported it but sided with Mulla Mustafa anyway (308-11). This rebellion ended in 1963 with the overthrow of Qasim's government. It



also catalyzed a permanent split between the progressive urban and conservative rural factions of the KDP, personified by Jalal Talabani and Mulla Mustafa, respectively.

By 1965 the Iraqi government had consolidated again, and began a new war against Kurdish nationalism (FLESH THIS OUT). The military's efforts focused on seizing cities and towns in Kurdish Iraq, but generally were unable to capture much of the countryside from Kurdish militias. The stalemate led to an agreement wherein the new Bazzazz government accepted Kurdish demands (WHICH WERE?); that agreement collapsed when Bazzazz was overthrown.

The collapse of *that* agreement led to a Kurdish civil war. Talabani and Shaykh Ahmad joined their respective forces to challenge Mulla Mustafa in 1966. The Ba'ath government, for reasons both of ideological amity and tactical accord, sided with the Talabani-Ahmad alliance. In that year began the flow of substantial aid to Mulla Mustafa's forces from Iran and Israel (McDowall 2000, 320-25). This conflict led in March 1970 to an agreement with the government, represented by Vice President Saddam Hussein. The agreement acceded to nearly all of the Kurds' major demands on language, cultural, and education policy, participation in government, development funds, resettlement, agrarian reform (again supported only by progressive Kurds), and other demands and in addition called for a Kurdish vice president of the republic (327-28). And, in a departure from past government policy the regime actually took some steps toward enactment of the agreement, especially on land reform.

Nonetheless, by 1971 fighting had already begun again (WHY-FLESH THIS OUT). In April 1972, Iraq and the Soviet Union concluded a mutual defense agreement, and in June 1972 Iraq nationalized its oil industry. These events catalyzed accelerated American support for

Mulla Mustafa and intensified the fighting. As a result, Mulla Mustafa's forces made serious gains against the Iraqi army and continued to do so through 1974. Throughout this period, most the human resource base for Kurdish rebellion was rural.

In March 1975, Saddam Hussein met the Shah of Iran in Algiers to conclude a treaty in which Iran would cease all support for Iraqi Kurds in return for Iraq recognizing the midpoint of the Shatt al-Arab river as the border between the two countries.<sup>7</sup> Within weeks, Mulla Mustafa's fighters retreated, returned to their homes, or fled into Iran. The end of his dominance of the Kurdish movement in Iraq coincided with a dramatic demographic change: the decline of rural population and subsequent urbanization of the Kurdish population in Iraq. [75-85 period?]

Following the defeat of Mulla Mustafa's and the KDP's forces in 1975, the PUK became the central organization in mobilizing Kurdish resistance to the Iraqi state. While considerably weaker initially than its predecessor had been, the PUK did manage to sustain the Kurdish challenge through the 1980s, in part through support from the Islamic Republic, which although busy repressing its own Kurds was happy to aid an enemy of its enemy in Baghdad. Between 1980 and 1987, the Iraqi government used *jash*, Kurdish fighters it paid, to combat the PUK's forces.<sup>8</sup> As McDowall (2000, 354-56) notes, many of these *jash* signed up only half-heartedly because neither the KDP nor the PUK had the administrative capacity to absorb such large

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<sup>7</sup> The British, hoping to limit Iraq's likely military power by depriving the country of a major port on the Persian Gulf, drew the boundaries of Iraq and Kuwait after World War I so that Kuwait would encompass all of the useable coastline within the former Ottoman province that became Iraq and Kuwait. Subsequently, Iraqi governments claimed the whole of the Shatt al-Arab in order to allow Iraq's naval forces to have sufficiently deep water in which to port.

<sup>8</sup> *Jash* is the Kurdish word for donkey, a pejorative moniker given these fighters by Kurdish civilians and encouraged by the Kurdish leadership.

numbers of new recruits. As a result, while indirectly on the Iraqi state payroll, many of them fed information to the Kurdish resistance.

In response both to persistent Kurdish rebellion and to Kurdish collaboration with the Islamic Republic during the first six years of the war, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein empowered Ali Hassan al-Majid, who would later be referred to as “Chemical Ali,” to take extreme measures to try to crush the Kurdish movement. Those efforts in 1987 and 1988 amounted to attempted genocide, in which as many as 150,000 people may have been killed and hundreds of thousands more forcibly resettled or driven from their homes as thousands of Kurdish villages were destroyed. Despite its brutality, al-Majid’s effort failed to “atomize” Kurdish society as he had hoped, for largely demographic reasons that the regime had failed to take into account. Destroying villages, forcibly resettling rural Kurds, and other countryside tactics might have worked in the 1960s, when nearly [WHAT PERCENT?] of Kurds still lived in rural areas, and when 60% of them still identified with tribal regional origins. By the early 1980s, that had changed dramatically; only WHAT PERCENT of Kurds remained outside of cities and large towns and only 20% of them identified tribally. In short, the regime’s success at accomplishing land reform had weakened rural elites dramatically, but had created what McDowall referred to rightly as a demographic “Trojan horse within [Kurdish] towns and townships” upon which the Kurdish Front could draw in mobilizing new recruits (2000, 370). The Iraqi government continued to fight Kurdish nationalists as though the same conditions present in the 1960s applied, and its failure to account for Kurdish urbanization, and the subsequent resource base on which the radical Kurdish leadership could draw, shaped

powerfully both the viability of the movement and the degree to which it could enlist external support.

Kurdish prospects changed radically in 1990 and 1991. By surviving the aftermath of the 1975 Iran-Iraq treaty and the attempted genocide of 1987-1988, the Iraqi Kurdish movement entered the 1990s intact and poised to capitalize on Saddam's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War. In its aftermath, Kurdish and Shi'a rebellions seriously challenged the hold of the Ba'ath regime in March. In Kurdistan, the uprisings were led not by the Kurdish parties but by the jash, who defected en masse and catalyzed a broader rebellion. In June 1991, peshmergas in Arbil and Sulaymaniya seized control of the two cities, leaving rural areas largely to government control. This tactical choice reflected the new demography of Kurdistan: by holding cities, Kurdish leaders held the bulk of their population, and especially that share of it that was ripe for mobilization into the movement.

This seizure of two of Kurdistan's three biggest cities heralded the most successful era of modern Kurdish nationalism. In May 1992, Iraqi Kurds held elections in what the no-fly zone established by the US-led coalition had made into a de facto Kurdish autonomous region. The KDP and PUK won 45% and 43.6% of the vote, respectively, crowding out all other Kurdish organizations, and eventually agreed on an uneasy joint rule. By 1996, tensions between the two organizations erupted into another Kurdish civil war in which the KDP, supported by the Iraqi government, almost destroyed the PUK, which had counted unwisely on American aid that never materialized (McDowall 2000, 388-89). The Iranian government stepped in to provide aid to the PUK in return for its collaboration against the Iranian Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP-I) in the summer of 1996. The result was that, until the American invasion of Iraq in

2003, the dependence of Iraq's two major Kurdish political organizations on external powers reinforced the split between them.

Since 2003, Iraq's Kurds have acquired a stake in their national state unprecedented in the post-independence era. Former leaders of the PUK and KDP—Jalal Talabani and Masud Barzani, respectively—now serve as presidents of Iraq and of the Kurdish regional government. It is striking that Talabani's main task today is to preserve the unity of the Iraqi state against, among other things, Kurdish aspirations represented by his rival. While it is undoubtedly true that external intervention both on behalf of Iraq's Kurds as a group and on behalf of one organization or the other was important at crucial moments in confrontations with the Iraq state, a comparative look at Kurdish resistance suggests that it is not *the* central explanation for success. External intervention has characterized Kurdish politics in all four countries under consideration here, and it has met varying degrees of success both across countries and within countries at different points in time. That fact suggests to me that external intervention—both the decisions made by foreign powers whether to provide assistance, and the eventual outcome of the episodes in which intervention occurs—are endogenous to broader sociopolitical factors within each Kurdish population. In short, foreign powers weighed both whether and how much to support Iraqi Kurds based on the likelihood of them succeeding. That decision, in turn, rested in significant part on the perceived ability of Kurds to mobilize sufficiently to challenge the Iraqi state successfully, which I argue rested on the demographics of various periods in post-independence Iraqi political life.

## **Conclusion**

The tendency to explain individual Kurdish movements in isolation from other national settings has obscured a compelling explanation for why some of those movements have sustained themselves over long periods of time, through episodes of incredible state violence, while others have remained moribund or only mounted sporadic efforts at challenging central governments. When we probe the experience of modern Kurdish nationalist movements across the entirety of greater Kurdistan, a coherent understanding of the central role of demographic and social change in hindering or facilitating the mobilization of human resources emerges.

Kurdish nationalists in Iraq and Turkey have succeeded where their counterparts in Iran and Syria have failed, the evidence suggests, largely because of propitious demographic circumstances. In the former two countries, early nationalist leaders came from the rural elite class and remained autonomous of central state authorities into the 1950s. After that, urbanization—in particular the growth of Kurdish-majority cities in Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan—created the societal “Trojan Horse” that made possible a generational shift in Kurdish leadership from rural to urban, conservative to radical, elites. In short, the ability of Kurdish nationalism to shift gears demographically and spatially was central to its success.

Kurdish nationalist movements in both Iraq and Turkey began in the interwar period as essentially rural, conservative, and aimed at preserving Kurdish social structures against the intrusion of modern state builders. As those states achieved some success at penetrating the Kurdish countryside and (in the case of Turkey) of introducing mechanized agriculture, they broke the social monopoly of power enjoyed by Kurdish elites and induced substantial urban migration. When they did, paradoxically, they catalyzed large Kurdish urban population in cities such as Sulaymaniya and Diyarbakir; those cities began to provide in the 1970s the new

locus of Kurdish nationalist mobilization. Reflecting this demographic change, the new Kurdish leaders were urban-based and more political radical than their predecessors: witness Sheikh Said vs. Abdullah Ocalan and Mustafa Barzani vs. Talal Jalabani.

There existed urban radicals in both the Iranian and Syrian Kurdish populations, but they still lacked by the 1970s a sizeable urban population base upon which to draw. The result was that, as states managed to exert control over rural elites, the Kurdish nationalist movements in Iran and Syria had nowhere to hide and no new social base to mobilize, effectively paralyzing them. This suggests that, as we continue to push forward scholarship on ethnoregional movements, we ought to bring social structure and change at the macro-level back to a central position in theory building and, in particular, to focus on variations in urbanization and other “core elements of modernity” (Waldner 2004) as important catalysts of contemporary ethnoregional nationalism and wars of self-determination.

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