



# Kurdish Studies Archive

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Kurdish Studies Archive

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## Editorial

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As I am writing this editorial in October 2022, current events unfolding in Kurdistan are resonating around the globe in unprecedented ways. The death of the young Kurdish woman Jîna (Mahsa) Amini at the hands of Iranian morality police on 16 September has sparked mass protests in Iran, which at the time of writing are entering their fifth week. Some call them the greatest challenge to the Islamic Republic since its establishment. Protesters both inside and outside Iran have been rallying around the Kurdish slogan “Jin, Jiyan, Azadî” (translated in Persian as “Zan, zandagî, azadî”) indicating the profound gendered nature of an uprising that has been driven by women’s rage, resentment, and grievances. At the same time, the slogan also points to the Kurdish discontent at play in the protests, and repression has been especially fierce in the provinces of Kurdistan and Baluchistan. In this context, these protests should also be read as part and parcel of the century-old struggle for greater political and cultural freedoms against the Iranian state’s chauvinist tendencies. As editorial team of *Kurdish Studies*, we would like to express our solidarity with the protesters. While it is too early to tell what the outcomes will be, we believe the intersectional nature of both women’s and Kurdish grievances needs to be recognised and we hope that lasting change can be achieved.

It only befits this issue, then, to begin with a contribution that puts Kurdish women’s grievances, dreams, and aspirations centre stage. Wendy Hamelink’s interview with Houzan Mahmoud, editor of the book *Kurdish Women’s Stories* (2021), gives precious insight into the circumstances leading to the publication of the book, Mahmoud’s own experiences and motivations, and the intersectional struggle of Kurdish women. This will be Wendy’s last contribution as associate editor to the journal after many years of unswerving engagement. We would like to thank her for all her generous efforts throughout the years and wish her all the best for the future.

This issue of *Kurdish Studies* further boasts a rich academic content, with four research articles on underrepresented topics in our field. Ahmet Cevdet

Aşkın's contribution presents an analysis of the discourse employed in mainstream Turkish print media when covering news related to the Kurdish conflict. As Aşkın shows, this discourse is heavily invested in the construction of a non-Turkish "other" against which Turkish national identity gets defined.

The potency of language as a social force is also a central focus of the following research article by Esat Şanlı on the potentials and challenges of Zazaki translation efforts. Şanlı's article provides a first scholarly account of such efforts by the Vate Group, underlining how translation can enrich a minority language like Zazaki while also highlighting the obstacles that translation efforts face.

Şerif Derince's contribution on Kurdish language teaching in Berlin extends this volume's focus on the sociopolitics of linguistic formations. Derince's astute analysis of the introduction of Kurdish as a heritage language taught at public schools in Berlin sheds light on the reproduction of entrenched hierarchies within a context of multicultural politics.

Mustafa Dehqan and Vural Genç's article, finally, takes us to the delicate power politics of seventeenth-century Bidlis under Kurdish rule. Based on the analysis of new archival documentation, the article highlights how Kurdish rule in the emirate unfolded through the careful negotiation of power at the local, regional, and imperial scale. The volume closes with a collection of book reviews that provide insight into current developments in our field.

### Acknowledgements

For their efforts in translating the abstracts for this volume, we would like to thank Shenah Abdullah, Mahîr Dogan, and Kübra Sağır. Our thanks are also due to Janet Klein for her help with copyediting and to Sacha Alsancaklı, for bringing this volume together.



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# Kurdish Women's Life Stories, Feminism, and Activism: A Conversation with Houzan Mahmoud

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## Abstract

In this article Houzan Mahmoud (editor of the book *Kurdish Women's Stories*, published in 2021), talks with Wendelmoet Hamelink (researcher on gender, migration, activism, and conflict at the University of Oslo) about the collection of the stories making up the book, about the writing process, and how the participants felt about being part of this project. The book contains 25 self-written stories by Kurdish women from all regions, including the diaspora. The conversation also touches on Mahmoud's own life experiences and how this eventually led her to start Culture Project and the work for this book. It gives insight into empowerment, hope and resilience of women living in desperate circumstances; into the development of feminist ideas and projects; into the interconnections between life in Kurdistan and in the diaspora; and into the alienation and uprootedness that life in exile can bring about.

## Keywords

life story – Kurdish history – feminism – women's history – empowerment

## Çîrokên jiyânê, femînîzm û çalakvaniya jinên kurd: Gotûbejêke ligel Houzan Mahmoud

Di vê gotarê de Houzan Mahmoud (edîtorê kîtêba *Kurdish Women's Stories*, di 2021an de çapbûyî) ligel Wendelmoet Hamelinkê (lêkolîner li ser zayenda civakî, koçberî, çalakvanî û pevçûnan li Zanîngeha Osloyê) li ser berhevkirina çîrokên ku kîtêbê pêk tînin, li ser proseya nivîsandine û hîsên beşdarên a li ser beşdarbûna vê projeyê diaxivin. Kîtêbê 25 çîrokên di hewîne ku jinên kurd ên ji hemû herêman, tevî dîasporayê bi xwe nivîsandine. Gotûbêjê herwiha diçe ser tecrubeyên jiyana Mahmoud bi xwe û vê çawa rê li ber wê vekirîye ku dest bi Culture Projectê û xebata ji bo vê kîtêbê kiriye. Nêrînekê dide ser hêzdarkirin/teşwîqkirinê, hêvî û berxwedêriya jinên ku di şert û mercên bêhêvî de dijîn; ser pêşveçûna hîzr û projeyên femînîst; têkiliyên di navbera jiyana li Kurdistanê û dîasporayê; biyanîbûn û bêkokiya ku jiyana sirgûnê dikare bi xwe re bîne.

### چیرۆکی ژبانی ژنانی کورد، فیمینیزم، و چالاکهوانی: گفتوگۆیهک لهگهڵ هۆزان مهحموددا

لهم ووتارهدا هۆزان مهحمود، (سه‌رنووسه‌ری كئيبی چیرۆکی ژنانی كورد، بلاوكراره له سالێ 2021)، له گه‌ڵ وێندیلیمۆت هه‌مه‌لینك، (تویژهر له بواری جینده‌ر، كۆچكردن، چالاکه‌وانی، و ملامانێ، له زانكۆی ئۆسلۆ)، گفتوگۆ ده‌كهن سه‌باره‌ت به‌ كۆكراره‌ی ئه‌و چیرۆكانه‌ی كه‌ كئيبه‌ كه‌ پێكه‌هه‌ین، و ده‌رباره‌ی پرۆسه‌ی نووسین، وه‌ چۆنیه‌تی هه‌ستكردنی به‌شداربووان له‌ پرۆژه‌كه‌دا. كئيبه‌كه‌ پێكه‌اتوه‌ له‌ بیست و پینچ چیرۆك كه‌ له‌ لایه‌ن ژنانی كورده‌وه‌ له‌ هه‌موو ناوچه‌كانه‌وه‌، به‌ تاره‌وه‌ گه‌شه‌وه‌، نووسراون. هه‌روه‌ها گفتوگۆكه‌ تیشك ده‌خاته‌ سه‌ر ئه‌زمونه‌كانی ژبانی مه‌حمود خۆی و چۆن بوونه‌ته‌ هۆی ئه‌وه‌ی ده‌ستبكات به‌ پرۆژه‌ی كه‌لتور و كاره‌كانی ئه‌م كئيبه‌. وه‌ رۆشنایی ده‌خاته‌ سه‌ر به‌هێزبوون، هیوا و خۆراگری ئه‌و ژنانه‌ی كه‌ له‌ باروودۆخی ناهه‌موار ده‌ژین؛ وه‌ به‌رچاو روونیش ده‌دات سه‌باره‌ت به‌ گه‌شه‌سەندنی بیر و پرۆژه‌ی فیمینستانه‌؛ وه‌ ده‌رباره‌ی په‌یوه‌ندیه‌ تێكه‌ه‌لكیشراره‌كانی نیوان ژبان له‌ كوردستان و له‌ تاره‌وه‌ گه‌دا؛ وه‌ ئه‌و نامۆبوون و له‌هه‌رگ هه‌لكیسه‌نایه‌ی كه‌ ژبان له‌ ده‌ره‌ده‌ریدا ده‌توانیت به‌ره‌می به‌ییت.

## Hîkayeyê heyatê cinîkanê kurdan, femînîzm û aktîvîzm: Hozane Mehmûd reyde xoşebere

Na meqale de Hozane Mehmûd (edîtora kitabê “Kurdish Women’s Stories” (Hîkayeyê Cinîkanê Kurdan), 2021 de weşaniya) Wendelmoete Hamelink reyde (ciğêrayoxa cinsîyet, koçberîye, aktîvîzm û têkewtişî ya Unîversîteya Osloyî) arêdayîşê hîkayeyanê kitabî, prosesê nuştişî û hîsanê beşdaranê projeyî ser o qesey kena. Kitab de 25 hîkayeyî est ê ke hetê cinîkanê kurdan ra ke pêro herêman ra yenê, dîaspora zî tede, nusîyayê. Xoşebere de qalê tecrubeyanê Mehmûd zî beno ke badê cû ê senî bîyê sebeb ke aye dest bi Projeyê Kulturî û xebata nê kitabî kerdo. Na xoşebere çim çarnena hem hêzdarbîyayîş, hêvî û xoverodayîşê cinîkanê ke binê şert û şurtanê zehmetîyan de yê, hem averşîyayîşê fikr û projeyanê femînîstan, hem pêragirêdayîşê cuya Kurdîstanî û yê dîaspora û hem zî cuya xerîbîye senî eşkena bibo sebebê pêşebîyayîş û kokêxoradûrîkewtişî.

### Introduction

In this conversation we reflect on Houzan Mahmoud’s book *Kurdish Women’s Stories* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), which was published in English and Sorani Kurdish as part of the Culture Project. The book contains 25 self-written (or self-told) stories by Kurdish women. The stories are unique testimonies of female experiences of life under oppressive regimes, war, imprisonment, as well as of gender-based violence, and the book is the first of its kind in collecting so many women’s stories, written from their own perspective and from different areas of Kurdistan, into one volume. It includes 15 stories from Iraqi Kurdish women, 5 stories from Iranian Kurdish women, 2 stories from Turkish Kurdish women, and 3 stories from Syrian Kurdish women. In total, 14 of these women still live in their region of origin, whereas 11 live in the diaspora, mostly in Europe.

The book was one of the projects carried out under Culture Project, a platform for Kurdish writers, artists, and activists, consisting of a web-magazine in Sorani Kurdish and English. It was initially founded in 2016 by Houzan Mahmoud, Ismail Hamalaw, and Miran Abraham. It aims to give space to Kurds in Kurdistan and the diaspora to spread new ideas, feminism, to break taboos, enhance gender equality, develop critical analyses of art and literature, and to “challenge and change Kurdish culture”.

Wendelmoet Hamelink initiated this interview as part of the ALCITfem research project<sup>1</sup> and as an editor of *Kurdish Studies*. She visited Mahmoud in her current place of residence in Germany where they spent a weekend together and had ongoing conversations about both their projects related to Kurdish women's lives. Through her questions, Hamelink provided her own reflections on the book as well as on the many life story interviews she has conducted herself with Kurdish women. The conversation also touches on Mahmoud's life experiences and how this eventually led her to start the Culture Project and the work for this book.

In *Kurdish Women's Stories*, the women's stories are arranged by age and cover several generations; the eldest participant was born in 1950 (first story) and the youngest in 1995 (last story). The stories focus on one or some important and often life-changing events in the authors' lives. Many women write about how they were affected by conflict and political oppression and by the execution of relatives; had to migrate under force or escape to other countries; and lived in continuous insecurity about their own and their relatives' safety. Others write about their experiences as women's activists, political leaders, or as female fighters, and about being part of political families whose members took great risks in the struggle for Kurdish rights. Some talk about early struggles for education and independence as girls, violence or pressure within the family, and about their efforts to become professionals such as lawyers, artists, psychologists, teachers. The stories also show disillusionment with Kurdish leadership, corruption and political parties; and the difficulties women face who had to build up a new life in the diaspora. Despite being told by women from different ages, different ideological, religious, and class backgrounds, as well as from different geographical areas, the stories demonstrate a resemblance in how Kurdish women struggled with societal and political limitations and exclusion, and often displayed a remarkable resilience and endurance through times of ongoing conflict and violence.

The interview took place in July 2022 and was fully recorded and transcribed by Hamelink. She shortened it in some sections, and Mahmoud read it for final corrections. Apart from some minor changes, no adaptations were made to the use of spoken language. The commonly used Kurdish terms *Bashur/Başûr* (South), *Bakur* (North), *Rojhelat* (East), and *Rojava* (West) are sometimes used to refer respectively to Iraqî, Turkish, Iranian, and Syrian Kurdistan.

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1 "Activism and its Moral and Cultural Foundation: Alternative Citizenship and Women's Roles in Kurdistan and the Diaspora". This is a collaborative project of researchers from Jagiellonian University, Cracow, University of Oslo, Cracow Economic University, and the Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research in Oslo. It is funded by Norway grants.

### Conversation

*Wendelmoet Hamelink (Wendy):* You collected so many stories. What about your own story?

*Houzan Mahmoud (Houzan):* That is a good question. I was born in Iraqi Kurdistan and I grew up there. Then I left Kurdistan with my former husband to the UK, and I have lived there ever since. I grew up in a very political family. They were all peshmerga fighters fighting against Saddam's regime. I had a very, very difficult and dangerous childhood and teenage years as well. Dangerous in the sense: the dangers from the government. I spent a lot of time in hiding. My mother would send us to different places, and distant relatives to stay with them so that, if we get arrested, it would not be all of us at the same time. My mother was very worried about us, me and my sisters, because in Saddam's prisons they were very brutal. So that was the situation, the first eighteen years of my life was all fear, danger, government terror, dictatorship, fascism. And growing up not knowing why we are suffering.

It was really weird that you are born in a country where your parents and grandparents and their ancestors were all born on this land, but you are an outsider and you are treated as a danger to that country and that place. And you are subjected to all kinds of persecution and genocide and chemical bombardment, it was too much for me to articulate why this is happening. Really to be honest I have only started in the past ten years to make sense of what happened to me and to my family and why we went through all of that. Obviously politically you know things, but on a personal level it is very difficult. And I think sometimes that the reason why I didn't write my story so far is probably because I was running away from all of it, you know you just don't want to go back there, it is a dark place, full of violence, killings, full of blood, of terror and fear, and witnessing my own brother being killed near our family home, by the regime. Hearing about all their friends, and the news about all their wonderful peshmerga friends being killed in government ambushes or in the mountains was difficult to comprehend at the time. I grew up with all these horror stories and sometimes I feel like: from where do I start and where to end? And these were the questions of the women in the book, asking us: where do I start? I have gone through a lot, I have seen a lot. And I think for a young person and for a child, this was too much to witness.

I tried to use my existence in the UK to learn the language, go to university, everything that I did was to provide a platform for everyone else who is in a similar situation. I think in the book *Kurdish Women's Stories* there is also me, my voice and my suffering, experiences, pain and wounds as well, through the women's stories. At this point I think it was important for me to have this

collective endeavour so that maybe one day, I have the guts and the courage to think about going there and writing my own story.

*Wendy: How did the women who wrote the stories respond after they received the book?*

*Houzan:* They were really happy. From the feedback that I got, some of them felt like “wow, we have now entered history”. Some of them shared it on their Facebook, and for some, their sons and daughters were surprised to see all this about their mothers, published in Kurdish and in English and they told their mum: why you never told us about this? Imagine, we don’t even talk about these things to our children. My daughter doesn’t know so many things about me. Because sometimes we feel that it is a burden and that we don’t want to put it on someone else, especially on our children, who grew up here, and were born here. I think that there was that element as well [for which the book was important], for the second generation. Our children who got the book, they made it into a gift for other people, they talked about it and wrote about it on Instagram, Facebook and social media. I think it has generated a good momentum, both between first and second-generation Kurds, here and in Kurdistan, but also among the women themselves and how they felt relaxed after getting that off their chest. Some women said: “It was like a therapy because I never knew how to talk about this, let alone write about it.” So it was really good. Especially writing for me was very important because traditionally speaking, Kurdish women and writing were two separate things, where writing is a luxury and education is a luxury as well. Not so many women could afford getting educated, even in my generation your family would prevent you from getting educated. And for me it was important to have that text, for Kurdish women to have their own text.

*Wendy: If I think of the women, I can also imagine that because their story is one out of 25, they are part of a larger historical context which gives meaning to their own story as well.*

*Houzan:* Definitely. When I published the book in Sorani in Kurdistan, so many of the women who had their story in the book came and they started telling their whole story again. It was so sweet! And I have pictures that they are holding the book and took photos together with me and they were hugging me and kissing me, saying, “wow you gave us this opportunity that our story is in the book and even when we die, we will have this story living on”. For the older generation who has no education, I made sure that we get their stories too. We sent

someone to talk with them, record it and transcribe it. Then they went back to read it to them to make sure that everything they have said is what is reflected in the text. We only sometimes restructured it, for example things about childhood we put it at the beginning. But everything, every single word was theirs. I made sure that their stories are included, because their lives are so important. Having received no formal education and their inability to write their own stories shouldn't mean their erasure from history. These women had a heroic role to play in society, despite not being educated, despite all the problems, the social conservatism and so on. And yes, I was really inspired by their lives.

*Wendy: The stories are mostly talking about suffering and about very difficult situations. It was striking to me that most of the women focused on such topics. Did you get any idea about why the women chose to write about this?*

*Houzan:* Women who wrote about the loss of loved ones, they really wanted to make sure that their story is included. Especially two of the women who had no education, they were at the book launch and they loved it. They said, "if we die now, we are happy". Trust me that is how they were talking. There was another woman who was an ex-member of the parliament, her father was executed and in her story, she talks about the last hug in the prison, she was also extremely happy because she wanted that story to be somewhere in a respectable book with a high standard.

They felt that the book was a serious project and an entire team was working on it: translators, editors, proof readers, and myself, working with the team and also with most of the women. I was always there for them myself and that was really important, in terms of that collective work but also in terms of seriousness of such a project, to make sure that it gets published here in Kurdistan but also worldwide. And when I sent them the English copies, they couldn't believe it. One thing I heard a lot is that people go there and take their stories and that they never hear about it again, that was one of the concerns. Or that newspapers or magazines in Kurdistan take their stories and they never hear about it, they don't even get a copy. But I made sure that every one of them got two copies, one in English and one in Kurdish so that they have it for their record. They liked the seriousness of the project and talking about it in the media and everywhere, they felt that it is something serious.

*Wendy: One of my friends who started reading the book, she is a Kurd from Turkey and she said: "I cannot read it because I feel overwhelmed, I feel so connected to the stories that I feel like I'm drowning in it." The stories are very heavy, it is about suffering.*

*Houzan:* Yes, even for me when I got the stories, I cried over so many of them. Especially for those of us who have suffered as well, it brings back all the memories of loss, of sadness, horror, fear, dictatorship, prison etc. I know that people who have endured this, they would really feel the emotional heaviness of it. But I know that it will also make them think: “Why did we never write our own stories as Kurdish women?” How many generations have gone through this, probably many for the past 100 years. How many stories do we have from them? Almost none! So I felt that, yes it can get to our heart, it can make us cry and feel sad, but it is also a record. And it was setting the scene for other projects, other books, better projects and books. It was just a stepping-stone for anyone to come forward with their story. And there is also a sense of pride and love and caring, sacrifice and solidarity, and it tells us a lot about these concepts as well.

*Wendy:* Yes indeed, and what I was trying to find out is whether the suffering shown in the book is also in some ways empowering. Then I thought that the empowerment lies in the fact that these people have lived through these stories and they're still there, and they have told their own stories.

*Houzan:* That is why for some of them it was like a therapy. They said that they felt relieved and happy and lighter after telling it and making sure that it is written. Sometimes I got a story that was very short but full of important events. And I would go and speak to the women and ask them: “Can you talk more about this and that?” and then I got the story back with another five or ten pages. That is how we evolved with them. And so often I said to them: “This might be difficult for you to go back into your memory, to dig in, to bring all these things in front of the readers. But this is also a chance for you to write. And if you ever feel that you do not want to do it, just drop it. And if you want to talk about it, I am always there.” So I was almost doing a counselling as well. But I also needed to talk with someone myself about how I felt about these stories, because I was crying with all of them. At the same time, it made me proud as a Kurdish woman: how they have endured all this and live. The women who came to the book launch, the ones who were in their sixties and seventies, they are so beautiful, they always have a smile on their face and they talk about these things with pride, that they did not bend to the dictator. If their husband or brother or son was killed by the regime, they are proud that they did not collaborate. My generation also suffered a lot but I still learned from them this love for life, despite your loss, your tragedies, but that is out of your control. And still you have so much love for life. I really appreciated that, it was a valuable lesson for me.

*Wendy: You have also been working on the Culture Project, can you say more about that?*

*Houzan:* We launched Culture Project in 2016, it started as a digital magazine in Kurdish and English, and we also produced a printed magazine in Kurdish in Kurdistan. Half of every issue was entirely dedicated to feminism and gender. We publish a lot online for young aspiring writers, feminists and artists as well as for the more established ones. It is mostly online but we have also done seminars and conferences in London and many in Kurdistan at the universities, talking about gender and art, feminism and art, cultural productions from a feminist perspective. We were introducing feminism into everything, even the artists looked at us as if we were mad. Because unfortunately the women organisations who have been there for thirty years, they have never managed to either call themselves feminists, or translate a text, have a seminar about any of these things, so the whole concept of feminist critique of art and literature and culture was totally new. We kind of injected it into the scene and we got lots of people from the diaspora and Kurdistan who were interested in writing for us and reviewing poetry, art and literature. And we tried to translate to both sides, from English into Kurdish and from Kurdish into English, to make that cultural bridge between Kurdistan and the outside world, and also the second-generation diaspora. So I think we attracted many good readers but also writers and others.

And the book was one of the projects of the Culture Project. I started the idea in 2018. I made a call on the Internet that we have this book project, I called it a self-writing project. It was then realised in 2020 and launched in 2021. Because of the corona pandemic, it was delayed.

*Wendy: If you think back to your own life story, how do you think your experiences have led you to set up the Culture Project and the book?*

*Houzan:* I grew up in a political family and there was always talk about the big things: changing the system, and the working-class struggle. I am from a leftist background and I am a leftist myself. And later on, when I saw all the problems with politics in my country and what it led to, I hated politics for so many years. But then I was very active in London and I realised that without a political party, even if you are doing a lot, you cannot channel it. So, I joined the Workers' Communist Party from Iraq. It was both a Kurdish and an Iraqi party, the main founders of the party were Kurdish and it was established in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1993, but it was pan-Iraqi. I thought, at least it is a leftist organisation, they are talking so big about women's rights, working class etc.

And because I was so active, after one year I was elected into the leadership of the party and then into the Politbureau. But it wasn't what I expected, then I resigned from everything.

So I resigned, that was the best decision of my life, and I gave myself some years to take a break from all of that and I started reading a lot of feminist literature. Then I realised that a lot of things that I was going through, and saying and doing, were so feminist. I thought, this is what feminism should do. So I started reading whatever I could find. And because women's organisations don't have a great reputation in Kurdistan, I didn't want to create another women's initiative. And I think that you have to have a holistic approach, you have to question women's rights in political systems, politics itself, within cultural production, cultural values and norms, everything. And I thought we could be effective in bringing these issues to debate via a cultural initiative, so that is why we co-founded Culture Project and it has been ongoing for six years now. We have done a lot of projects and seventy percent of our work is voluntary. We all work for a living and if we can get funding we spend it on projects, like this book for translation, proofreading fees etc. So I try to do unique projects of which I know that there is a gap, to fill those gaps.

*Wendy: I think over the last decade women have emerged more in the public domain, such as singers, politicians, the focus on female guerrillas in Rojava, women writers, poets, academics, artists. Do you see a reason why this happened now at this point in time, that Kurdish women became so visible?*

*Houzan: I think that Kurdish women always had some role to play, but they came more to the attention of the media because of the Rojava revolution. And also because of refugee waves. In the 1990s we came to Europe, we educated ourselves and some of us tried to use, at least I tried to use my presence to do things for Kurdish women. In Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991 we have been semi-autonomous, there is oil and all these things, obviously it is very different from what we were like under Saddam's regime. In every political transformation things change. And with capitalism, consumption, marketisation of everything, women have to work as well to be able to live. They have expectations, aspirations. So there are more women in the public space, in the media, singing, music, art and literature. And there is an exposure. Because of social media and technology people see a lot from outside, they know what is happening in Asia, America and Europe etc. Especially the young people have learned new languages like English. They all have access to Internet and they know how people live in other places. I think that has changed a lot of things. In my time*

under Saddam's regime, we had absolutely no contact with the outside world. I never travelled even to another city, that is how isolated we were. The education was in the service of Baathism. When I see people in North Korea, I think, "this was our situation under Saddam's regime". I really relate to that. I never knew even how other people live in other cities, in Baghdad for example. We had to read books in hiding. People were caught with books and were executed for that. But nowadays everything has opened up and people travel, they go to Europe to study. In our time there was none of this unless you were in good terms with the regime.

*Wendy: I think the book also shows an increased connection between women from different areas of Kurdistan, the diaspora plus Kurdistan. And some of the women I interviewed in Bakur also travelled to Rojhelat, to Bashur, to Europe for festivals and meetings. What have you yourself learned from the stories of women from other regions of Kurdistan and how do you think these connections could contribute to a better situation for Kurdish women?*

*Houzan: I think that Kurdish women have been so divided and so isolated from each other, you might not believe it, for example, I met Bakuris and Rojavais [for the first time] in London. There is no connection, no communication because of the imposition of borders, because of limitations placed on us, all these artificial borders. So I thought that it is very important to reconnect through a book, through our text. When the division happened and we were placed under all these dictatorships year after year, but you have all these women at the other side of the borders. Their experiences might differ a little bit, but still they lived like Kurdish women, they go through things like Kurds. So the sufferings are also very similar. Before you didn't know about these things, but now, because of the media, because of some communication and exchange, we know a little bit more whereas in my time I never met anyone from Rojava, Rojhelat or Bakur. You simply cannot travel there and they could not travel to us. Even now, because of all political problems and borders, that is still difficult. So I thought that it is a great idea to cut through all these political borders and to reconnect through art, writing, literature.*

*Wendy: The stories show on the one hand a lot of similar experiences when it's about political oppression, gender-based violence, diaspora, forced migration, war, things that women have experienced in all parts of Kurdistan. Was it difficult for you to find women from Rojava, Rojhelat etc., since they are still underrepresented in the book?*

*Houzan:* Yes, it was very difficult and especially because it was also my first project. It was difficult because I would find women, but they were not willing to write. They would just say, “you know everyone has gone through the same things, why would I write about it?” That is the thing everyone would say. And obviously I never wanted to convince people to write. I wanted them to totally freely volunteer to write about themselves or not. I spoke with a couple of women from Rojhelat and they had particularly important stories but they were too traumatised to even talk about it. And I had no access to go to Rojava, Rojhelat, I have really done it from abroad. And for me it was not about equal numbers, that is not possible. Bashur is my place and I know people there; I can get many stories if I want to. But we had zero budget for this book. So, we could not ask someone from Rojava, give them some money and go and collect stories. And there are so many people who are not willing to do such things for free. And sometimes women think that they will be given money if they are in the book. Because unfortunately the international funding has corrupted everything. Funding is good, to do good projects, but it has also corrupted people’s way of doing and seeing things.

*Wendy:* Yes and it is very important that people do this because they like it, not because of the money.

*Houzan:* Exactly, because then the focus becomes about money rather than about the actual project. For me this is a political project, it is not just about stories, it is a political, historical, and a feminist project as well. You have all these men’s biographies in Kurdistan and autobiographies. From all these ex-peshmerga fighters and we don’t know how much of it is true or not. That’s another question. They all turned themselves into heroes but they are all corrupt now. And you hardly see any women’s stories out there, but why? I have met a woman prisoner from Bashur, I remember her story from when I was a child. Her story was so famous, she went through hell, and she was imprisoned. But when I asked her to write about her story, her husband was there and he responded before her. He said: “Oh there is no need for her to write about herself, lots of women went to prison.” I said: “But her story is different. I remember her story from my childhood.” The man had not been in prison or anything, okay he had been active in politics. I don’t want to analyse people but I think that there was some kind of jealousy: why would my wife’s story get published and get credit but not mine? And I looked at the woman and I said, “what do you think?” I felt so sad at that moment. She said, “I’m not sure, I will think about it, it’s not easy.” And I said, “yes, I totally understand that it’s not easy. But you don’t even have to write it for this book, I urge you to do it for your own

book. Write your own book. We need that story, your children should be able to have your life in front of them, written.”

So obviously you have men who feel like that, and then women who think, so many people have gone through hell, why should I write mine? That sentiment as well is difficult. Whereas it is so important. So many women who lived through hell died and we don't know their stories. So our women's history is lost. Or in Bashur for example, because of the political rhetoric, they turn certain women from the nineteenth or twentieth century into national heroes. Obviously, some of them were stooges of British colonialism or Ottoman colonialism but because they had accumulated wealth and social prestige they're turned into national heroes. I hate that and I wrote about it. These are not the women who represent me. They managed to get all this wealth and their children or grandchildren are multi-millionaires whereas people lived in total poverty. Because they were stooges to the British Empire or the Ottoman Empire before that. So why would you turn them into heroes? They are not, they are simply collaborators. It is their stories that are being written, glorified and taught, and not others, because there is a lack of narratives. Probably there were many brave women in that time, but because they were not part of the networks and elites, their stories are buried. I don't want that to happen to the women of this generation as well.

*Wendy: Do you think that it helps that there is a diaspora where stories can be told more easily? Do you think that that will happen or do you think that people would rather want to forget?*

*Houzan:* Actually, the Kurdish diaspora, for a big part of us, we still have our hearts and minds there. We cannot live here without Kurdistan. Kurdistan is here, in my opinion. It is with me everywhere, wherever I go. Because of my attachment to that people, to that land. To the story, to the history, to the revolutions that took place, to my family, my loved ones, to everyone. And the reason that I speak up and that I do something and that I want to help, is not because I want to live there. I am totally uprooted right now, I know that even if I go back, I will not make it home. I know that deep down. Because I have also changed, and Kurdistan has changed too. But I want that place to be a better place for those who live there. Whoever, Kurds, non-Kurds. I want Kurdistan to be an inclusive place, land, where everyone can live peacefully and freely. It doesn't matter if I want to live there or not want to live there. And that is why in the past twenty-five years I've been doing all I can, next to a full-time job for living, to at least contribute in some ways to the struggle. Lots of Kurdish diaspora are totally forever involved in things about Kurdistan. And so many

times when some injustice happens in any part of Kurdistan, we are the first to speak out, to put pressure on governments. So, I think the Kurdish diaspora is very vital to the existence of Kurdistan as well.

*Wendy: Thank you so much. I don't know if there is anything you would like to add, something that has not been discussed?*

Everywhere in Europe, Canada, America, everywhere Kurdish people are doing initiatives independently of political parties. And they connect to Kurdistan. This interconnection between diaspora and Kurdish people is very important for people on the ground in terms of cultural and political exchanges. And this is how from the beginning we made feminism a debate, we made it known. Through translations, debates, seminars, both online and offline. And I think that helped to shape a lot of things. The Culture Project and other projects out there really helped a lot. And for us in the diaspora, for our existence, it is a breath, it is oxygen for me to be connected to Kurdistan.

*Wendy: Some of the stories in the book of people who live in the diaspora now, I felt that it also speaks through the stories how much they have lost and how disconnected they feel. It is a big contradiction that they have given so much of their lives for the freedom of women, of Kurds, of Kurdistan and then they have to live outside of it.*

*Houzan:* Yes, that is also very true. When you arrive in this country you only arrive with your small baggage of clothes and endless trauma. You have to rebuild your life from scratch. From pots and plates to bigger furniture, you even need to rebuild yourself. It's like you're born again, you have to learn a new language entirely and to work, to live, to integrate. In my generation there was a lot of pressure on us to even assimilate in European countries. We thought that the more we would become Anglicized the more we are accepted in the society to live among Europeans. We would even eat sandwiches instead of our own food, we would drink, go to clubs and try to have white friends. Those who integrated and did these things felt more advanced than those who were slow in "integrating". But now I think it is nonsense and I wonder why we did that, why on top of all the trauma and uprooting we had to put up with this too.

In the past ten years I've just been reflecting on my two lives: one in Kurdistan and one in the diaspora. It tells you how much effort we had to make to fit in, but we still never do, both at home and here. Under Saddam's regime, Kurds could never fit in anywhere. And even here we had to try so much. And sometimes I feel really tired and shattered.

*Wendy: And probably also as a woman, that you try to fit in ...*

*Houzan:* Yes, it is double! Kurdish women are doing much better in terms of learning languages etc. And I think that sometimes we even take that burden on: working outside, working inside, raising children, caring for Kurdistan. As Kurdish women in the diaspora we have very tough lives. (...) I have some really wonderful intellectual Kurdish female friends who I can really count on. We share also personal experiences, and experiences with our children, with our husbands, with the Kurdish community. Because we also have problems with the Kurdish community, we do not even fit in the Kurdish community. People like me, we have to fight on many fronts. And also, racism on top of everything.

So sometimes I feel that I need five more lives for each front, it's not easy. And sometimes I just decide to switch off from everything, then I don't want to hear racism, I don't want to see the Kurdish community blaming me, criticising me for saying this or doing that. They judge you day in and day out. And how much can you really care about that? Not much really if you want to live. They judge you on everything: the way you wear clothes, the way you talk etc. But there is also a section of the Kurdish community who are proud of you, which is nice. They would want other women to be like you, to follow in your footsteps, build themselves, become independent and fight. I appreciate that but I also don't want to be a role model for anyone. I think every Kurdish woman has the potential to be someone they want to be. But the restrictions and the fights are so much that many just decide altogether not to go for it. I have seen Kurdish women doing that: let's just leave everything, let's just not bother. That's why I'm saying: the multiplicity of problems, of burdens, of fitting or not fitting, of losing everything, being uprooted affects our lives. Sometimes I feel like I live in suspension, that I'm not really anywhere.

*Wendy: Do you think that it's very different for your daughter or do you think that she has similar experiences?*

*Houzan:* We always have this conversation; she thinks that she is Kurdish but I say: "You are more English than Kurdish!" (Laughing.) Because of the culture in school and how she was brought up. And also, when she was a child, I didn't want her to have this identity crisis. But it just happens, you cannot help it.

*Wendy: She was born and raised in London?*

*Houzan:* Yes. She is more of a Londoner to be honest. And I don't mind, she was born there. Obviously from a Kurdish parent, but she has the right to choose

the identity that she wants in terms of belonging. But she loves Kurdistan and I take her there from time to time. As the second generation she also has her own problems of fitting in. No matter how much they want to belong to the London environment there is still all these class divisions and ethnic divisions and racism as well, institutional racism. So many times, she had problems in school because of racism. And this is London, we thought that it is so multicultural. So obviously they have their share of the burden as well. But we did a big part of it. She would often come home and say: "Mom I am so happy you are not like other people's mothers." So I would say: "What do you mean like other mothers?" And she used to say: "You don't make me wear a veil, you don't make me pray, you don't talk about Islam, you are an atheist, that is so good." For her this was an incentive to grow up free from all of that, from all of these dictatorships. But there are other issues that concern her as well.

*Wendy: What do you envision is the next step? I know you're still working on some projects ...*

*Houzan:* In terms of my future projects, currently I am working on another book. This one is specifically on female political imprisonment and their stories and life stories. So far, we have collected fifteen stories from all parts of Kurdistan. I know that it will make everyone cry when they read the stories because of the amount of torture and psychological and physical pain and scars these Kurdish women have experienced, but also the heroism and the struggle against fascisms both throughout the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. Because some of the women who wrote their stories for us are still in Turkish prisons where they wrote it and someone smuggled it out for us. So we are working on that book and I hope that it will come out next year, if not sooner.

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# Categories of Otherness in the Discursive Construction of National Identity during an Internal Conflict: Turks and Politically Organized Kurds in the Print Media

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## Abstract

This article examines how Turkish national identity and otherness have been constructed in mainstream print media in Turkey during the ongoing ethnic conflict. The study applies critical discourse analysis to a sample of 449 news articles published in three leading mainstream dailies, *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *Sabah*, during a month of intensifying conflict between Turkish security forces and PKK militants in 2015. I identify five forms of discourse used to discursively construct national identity and otherness: military-legal, national-symbolic, cultural-ethical, dramatic-emotional, and ethnic. Together, these discourses construct a Turkish national identity while reinforcing the 'other' as illegitimate, non-national, unethical, inhumane, and non-Turk.

## Keywords

Kurdish question – PKK – critical discourse analysis – ethnic conflict – print media

## Kategoriyên yêdinbûnê di avakirina gotarî ya nasnameya netewî de dema pevçûnên navxweyî: tirk û kurdên bi awayê polîtîk rêkxistî di medyaya çapbûyî de

Ev gotar analîz dike ka çawa nasnameya neteweyî ya tirk û yêdinbûn di medyaya çapbûyî ya navendî de hatiye avakirin di dema pevçûnên etnîkî yê berdeyam de. Ev xebat analîza dîskûrê/gotarî ya rexneyî tetbîq dike li ser 449 nimûneyên nûçeyên çapbûyî yê ji teref sê rojnameyên navendî yê sereke Hürriyet, Milliyet û Sabahê di meheke pevçûnên giran ên navbera hêzên ewlehiyê yê tirk û milîtanên PKKê ya sala 2015an de. Ez pênc formên dîskûrê pênase dikim ku di avakirina dîskûrî ya nasnameya netewî û yêdinbûnê de hatine bikaranîn: leşkerî-legal, netewî-sembolîk, kulturî-etîkî/exlaqî, dramatîk-hestî û etnîkî. Ev dîskûr bi hev re nasnameyêke netewî ya tirkî ava dikin ligel xurtkirina 'yêdin' wekî xeyrîmeşrû, ne-netewî, ne-exlaqî, ne-însanî û ne-tirk.

### پۆلێنھکانی جیاوازیکردن لە بنیاتنانی گوٲاری ناسنامھیی نھتھوھیی لە کاتی مەملانئییھکی ناوڤویدا: تورک و کوردی سیاسی رێکڤراو لە میدیای چاپکراودا

ئەم بابەتە لە چۆنیەتی بنیادنانی ناسنامە ی نەتەوھیی و ئەویتی تورک لە میدیای چاپکراوی سەرھەکی لە تورکیادا دەکۆلێتەوھ، لە کاتی مەملانئیی بەردەوامی نەژادی دا. توێژینەوھە شیکاری گوٲاری رەخنەگرانە بە کاردەھێنێت لەسەر نمونەنەیک لە چوارسەد و چل و نۆ بابەتی ھەوأل، کە لە سێ رۆژنامە ی سەرھەکی) حورییەت، مێللەت و سەباح(، لە ماوھ ی مانگیک لە مەملانئیی چیری نیوان ھێزە ئەمینیەکانی تورکیا و چە کدارانی پەکەدەدا، لە سالی ۲۰۱۵ دا بلاوکراونەتەوھ. مە پینچ فۆرمی گوٲارم دەستینیشان کردووە کە بە کارھینراون بۆ بنیاتنانی گوٲاری ناسنامە ی نەتەوھیی و ئەویتیروون: سەربازی-یاسایی، نەتەوھیی-سیمیوولی، کەلتووری-ئەخلاقیی، دراماتیک-سۆزداری و نەژادی. پینکەوھ، ئەم گوٲارانە ناسنامە یھەکی نەتەوھیی تورکی دروست دەکەن، وھ لە ھەمان کاتدا دەبنەھۆی بەھیزکردنی گوٲاری'ئەوی دیکە'وھ ک ناشەرعی، نانەتەوھیی، ناەخلاقیی، نامرۆفانە و تورک نەبوو.

## Viraştişê nasnameyê neteweyî yo vatişkî yê wextê pêrodayîşê zereyî de kategorîyê wetênî: çapemenîye de tirk û kurdê rêxistinane sîyasîyan

*Na meqale analîz kena ke wextê pêrodayîşê etnîkî de çapemenîya Tirkîya ya bingeyêne de wetênî û nasnameyê tirkan o neteweyî senî ameyê viraştene. Cigêrayîş pê analîzê dîskûrsî yo rexnegir qayîte 449 nuşteyanê xeberan keno ke mengêka serra 2015î de hetê hîrê rojnameyanê serekeyan Hürriyet, Millîyet û Sabah ra derheqê pêrodayîşê giranî yê mabênê hêzanê asayîşê tirkan û mîlîtanane PKK de weşanîyayî. Ez panc tewirane dîskûrsî tesbît kena ke munaqeseyan de semedê viraştişê wetênî û nasnameyê neteweyî ra ameyî xebitnayene: leşkerîyo qanûnî, neteweyîyo sembolîk, kulturîyo etik, dramatikîo zerrîzîz û etnîkkî. Pêro pîya, nê dîskûrsî yew nasnameyê tirkan o neteweyî virazenê û giranî danê ser ke “ê bînî” sey nemeşrû, bêneteweyî, neetîk, bêînsaf û netirk bêre musnayene.*

### Introduction: Ongoing Conflict and Battlefield of the Discourses

After World War I, the fall of the Ottoman Empire left a political vacuum in the Kurdish-inhabited lands in southeastern Anatolia and northern Iraq. The Lausanne Treaty, signed on 24 July 1923, formalized the *de facto* division of Kurdish-inhabited lands among Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, ushering in decades of turbulence for the Kurds in this region.<sup>1</sup> Chaliand characterizes the colonial re-partitioning of the Middle East following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire as the Kurds’ misfortune.<sup>2</sup> McDowall thinks that the Kurds only really began to think and act as an ethnic community after World War I.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the ‘Kurdish question’ in a broader sense emerged after 1918. This article concerns the discursive construction of a dominant identity through otherness categories in Turkey.

Although the terminologies vary, scholars across multiple fields generally accept that Kurdish ethnic identity has been a political, social, and cultural issue in Turkey since the foundation of the Republic in 1923. The roots of the

1 Othman Ali, “The Kurds and the Lausanne peace negotiations, 1922–23,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 33 no. 3 (1997): 521.

2 Gerard Chaliand, ed. *People without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, trans. Michael Palis (London: Zed Press, 1980), 11.

3 David MacDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 4.

'Kurdish problem', which occasionally takes the form of armed rebellions against the central government, go back to the Ottoman Empire.<sup>4</sup> According to Yayman, there have been 29 Kurdish rebellions against the central governments since 1806, of which nine occurred in the Ottoman period.<sup>5</sup> However, Çandar argues there have only been four major Kurdish armed uprisings that can properly be called rebellions since the Turkish Republic's foundation in 1923. The first three, in 1925, 1930 and 1937, were all led by either religious figures or tribal chieftains, and the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Worker's Party) initiated the most recent one in 1984.<sup>6</sup>

Yeğen summarizes the different approaches to the Kurdish question in Turkey. In the first half of the twentieth century, it was generally conceptualized as a fatal rivalry between the backward, pre-modern and tribal past and the prosperous present. In the 1950s and 60s, it was perceived as a tension between the peripheral economy and national market. Later, in the 1970s, Kurdish unrest was understood to be a communist incitement. Since the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in the 1990s, it has been seen as a matter of ethnic revival and separatism.<sup>7</sup> İçduygu, Romano, and Sirkeci assert that this revival is the result of the material and non-material insecurity of the Kurdish population in Turkey.<sup>8</sup> This insecurity is arguably not solely a Turkish problem, as Kurds today are minorities in Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq. According to Sheyholislami, although Kurds form part of the four different social and political systems, a cross-border or trans-state Kurdish identity has been growing since the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> This change has inevitably alarmed the sovereign states, including Turkey, and provoked them into harsh measures

4 Barış Ünlü, *Türklük Sözleşmesi: Oluşumu, İşleyişi ve Krizi* (Ankara: Dipnot, 2018); Büşra Ersanlı, Günay Göksu Özdoğan, Nesrin Uçarlar, *Türkiye Siyasetinde Kürtler: Direniş, Hak Arayışı, Katılım* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2012); Hamit Bozarslan, *La question kurde: États et minorites au Moyen-Orient* (Paris: Tallandier, 2013); İsmail Beşikçi, *Devletlerarası Sömürge Kürdistan* (İstanbul: Alan, 1999); Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Press, 1992); Mesut Yeğen, *Devlet Söyleminde Kürt Sorunu* (İstanbul: İletişim, 1999), *Müstakbel Türk'ten Sözde Vatandaş: Cumhuriyet ve Kürtler* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2014).

5 Hüseyin Yayman, *Şark Meselesinden Demokratik Açılıma: Türkiye'nin Kürt Sorunu Hafızası* (Ankara: SETA, 2011), 54–55.

6 Cengiz Çandar, *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 151.

7 Mesut Yeğen, "Turkish nationalism and the Kurdish question", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30 no. 1 (2007).

8 Ahmet İçduygu, David Romano, İbrahim Sirkeci, "The ethnic question in an environment of insecurity: The Kurds in Turkey", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22 no. 6 (1999): 993.

9 Jaffer Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity, Discourse, and New Media* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 47.

to control it. As a result, social tensions have increased and paved the way for armed conflicts. The PKK, which has, next to Turkey, organisational footprints in Iran, Iraq, and Syria as well, is one of the prominent actors in this process. O'Connor argues that the PKK insurgency has been a major factor in the strengthening of Kurdish identity to today's level.<sup>10</sup> This conflict should be defined as a trans-state ethnic conflict, as it also affects the Kurds living in Syria, Iran, and Iraq.<sup>11</sup>

Currently, vast areas stretching from northern and eastern Syria to northern Iraq are the site of well-prepared and organised military operations conducted by Turkey, Iraq, and the Kurdistan Regional Government. For success, a military operation must be legitimate in the eyes of the people, and public discourses for and against such operations are important components of these struggles. Likewise, armed insurgent groups, too, seek to build legitimacy for the sake of their causes.<sup>12</sup> In conflicts with an ethnic dimension, this discursive struggle involves the construction/reconstruction of identities and otherness.

This article examines how Turkish national identity and otherness have been constructed in the mainstream print media in Turkey in the context of the 'Kurdish problem'. In approaching this research question, it applies critical discourse analysis (CDA) to a sample of 449 articles published in three leading mainstream dailies, *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet* and *Sabah*, during a month of intensifying conflict in 2015. It concludes that Turkish national identity is constructed through otherness categories such as 'illegitimate', 'non-national', 'unethical', 'inhuman', and 'non-Turk', which are established through 'military-legal', 'national-symbolic', 'cultural-ethical', 'dramatic emotional', and 'ethnic' discourses, respectively.

25 July 2015 is chosen as the beginning of the one-month study period, as that is the date on which the Turkish air force bombed the PKK camps in northern Iraq, ending almost two and a half years of truce. The bombing signalled the failure of the so-called peace talks, which had been initiated by the government in the first days of 2013, and gave rise to frustration in Turkish civil society, especially among the Kurds. According to Çandar, with the collapse of the peace process, the unprecedented hopes for a nonviolent resolution

10 Francis Patrick O'Connor, "Radical political participation and the internal Kurdish diaspora in Turkey", *Kurdish Studies* 3 no. 2 (2015): 167.

11 Kemal Kirişci and Gareth M. Winrow, *The Kurdish Question and Turkey: An Example of a Trans-State Ethnic Conflict* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 26.

12 Eric W. Schoon, "Building legitimacy: Interactional dynamics and the popular evaluation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey", *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28 no. 4–5 (2017).

of the Kurdish question in Turkey were lost, giving way to intense conflict.<sup>13</sup> Notably, the bombardment occurred as the ruling AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party) lost the majority in parliament due to the HDP's (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, Peoples' Democratic Party) success in the general elections on June 7.<sup>14</sup> Under these political and social conditions in general, the said military policy shift gave momentum to armed conflicts in the mountains and sparked armed street fights in several south-eastern towns such as Sur, Cizre, and Nusaybin as paramilitary forces connected with the PKK, originally called the YDG-H (*Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareketi*, Patriotic Movement of Revolutionary Youth), and later the YPS (*Yekîneyên Parastina Sîvîl*, Civil Defence Units) erected barricades and defended them for several months before being harshly suppressed. Bakan attempts to explain the dynamics of this urban conflict with reference to the dialectical relation between macro- and micro-level politics and suggests that socio-spatial dynamics comprised significant mechanisms that facilitated the conflict in Sur.<sup>15</sup>

### Literature Review

The current conflict in Turkey began on 15 August 1984, when the PKK simultaneously attacked Eruh and Şemdinli, two towns in south-eastern Turkey. Parallel to this ongoing conflict, there has been an extensive body of research on the Kurdish question in Turkey. In their review, Yeğen, Tol, and ÇalıŖkan observe the breadth of this literature, which stretches from the significance of traditional social structures to the displacement of Kurds and the role of Kurdish women in resistance, and from the Turkish state's policies towards Kurds to the conflict-resolution process.<sup>16</sup> Ünver uses a discursive approach to compare how Turkish, European, and American legislatures construct the Kurdish question in their political debates.<sup>17</sup> Aktürk argues that counter elites, armed with a new discourse about the relationship of ethnicity to nationality,

13 Çandar, *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with Kurds*, 421.

14 Gönül Tol, "Turkey's endgame in Syria", *Foreign Affairs* (2019): 3, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2019-10-09/turkeys-endgame-syria> (last accessed on 2-10-2022).

15 Ronay Bakan, "Socio-spatial dynamics of contentious politics: A case of urban warfare in the Kurdish region of Turkey", *Kurdish Studies* 8 no. 2 (2020).

16 Mesut Yeğen, Uğraş Ulaş Tol, Mehmet Ali ÇalıŖkan, "Ethnicity and elections in eastern Turkey: What do the Kurds want?", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 7 no. 4 (2020).

17 Hamid Akın Ünver, *Turkey's Kurdish Question. Discourse and Politics since 1990* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

can change an ethnicity regime. The AKP's post-2009 reforms on the rights of linguistic minorities could be seen as symptomatic of a movement away from a policy of assimilation to one of multiculturalism.<sup>18</sup> However, in a recent study, Türkmen suggests that the AKP government's policies regarding the 'Kurdish problem' have become ethno-nationalist since the elections of 7 June 2015.<sup>19</sup> Despite the range of well-documented themes, the literature neglects some aspects of this conflict, including how the mainstream print media in Turkey has discursively represented Turkish national identity and otherness during the ongoing ethnic-based conflict. Two exceptions are Sezgin and Wall's examination of the media's representations of Kurds in Turkey based on a case study of *Hürriyet* newspaper<sup>20</sup> and Erdem's analysis of the representation of the Kurds and the pro-Kurdish DTP (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, Democratic Society Party) in mainstream Turkish media between 2008 and 2009.<sup>21</sup> In fact, while reporting on the armed struggle carried out by the PKK against the Turkish state and Kurdish demands for autonomy, the print media has discursively constructed and reinforced a Turkish national identity that is coterminous with the sovereign state through the marginalisation of various social groups and political and civic institutions. This article uses critical discourse analysis to identify and analyse the otherness categories used in the print media to construct Turkish national identity during this intense conflict.

### Discourse and Identity: a Close Relation

The term 'discourse' is used differently by scholars in linguistic and cultural studies. While German and Central European scholars make a distinction between 'text' and 'discourse', 'discourse' is often used for both written and oral texts in the English-language literature.<sup>22</sup> Talbot uses the term 'text' for the observable product of interactions, i.e., a cultural object, and 'discourse' for the

18 Şener Aktürk, *Regimes of Ethnicity and Nationhood in Germany, Russia, and Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

19 Gülay Türkmen, *Under the Banner of Islam. Turks, Kurds, and the Limits of Religious Unity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

20 Dilara Sezgin and Melisa A. Wall, "Constructing the Kurds in the Turkish press: A case study of *Hürriyet* newspaper", *Media, Culture & Society* 27 no. 5 (2005).

21 Derya Erdem, "The representation of the Democratic Society Party (DTP) in the mainstream Turkish media", in *The Kurdish Question in Turkey*, eds. Cengiz Gunes and Welat Zeydanhoğlu (New York: Routledge, 2014).

22 Gilbert Weiss and Ruth Wodak, *Critical Discourse Analysis* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 13.

process of interaction itself, i.e., a cultural activity. She suggests that “text is the fabric in which discourse is manifested, whether spoken or written, whether produced by one person or several. The distinction, then, is between product and process, between object and activity”.<sup>23</sup>

For Foucault, the term ‘discourse’ means an institutionalized way of speaking or writing about reality, and it defines for the users what is worthy of being intelligibly thought and said about the world. In every society, the production of discourse is controlled, selected, organised, and distributed by specific procedures, including exclusion techniques. Accordingly, for Foucault, discourse is the thing for which and by which there is a struggle. In short, it is power to be seized.<sup>24</sup>

Combining linguistic and Foucauldian approaches, CDA formulates discourse as a form of social practice. As bodies of knowledge and practice that shape people, discourses give power to some and not others. They only exist in social interactions in specific situations.<sup>25</sup> In other words, “describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it: the discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them”.<sup>26</sup>

Identity is constructed based on similarities and differences. Any identity, therefore, needs to be defined based on the ‘other’. However, rather than a static social category, identity can be understood as a dynamic process situated in time, ever-changing.<sup>27</sup> It needs to be reconstructed and reinforced primarily through discourse. Sheyholislami notes that while identity constructs are not exclusively discursive, identities must be articulated in language and other semiosis and discursive constructs of identity must be disseminated and negotiated among people.<sup>28</sup> The national identity of individuals who perceive themselves as belonging to a national collective is manifested in, among other things, their social practices, including their discursive practice.<sup>29</sup> This is a particular form of social practice and plays a central part in forming and expressing

23 Mary Talbot, *Media Discourse: Representation and Interaction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 9.

24 Michel Foucault, *L'ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 18–20.

25 Talbot, *Media Discourse: Representation and Interaction*, 13.

26 Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, “Critical discourse analysis”, in *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, ed. Teun van Dijk (London: Sage, 1997), 258.

27 Ruth Wodak, Rudolf de Cillia, Martin Riesigl, Karin Liebhart, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, trans. Angelika Hirsch, Richard Mitten, J. W. Unger (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 11.

28 Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity, Discourse, and New Media*, 21.

29 Wodak, de Cillia, Riesigl, Liebhart, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 29.

national identity. According to Billig, citizens are daily reminded of their identity, and small words, rather than grand memorable phrases offer constant, but barely conscious, reminders of the homeland, making 'our' national identity unforgettable.<sup>30</sup> For a member of an imagined collective, national identity is indeed a matter of construction of the 'other', the one from whom she/he considers herself/himself different and thanks to whom she/he reinforces being herself/himself. The categories of otherness used in this process can be constructed discursively through the media. The mainstream media provides a platform where this discourse is both produced and conveyed. Sheyholislami suggests that the media's discourse not only reinforces the national identity that is desired by the public, but also modifies, reshapes and rearticulates that identity.<sup>31</sup> Van Dijk, too, discusses the ideological and structural role of news media in the field of ethnic affairs; the media provide not only information and beliefs, but also a framework for interpreting this information.<sup>32</sup>

Arcan thinks that the news media can play a central role in escalating or reducing conflicts and violence by framing information.<sup>33</sup> Weiss and Wodak suggest that news texts are often sites of struggle in that they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, a discursive construction of otherness that strengthens national identity is a struggle that plays out in news texts. From the establishment's perspective, representing an organisation that is endangering the national identity, whether through armed struggle or other means, as the 'other' could be considered a highly effective method for creating citizens' support for eliminating the danger.

### Methodology

Qualitative methods are appropriate for the research outlined above, as they are interpretive and case oriented. A purposive sampling method was used to choose three of the mainstream daily newspapers published in Turkey: *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *Sabah*. Due to their circulation and credibility, they represent the research universe of mainstream Turkish newspapers. According

30 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 2002), 93.

31 Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity, Discourse, and New Media*, 25.

32 Teun van Dijk, *Elite Discourse and Racism* (London: Sage, 1993), 242.

33 Hediye Esra Arcan, "Ethnic conflicts and the role of the media: The case of Turkish media", *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 4 no. 10 (2013): 344.

34 Weiss and Wodak, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 15.

to the Turkish Press Advertisement Agency data, the total circulation of 36 national dailies published in Turkey in July–August of 2015 was about 3,160,854 a day. The average daily circulations of *Hürriyet*, *Sabah*, and *Milliyet* are, respectively, 361,276, 318,458, and 147,801. *Hürriyet* and *Milliyet* have been in print for over 60 years, and *Sabah* has been published since 1985. The front page logos of *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *Sabah* include, respectively, the phrases ‘Turkey belongs to the Turks’, ‘Trust in the Press’, and ‘Turkey’s best newspaper’. As mainstream media outlets, their positions on national security issues are in line with the state’s. They also served as the research universe in another study of the representation of Kurds in the mainstream print media.<sup>35</sup> The sample consists of all of the news stories about the ongoing conflict published in these three newspapers in a one-month period during which the armed attacks and actions gained momentum. CDA was then applied to this sample.

CDA reveals the intricate relationships between text, talk, social cognition, power, society, and culture.<sup>36</sup> In other words, it demystifies texts shaped ideologically by relations of power by focusing on the opaque relationship between discourse and societal structure.<sup>37</sup> It is also a particularly valuable method for studying identity because of its critical and constructionist approach.<sup>38</sup> CDA adopts a critical approach to the object of investigation, as it endeavours to make explicit the power relationships that are frequently hidden. Using the concepts of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, CDA examines the relationships between texts.<sup>39</sup> These two concepts have particular importance for the analysis of news articles and the discourses constructed and disseminated in them.

There are several schools of CDA, which differ according to their theoretical foundations and methodologies. For example, Fairclough’s dialectical-relational approach uses an essentially Marxist framework; Van Dijk’s socio-cognitive discourse analysis focuses on the interaction between cognition, discourse, and society; the discourse-historical approach focuses on interconnections between texts and discourses in their historical contexts; and the Duisburg School, sometimes referred to as dispositive analysis, argues

35 Bayram Ayaz, *Türk Basını: Türkiye’de İnsan Hakları ve Kürt Sorunu Örneğinde* (İstanbul: Belge, 1997).

36 Teun van Dijk, “Principles of critical discourse analysis”, *Discourse & Society* 4 no. 2 (1993).

37 Encarnacion Hidalgo-Tenorio, “Critical discourse analysis, an overview”, *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 10 no. 1 (2011): 188.

38 Susan Ainsworth and Cynthia Hardy, “Critical discourse analysis and identity: Why bother?”, *Critical Discourse Studies* 1 no. 2 (2004): 246.

39 Michael Meyer, “Between theory, method, and politics: positioning of the approaches to CDA”, in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, eds. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: Sage, 2001), 15.

that it is discourse that makes subjects.<sup>40</sup> Here, I use the discourse-historical approach, pioneered by Ruth Wodak, to analyse the news articles. I select the discourse-historical approach because the Kurdish question has historical roots. As the discourse-historical approach attempts to integrate historical knowledge with the social and political contexts in which discursive events are embedded,<sup>41</sup> it seems an appropriate approach for this research.

Wodak suggests that discourses about nations and national identities rely on at least four types of discursive macro-strategies: constructive, preservative or justificatory, transformative, and destructive. Constructive strategies aim to construct national identities, whereas preservative or justificatory strategies are concerned with their conservation and reproduction.<sup>42</sup> The last two macro-strategies aim to change and dismantle national identities, respectively. The first two discursive macro-strategies suit the present research, which examines the discursive construction of Turkish national identity through otherness categories. These macro-level strategies work in the news stories through micro-level strategies, which might be called discourse-analytical tools. This study examines the use of nomination and argumentation strategies in the sample texts. The nomination strategy deals with the construction of in-groups and out-groups, and the argumentation strategy justifies positive or negative attributions. Specifically, this study considers the construction of categories of otherness through the discursive construction of out-groups, and the use of argumentation strategies to justify this exclusion or othering.

A search of the news articles published in *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *Sabah* between July 26–August 24 of 2015 found 449 news articles (112 in *Hürriyet*, 153 in *Milliyet*, and 184 in *Sabah*) about the conflict.<sup>43</sup> CDA was then used to examine how the discourse strategies of nomination and argumentation were used to (re)construct national identity and otherness categories.

### Critical Discourse Analysis of the News Articles

This analysis of the elements of the discourse strategies in the news articles identified five discourse forms: military-legal, national-symbolic, cultural-ethical, dramatic-emotional, and ethnical. Each of these forms is scrutinised below

40 Hidalgo-Tenorio, “Critical discourse analysis, an overview”, 189–194.

41 Ruth Wodak, “The discourse-historical approach”, in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, eds. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: Sage, 2001), 65.

42 Wodak, “The discourse-historical approach”, 71–72.

43 The search of the newspapers’ archives was carried out at the İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality’s Atatürk Library.

with examples. The author has translated the related parts of the news articles from Turkish to English.

Before presenting the analysis of the articles, it is worth noting the type of discourse typically found in these three newspapers. First, in Turkey, the mainstream media's coverage of national security issues is highly dependent on statements issued by officials such as the prime minister, ministers, military commanders, and senior political party members. Second, the media tends to use a sensational style to attract public attention, especially when it comes to attacks against the security forces by the PKK. This reporting style largely builds on official statements. Accordingly, the newspapers reproduce and reflect the official discourse in their pages, acting as if they are the guards of the established system. They eagerly line up with the state, leaving aside their duty as the Fourth Estate according to the liberal model of mass communication. This attitude is not restricted to the armed conflicts between PKK militants and Turkish security forces. Yüksek, among others, observes the same attitude during the Gezi Park protests of 2013 in Turkey, stating that the mainstream media published news generally based on the political elites' statements. Considering it a general trend in the mainstream media, Yüksek draws attention to the identical headlines on the first pages of many newspapers, which were exactly the same word by word as the prime minister's statement.<sup>44</sup>

### The Military-Legal Discourse

The military-legal discourse consists of language expressing all kinds of activities carried out against the armed organisations and unarmed threats that are considered dangers to national security. These activities target the PKK, its supporters and the institutions that are allegedly affiliated with it. Since the PKK's armed actions challenge the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, the language used to construct this form of discourse stresses the legitimacy of the state's activities and the legal basis for them. Frequently used words in this form of discourse to describe military/legal activities against PKK and the parties or civic institutions that are allegedly supporters<sup>45</sup> are 'terrorist', 'separatist', 'treacherous', 'anti-democratic', 'pro-war', and 'violent'.

44 Derya Yüksek, "Alternatif Medya ve Direniş Kültürü: Sosyal Hareketlerde Birleştirici Güç Olarak Alternatif Medya", in *Türkiye'de Alternatif Medya*, eds. Barış Çoban and Bora Ataman (İstanbul: Kafka, 2015), 66.

45 In the news media, these alleged supporters include the BDP (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, Peace and Democracy Party), HDP, DBP (*Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi*, Democratic Regions

In the article *'Message received, Kandil hit'*, published in *Hürriyet* on 26 July 2015, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu is quoted as follows:

If someone tried to give us a message by martyring those cops,<sup>46</sup> we got that message, and our planes hit Kandil. Whoever tries to give the same message will pay. The primary purpose of these operations is to protect our democracy. HDP officials continually talk about the state of non-conflict. It is high time for them to decide: Guns or democracy? Violence or peace?

Such statements in the daily newspapers construct violence as the opposite of democracy. The HDP, as a legal party in parliament, is asked to choose between these two options. Although not explicitly expressed, the government asks the HDP to join the ranks of democracy against the PKK, the violent organisation referenced by the code Kandil – a mountainous area in northern Iraq that hosts the PKK's bases and training camps. The article *'Impudent declaration from HDP'* in *Sabah* on the same day states that the operations against the PKK disturbed the HDP. It also states that a joint declaration issued by the party and the co-chairs of the DBP, DTK, and HDK contained expressions threatening the government and security forces. The articles characterise the statements by the HDP and the other institutions about the airstrikes targeting PKK's bases in northern Iraq as 'impudent' and 'threatening'. In contrast, they represent the security operations as legitimate and based on the legal norms universally granted to sovereign states. These are examples of the military-legal discourse. They highlight that the PKK threatens Turkey, and that the military operations will continue against this threat to democracy and freedom in Turkey.

These articles employ the argumentation strategy, since they justify military operations discursively. The air raids are targeting the PKK bases because they threaten Turkey, democracy, freedom, and the lives of citizens. Therefore, the state's security forces must eliminate this threat, and their activities have full legitimacy. Here, the operations' legitimacy is established through indirect expression of the state's obligations. There are also phrases directly expressing this legitimacy in the press release by the Prime Minister's Centre for Coordination, reported on in *Sabah* in the article *'Leadership on target'* on

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Party), DTK (*Demokratik Toplum Kongresi*, Democratic Society Congress), and HDK (*Halkların Demokratik Kongresi*, Peoples' Democratic Congress).

46 Two policemen were found dead in their shared flat in Ceylanpınar, a district of Şanlıurfa, on 22 July 2015. Each of them was killed with a bullet to the head.

26 July 2015. The article states that the targeting of the terrorist organisation, the PKK, was a legal measure for defending national sovereignty under international law. It is significant that the press release states that the legitimacy of the operations carried out against the PKK, defined as a terrorist organisation, is based on international law on the defence of national sovereignty. These operations are legitimate because international law includes a state's right of self-defence. Hence the PKK has no legitimacy and is constructed as the 'other' against the Turkish national identity represented by the state.

On 19 August 2015, *Hürriyet* published the statements made by the new Chief of Staff, Hulusi Akar, during the commandership's handover ceremony. The commander describes the government's response to the PKK as follows: "The terrorist actions intend to damage our country and nation's unity, our brotherhood of thousands of years, and the insidious and treacherous attacks against our innocent citizens and security personnel did and will receive the severest and most effective responses".

The general insinuates that the PKK is a legitimate target since it organises insidious and treacherous terrorist actions. Here, the nomination strategy works to discursively construct out-groups. While the nomination strategy works by denoting the PKK and its affiliates as 'terror/terrorist', 'treacherous', 'insidious', 'separatist', 'pro-war', and 'anti-democratic' in the news texts, the argumentation strategy works by stressing the legitimacy of the state's actions to eliminate this threat against the nation-state. Through this discourse form, the PKK and its affiliates are constructed as the other against Turkish national identity, which is represented by the general, the nation's unity, citizens, and security personnel.

This critical discourse analysis indicates that the PKK and its so-called affiliates are categorised as the other in the news media by being defined as 'illegitimate'. Turkish national identity, which represents Turkey, the state, the Republic, democracy, legitimacy, and rights and freedoms, is constructed and reinforced by the military-legal discourse that applies this otherness category of 'illegitimacy'.

### The National-Symbolic Discourse

The national-symbolic discourse in the newspaper articles consists of repetitive phrases that represent or evoke the nation. Therefore, it is possible to argue that this form of discourse relies on elements that enable Turks to think of the nation-state as an imagined political community. In the news, this form of discourse is constituted with language such as 'flag', 'Turkish flag', 'coffin covered

with the flag', 'homeland', 'citizen', 'nation', and 'national'. Everything referencing the nation or nationalism in the newspaper articles has an affirmative tone. Therefore, the nomination strategy is predominant in the constitution of this discourse form.

Some examples will elaborate this point. An article published in *Sabah* on 26 July 2015 with the headline '*Leadership on target*' reports that according to the Prime Minister's Centre for Coordination, the weapons used in the operation were produced locally with national resources. Another article on the same page, '*Pars from the air, Storms from the land*'<sup>47</sup> states that Turkey hit the intended targets using its domestically manufactured military equipment. An article published in *Sabah* on July 30 about the bombardment of PKK targets in northern Iraq, '*Hitting in the name of Major Aslan*', states that fighter jets dropped bunker-busters developed by the Institute of Research and Development of the Defence Industry of TÜBİTAK (*Türkiye Bilimsel ve Teknik Araştırmalar Kurumu*, Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey). On 24 August 2015, an article in *Sabah*, '*Bombs like rain on traitors*', reports that the operation conducted against the PKK's Haftanin base in northern Iraq used F-16 jets and domestically manufactured Atak helicopters. Phrases such as '*national means*', '*national resources*', and '*domestically manufactured*' contribute to the discursive construction of an in-group, which is consistent with the nomination strategy, and imply that the state's fight against the PKK is not dependent on foreign countries for supplies. The emphasis on 'national' seems critical, since dependence on foreign procurement for national defence implies 'non-national' and points to a potential weakness in the argument that the state is protecting national interests.

For July 29, several newspapers articles about the funeral of the gendarmerie commander Major Aslan Kulaksız contain phrases that contribute to the national-symbolic discourse. The article in *Milliyet*, '*I brought my Lion like lions*', a headline that refers to a Turkish idiom implying bravery, states that Sibel Kulaksız wearing her husband's cap gave a soldier's salute in front of the coffin covered with the Turkish flag, saying '*He is my Lion, the entire nation's Lion, the entire homeland's Lion*'. Wearing the military cap and giving the military salute indicates symbolic identification with the army, which also represents the national identity. The words of his wife present the martyred major<sup>48</sup> as a symbol representing the nation and the homeland. Aslan, the major's name, means lion in Turkish, which is the symbol of power and superiority

47 Pars and Storms refer, respectively, to F-16 fighter jets and T-155 howitzers.

48 When the government officials, soldiers, and police are killed while performing their duties in Turkey, they are called 'martyr'.

in nature, and it is frequently used in all of the newspaper articles to denote the Turkish nation's bravery. An article in *Sabah* states that Vecdi Gönül, the National Defence Minister and General Abdullah Atay, the Gendarmerie General Commander, attended the funeral at Dönertaş mosque after visiting the house of the martyr's father for the last goodbye. Dursun Kulaksız, the martyr's 21-year-old son, also wore his father's cap during part of the ceremony. Here, by wearing the military cap, the martyred officer's son is identified with the military representing the national identity.

The national-symbolic discourse in the newspapers is constructed with words such as 'Turkish flag', 'soldier's salute', 'military cap', 'homeland', and 'nation', which denote the discursive construction of an in-group following the nomination strategy. Mentioning the minister's and the commander's participation also contributes to the discourse, as both represent the state and the nation. It is noteworthy that martyred security officers' family members exhibit national symbols such as the flag, military caps and uniforms at the funerals. Using national symbols to denote the national identity at these events also contributes to othering those who killed the officers, their organisations and parties.

Thus, the national-symbolic discourse is constructed through language that represents, indicates, and implies the national, and its *sine qua non* symbols and metaphors such as 'flag', 'homeland', 'nation', and 'martyr'. This discourse represents the other as the 'non-national'. That is, the otherness category that is used to reproduce the national identity is 'the non-national'. The PKK is placed in the 'non-national' category because it kills security officers and threatens national unity; the political party, the HDP, is presented as having a close relationship with the 'non-national' PKK. This classification is possible due to the national-symbolic discourse, which is prominent in the newspapers. The PKK and the parties related to it are indirectly coded as illegitimate, because they are presented as the opposite of the homeland, nation, flag, and military. They are discursively constructed as the 'non-national' other.

### The Cultural-Ethical Discourse

The cultural-ethical form of discourse relates to a society's cultural and ethical value judgments and is constructed in the newspapers in their discussions of attitudes, behaviours, thoughts, actions, and consequences. The traditional values define what is to be glorified, respected, and blessed or disdained and condemned. Schlesinger considers national cultures as the repository of classification systems and suggests that they make the identification of 'self' and

'other' possible.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, national culture plays a significant role in constructing otherness and otherness categories. This is particularly so in this case study of othering during the intensification of internal conflict in Turkey. In the news media, keywords that are frequently used to constitute the cultural-ethical discourse are 'hero', 'traitor', 'ambush', 'mean', 'inglorious', 'treacherous', 'hitting from behind', and 'bitch'. The positive qualities are attributed to Turkishness, whereas the negative ones are recognized as otherness qualities. The PKK, classified as a terrorist organisation, kills security personnel, even when asleep.

Security personnel are ambushed, hit from behind, and murdered in front of their families. This means that PKK uses methods that are entirely outside of assumed Turkish cultural norms and ethical values. The strategies of nomination and argumentation are used to construct this form of discourse. The sublimated values, such as bravery, heroism, and sacrifice, represent the national identity and accordingly contribute to the discursive construction of an in-group, following the nomination strategy, while terms such as treacherous, coward, and inglorious construct the other's identity as the out-group. The argumentation strategy operates by demonstrating that the actions of the PKK violate cultural and ethical values. For instance, when the news reports that the PKK has killed soldiers in an ambush, it implies treachery and cowardice, since ambushes are traditionally interpreted as a method used by those who do not have enough courage to fight face-to-face. The article '*Treacherous trap with bomb-loaded vehicles*' published in *Milliyet* on 27 July 2015, demonstrates these strategies:

A bomb-loaded vehicle exploded in Lice, a Diyarbakır district, just as the military vehicle was passing, martyring two soldiers, and wounding four soldiers. The General Staff's statement relating to the attack was as follows: "When our personal arrived at the site, the terrorists detonated the bomb-loaded vehicle and the handmade explosives placed there. The separatist terror organisation treacherously planned them. A Cobra armoured vehicle overturned due to the explosion".

The PKK members, who killed the security personnel, are denominated as 'traitors' and 'separatists'. The PKK fighters are 'treacherous' because they ambush soldiers. The fact that the word 'ambush' points to a military tactic is not important. It is here identified with 'treachery' and the PKK is constructed

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49 Philip Schlesinger, *Media, State, and Nation: Political Violence and Collective Identities* (London: Sage, 1991), 174.

as the treacherous other against the nationalist martyrs. Discourse works here through the argumentation strategy.

An article about Lahican Kaçar, a 22-year-old pregnant woman, is another striking example of the cultural-ethical discourse. In the article '*Helicopter carrying pregnant woman under fire*', published in *Sabah* on August 2, the story is as follows:

The Hakkari-Çukurca road was closed due to the detonation of a hand-made bomb by PKK terrorists at the Sine Bridge location. Meanwhile, Lacihan Kaçar, who was in labour, could not be taken to the hospital, and citizens asked the soldiers for help. Kaçar was sent to the hospital by a military helicopter. PKK terrorists opened fire to harass the helicopter landing there.

The article states that Kaçar, who faced a risky delivery, was transferred from the hospital in Çukurca to the state hospital in Hakkari but came suddenly face-to-face with death due to the road closure. The army rushed to help her. The units conducted the operation while under fire, managing to conduct a breath-taking rescue. Despite the danger, the helicopter took off and came under fire from the terrorists while in the air. The PKK blocked transportation by destroying the bridge, which put civilians in danger. The roadblock risked the lives of the pregnant woman and her unborn baby. The woman and her baby might have died if the army had not rushed to help her. The PKK opened fire on a helicopter transporting a pregnant woman and tried to prevent the humanitarian aid operation. Here, the armed organisation is an unethical agent, while the Turkish army represents the ethical agent seeking to transfer the pregnant woman to the hospital despite all the difficulties. In the news article, the national identity represented by the Turkish army is constructed based on the 'unethical' otherness category; the PKK is placed in that category through the argumentation strategy of discourse.

This analysis shows how the PKK is represented as 'unethical' in the news media due to its disregard for society's traditional values. It acts unethically against the 'heroic' and 'brave' individuals who express the national identity by protecting pregnant women. Here, the Turkish national identity is constructed based on opposition to the 'unethical' otherness category.

### **The Dramatic-Emotional Discourse**

The dramatic-emotional discourse is constructed using phrases that appeal to and provoke emotions and strengthen common affective states. The funerals

of martyrs provide suitable contexts for poignant and dramatic expressions of emotion. In the news articles, emotional expressions are usually organized around the most emotive words in Turkish society, such as ‘family’, ‘child’, ‘marriage’, ‘wedding’, and ‘pregnancy’. The expressions that build the emotional-dramatic discourse in the sample of news texts in this study are clear examples of sensationalist journalism. Higgins thinks that the media’s populist language is related to political populism in today’s world.<sup>50</sup> According to Mudde, the spirit of the time is populism, and populist discourse has become mainstream in Western democracies.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, since internal conflicts are also struggles to form public opinion, it is not surprising that they make populist discourses more prominent in the political sphere. Populism is also promoted through sensationalist reporting styles. The sensationalist reporting of a statement given by Yalçın Akdoğan, the Deputy Prime Minister, exemplifies this. The article ‘*Akdoğan: HDP back to factory settings*’, published in *Milliyet* on 2 August 2015, quotes Akdoğan’s words to the HDP about their relationship to the PKK as follows: “Here you let them abuse you. You betrayed the peace process. You know why? Because you act according to the borrowed mind. There is a prompter near you, and it whispers to your ears. The phrases you used are not yours”. This constitutes an excellent example of populist political discourse. The headline ‘*Back to factory settings*’ uses a common metaphor to say that although the HDP had acted democratically during the negotiations at İmralı, it was ‘back’ to acting according to the PKK’s orientations in the new period.

The argumentation strategy is dominant in the construction of the dramatic-emotional discourse in the newspapers. The ‘other’ creates enormous suffering and frustrations, which are reflected in dramatic and emotional phrases. The reason for all this suffering is the ‘other’ who seeks to martyr ‘us’, hurt ‘us’, and act against ‘our’ national and social values.

The article ‘*What great pain*’, published in *Milliyet* on 3 August 2015, exemplifies the dramatic-emotional discourse. The story about the funeral of 35-year-old specialist sergeant Ali Gökçen, who was killed by a PKK mine, states that his wife, Songül Gökçen (30) and her daughters, 11-year-old Buğra and 3-year-old Azra, burst into tears upon seeing the coffin covered with the flag.

First, it is noteworthy that the headline emphasises suffering. The PKK martyred the soldier, who was married and had two young children, and it made his wife a widow and his children orphans. As the other, the PKK is responsible for all this suffering and irreparable loss, and the national identity is represented by the sufferers.

50 Michael Higgins, “Mediated populism, culture, and media form”, *Palgrave Communications* 3 no. 3 (2017): 1.

51 Cas Mudde, “The populist zeitgeist”, *Government and Opposition* 39 no. 4 (2004): 542.

Numerous dramatic and emotional phrases appear in *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *Sabah*'s reporting on the PKK attack in Silopi on August 10. The article '*Mined trap: 4 policemen martyred*' in *Hürriyet* states, "After the mine attack, the police team of which Süleyman Aydın [the victim's father] is a member rushed to the crime scene. He is said to have contributed to the efforts of taking his son's body out of the demolished vehicle". It continues, "Martyr Savaş Akyol had officially married Fatma Yağar. The couple had distributed the invitation cards for the celebration party on August 23 in Sincan, Ankara". The article in *Milliyet*, '*Treacherous trap for police in Silopi: 4 martyrs*' states that the relatives and neighbours of the martyr said that Akyol had rented an apartment, bought the furniture and household appliances, distributed the invitation cards, and that the henna night and wedding party would be on August 22 and 23, respectively.

The quotations from these articles exemplify the construction of the dramatic-emotional discourse. Sentimentality is amplified by details of the preparations for marriage and the victim's father being in the position of removing his son's body from the vehicle hit by the attack. Once again, the PKK and its inhumane actions are the cause of all these sufferings and loss. Here, the national identity of Turkishness is constructed through the use of the otherness category of 'inhumanity' constructed by the dramatic-emotional discourse.

### The Ethnic Discourse

The ethnic discourse in the newspapers is constructed using language that expresses, points to, or implies the otherness of social groups, ethnicities, and geographies considered to be outside the historical, social, and cultural spheres of Turkish identity. This discourse can be constructed in explicit forms such as 'Kurd/Kurds', 'Kurdistan', or 'Kurdish citizens', or through coded language such as 'the region', 'East and South-east', or 'citizens in the region'. Bruinessen argues that the armed conflict has increased the Kurds' awareness of their distinct ethnic identity.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that the language used by national institutions, especially the state, focuses on national identity. Accordingly, the constructed discourse changes according to the seriousness of the threat and pointing to a different ethnicity becomes a problem from the very moment it is expressed.

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52 Martin van Bruinessen, "Shifting national and ethnic identities: The Kurds in Turkey and the European diaspora", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 18 no. 1 (1998): 50.

The articles *'Terror bases destroyed one by one'*, published in *Sabah* on 26 July 2015, makes the following statements in a story about 19 people detained in the town of Aydın: "HDP Aydın Provincial Co-Chair Pınar Akpınar's attitude and statements are surprising. Akpınar, who went to the police station, argued as if being a lawyer that the detainees were innocent. By saying that the region, which she called Kurdistan, was bombed by Turkey, she openly manifested her sympathy for the PKK". The article reports on an air operation by the Turkish Air Force against the PKK bases in northern Iraq. The operation was conducted in a region governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government. The fact that Akpınar called this geographical region 'Kurdistan' makes her a PKK sympathizer in the eyes of the mainstream print media in Turkey. By using the term 'Kurdistan' for the region, she violates the invisible ban imposed by the dominant discourse. The newspaper also implies this is part of the same process through which Akpınar insists on the detainees' innocence. In other words, she exceeds the limits of acceptable discourse. In the news article, the ethnic discourse is constructed by putting the PKK, HDP, and Kurdistan into the same category. This is an example of how the nomination strategy functions in constituting this discourse form.

Another example for the ethnic discourse is the article *'No place for ISIS on the border'*, published by *Hürriyet* on July 25. It includes the following statement that Prime Minister Davutoğlu gave in his meeting with the editors-in-chief of the Turkish dailies: "*Since Thursday, I have received so many supportive messages from the East and South-east, thank-you messages, saying 'we wanted to see the state'. The people who remained silent due to the PKK's pressures will speak louder from now and on*". The article *'Matter of existence for the state'* in *Milliyet* quotes Davutoğlu's statements about the HDP: "They engaged in a two-part game; the first one was to make use of the advantage of the election of 80 MPs in Ankara and Istanbul, and the second was to make use of the PKK's armed presence in the region as an advantage". Thus, according to the head of the AKP government, the people living in the South-east had been silent about the PKK's oppression because of fear but had expressed their support for the state freely since the government had started to take drastic measures against the PKK. Here, the geographical region where the population has a non-Turkish ethnicity is coded as 'East', 'South-east', or 'the region'.

This analysis shows that the discourse in newspaper articles distinguishes Kurdish ethnic identity from Turkish national identity. The discourse on Kurdish identity may be explicit or coded. The PKK, waging an armed struggle against the Turkish state, in which it claims to fight on behalf of the Kurds, and the HDP, which defends the rights of the Kurds and is therefore often accused

of being associated with the PKK, prefer the use of open language such as 'Kurd', 'Kurds', and 'Kurdistan', whereas the statements of the officials prefer coded language such as the 'region'. In instances where the word 'Kurd' is used in official statements, the word 'citizen' is often added.

Thus, the ethnic discourse is constructed in the news texts through language that creates the 'non-Turk' otherness category against which the national identity is constructed. In the newspaper articles, almost everything in the 'non-Turk' category is associated with an indicator of Kurdish identity.

Above I identified five forms of discourse used to discursively construct national identity and otherness: military-legal, national-symbolic, cultural-ethical, dramatic-emotional, and ethnic. An analysis of the relative frequency of the words and phrases associated with the different discourse forms identified in 449 news articles shows that the language of the military-legal discourse appears in 76% of them. In other words, the military-legal discourse is the dominant form in the news. Expressions constructing the cultural-ethical discourse appear in 28.7% of the articles, and 16% of the articles contain language of the dramatic-emotional discourse. The last two forms of discourse are almost equally common: they appear in 12.7% and 12.0% of the articles, respectively. This distribution seems consistent with a period of intensifying conflict. During a period when a strong wave of violence was affecting both urban spaces and rural areas, the discourse takes a form based on the language of violent encounters and is concerned with qualifying such actions as legal or illegal.

### Concluding Remarks

This study examined how Turkish national identity and the otherness categories it is defined against have been constructed in the mainstream print media's dailies *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *Sabah*. It analysed 449 news articles published in a one-month period of intensifying conflict in 2015. The main results are outlined above. Since all mainstream media in Turkey adopt the same approach to national security issues and use political and military elites' statements as their primary sources, the above examples from the three dailies should give an accurate overview of discourse types and otherness categories in Turkish public discourse in general.

Using the discourse-historical concepts of argumentation and nomination strategies, I find that Turkish national identity is constructed and reinforced through the construction of multiple otherness categories including

'illegitimate', 'non-national', 'unethical', 'inhuman', and 'non-Turk'. These categories are established through five forms of discourse, which can be conceptualized as military-legal, national-symbolic, cultural-ethical, dramatic-emotional, and ethnic discourses, respectively.

If these five discourse categories are treated as streams that feed a river, it is possible to say that some of the forms are stronger or weaker, just as the flow of some streams is stronger or weaker than others. Together, the five streams serve to vigorously construct national identity, just as streams come together to form a river. It seems that political populism, which has become the dominant form of political communication today, plays a vital role in the construction of Turkish national identity in these circumstances, as does sensationalist journalism. The fact that all three newspapers in this study directly convey statements uttered by politicians and military personnel who use populist political language and use sensational and emotion-provoking phrases for headlines, is consistent with a sensational journalism style. In other words, the use of populist language by the print media and politicians facilitates the discursive construction of otherness categories. Due to this othering process, social tensions inevitably increase and provide a fertile ground for exacerbating ethnic-based conflict, creating a difficult environment for peace initiatives.

This study is limited to a one-month period of intensifying conflict. It would be valuable to conduct a study of discourse forms and otherness categories in the print media during peace negotiations. Such research would enable us to determine how external conditions affect the discourse forms and otherness categories on which Turkish national identity is constructed and consolidated. I expect that the construction of national identity and otherness categories would be less explicit in other periods. This research could contribute to conflict-resolution initiatives, as resolution processes need a climate of mutual understanding and compromise, and the media could play an affirmative role in this process by avoiding the sensationalist reporting style. This article also draws attention to the relevance of news media discourses to peaceful cohabitation in multi-ethnic societies.

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# The Potentials and Challenges of Zazaki Translation for Language Revitalisation

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## Abstract

Turkey's policy of linguistic vis-à-vis minority languages has seen the use of Zazaki deteriorate to the point that it has been designated 'vulnerable' in one of UNESCO's reports on languages worldwide that was published in 2009. Despite oppression of the language, its translation activity has increased, especially by the Vate Group which was established to revitalise and standardise Zazaki. To explore the contribution of translation to the revitalisation process, samples from the translation corpora and the activity of the Vate Group are examined; special attention is paid to the translated work *Sinemaya Bêvenge*. This brief depiction of Zazaki translation shows that it has the potential to contribute to revitalising a minority language, especially by enriching and modernising its lexicon.

## Keywords

Zazaki – cinema – vulnerable language – linguistic – language revitalization

## Potansiyel û zehmetiyên wergera zazakî ji bo vejandina zimanî

Polîtîkaya Tirkiyeyê a qirkirina-zimanî ya li hember zimanên kêmaran bû sedem bo bikaranîna zazakî ew qas kêr bibe ku ji teref yek ji raporên UNESCO yê ya li ser hemû

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## Introduction

Having been subjected to severe assimilation policies by the Turkish state for decades, the Kurds continue to struggle strenuously to protect their own distinct cultural and linguistic heritage. Compared to the widespread Kurmanji Kurdish community, the Zaza community is arguably lesser known and facing fragile linguistic sustainability, faced with the threat of Turkish dominance. The Zaza population mainly inhabits the eastern part of Turkey and most speakers of Zazaki call themselves Kurd.<sup>1</sup> The group has three other names apart from Zaza: Kirmanc, Dimili or Kird. Accordingly, the names Zazaki, Kirmancki, Dimilki or Kirdki are used to refer to the language.<sup>2</sup> The Zazas in the *Dêrsim* (Tunceli in Turkish) region call their language Kirmancki, those in the *Çewlîg* (Bingöl) region call it Kirdki, in the town of *Sêwregî* (Siverek) people use Dimili and in *Elezîz* (Elazığ) and some parts of *Amed* (Diyarbakır) province people call their own language Zazaki. Mehmed S. Kaya, who studied the community's social structure extensively, reminds us that there are no official statistics on the Zaza people, because Kurds are a taboo. It is estimated that around three million Zaza-speaking Kurds live in the southeast of Turkey.<sup>3</sup> Since the early 1920s the strict assimilation of both Kurmanji and Zazaki implemented by the Turkish state has vastly hampered the development of Zazaki and literary activities such as translation. Following the establishment of the Republic, the Kurdish language and identity, along with the geographical area of Kurdistan were gradually denied, and official state rhetoric claimed that there were no Kurds in Turkey.<sup>4</sup> The Republic of Turkey pursued a policy and practice of deliberate killing of the Kurdish language;<sup>5</sup> as a result, Zazaki was categorised as vulnerable in the UNESCO 2009 language report, which was published in the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* in 2010.<sup>6</sup> In that report, a vulnerable language is described as one where most children or families of a

1 Sebastian Maisel, ed. *The Kurds: An Encyclopedia of Life, Culture, and Society* (California: ABC-Clio, 2018), 142.

2 M. Malmîsanîj, *Kirmancca ile Karşılaştırmalı Kirmancca Zazaca Dilbilgisi* (Istanbul: Vate Publishing House, 2015), 17.

3 Mehmed S. Kaya, *The Zaza Kurds of Turkey: A Middle Eastern Minority in a Globalised Society* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 5.

4 Welat Zeydanlıoğlu, "Turkey's Kurdish Language Policy," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 217, (2012): 100.

5 Amir Hassanpour, Jaffer Sheyholislami and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, "Kurdish: Linguicide, resistance and hope," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 217, (2012): 6.

6 Christopher Moseley, ed. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (France: UNESCO Publishing, 2010), 40.

particular community speak their parental language as their first language, but it is restricted to specific social domains, such as home.<sup>7</sup> Revitalisation is applied to languages that are not in the 'safe' category, such as those classified as vulnerable, endangered or extinct, and its ultimate aim is their use once again by a wide range of community members, from young to old.<sup>8</sup> The implementation of a revitalisation process depends on the support of the state that governs the minority groups within its borders, as stressed by Sue Wright:

A number of the strategies for revitalization will need the approval of the state and may require changes in state law. Their implementation will need extensive financial support from general taxation. Revitalisation of a minority language is language policymaking and language planning at a local level and the activities encompassed by it are the status planning, corpus planning and acquisition planning usually undertaken by the state: that is designating the language as a medium in certain institutions (status planning); making the language fit for that purpose, by codifying and standardising it (corpus planning); educating speakers to use it in both written and spoken forms (acquisition planning).<sup>9</sup>

The role of translation in language revitalisation has been emphasised by many scholars. Eithne O'Connell suggests that 'translation is likely to be a significant linguistic activity and sometimes even a vital survival strategy for the minority language culture'.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Michael Cronin stresses the urgent need for exploration of the effects of translation activity on minority languages,<sup>11</sup> and draws attention to the significance of the sustainability of the activity for minority languages:

Minority languages have a fundamentally paradoxical relationship with translation. As languages operating in a multilingual world with vastly accelerated information flows from dominant languages, they must translate continually in order to retain their viability and relevance as

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7 Moseley, *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, 11, 12.

8 Justyna Olko and Julia Sallabank, eds. *Revitalizing Endangered Languages: A Practical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 37.

9 Sue Wright, *Language Policy and Language Planning: From Nationalism to Globalisation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 287.

10 Eithne O'Connell, "Translation and Minority Language Media: Potential and Problems: An Irish Perspective", in *Minority Language Media: Concepts, Critiques and Case Studies*, eds. Mike Cormack and Niamh Hourigan (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2007), 213.

11 Michael Cronin, *Translation and Globalisation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 141.

living languages. Yet, translation itself may in fact endanger the very specificity of those languages that practice it, particularly in situations of diglossia.<sup>12</sup> The situation of translation in the culture of a minority language is therefore highly ambiguous.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, as part of language documentation, translation can play a significant role in the revitalisation process, as seen in the experiences of a few minority languages. For instance, in the case of the Basque language, translation has been closely linked to revitalisation and has also become the symbol of its modernisation, inspiring numerous works of lexical re-structuration and developing new registers and discourses.<sup>14</sup> It can be stated that in the case of Zazaki translation there are signs of a development similar to the Basque example. Following on the experiences and initiatives of a number of Zaza translators, which are shared in the rest of this study, it is seen that Zazaki vocabulary has widened, and the modernisation of the language has become one of their main agendas.

In this paper, I argue that despite the lack of state support for minority languages in Turkey, the translation activity of language activists has contributed to the development and revitalisation of Zazaki. The objective of this paper is to investigate some aspects of translation into the studied language and its potential to effect revitalisation. Special attention is given to the translation of a book on cinema, entitled *Sînemaya Bêvenge* (The Silent Cinema), translated by the author of this article. In the first section of this paper, the background to the vulnerable situation of Zazaki is presented. First, I discuss the history of the assimilation process in Turkey and, secondly, I provide an account of the Zazaki translation corpora and deal with the challenging conditions of the translation activity. The third section of the paper introduces the Vate Group, its emergence and contribution to the standardisation and revitalisation of Zazaki. The last section is devoted to the translation of the aforementioned work on cinema in which the Vate Group's neologisms and adopted standardisation were applied. It is important to remind readers that, despite the translation efforts of that group or other Zazaki revivalists, the translation works in that language remain scant. Also, the topics of translation into Kurdish and

12 Diglossia refers to a situation when two languages or language varieties exist side by side in a community and each one is used for different purposes. Usually, one is a more standard variety, the other a non-prestige variety.

13 Michael Cronin, "Altered States", *Translation and Minority Languages. TTR (Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction)* 8 no. 1 (1995): 89.

14 Guillem Belmar Viernes, "The Role of Translation in the Revitalization Process of Minority Languages: The Case of Basque", *Sustainable Multilingualism* 10 no. 1 (2017): 45.

the links between the Kurdish language and cinema seem to have been little studied, presenting one of the main challenges to the present study.

## Zazaki – A Vulnerable Language

### *Assimilation Policy in Turkey*

It is no exaggeration to say that one of the harshest policies toward minority languages has been practiced in Turkey, where the entire state machinery was mobilised to eliminate Kurdish, both spoken and written.<sup>15</sup> Shortly after being founded, the Turkish Republic implemented linguicide policies.<sup>16</sup> The abolition in 1924 of Kurdish schools, religious foundations, and publications<sup>17</sup> was one of the early indicators of this policy. There were many campaigns launched by state-funded organisations which promoted speaking Turkish instead of the mother tongue. ‘Citizen, Speak Turkish!’ (*Vatandaş, Türkçe konuş!*) was a well-known campaign that aimed to eradicate the public visibility and audibility of languages other than Turkish. It was considered one of the most important Turkification attempts in the early years of the Republic.<sup>18</sup> Mehmed S. Kaya describes the forced assimilation as comprehensive and mentions policies such as replacing the names of Kurdish villages, streets, mountains, and rivers with Turkish equivalents, prohibiting Kurdish names for newborns and removing Kurdish content from history books.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Kurds retained Kurdish names for both people and regional places outside official use and today it is not uncommon for people and places to have two names, one Kurdish and one Turkish. On the other hand, it is important to stress that military power remained the most effective means and mechanism of integration in the hands of the Turkish state, which insisted on assimilation and the denial of Kurdish identity as the only acceptable form of membership in the new state.<sup>20</sup> One well-known example of the use of military power to eliminate

15 Amir Hassanpour, *Essays on Kurds: Historiography, Orality, and Nationalism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2020), 74.

16 Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson, eds. *Linguistic Human Rights: Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination* (New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 1994), 362.

17 Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl, eds. *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview* (London: Routledge, 2005), 56.

18 Senem Aslan, “‘Citizen, Speak Turkish!’: A Nation in the Making”, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 13 (2007): 246.

19 Kaya, *The Zaza Kurds of Turkey*, 115.

20 Abbas Vali, ed. *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 96.

Kurdish identity was the Dêrsim Genocide, which was committed in 1937–38. According to Dilşa Deniz, “the military operations in Dersim (...) were primarily launched to enact policies of Turkification and Islamization”,<sup>21</sup>

Following the 1980 military coup, the 1982 constitution banned the use of Kurdish. Under article 66 of that constitution, everyone who has Turkish citizenship is defined as a Turk.<sup>22</sup> The law that banned speaking Kurdish was lifted when the late President Turgut Özal repealed Law 2932 in April 1991,<sup>23</sup> while the ban on Kurdish language publications and broadcasts was lifted when Kurdish was legalized in 2002.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, however, the restrictions intended to prevent or limit use of the language continue to this day. In 2009, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) took some steps to reform Turkey’s stance towards the Kurdish language, mainly to fulfil EU membership criteria. The government established TRT 6 as a Kurdish channel.<sup>25</sup> Thereafter, Kurdish departments at the universities of Artuklu, Munzur, Bingöl, and Dicle were established, and Kurdish was to be introduced as an elective course in primary schools. However, it can be argued that these reforms were primarily realised to gain Kurdish support for the AKP, since the party framed its policies in a technocratic way, defended them with reference to the EU accession plans, and did not show awareness that the political system in Turkey truly needed a radical overhaul.<sup>26</sup>

The electoral triumph of the People’s Democratic Party (HDP, *Halkların Demokratik Partisi*) in June 2015 posed a direct challenge to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s hegemony; in April 2015, he repealed the Dolmabahçe Agreement<sup>27</sup> which was made between the Turkish government and

21 Dilşa Deniz, “Re-assessing the Genocide of Kurdish Alevis in Dersim, 1937–38”, *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 14 no. 2 (2020): 39.

22 David MacDonald and Carole A. O’Leary, eds. *Kurdish Identity: Human Rights and Political Status* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2007), 63.

23 Human Rights Watch, *Restrictions On The Use Of The Kurdish Language* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999).

24 Jaffer Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity, Discourse, and New Media* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011): 84.

25 In 2015, it was renamed ‘TRT Kurdi’ and it broadcasts primarily in Kurmanji Kurdish, while a few programmes are broadcast in Zazaki Kurdish as well. The news programme *Ajansa Zazaki*, the weather forecast *Weziyetê Hewa* and the cultural programme *Bigeyr Bivin* (Travel and See) can be mentioned among its Zazaki content.

26 Marlies Casier, Joost Jongerden, Nic Walker, “Turkey’s Kurdish Movement and the AKP’s Kurdish Opening: A Kurdish Spring or Fall?”, in *The Kurdish Spring. Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds*, eds. Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2003), 135–162.

27 Nikos Christofis, “The state of the Kurds in Erdoğan’s ‘new’ Turkey”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 21 no. 3 (2019): 255.

pro-Kurdish representatives at the Prime Minister's office in Istanbul on 28 February 2015. The agreement included ten articles that aimed to solve the Kurdish question. After the failed military coup attempt in July 2016, a state of emergency was declared by the state and the oppression of the HDP as well as pressures on Kurdish language and culture intensified. This led to the closure of Kurdish language and culture associations, pressure on publishing houses, TV and radio channels, as well as a ban on books and internet pages. Kurdi-Der, the Association of Kurdish Writers in Diyarbakir and *Jiyan TV*, which was a bilingual Kurdish TV channel mainly broadcasting in Zazaki,<sup>28</sup> were some of the victims of that oppressions. Many Kurdish academics were dismissed from their positions too. Among hundreds of graduates from Kurdish Language and Literature Departments, only very few have been appointed as teachers of the Kurdish language.<sup>29</sup> Such practices by the AKP government cast suspicion on the sincerity of its measures.

Revitalisation efforts, which have intensified following the release of the aforementioned UNESCO report, could not bring an end to the shift from Zazaki language use towards Turkish. Nevertheless, the increase in the number of magazines and newspapers as well as in the publication of books, including translated works, is noteworthy. For instance, newspapers such as *Newepel* (2011) and *Rojnameyê Zazakî* (2013) and magazines such as *Şewçila* (2011) and *Ma* (2013) were published. Additionally, some news agencies such as *Jin News* (Woman News Agency) and *Firat News Agency* (ANF, *Ajansa Nûçeyan a Firat* in Kurdish) and the Kurdish news website *Rûpela Nû* (The New Page) began to offer a Zazaki option among languages on their platforms. At the same time, works from Swedish, German, Persian or English have been added to the Zazaki translation corpora.<sup>30</sup> The diversification of the number of source languages and the intensification of revitalisation efforts evolved almost simultaneously; they can be interpreted as attempts to hinder language shift towards Turkish by drawing the community's attention to world literature through its own language. Until then, due to long years of assimilation, Turkish played the

28 Vecdi Erbay, "Silencing the Kurds: Shuttered media and cultural institutions", *Index on Censorship: A Voice for the Persecuted*, 13 April 2017. Available online at <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2017/04/silencing-kurds-shuttered-media-cultural-institutions> (last accessed on 9-10-2022).

29 Serkan Alan, "Kürtçe öğretmenliğe sadece üç yeni kontenjan: 76'dan 79'a çıkacak," *Gazete Duvar*, 1 May 2021. Available online at <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/kurtce-ogretmenlige-sadece-uc-yeni-kontenjan-76dan-79a-cikacak-haber-1520924> (last accessed on 9-10-2022).

30 Ahmet Kırkan, "Zazacaya Çevrilen Eserler ve Bunların Çeviri Bilimsel İncelemesi", *The Journal of Mesopotamian Studies* 7 no. 1 (2022): 27.

role of intermediary language for assimilated or bilingual Kurds, those who speak both Kurdish and Turkish, for accessing world literature. Zazaki translation activities interrupted the intermediary role of Turkish and increased the confidence of readers in their own language, as it provided a direct connection between Zazaki and the languages of world literature, such as French or English.

### *An Outline of Zazaki Translation Activity*

One of the important factors in Zazaki vulnerability is the late transition from oral to written form, in Arabic script, which took place only in 1892.<sup>31</sup> Hence, Zazaki was fragile in terms of its literary history against assimilation policies by the Turkish state. Although Mustafa Dehqan claims to have seen a Zazaki manuscript written in 1798,<sup>32</sup> the authenticity of that claim seems arguable, especially, due to lack of publication of a complete copy of the mentioned manuscript by Dehqan so far.<sup>33</sup> The earliest Zazaki texts can be found in Orientalist Peter Lerch's *Forschungen über die Kurden und die Iranischen Nordchaldäer*, which was published in 1857.<sup>34</sup> Arguably, the first book translated into the language was the Bible, in 1900.<sup>35</sup> However, no copies of that book have been discovered so far. Other than this, two translations from Kurmanji into Zazaki by Omerê Elî cited in Albert von Le Coq's *Kurdische Texte* can be considered the earliest examples of translation into Zazaki.<sup>36</sup> Those texts most probably also form the first-ever samples of Kurdish inter-dialectal translations. Meanwhile, according to Ahmet Kırkan, the first ever text that was translated from the Kurmanji dialect into Zazaki is *Lwî û Kery* (The Fox and the Hen), which was translated by Şêx Evidirehîm and published in *Çira* magazine.<sup>37</sup> As it is beyond the scope of this study to explain the development of such translation activity among the Kurds, I wish only to mention that translations between Kurdish dialects and their historical context are one of the least investigated subjects.

31 Nurettin Beltekin and Ahmet Kırkan, eds. *Sözden Yazıya Zazaca* (Istanbul: Peywend, 2019), 69.

32 Mustafa Dehqan, "A Zazaki Alevi Treatise from Diyarbekir", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20 no. 3 (2010): 2.

33 Veysel Yıldızhan, "Nuştoxê Çimeyanê Tewr Verênanê Kirmanckî û Nuşteyê Înan (1798–1903)", in "Zazaca ve Zazalar; Edebiyat, Kültür ve Dil," special issue, *The Journal of Mesopotamian Studies*, no. 5 (2020): 114, 115.

34 Beltekin and Kırkan, eds. *Sözden Yazıya Zazaca*, 19.

35 Murat Varol, ed. *1. Uluslararası Zaza Dili Sempozyumu*, (Bingöl: Bingöl Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2011), 281.

36 Albert von Le Coq, "Übersetzung der Erzählungen 'Dünya güzele' und 'Yusib aziz' aus dem Kurmanğî ins Zaza", in *Kurdische Texte* (Berlin: Reichsdruckerei, 1903), vol. 2, 63.

37 Kırkan, "Zazacaya Çevrilen Eserler", 30.

Given the seriously limited Zazaki translation corpora, less than one hundred works,<sup>38</sup> the detrimental effects of linguistic on the language's development is clear. As a result of that policy, both Kurmanji and Zazaki have relied mainly on oral tradition to survive. Travelling oral performers/reciters of epics, the *deyrbaz* (Kurmanji/Zazaki) and the *dengbêj* (Kurmanji) have helped the language remain alive.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, Metin Yüksel points out that “*dengbêj* performances can also be seen as the stocks of the registers of the unarchivable elements of Kurdish culture”.<sup>40</sup>

After a long break in translation activity that lasted more than seven decades, two poems by the Kurdish poet Ahmed Arif were translated from Turkish into Zazaki by Malmîsanij in 1978.<sup>41</sup> Later, he also translated a short story by Turkish novelist Sabahattin Ali and two poems by Nazım Hikmet which appeared in the bilingual magazine *Tirêj*.<sup>42</sup> In other bilingual Kurdish magazines, such as *Berhem* and *Hêvî*, the source languages of Zazaki translations expanded to Persian and French. *Berhem* was a bilingual Kurdish magazine published in Stockholm from 1988 to 1991 and *Hêvî* was published in Paris from 1983 to 1992. Most of the translations in the 1980s were done by secular or leftist activists who chose works by Kurdish or Turkish leftist writers, which points to the role of the ideology of translators in the revitalisation process.<sup>43</sup> The late adoption of book translation into Zazaki indicates to what extent the assimilation policy hampered the literary development of the language.

For instance, the first-ever book translated into Zazaki, *Memik Axa Wo Dêrsimij* (*The Dersimian Memik Agha*), appeared in 1994. The author, Haydar Işık, was a Zaza from Dêrsim, known for his works specialising in Kurdish history, especially the Dêrsim Genocide. The novel was published by Belge Yayınları in 1990 and its Zazaki translation was published by APEC Publishing House in Sweden in 1994. It is noteworthy that, since then, according to Mutlu Can, no other novel has been translated from Turkish into Zazaki, and the sum of book translations from Turkish into Zazaki does not exceed twenty.<sup>44</sup> Zaza

38 Mutlu Can, *Bibliyografyaya Kirmanckî (Zazakî) 1963–2017* (Istanbul: Vate, 2018), 27–45.

39 Şehnaz Tahir Gürçaglar, Saliha Paker, John Milton, eds. *Tradition, Tension and Translation in Turkey* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2015), 262.

40 Metin Yüksel, “Dengbêj, Mullah, Intelligentsia: The Survival And Revival Of The Kurdish-Kurmanji Language In The Middle East, 1925–1960” (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2011), 108.

41 Can, *Bibliyografyaya Kirmanckî*, 429.

42 Murat Varol, “Zaza Edebiyatında Tirêj Dergisinin Yeri”, *Mukaddime* 6 no. 1 (2015): 142–147.

43 Román Alvarez and Maria Carmen África Vidal, eds. *Translation, Power, Subversion* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1996), 5.

44 Can, *Bibliyografyaya Kirmanckî*, 27–45.

readers access works in Turkish more easily and quickly than in Zazaki, which may be one of the reasons for their reluctance to seek out the translations from the dominant language of the country into their mother tongue. The scarcity of reprints of the books translated from Turkish into Zazaki seems to attest to this reluctance. An analogy of this scarcity of translations from Turkish into Zazaki can be made with the Catalan example shared by Montserrat Bacardí:

by the beginning of the 20th century, the enlightened minority that wished to read *Buscón* or *La Regenta* were in a position to do so directly in Spanish (...): translation was no longer necessary. And clearly, when unnecessary, it loses part of its underlying justification and becomes in a sense delegitimised.<sup>45</sup>

It seems that the speeding up in language shift of the Zaza audience towards Turkish negatively impacted the need for translations from the dominant language. Also, it seems that as a result of lack of access of education in their mother tongue, most Zaza readers tend to read translations from other languages into Turkish rather than translations into Zazaki. However, from the point of view of language revitalisation, translation activities are able to question the hegemony of the dominant language, and minority language activists should not avoid translating from the dominant language.<sup>46</sup> Hence, the scarcity of translations from Turkish into Zazaki appears to be a gap to be covered in the translation and revitalisation process. In addition, the strict assimilation and ongoing promotion of Turkish in almost all socio-economic spheres leave little opportunity to Kurdish in everyday life. Known for her studies on the revitalisation of endangered languages, Justyna Olko states that “economic benefits and commercialization are an often neglected dimension of language revitalization programs, despite being of key importance: many languages cease to be spoken precisely because of their perceived lack of utility and economic value”.<sup>47</sup> Turkish, which is still the only official language in the country, has become the main commercial language used in everyday life in

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45 Montserrat Bacardí, “Translation from Spanish into Catalan during the 20th Century: Sketch of a Chequered History”, in *Less Translated Languages*, eds. Albert Branchadell and Lovell Margaret West (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2005), 258.

46 Oscar Diaz Fouces, “Translation Policy for Minority Languages in the European Union: Globalisation and Resistance”, in *Less Translated Languages*, eds. Albert Branchadell and Lovell Margaret West (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2005), 100.

47 Justyna Olko, “Economic Benefits Marketing and Commercializing Language Revitalization”, in *Revitalizing Endangered Languages: A Practical Guide*, eds. Justyna Olko and Julia Sallabank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 141.

most Kurdish cities over decades. The economic devastation of Kurdish society, which worsened following the enforced evacuations by the state between 1991 and 1997, can be regarded as one of the main reasons behind that linguistic shift in urban areas. It was estimated that 3,500 villages were evacuated and around three million people, mainly Kurds, were displaced.<sup>48</sup> Here, it is important to remember that “a key variable in assessing the possibilities for language revitalization is the existence or lack of governmental funding for language revitalization”.<sup>49</sup> The Turkish state does not provide any financial support for the revitalisation of Kurdish; in contrast, as will be shown in the following sections, it tries to hamper efforts in that direction. Today, Turkish is the main commercial language in two predominantly Zaza city centres, namely Dêrsim and Çewlîg. In towns such as Hêni, Pîran or Sêwregî, Zazaki is sometimes used in shops, restaurants or cafés. In terms of the publication market, there are four main publishing houses that publish predominantly in Zazaki: Vate, Roşna, Tîj, and Vir. Meanwhile, some Kurmanji-dominated publishers such as Peywend, J&J, Nûbihar, Dara, and Avesta have published a few books in Zazaki too. Apart from experiencing oppression from the Turkish state,<sup>50</sup> the limited readership of the Kurdish language in Turkey and high printing costs due to high inflation rates in recent years are other reasons for the economic problems hampering the revitalisation process.

What is more, Kurmanji Kurdish, which also suffers from Turkish dominance, poses an additional threat to Zazaki. This is especially visible in Kurdish politics. The pro-Kurdish party HDP, which carries out its activities and makes statements overwhelmingly in Turkish, uses Kurmanji as its second language, but Zazaki is almost never used, even though it is the native tongue of the party's famous imprisoned leader, Selahattin Demirtaş. The party's Kurdish social media uses Kurmanji, while Zazaki is used only during Kurdish festivals in short celebration messages. The apathy of Kurdistan Regional Government's media, such as Rûdaw or Kurdistan24 news channels, which are very active in Turkey as well, towards Zazaki is a matter of complaint brought up by Zazaki speakers too. The number of books translated from Kurmanji into Zazaki is also very low. Some of these few works include *Dêrsim Raywanî û Cografya* written

48 Kerim Yıldız, *The Kurds in Turkey: EU Accession and Human Rights* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 17.

49 Lenore A. Grenoble and Lindsay J. Whaley, *Saving Languages: An Introduction to Language Revitalization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 34.

50 Constanze Letsch, “Kurdish publishing house struggles with bans as state repression escalates”, *The Arab Weekly*, 28 September 2019. Available online at <https://the arab weekly .com/kurdish-publishing-house-struggles-bans-state-repression-escalates> (last accessed on 11-10-2022).

by Armenian writer Andranik and translated from Armenian into Kurmanji by Tîmûrê Xelîl in 2009 and, one year later, from Kurmanji into Zazaki by Roşan Lezgîn. *Dêrê Santa Ragnhilî* (original name *Li Dêrê*), written by Hesenê Metê, and translated by J. Îhsan Espar, and Kurdish scholar Ehmedê Xani's masterpiece *Mem û Zîn*, translated by Mûrad Canşad into Zazaki and published by Roşna publishing house in 2018, are further translated works. To our knowledge, there has so far been no book translated from two other Kurdish dialects, Sorani and Hawrami, into Zazaki or vice versa. The early translations were mainly inter-dialectal or from Turkish. However, in recent years a few books have been translated from Swedish, German, Persian, English, and Arabic.<sup>51</sup> Among Zazaki translations, the dominant genre is literature such as poems, short stories, and novels. In addition to translations of the Quran, which include *Tefsîrê Roşnayî* (2016), translated by Mela Mehemedê Hezanî and published by the Kurdish Institute in Amed, a few other religious books have been translated from Turkish into Zazaki, including Said Nursi's *Rîsaleya Îxlasî* (original name *İhlas Risalesi*) and *Rîsaleya Birarîye* (original name *Kardeşlik Risalesi*) which were translated by Serdar Bedirxan and published by Zehra publishing house in 2014.<sup>52</sup> Another religious work that should be mentioned is *Mijdîyana Mesîh Îsay Çimê Lukay Ra* ("The Gospel according to Saint Luke"), which was prepared by The Bible Society in Turkey and published in 2020. Also, there are two theoretical books that were translated from Turkish and which touch upon cinema and theatre: *Sînemaya Bêvenge* (2015) by Nilgün Abisel, which was originally published as *Sessiz Sinema* ("The Silent Cinema") and translated into Zazaki by the author, and *Hunerê Dramî* (2015) by Özdemir Nutku, originally published as *Dram Sanatı: Tîyatroya Giriş* ("The Art of Drama: Introduction to Theatre"), which was translated by Deniz Gündüz.

Since Zazaki does not possess a standard form yet, following the above-mentioned translation efforts, it may be helpful to recall the role of standardization in revitalisation processes to understand the studied language's translation challenges. Grenoble and Whaley describe standardisation as a necessary part of creating local language literacy, and therefore as a critical part of language revitalisation efforts.<sup>53</sup> Standardisation plays a principal role

51 These include Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which had been translated from English into Swedish by Maj Bylock and was translated from Swedish into Zazaki (2005) by J. Îhsan Espar; Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (*Bedîyayîş*), translated from German (2015) by Jêhatî Zengelan; Sohrab Sepehri's *The Death of Color and Traveler* (*Mergê Rengî & Raywan*), translated from Persian (2020) by Nevzat Valêrî; and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (*Merreyî û Merdimî*), translated from English (2021) by Sezgin Fîrat.

52 Kîrkan, "Zazacaya Çevrilen Eserler", 27, 32.

53 Grenoble and Whaley, *Saving Languages*, 130.

in the revitalisation of Zazaki too, as seen in the efforts of the Vate Group. To clarify the role of possessing a standard form, Zazaki can be compared with the two major standard Kurdish dialects, Sorani and Kurmanji, in terms of translations into other standard languages. The standardisation of these two dialects is more advanced and numerous literary works have already been translated from these dialects into foreign languages including Greek, Polish, and English.<sup>54</sup> Throughout this study, however, no translated book from Zazaki into a standard, either a Kurdish one or a foreign, language could be located.

In addition to the lack of a standard form, one of the reasons behind the absence of translations into foreign languages is the lack of collocation between the Zazaki language and Kurdish identity, which in turn negatively affects its recognition by outsiders. It seems that in Turkey the term Kurd is usually collocated with the Kurmanji group, and the identity of the Zaza group is often disputed in that regard. Therefore, foreigners who explore the situation of the Kurds in Turkey become familiar with the Kurmanji majority but not the Zaza minority. Consequently, this hinders the knowledge of Zazaki among outsiders. Moreover, the dispute over the ethnic identity of the Zaza group was reinforced by a separatist idea which arose in the diaspora. In the 1980s, a number of Zaza speakers in Sweden and Germany, who had previously identified themselves as Kurds, began speaking of the Zazas as a distinct group of people with their own culture, and a history presented as distinct from that of the Kurds.<sup>55</sup> Ercan Çağlayan claims that the separatist group put the linguistic distinction at the centre of the ethnic identity debate and adds that it ignored the many common aspects that the community shares with other Kurdish groups.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, it is possible to accept both the conclusions of historical linguistics (Zazaki is not closely related to Kurmanji), and those of many native speakers (Zazaki speakers are Kurds, and their language belongs to a larger-order entity, “Kurdish”).<sup>57</sup> The minimalist approach to the identity issue not only caused deeper polarisation inside the community with regard to its politics, but also paved the way for a dichotomy in the standardisation process, which diminished the possibility of joint cultural and revitalisation

54 Farangis Ghaderi and Clémence Scalbert-Yücel, “An Etat Présent of the Kurdish Literature in English translation”, *The Translator* 27 no. 2 (2021): 153–154.

55 Martin van Bruinessen, *The Kurds in Movement: Migrations, mobilisations, communications and the globalisation of the Kurdish question* (Tokyo: Islamic Area Studies Project, 1999).

56 Ercan Çağlayan, *Zazalar Tarih, Kültür ve Kimlik* (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University, 2016), 161, 162.

57 Geoffrey Haig and Ergin Öpengin, “Kurdish: A Critical Research Overview”, *Kurdish Studies* 2 no. 2, (2014): 111.

efforts, including translation. For instance, the Zazaist group's Jacobson alphabet includes letters such as *ğ*, *ı* and *ü*, which are used in Turkish as well, and it has 32 letters,<sup>58</sup> which seems to come from its reactionary attitudes towards Kurdishness, while the pro-Kurdish Vate Group uses and encourages Celadet Bedirxan's Kurdish alphabet of 31 letters, which excludes the mentioned three letters. Since Zazaki is a non-standardised language, and translation is mostly done between languages that already possess a system of linguistic norms, the number of products translated into and from Zazaki remains limited. Thanks to increased interest in translation activity among the Kurds, there is now a Kurdish magazine called *Lewerger* solely devoted to translation activities that started its publication in September 2022. Moreover, in magazines such as *Vate*, *Ewro*, *Zarema* or *Wêje û Rexne*, some articles have already appeared dealing with various aspects of translation in the Kurdish context and translations from other languages into Kurdish, such as Nevzat Valêrî's article "Açarnayîş û Açarnayox" ("Translation and Translator") where he shares various translation theories and focuses on the role of translators in literature;<sup>59</sup> Edward Said's "Intellectual Exile" article, which was translated from English into Kurmanji by Ömer Delikaya with the title "Di Wêjeyê de Sirgûnî û Rewşenbîrî";<sup>60</sup> or Jacques Prévert's poem "Barbara", which was translated from French into Zazaki by Bengin Roşn.<sup>61</sup>

### *The Vate Group and Its Role in Translation and the Revitalisation of Zazaki*

The Vate Study Group (Grûba Xebate ye Vateyî in Zazaki), which was established by a few academics and language activists in Sweden in 1996, is regarded as a Zaza revivalist group due to its efforts devoted to the standardisation and modernisation of the language, including their members' considerable literary output. This group held 33 meetings from 1996 to 2021, and in these meetings, attempted to do the work necessary for the standardisation of written Zazaki. The most common words used in the daily language were selected and standardised, word roots and prevalence having been taken into account.<sup>62</sup> Sue Wright lists among language development strategies the production of a

58 C. M. Jacobson, *Zazaca Okuma-Yazma El Kitabı* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 1997), 9.

59 Nevzat Valêrî, "Açarnayîş û Açarnayox", *Ewro: Teorî, huner û edebîyat* 1 (2016): 99–102.

60 Ömer Delikaya, "Di Wêjeyê de Sirgûnî û Rewşenbîrî", *Wêje û Rexne: Kovara lêkolîn, rexne û teorîya wêjeyê* 2 (2014): 153–161.

61 Bengin Roşn, "Barbara", *Vate: Kovara kulturî* 28 (2007): 165–166.

62 Vate Study Group, "About Us", *Vate*. Available online at <https://vate.com.tr/about-us/vate-study-group> (last accessed on 11-10-2022).

written form of the language, encouragement of the acquisition of the language, literacy, funding, the encouragement of literary production and translation of administrative documents.<sup>63</sup> Peter K. Austin also refers to translation activity in terms of revitalisation efforts. He points out that:

Language revitalizers can adopt the methods, practices, and tools of language documenters and make high-quality audio-visual records of learners' knowledge and use of language and cultural phenomena, and accompany them with transcriptions, translations, notes, metadata, and metadocumentation, using the documenters' software and data models where appropriate.<sup>64</sup>

As stressed by J. İhsan Espar, one of the founders of the Vate Group, the standardisation of Zazaki is the group's main aim,<sup>65</sup> including efforts focusing on vocabulary and thesaurus studies, lexicon, grammatical and orthographic rules, as well as on the creation of modern literature in Kirmancki/Zazaki.<sup>66</sup> Deniz Gündüz cited both modernisation and standardisation of the language among the fundamental aims of the group. He stressed that his participation in translating a book on drama, the previously mentioned *Hunerê Dramê*, was inspired by the idea of contributing to the modernisation of the language.<sup>67</sup> Also, according to him, "developing knowledge about the Zaza and the Kurdish national idea, especially among those who are not convinced about their Kurdish background", is among the group's most important tasks.<sup>68</sup> So far, the Vate Publishing House, established in 2003, has published several dictionaries,

63 Wright, *Language Policy and Language Planning*, 287.

64 Peter K. Austin, "Language Documentation and Language Revitalization", in *Revitalizing Endangered Languages: A Practical Guide*, eds. Justyna Olko and Julia Sallabank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 211.

65 J. İhsan Espar, "Kırmanccanın (Zazacanın) standart bir yazı diline kavuşması için yapılan çalışmalar: Vate Çalışma Grubu ve Vate dergisi", *Vate*, 24 November 2021. Available online at <http://vate.com.tr/kirmanccanin-zazacanın-standard-bir-yazi-diline-kavusmasi-icin-yapilan-calismalar> (last accessed on 11-10-2022).

66 See also Bilal Zilan, "The Work on Standardization of the Vate Group". Available online at [https://www.academia.edu/31644969/Vate\\_%C3%87al%C4%B1%C5%9Fma\\_Grubu\\_ve\\_Zazacay%C4%B1\\_Standartla%C5%9Ft%C4%B1rma\\_%C3%87al%C4%B1%C5%9Fmalar%C4%B1\\_The\\_Work\\_on\\_Standartization\\_of\\_the\\_Vate\\_Group\\_](https://www.academia.edu/31644969/Vate_%C3%87al%C4%B1%C5%9Fma_Grubu_ve_Zazacay%C4%B1_Standartla%C5%9Ft%C4%B1rma_%C3%87al%C4%B1%C5%9Fmalar%C4%B1_The_Work_on_Standartization_of_the_Vate_Group_) (last accessed on 11-10-2022).

67 Deniz Gündüz, interview by the author, 14 October 2021.

68 Renata Kurpiewska-Korbut, "The Socio-Political Role of Modern Kurdish Cultural Institutions", in *Rediscovering Kurdistan's Cultures and Identities: The Call of the Cricket*, ed. Joanna Bocheńska (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 125, 126.

as well as a considerable amount of the language's literary corpus which contributed much to Zazaki revitalisation. Moreover, the *Vate* magazine, published since 1997, has recently released its 72nd issue. It is the group's main channel to convey revivalist ideas, and grammatical and vocabulary proposals. The group's efforts in translation, including the publication of books and translated texts in *Vate* magazine,<sup>69</sup> show that translation is essential for language revitalisation and should be considered a part of minority language policy.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, translation activity is well rooted in the group. One of its founding members, Malmîsanij, is also the earliest modern Zazaki translator, who since 1978 has translated literary works from languages ranging from Kurmanji, French, and Persian to Turkish into Zazaki. At the same time, given the fact that language revitalisation often focuses on transmitting the language to children,<sup>71</sup> the group's role in translating children's literature should be mentioned too. J. İhsan Espar and Haydar Diljen are some of the earliest and most productive Zaza translators in this regard. Both group members have considerably contributed to the genre of children's literature with their translations from Swedish and Kurmanji.<sup>72</sup> As pointed out by Viernes, favorable outcomes of translation activities in a minority language can be a determining factor in its standardisation process:

Translations have often been a main component of the bases for the standardization of languages around the world, both big and small. In the case of German, for example, the translation of the Bible set the foundations upon which Standard German (or *Hochdeutsch*) was developed. However, with minority languages this role of translation becomes more relevant, especially when the original written literature has been scarce or non-existent. Then, translations are the only basis available upon which the standard model can be built.<sup>73</sup>

It can be stated that both the late transition of Zazaki to writing and the current slow standardisation process make it difficult to compare its case with the German experience. However, it is not a coincidence that the development of standardisation efforts of Zazaki and the increase in translation coincided; this suggests that translation activity assists the standardisation process.

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69 Can, *Bibîyografyaya Kirmanckî*, 147, 148.

70 Viernes, "The Role of Translation", 39.

71 Olko and Sallabank, eds. *Revitalizing Endangered Languages*, 35.

72 Can, *Bibîyografyaya Kirmanckî*, 28, 29.

73 Viernes, "The Role of Translation", 43.

Concomitantly, as the Vate Group's efforts for standardisation of Zazaki continue, so do its contributions to the translation of works into Zazaki.

*Sînemaya Bêvenge – Translating a Book on Cinema into Zazaki*

In his book devoted to translation and its links with cinema, Cronin claims that neglecting the use of cinema in translation studies means neglecting the use of a highly engaging and effective medium for soliciting responses on a wide variety of topics directly related to the business of translation.<sup>74</sup> Cinema, as a modern phenomenon, has become one of the strongest means of expression both for individuals and for communities, including the Kurdish community.<sup>75</sup> Despite the fact that the appearance of Kurdish culture in movies dates back to 1926 with *Zarê*, a silent film made by Armenian director Hamo Beknazaryan,<sup>76</sup> the encounter of the Kurds with the medium of cinema was a notably belated one, due to the social, political, and economic circumstances experienced by the Kurds. Kurdish filmmakers eventually took to the stage and invented Kurdish cinema as a concept at a time when the world was celebrating the centenary of the birth of cinema.<sup>77</sup> With the emergence of MED TV, and the Kurdish channels that were established later, Kurdish cinema took a further step and Kurdish directors, especially those who were making short films, found a platform to deliver their films to the audience.<sup>78</sup> The Zazaki adventure in filmmaking is novel as well. Despite that late participation, today there are many short films in Zazaki, such as *Sîpê* (“White”) directed by Kamer Erdoğan and released in 2012; *Vîr* (“The Memory”) by Burhan Ateş, released in 2017; *Cênîya Nêeysayî* (“The Invisible Woman”) by Lütü İrdem, in 2016; as well as a few full-length films such as *Perre Dima So* (“Follow the Feather”), directed by Nuray Şen, which was released in 2004; or *Hewno Bêreng* (“The Colourless Dream”), by Mehmet Ali Konar, released in 2018.

To contribute to Kurdish cinema by providing textual materials in Kurdish, in 2015 the *Komeleya Akademiya Sînemayê ya Rojhilata Navîn* (“Middle East Cinema Academy Association”) carried out a project entitled “Mother Tongue and Cultural Studies” which was funded by the European Union. This association is one of the Kurdish culture and art organisations whose activities

74 Michael Cronin, *Translation Goes to Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2008), xi.

75 Müjde Arslan, *Kürt Sineması: Yurtsuzluk, Sınır ve Ölüm* (Istanbul: Agora Kitaplığı, 2009), xii.

76 Sunçem Koçer, “Kurdish Cinema as a Transnational Discourse Genre: Cinematic Visibility, Cultural Resilience, and Political Agency”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (2014): 479.

77 Ayça Çiftçi, “The Politics of Text and Context: Kurdish Films in Turkey in a Period of Political Transformation” (PhD dissertation, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2015).

78 Arslan, *Kürt Sineması*, 12.

have been restricted by the Turkish state following the failed military coup of 2016. As part of the project, nine books were translated into Kurmanji and two into Zazaki. The common feature of the books, both cinematic and theatrical, was the predominance of their descriptive aspect and educational purpose, which is why they had been chosen for the students of the Academy. From the perspective of language revitalization, it can be said that these works contributed to the corpus of Kurdish cinema lexis. One of the project's books was *Sessiz Sinema*, translated into Zazaki as *Sînemaya Bêvenge*. It is the first book on cinema translated into Zazaki. The first chapter of the book deals with the history of cinema, mainly concentrating on the stages that paved the way for the invention of the cinematograph, while the other chapters deal extensively with the silent film era by focusing on Hollywood (US), German, French, and Soviet cinema.

The book was overwhelmingly descriptive and focused on the technical aspects of filmmaking, which is why an extensive terminology of film was needed. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges of the translation was with regard to the lexical terms. For instance, before the translation of this work, there was only one short paper on film terminology published in Zazaki by the Vate Group, in the 38th issue of the *Vate* magazine. The paper promoted neologisms such as *kaybaz/e* (actor/actress) created from *kaye* meaning game or play and *baz*, a suffix which gives the meaning of doing or performing something to the noun. Another example was *serrol*, meaning main protagonist, as a combination of two nouns, *ser* meaning "head" and *rol*, seems to be borrowed from Turkish *rol*.<sup>79</sup> Apart from Zazaki, both Kurmanji Kurdish and Turkish use "rol" too, which was etymologically borrowed from French "rôle" and is produced by its variant "roole".<sup>80</sup> As neologisms enter languages, minority languages need to keep up with new terminology. However, they need to do so carefully, respecting the structure of their own language and without sacrificing genuineness,<sup>81</sup> as is indeed the case in Vate Group's paper on film terminology. The lexical questions were not limited to Zazaki but also valid for Kurmanji. In addition to existing materials such as dictionaries, books or magazines that had been reviewed carefully, three workshops with the participation of film directors and stage actors, such as Zeynel Doğan and Rüknettin Gün, were organised at Diyarbakir's City Theatre to address this issue. The idea behind the workshops was to discuss and decide which terms to use, asking

79 Vate Study Group, "Termê Sînemaya", *Vate* 38 (2012): 10, 20.

80 Eric Partridge, *A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2804.

81 Viernes, "The Role of Translation", 44, 45.

the opinions of individuals who were practitioners of theatre and cinema. This allowed for making more accurate decisions about the terms in question. In addition to lexical issues, structural or semantic discrepancies between source and target languages can also become a big challenge during the translation process. For example, it is very difficult to translate accurately into Chinese the Western, especially American, concept of identity and other related terms and phrases in a way consistent with the original connotations.<sup>82</sup> Regarding one of the semantic challenges of *Sînemaya Bêvenge*, the sentences in the source language (Turkish) were often quite long; in Zazaki, ideas are usually expressed with shorter sentences, both in speech and in writing. Therefore, when a sentence was confusing semantically because of its length, it was divided up without altering its meaning. However, this ambitious translation project failed at reaching the expected level due to the oppression of the association that intensified following the 2016 coup attempt. The books were supposed to be introduced to a wider public via conferences and symposiums, but the repression hampered the process of commercialisation. Nevertheless, I introduced the book in the *Ewro* literature and art magazine with an article entitled “Kitabê Sînemaya Bêvenge Ser o” (“On the Silent Cinema Book”).<sup>83</sup> The process of translation of this book mirrors, in miniaturised form, the many challenges which the Kurdish and especially the Zazaki language face today. It demonstrates that, despite the oppression and challenges, the literary corpus of Zazaki is widening with the help of translation, and thus its revitalisation advances unwaveringly.

### Conclusion

Two years after the emergence of the first book translated into Zazaki (1994), the establishment of the Vate Group was a significant step towards enriching and diversifying Zazaki translation activities. Despite the decades-long interruption of translation activities, it was mainly thanks to the Vate Group’s efforts at standardisation that the role of translation became noticeable, notably in the enrichment of literary corpora and in diversifying the genres of the translated works. The idea of modernising the language seems to represent a common ground for the Vate Group and Zazaki language activists, both aiming at the same objective. Translators, not only from within the group but also

82 Eva Hung, ed. *Translation and Cultural Change* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2005), 107, 108.

83 Esat Şanlı, “Kitabê Sînemaya Bêvenge Ser o”, *Ewro: Teorî, huner û edebîyat* 1 (2016): 103–118.

some from outside, adopted the suggested rules of standard usage proposed by Vate and implemented them in their works. For instance, in *Sînemaya Bêvenge*, which was inspired by the idea of making Zazaki familiar with cinema as well as contributing to the modernisation of the mother tongue, some neologisms and grammatical solutions proposed by the group were applied. Therefore, language activists and academics who are concerned with Zazaki should further research the experiences of translation for ideas and strategies useful for language revitalisation. The scarcity of critical publications devoted to both Zazaki and Kurmanji translations, which became apparent in the course of this study, is certainly also an obstacle to successful revitalisation. Nevertheless, following the release of the UNESCO report on the vulnerability of Zazaki, and despite the total lack of state support, the Zaza community has made considerable efforts to defend and revitalise the language. It is, however, necessary to conclude that linguicidal policies in Turkey remain the primary reason for the endangering of minority languages. If such policies continue, the situation of the Zazaki language will likely deteriorate from vulnerable to endangered in the near future. In order to prevent this from happening, the state should democratise its language policy, end the oppression of Kurdish media, publishing houses, language and cultural institutions, and make Kurdish compulsory in education.

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# Great Expectations, Trivialised Gains: a Critical Enquiry into Kurdish Heritage Language Teaching in Berlin

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## Abstract

Multilingualism is being embraced more and more rhetorically in Germany, yet the language policy approach put into practice in schools shows a hierarchical order within which languages are treated unequally. While some are viewed favourably, some others are either marginalised or largely ignored. Analysing the newly introduced Kurdish heritage language teaching in Berlin, this article seeks to explore how language hierarchies function in schools and how teaching Kurdish is confined by such hierarchies. Drawing on field notes and observations collected as part of a larger project, the article pinpoints the structural limitations and challenges faced by Kurdish heritage language instruction in Berlin and why it might contribute to the reproduction of hierarchical attitudes towards multilingualism rather than challenge them.

## Keywords

language policy – linguistic hierarchy – Kurdish Language Teaching – multilingualism – migration

## Hêviyên mezin, qezencên biçûk: lêkolîneke rexneyî ya li Berlînê hînkirina zimanê mîrasê kurdî

Pirzimanî bi awayekî retorîk li Almanyayê her ku diçe bêhtir tê pejirandin lê nêrîna polîtîkaya zimanî ya li dibistanan tê bicihkirin rêzeke hiyerarşik nişan dide ku tê

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de ziman miameleyeke newekhev dibînin. Digel ku hin ziman bêhtir tèn pejirandin, hinekên din yan tèn marjînalîzekirin an jî tèn tune-hesibandin. Bi tehlîlkirina li Berlînê hînkirina zimanê mîrasê kurdî ya nû destpêkirî, ev gotar hewl dide kişf bike ka hiyerarşiyên zimanî li dibistanan çawa dixebitin û çawa hînkirina kurdî bi van hiyerarşiyên tî bisînorkirin. Li ser bîngeha notên qadê û çavdêriyên wekî beşa projeyê mezintir hatine berhevkerin, ev gotar sînorkirî binyadî û zehmetiyên perwerdehiya hînkirina zimanê mîrasê kurdî ya li Berlînê nişan dide û çima ev dikare beşdariya jî nû ve hilberîna helwestên hiyerarşik li hember pîrzimaniyê bike, di dewsa ku dijîtiyê li hember wê bike.

## چاوه‌روانیه مه‌زنه‌کان، ده‌ستکه‌وته بێ بایه‌خه‌کان: لیکۆلینه‌وه‌یه‌کی ره‌خه‌گرانه‌ ده‌رباره‌ی فێرکاری زمانی که‌له‌پووری کوردی له‌ به‌رلین

له‌ ئەلمانیادا، فره‌ زمانزانی زیاتر و زیاتر به‌شیوه‌یه‌کی به‌رچاو بایه‌خه‌ی بێ ده‌دریت. به‌لام له‌گه‌ڵ ئەوه‌شدا یاسای جێبه‌جێکردنی شیوه‌یه‌ک له‌ پله‌به‌ندی پشان ده‌دات، که‌ تیایدا زمانه‌کان به‌ شیوه‌یه‌کی نایه‌کسان ته‌ماشای ده‌کری.

له‌ کاتی‌دا هه‌ندێکیان بایه‌خه‌یان بێ ده‌دریت، هه‌ندێکیتریان جیاکاریان به‌رامبه‌ر ده‌کریت، یاخود تارا‌ده‌یه‌کی زۆر فره‌رامۆش ده‌خه‌ری. له‌ رێی شیکردنه‌وه‌ی فێرکاری زمانی که‌له‌پووری کوردی، که‌ تازه له‌ به‌رلین ناسیتره‌وه‌، ئەم وه‌تاره‌ هه‌ولده‌دات له‌ چۆنیه‌تی کارکردنی پله‌به‌ندی زمان له‌ قوتابخانه‌کان و فێرکردنی زمانی کوردی بکۆلیته‌وه‌، که‌ به‌م پله‌به‌ندیانه‌ سنووردارکراوه‌.

به‌ پشت‌به‌ستن به‌ تێبینیه‌ مه‌یدانییه‌کان و ئەو سه‌رنجانه‌ی که‌ کۆ کراونه‌ته‌وه‌ وه‌ک به‌شیک له‌ پرۆژه‌یه‌کی گه‌وره‌تر، ئەم وه‌تاره‌ سنووردارێ بیکهاته‌ و ئەو ئالانگاریانه‌ ده‌ست نیشان ده‌کات که‌ رووبه‌رووی فێرکردنی زمانی که‌له‌پووری کوردی بوونه‌ته‌وه‌.

له‌ به‌رلین؛ وه‌ بۆچی ره‌نگه‌ بێته‌ هۆکاری دووباره‌ به‌ره‌مه‌پێنانه‌وه‌ی تێروانینی پله‌به‌ندیانه‌ به‌رامبه‌ر فره‌زما‌ین، له‌ جیا‌ین رووبه‌رووبوونه‌وه‌یان.

## Hêvîyê girsî, qezencê qijkekî: derheqê musnayîşê zîwanê mîrasî yê kurdkî yê Berlînî de cigêrayîşo rexnegir

Almanya de zafzîwanîye hêdî-hêdî hîna zaf yena ra zîwan. Labelê polîtîkaya pratîke ke mekteban de ca gêna, tede hîyerarşiyêka têduştnebîyayîşê zîwanan vejîyena orte. Herçiqas ke tayê zîwanî tercîh benê, tayê bînî yan marjînalîze benê yan zî zafane yenê peygoşkerdene. Bi analîzkerdişê musnayîşê zîwanê mîrasî yê kurdkî ke Berlîn de newe

dest pêkerd, na meqale kena ke kifş bikero ke mekteban de hîyerarşiyê ziwanan senî qewimîyenê û musnayîşê kurdkî senî nê hîyerarşîyan mîyan de sînorkerde maneno. Pê notanê warî û obzervasyonanê ke çarçewaya projeyêka girse de ameyî arêdayene, no nuşte asteng û zehmetîyanê awankîyan ke musnayoxê ziwane mîrasî yê kurdkî Berlin de vînenê, înan tesbît keno û ser o zî nawneno ke herinda ke duştê înan de vejîyo, no beno ke neweraviraştîşê tewranê hîyerarşîyanê zafziwanîye havile bikero.

## Introduction

Berlin is one of the prominent urban contexts where many languages can be heard on the streets; public institutions use several languages in publications such as informative flyers or on the website of the city administration; publicly funded civil society organizations provide services in multiple languages; the vast majority of the city's classrooms host multilingual students; several languages are taught in schools; and a number of cultural and literary activities are carried out through many languages in the city. In other words, multilingualism is widely acknowledged both in practice and rhetorically in Berlin. However, not all the languages enjoy the same status and are approached equally by the public administration and in the wider society. Like in many other urban contexts in Europe, the language policy approach prescribed in Berlin favours certain languages over the others and thus leads to linguistic hierarchies, forcing the speakers of less favoured languages to shift towards the dominant language(s) of the society. In fact, Berlin is not the only city in Germany where languages are treated hierarchically. In the case of Hamburg, Gogolin argues that "the linguistic situation we live in is composed of languages with more or less legitimacy, higher or lower status, larger or smaller numbers of users, and other aspects of difference".<sup>1</sup>

Education context is one of the primary domains where the operation of linguistic hierarchies can be clearly observed. The status of languages used in schools reflects the status of the languages within the wider language policy adopted by the authorities.<sup>2</sup> This holds especially true for the so-called "family languages" or "heritage languages" (henceforth HL) brought into the classrooms by students. Recognizing and welcoming those languages as

1 Ingrid Gogolin, "Linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe: a challenge for educational research and practice", *European Educational Research Journal* 1 (2002): 124.

2 James W. Tollefson, ed. *Language Policies in Education* (London: Routledge, 2012).

educational resources<sup>3</sup> bears the potential to challenge oppressive language ideologies through multilingualism in schools and thereby to contribute to social cohesion.<sup>4</sup> Maintaining linguistic hierarchies, on the other hand, may lead to the reproduction of further inequalities and shape social relations accordingly. Consequently, a seemingly progressive practice of teaching HL in schools might prove counterproductive in the absence of a socially responsible, language-affirmative and critical language policy aiming at social cohesion within the wider society.

A critical enquiry into the recently introduced Kurdish heritage language (henceforth KHL) teaching in Berlin can reveal how hierarchical language policies operate in Berlin. Being a “stateless language”, Kurdish<sup>5</sup> – as a group of languages/dialects – is one of the frequently spoken community languages in Berlin; yet, it is faintly recognized by the authorities and public offices.<sup>6</sup> Despite a relatively long tradition of HL in Germany, Kurdish was only introduced in few schools of Berlin as late as 2019 after long years of campaigning, community efforts and against the backdrop of various challenges and limitations. Yet, little is known about the status of Kurdish in Berlin and, more specifically, the KHL teaching in schools, since there is no comprehensive research on this issue.

Departing from this background, the article aims at deconstructing the hierarchical language policy implemented in the Berlin educational context in the case of KHL teaching through theoretical discussions of multilingualism, language policy as well as heritage language teaching. To do so, an eclectic research methodology is employed that is based on an ongoing larger research project (for more details on the methodology employed, see section 5.1). In order to situate KHL teaching within the wider literature, first a general overview of the theoretical framework informing this article is presented below. Then, the language policy both at national level in Germany and in Berlin is

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3 Almut Küppers and Christoph Schroeder, “Warum der türkische Herkunftssprachenunterricht ein Auslaufmodell ist und warum es sinnvoll wäre, Türkisch zu einer modernen Fremdsprache auszubauen: Eine sprachenpolitische Streitschrift”, *Fremdsprachen Lehren und Lernen* 46 no. 1 (2017): 56–71.

4 Jim Cummins, *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society* (Los Angeles: California Association for Bilingual Education, 2001).

5 For a detailed discussion and useful categorisation regarding the Kurdish language and its dialects, see Ergin Öpengin and Geoffrey Haig “Regional variation in Kurmanji: A preliminary classification of dialects”, *Kurdish Studies* 2 no. 2 (2014): 143–176.

6 Şerif Derince, *Kurdisches Leben in Berlin: Ergebnisse einer Quantitativen Umfrage* (Berlin: Yekmal Akademie, 2020).

introduced with a specific focus on languages in education context and the status of HL teaching. The next two sections contextualize the situation of the Kurdish language in Germany, and explore the structural challenges, difficulties, and limitations experienced in the case of KHL teaching in Berlin. The article concludes with a discussion section seeking to establish a critical dialogue between KHL teaching, the teaching of other HLS, and the language policy concerning multilingualism, in an attempt to challenge language hierarchies in education.

### Theoretical Considerations

Multilingualism has become a *hot topic* in the field of language and education research as well as in policy documents and public discourses over the last decades.<sup>7</sup> Conteh and Meier describe this interest as the “multilingual turn” and present a thorough analysis of how multilingualism is conceptualised and experienced differently in various contexts.<sup>8</sup> While multilingualism, both at the individual and societal level, is highly celebrated and various benefits of multilingualism are being advocated,<sup>9</sup> such topics as visible and invisible hierarchies among languages and the connection of language, discrimination, and inequity are less salient in the literature. However, the reality is that in many contexts, multilingualism is often accompanied by injustice, inequality, and violence.<sup>10</sup> To this end, scholars suggest that geopolitical, ideological, and historical contexts must be taken into consideration while discussing multilingualism.<sup>11</sup> Following such an orientation to multilingualism, scholars have documented how different languages are treated hierarchically in

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7 Durk Gorter, “Multilingual inequality in public spaces: Towards an inclusive model of Linguistic Landscapes” in *Multilingualism in Public Spaces: Empowering and Transforming Communities*, ed. Robert Blackwood and Deirdre A. Dunlevy, (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 13–30.

8 Jean Conteh and Gabriela Meier, *The Multilingual Turn in Languages Education: Opportunities and Challenges* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2014).

9 Robert Blackwood and Deirdre A Dunlevy, eds. *Multilingualism in Public Spaces* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.).

10 Joseph Lo Bianco, “A meeting of concepts and praxis: Multilingualism, language policy and the dominant language constellation”, in *Dominant Language Constellations*, ed. Joseph Lo Bianco and Larissa Aronin (Cham: Springer, 2020), 35–56.

11 Li Wei, “Foreword: Multilingualism and Dominant Language Constellation”, in *Dominant Language Constellations*, ed. Joseph Lo Bianco and Larissa Aronin (Cham: Springer, 2020), vii.

education contexts,<sup>12</sup> and how the competencies of multilingual students are ignored while their “voices” go “unheard” in schools in the migration context.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, studying language hierarchies in multilingual settings is crucial since the ramifications of such relations are huge for language communities speaking different languages.<sup>14</sup>

On another level, scholars have criticised focusing too much on languages as abstractions and suggested a closer examination of what multilinguals do with their languages.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the term *translanguaging* has emerged in the literature to refer to the dynamic multilingual characteristic of individuals. On this basis, the strict separation of languages of multilinguals, as is the case in heritage language teaching, is criticised since the full range of their linguistic and communicative repertoires is ignored. Therefore, scholars promoting these concepts suggest that learning and teaching activities as well as materials must reflect the dynamic characteristics of multilinguals.<sup>16</sup>

How multilingualism of individuals and communities is perceived in a society is directly related to the type of language policy approach operating both officially and discursively in that society. In one of the earlier accounts, Ruiz identified three language policy orientations towards languages other than a national language.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, when languages are seen *as a problem*, multilingualism is taken as a complication and it needs to be overcome through such ways as assimilation or restriction. Where languages are approached *as a right*, learning and teaching of non-dominant languages is considered to be a human right which has to be exercised under the protection of laws, usually in the form of minority rights. On the other hand, languages can be seen *as a resource* as well, as a result of which multilingualism is taken as an asset. However, other scholars have criticised such an approach on several grounds. Going beyond mere categorisations and non-contextualised analyses, scholars have shown that all activities related to language policy are determined by ideological or structural considerations, which result in coercive power relations

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12 Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Robert Phillipson, Ajit K. Mohanty, Minati Panda, eds. *Social Justice Through Multilingual Education* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2009).

13 Katharina Brizić, Yazgül Şimşek, Necle Bulut, “Ah, our village was beautiful: Towards a social linguistics in times of war and migration”, *The Mouth – Critical Journal of Language, Culture and Society* 8 (2021): 29–63.

14 Gorter, “Multilingual inequality in public spaces”.

15 Ofelia García and Li Wei, eds. *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

16 García and Li Wei, *Translanguaging*.

17 Richard Ruiz, “Orientations in language planning”, *NABE journal* 8 no. 2 (1984): 15–34.

that have to do with dominance and hegemony.<sup>18</sup> Also, there is not always a true congruence between the *overt language policy* of a country and its actual implementation, because even if a government or administration officially endorses multilingualism, the steps towards realisation of an equitable multilingual society usually lag behind.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the allocation of resources is not equal for all non-dominant languages, which results in significant differences regarding the promotion of multilingualism. Similarly, there is usually a sizeable gap between official language policies and the community perceptions regarding use of these languages.<sup>20</sup> As Hymes explains, languages may be equal, but they hold different values and power in society.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, even when multilingualism is promoted in a society, not all of the languages may enjoy the same level of prestige and appreciation despite the same official language policies in place. Lastly, the traditional analyses of language policy orientations focused solely on governmental measures and excluded community efforts and the struggle for social justice and an end to linguistic injustices led by grassroots movements.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, it is crucial to analyse language policy measures taking into account the social, political, and economic factors influencing language use and teaching and differentiating between *macro* and *micro* language policies in order to better understand how language policy is perceived and implemented or resisted in a given context.<sup>23</sup>

Discussions around Heritage Language Teaching (henceforth HLT) in various contexts often appear in conjunction with bilingualism and multilingualism, as heritage language speakers and learners are almost always multilingual.<sup>24</sup>

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- 18 James W. Tollefson, *Planning Language, Planning Inequality* (London: Longman, 1991); Judith Irvine and Susan Gal, "Language ideology and linguistic differentiation", in *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics and Identities*, ed. Paul V. Kroskrity (Oxford: James Currey Publishers, 2000), 34–84; Bernard Spolsky, *Language Management* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 19 Elana Shohamy, *Language Policy: Hidden Agendas and New Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- 20 Stephen May, *Language and Minority Rights: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Politics of Language* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
- 21 Dell Hymes, "Inequality in language: Taking for granted", *Penn Working Papers in Educational Linguistics* 8 (1992): 1–30.
- 22 Thomas Ricento, "Historical and theoretical perspectives in language policy and planning", *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 4 no. 2 (2000): 196–213.
- 23 Anthony J. Liddicoat and Richard B. Baldauf, "Language planning in local contexts: Agents, contexts and interactions", in *Language Planning in Local Contexts*, ed. Anthony J. Liddicoat and Richard B. Baldauf (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2008), 1–12.
- 24 Panayota Gounari, "Rethinking heritage language in a critical pedagogy framework", in *Rethinking Heritage Language Education*, ed. Peter Pericles Trifonas and Themistoklis

Although the term “heritage language” was originally used in multilingualism and second language acquisition research in Canadian context,<sup>25</sup> it has now been largely established as an autonomous discipline within applied linguistics,<sup>26</sup> not only in North American academia, but also in Europe.<sup>27</sup> Scholars have defined the term in relation to an incompletely learned home language in migration contexts, connected with a shift to a dominant local language.<sup>28</sup> In any case, “definitions of ‘heritage language’ remain dynamic rather than static, reflecting the contested cultural and political terrain to which the term refers”,<sup>29</sup> and the term is used in reference to immigrant or minority languages with different status in various country contexts.<sup>30</sup>

Since HLT has emerged as an autonomous discipline, such issues as learner identity and motivation,<sup>31</sup> teaching methodologies in HLT,<sup>32</sup> teacher training and professionalisation,<sup>33</sup> and language policy towards HLT<sup>34</sup> have been frequently researched and explored in various contexts. Therefore, it is safe to

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Aravossitas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 254–269; Jennifer Leeman, “Heritage language education and identity in the United States”, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 35 (2015): 100–119.

- 25 Jim Cummins, “Mainstreaming plurilingualism: Restructuring heritage language provision in schools”, in *Rethinking Heritage Language Education*, ed. Peter Pericles Trifonas and Themistoklis Aravossitas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1–19.
- 26 Silvina Montrul, “How similar are adult second language learners and Spanish heritage speakers? Spanish clitics and word order”, *Applied Psycholinguistics* 31 no. 1 (2010): 167–207.
- 27 Tanja Kupisch, “A new term for a better distinction? A view from the higher end of the proficiency scale”, *Theoretical Linguistics* 39 no. 3–4 (2013): 203–214.
- 28 Silvina Montrul, *The Acquisition of Heritage Languages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- 29 Cummins, “Mainstreaming plurilingualism”, 3.
- 30 Peter P. Trifonas and Themistoklis Aravossitas, eds. *Handbook of Research and Practice in Heritage Language Education* (Cham: Springer: 2018).
- 31 Arianna Berardi-Wiltshire, “Reframing the foreign language classroom to accommodate the heritage language learner: A study of heritage identity and language learning motivation”, *New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics* 18 no. 2 (2012): 21–34.
- 32 Sara Beaudrie, Cynthia Ducar, Kim Potowski, *Heritage Language Teaching: Research and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014).
- 33 Jim Anderson, “Pre-and in-service professional development of teachers of community/heritage languages in the UK: Insider perspectives”, *Language and Education* 22 no. 4 (2008): 283–297; Manel Lacorte, “Teacher development in heritage language education”, in *Innovative Strategies for Heritage Language Teaching: A Practical Guide for the Classroom*, ed. Marta Fairclough and Sara M. Beaudrie (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 99–119.
- 34 Jeff Bale, “International comparative perspectives on heritage language education policy research”, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 30 (2010): 42–65.

claim that the field of HLT is concerned with both theoretical issues (regarding primarily the characterization of HL learners and speakers and policies) and instructional issues regarding what and how to teach.

### *Hierarchical Operation of Language Policy in Germany and in Berlin*

Germany is home to hundreds of languages with different statuses, composing an uneven ecology of languages.<sup>35</sup> What differentiates the status of these languages is in some cases official legislation, and in some other cases the practices and perceptions towards these languages in many domains of life. Drawing on and expanding the discussions by Gogolin and Adler and Beyer, it is possible to categorize the status and situation of languages in Germany as: i) German as the dominant language; ii) prestigious Western languages; iii) officially-recognized regional minority languages; iv) immigrant languages that are state languages elsewhere; and finally v) immigrant languages without the position of a state language elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> The status of which languages are taught in schools and how is closely related to this categorisation into *layers of legitimacy*.<sup>37</sup>

German is understandably the sole medium of instruction in the majority of schools. However, a number of other languages are also being used as languages of instruction or taught in language classes. Like many other European Union countries, Germany follows the m+2 policy, in reference to the broad goal of the European Commission which encourages teaching of at least two languages in addition to one's mother tongue.<sup>38</sup> In order to better understand to which languages the policy particularly refers to, one can look at the statistics of languages taught in German schools. The table below compares the statistics of language courses taken by students in all types of schools at all levels across Germany and in Berlin in 2018–2019.<sup>39</sup>

35 Astrid Adler and Rahel Beyer, "Languages and language politics in Germany", in *National Language Institutions and National Languages: Contributions to the EFNIL Conference 2017 in Mannheim*, ed. Gerhard Stickel (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Science, 2018), 221–242.

36 Gogolin, "Linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe"; Adler and Beyer, "Languages and language politics in Germany".

37 Gogolin, "Linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe", 124–126.

38 European Union, "Languages". Online at [https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/languages\\_en](https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/languages_en) (last accessed 24-9-2022).

39 Statistisches Bundesamt, *Bildung und Kultur. Allgemeinbildende Schulen. Schuljahr 2018/2019* (Wiesbaden: Statistisches Bundesamt, 2019).

TABLE 1 Attendance to language lessons in Germany and in Berlin

Language	Number of Students		in Percentage (%)	
	Germany	Berlin	Germany	Berlin
English	7.025.004	287.891	84.36	79.97
French	1.401.189	51.614	16.82	14.33
Latin	597.279	17.863	7.17	4.97
Spanish	463.968	30.230	5.57	8.40
Russian	101.862	5.115	1.22	1.42
Italian	47.670	1.935	0.57	0.54
Turkish	42.435	1.962	0.51	0.54
Old Greek	10.815	1.837	0.13	0.51
Other Languages	78.483	5.949	0.94	1.65
Total	8.330.457	360.031	100	100

The table clearly shows that English is the most taught language in the German school system, since out of 8.330.457 students in Germany, 84.36% take English classes. The primary reason for the dominance of English in schools is that it is introduced as the first foreign language, which is compulsory for all students. Other prestigious European languages such as French, Latin and Spanish also have their established place in the curricula albeit to a much lesser extent. These languages are usually elected by students as second foreign languages. The table also shows that there is a peripheral place for Russian, Turkish, and Italian, which are taught either as heritage languages or second and third foreign languages in schools, whereas languages such as Arabic, Polish, or Kurdish are out of the picture. In other words, a selective type of multilingualism is promoted in schools, which is similarly the case in many other European countries.<sup>40</sup> As for Berlin, out of 360.031 students in Berlin, 79.97% take English, a little less than the country average. French is again the second most taken language course, attended by 51.614 students (14.33%). These two languages are taught as first foreign languages. Spanish, Latin, and Russian are respectively listed as what we may assume are second foreign languages taken by students in secondary schools. Heritage language courses, once again, are taken by a marginal number of students.

40 Eurydice/Eurostat, *Key Data on Education in Europe* (Brussels: Eurydice, 2012).

### *Heritage Language Teaching in Germany*

The introduction of HLT<sup>41</sup> in German schools is the consequence of large immigration movements between 1960 and 1970 as part of the agreements between Western Germany and several Southern European and North African countries for the recruitment of “guest workers”. Reich argues that the initial aim of the lessons was to prepare the pupils for the continuation of their education in their home country after their anticipated return.<sup>42</sup> However, when many of the workers stayed in Germany even after the termination of the labour agreements, the focus of the lessons had to change to support the continued communication between the pupils and their relatives and grandparents in the countries of origin. The final transformation regarding HLT took place as part of the pedagogical shift suggesting the development of interdependence between the languages of the pupils. Accordingly, it was suggested that when the pupils were encouraged to gain language proficiency and literacy skills in their mother tongues, they would then be able to learn new languages more efficiently, as the knowledge attained in one language could be transferred to their other languages.

In total, there are 30 different languages offered with the status of HL lessons in schools in Germany.<sup>43</sup> Some of the most frequently taught languages with this status are Turkish, Russian, and Arabic. The participants in these courses are mostly pupils who come from families where one of these languages is used.<sup>44</sup> Participation in HL lessons is on a voluntary basis and offering these lessons depends on parents’ demand and attendance of a minimum number

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41 The common terminology used to refer to “heritage language” in the German educational context is *Herkunftssprache*, which can be translated as “language of origin”, in reference to the teaching of “immigrant languages” as elective courses or voluntary afterschool activities. However, this article sticks to the term “heritage language” as it is the common term in the literature produced in English and it refers to the historical implications of migration.

42 Hans H. Reich, “Institutionelle Entwicklungen des Herkunftssprachenunterrichts in Deutschland (mit einem Seitenblick auf Österreich und die Schweiz)”, in *Die Zukunft der Mehrsprachigkeit im deutschen Bildungssystem: Russisch und Türkisch im Fokus*, eds. Cemal Yıldız, Nathalie Topaj, Reyhan Thomas, Insa Gülzow (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017), 81–97.

43 Mediendienst, “Wie verbreitet ist herkunftssprachlicher Unterricht?”, April 2019. Online at [https://mediendienst-integration.de/fileadmin/Herkunftssprachlicher\\_Unterricht\\_2019.pdf](https://mediendienst-integration.de/fileadmin/Herkunftssprachlicher_Unterricht_2019.pdf) (last accessed on 24-9-2022).

44 Till Woerfel, Almut Küppers, Christoph Schroeder, “Herkunftssprachlicher Unterricht”, in *Handbuch Mehrsprachigkeit und Bildung*, eds. Ingrid Gogolin, Antje Hansen, Sarah McMonagle, Dominique Rauch (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2020), 207–212.

of students, which might differ across contexts.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, there is a steady decline in the number of students attending HL lessons across languages over the years, to the extent that it is anticipated that HL lessons might soon come to an end in primary schools in Germany.<sup>46</sup>

Almost three quarters of all HL lessons take place in primary schools,<sup>47</sup> because pupils are required to take foreign language lessons at the upper levels. Officially, most HL s can be taken as a second foreign language at the lower and upper secondary levels. However, in practice, this option has so far been mostly limited to the teaching of Turkish and Russian, and it is practised in schools where there is a high concentration of students from these language backgrounds.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, there is no available data on whether the participants to these courses are exclusively speakers of the respective HL s, or whether students from other language backgrounds opt for these courses, too.

A review of the relevant literature reveals that two core areas of discussion emerge regarding HLT in Germany. The first area covers studies of the language policy regulating HLT in schools and the official terminology accompanying the policy, whereas problems and limitations confronted during the implementation of HLT constitute the second area.

Küppers, Schroeder, and Gülbeyaz categorise the language policy on teaching Turkish in Germany into two distinct types: *exclusive teaching of Turkish*, which is based on the traditional HLT model, and *inclusive teaching of Turkish*, in which Turkish is being taught as a foreign language at the secondary school level.<sup>49</sup> The authors argue that the traditional model adhering to the common labels of “HL instruction” or “mother tongue teaching” are problematic, because these terms contribute to further ethnicisation of students having migration backgrounds. Furthermore, Schroeder and Küppers contextualise the Turkish HL lessons within the wider school system in Germany and suggest

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45 Almut Küppers, Christoph Schroeder, Esin Işıl Gülbeyaz, “Languages in transition. Turkish in formal education in Germany. Analysis & perspectives. IPC-Mercator Policy Brief” (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center, 2014).

46 Almut Küppers and Kutlay Yağmur, “Why Multilingual Matters. Alternative Change Agents in Language Education Policy. IPC Focus-Report” (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center, 2014).

47 Ingrid Gogolin and Stefan Oeter, “Sprachenrechte und Sprachminderheiten – Übertragbarkeit des internationalen Sprachenregimes auf Migrant (inn) en”, *Recht der Jugend und des Bildungswesens* 59 no. 1 (2011): 30–45.

48 Helena Olfert and Anke Schmitz, “Heritage language education in Germany: A focus on Turkish and Russian from primary to higher education”, in *Handbook of Research and Practice in Heritage Language Education*, ed. Peter P. Trifonas and Themistoklis Aravossitas (Cham: Springer: 2018), 397–416.

49 Küppers, Schroeder, Gülbeyaz, “Languages in transition”.

that immigrant languages are not protected nor treated equally compared to the common conception of multilingualism and linguistic diversity usually associated with certain European languages.<sup>50</sup> It has also been highlighted that not only the use of the term “Herkunftssprache/heritage language”, but also the language policy behind HLT is flawed, since it confines the language to an origin country and not to any meaningful place in Germany, where the students taking the HL lessons are actually living.<sup>51</sup> As a remedy, they recommend “upgrading” the status of HLT in a way that would integrate them into formal school curricula as modern foreign languages. Research on teaching Arabic as HL in Germany also corroborates this suggestion and claims that such a move would be pedagogically sounder, in addition to being a politically more just position.<sup>52</sup> However, drawing on the specific case of teaching Russian in Germany, Olfert and Schmitz claim that changing the status of HL lessons alone may not suffice unless the instruction and literacy acquisition in the respective HL is also claimed by the language community bottom-up.<sup>53</sup>

As for the studies focusing on limitations and difficulties arising during the implementation of HLT in Germany, several scholars highlight the structural problems experienced in teacher recruitment, teacher qualifications, teaching and learning materials as well as curricular issues; they argue that these limitations contribute negatively to the already downgraded status of HLT.<sup>54</sup> Küppers, Schroeder, and Gülbeyaz conclude that the teaching of Turkish in Germany is mostly not based on an empirically founded methodology, but rather derives from various teaching applications depending on hands-on approaches developed and practised by teachers in the absence of a guiding curriculum.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, exploring the perceptions and experiences of Turkish teachers in Germany, other scholars report that both the students

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50 Christoph Schroeder and Almut Küppers, “Türkischunterricht im deutschen Schulsystem: Bestandsaufnahme und Perspektiven”, in *Bildung in Transnationalen Räumen*, eds. Almut Küppers, Barbara Pusch, Pınar Uyan Semerci (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016), 191–212.

51 Almut Küppers and Christoph Schroeder, “Warum der türkische Herkunftssprachenunterricht ein Auslaufmodell ist und warum es sinnvoll wäre, Türkisch zu einer modernen Fremdsprache auszubauen. Eine sprachpolitische Streitschrift”, *Fremdsprachen Lehren und Lernen* 46 no. 1 (2017): 56–71.

52 Zouheir Soukah, “Der Herkunftssprachliche Unterricht Arabisch in NRW: Lage und Perspektive”, *Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht* 27 no. 1 (2022): 415–436.

53 Olfert and Schmitz, “Heritage language education in Germany”.

54 Schroeder and Küppers, “Türkischunterricht im deutschen Schulsystem”; Olfert and Schmitz, “Heritage language education in Germany”.

55 Küppers, Schroeder, Gülbeyaz, “Languages in transition”.

attending the lessons and their teachers go through motivational problems;<sup>56</sup> parents are usually indifferent to the lessons; the classroom settings in which the lessons take place are not appropriate in terms of both physical conditions and access to technological tools; the school administrators are not always open for cooperation; and, finally, teaching materials are not always appealing to learners.<sup>57</sup>

### *Heritage Language Teaching in Berlin*

HL lessons in Berlin are being offered both by foreign consulates and the Berlin Senate. Initially, the HL lessons were only organized by official missions of the respective languages in Germany. In other words, the languages not represented by a state, e.g. Kurdish, were not eligible to be taught as HL in schools. However, the Berlin coalition government formed in 2016 adopted a new strategy concerning HLs to be offered in schools. The coalition agreement openly listed Kurdish as one of the languages to be taught. Consequently, a path was opened for the teaching of Kurdish as an elective HL in Berlin starting from the school year 2019–2020.

As part of its new approach, the Berlin Senate also published its framework concept on multilingualism in Berlin schools, which included teaching more HLs irrespective of their official status in origin countries.<sup>58</sup> The framework seems promising for the teaching of HLs in Berlin for several reasons. First of all, the term *Herkunftssprache* (“language of origin”) is scrutinised and the term *Erstsprache* (“first language”) is suggested as an alternative. Secondly, the recognition of more HLs with the status of second foreign languages in secondary schools is supported to give a more sustainable role to HLs in the school system. Thirdly, the need to incorporate assessment and degrees regarding HLs is put forward. More investment in teacher training and the reinforcement of HL teachers’ qualifications are also being proposed. Lastly, the report suggests that designing a common curriculum for HLs might increase the quality and effectiveness of language teaching and attract more students to these lessons.

56 Paul Haller, *Türkischer Herkunftssprachenunterricht an Gesamtschulen in Nordrhein Westfalen. Eine qualitative Befragung von (angehenden) Lehrkräften* (Münster: Waxmann, 2021).

57 Mustafa Çakır and Cemal Yıldız, “A study on the Turkish teachers’ experiences on the Turkish language and culture course in the schools of Germany: A field research”, *Journal of Foreign Languages* 4 no. 2 (2016): 43–71.

58 Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Familie, “Konzept zur Förderung der Mehrsprachigkeit liegt nun vor”, Press release from 18-11-2021. Online at <https://www.berlin.de/sen/bjf/service/presse/pressearchiv-2021/pressemitteilung.1148278.php> (last accessed 24-9-2022).

However, the actual practical steps have yet to be seen, especially as there is a steady decline in the number of students attending HL classes over the years in Berlin,<sup>59</sup> a tendency also observed across HL s in other regions of Germany.<sup>60</sup>

### *Kurds and Kurdish Language in Germany and in Berlin*

Kurdish immigration to Germany dates back to the end of the 19th century, when some Kurdish military elites and intellectuals came to the country.<sup>61</sup> Since then, the population has increased rapidly as a result of a number of political, social, and economic hardships faced in mainland Kurdistan, resulting in immigration to Berlin and other major cities in Germany since the early 1960s. These migration movements together with the growth of the community thanks to new generations born in Germany have created the largest Kurdish population in the diaspora, with around one million people.<sup>62</sup> However, since members of the Kurdish communities are in official and administrative (e.g. school) censuses not represented as Kurds, but only by their respective nation states of origin (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, etc.), there is no official data to cite. The same situation exists in Berlin as well, but cautious estimates range between 100.000 and 150.000 persons, a population comparable to other large communities in Berlin such as Turkish, Arab, Polish communities, as well as communities from the former Soviet Union.<sup>63</sup>

Directly related to the status of Kurdish as a non-state language, there is a great absence of systematic and comprehensive research on the situation of Kurdish in Germany. However, the limited data suggests that ethnolinguistic vitality is high among members of the Kurdish community. As a quantitative survey carried out in Berlin revealed, many of them use Kurdish actively in their everyday life along with German as well as Turkish, Arabic, and English; furthermore, they consider preserving the Kurdish language and teaching it in schools to be highly important.<sup>64</sup>

59 Mediendienst, "Wie verbreitet ist herkunftssprachlicher Unterricht?"

60 Küppers, Schroeder, Gülbeyaz, "Languages in transition".

61 Brigit Ammann, "Kurds in Germany", in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas*, ed. Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, Ian A Skoggard (Boston: Springer, 2005), 1011–1019; Kenan Engin, *Kurdische Migrant\_innen in Deutschland: Lebenswelten, Identität, Politische Partizipation* (Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2019).

62 Kurdische Gemeinde Deutschland, "Zahl der Kurden in Deutschland sprunghaft angestiegen", Press release 52/0809-2015. Online at <https://kurdische-gemeinde.de/zahl-der-kurden-in-deutschland-sprunghaft-angestiegen> (last accessed 24-9-2022).

63 Derince, *Kurdisches Leben in Berlin*.

64 *Ibid.*

### *Kurdish Heritage Language Teaching in Germany*

There is a relatively long history of Kurdish HLT in Germany, yet the practice is limited to only six federal states, namely Bremen, Niedersachsen, Rheinland-Pfalz, Nordrhein-Westfalen (NRW), and recently Brandenburg and Berlin. The teaching of Kurdish as HL in Germany started in 1993 in Bremen. The lessons have been continuing uninterrupted since. The Association of Kurdish Teachers in Europe (Yekîtiya Mamosteyên Kurd, YMK) estimates that there are 28 teachers of Kurdish working in 75 schools across 37 different cities in the said six states and the number of students attending these lessons is around 3000 as of 2020.<sup>65</sup> While most of the lessons are in the Kurmanji dialect, in rare cases Kirmancki/Zazaki and Sorani are also being taught, respectively in Duisburg (NRW), and in Bochum and Köln (NRW) as well as Mainz, the capital of Rheinland-Pfalz.

On the other hand, the number of scholarly research on KHL lessons in Germany is considerably limited, as is the case elsewhere.<sup>66</sup> In one of the rare examples of such studies, Hajo briefly describes the format and content of the then newly introduced KHL lessons in Bremen; this work can be considered as one of the early scholarly accounts of Kurdish teaching in Germany.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, in a descriptive report, Müller and Roxel explore the profile of the participants, the materials used, and the objectives of KHL lessons in Bremen. Some of the difficulties experienced in implementation of the lessons are also presented in the report.<sup>68</sup> As part of a larger research project, Skubsch explores teaching Kurdish as HL in Bremen, Niedersachsen, and Hamburg, and highlights the limitations of the language policy within which the lessons are situated. She also comes up with socio-pedagogical suggestions to improve the practice of teaching HLs in general.<sup>69</sup>

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65 YMK meeting, 13-3-2021.

66 Şerif Derince, "Kurdish elective language lessons in Germany and Turkey: Limitations, gains, comparisons", in *Language Rights and Linguistic Diversity*, ed. Bülent Bilmez (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi University Türkiye Kültürleri Araştırma Grubu, 2021), 129–142.

67 Zaradachet Hajo, "Kommentar zum kurdischen muttersprachlichen Unterricht (KML) in Bremen", *Lêkolîn* 6 (1996): 8–16.

68 Yvonne Müller and Angela to Roxel, "Muttersprachlicher Unterricht Kurdisch in Bremen", in *Bericht über das Schulbegleitforschungsprojekt Muttersprachlicher Unterricht Kurdisch – Entwicklung von Unterrichtsmaterialien –*, ed. Antje-Katrin Menk (Bremen: Universität Bremen, 1997), 4–29.

69 Sabine Skubsch, *Kurdische Migration und Deutsche (Bildungs-) politik* (Münster: Unrast, 2002).

### This Study: Kurdish Heritage Language Teaching in Berlin

The introduction of Kurdish heritage lessons in Berlin occurred as late as 2019 when it was officially introduced in three schools. This was considered a major achievement for the community, which came to fruition after a long process of lobbying, efforts, and community involvement,<sup>70</sup> as well as some larger political developments. Understanding the dynamics behind the introduction of KHL teaching in Berlin and situating it within the context of larger language policies operating in the city is critical both for the prospects of the lessons in Berlin and for teaching Kurdish elsewhere. This is what the current paper seeks to achieve.

#### *Methodological Remarks*

The discussion below regarding the introduction of KHL teaching in public schools in Berlin is based on field notes and observations by the author, with three complementary roles during the research process. On the one hand, the author participated in the community efforts as a language activist and as the representative of one of the community organisations that formed and coordinated *Kurdisch AG*,<sup>71</sup> an initiative established in 2016 by eleven civil society organisations working closely with diverse Kurdish communities in Berlin with the aim of formally establishing Kurdish lessons in schools. Secondly, the author joined a number of meetings with different individual and institutional actors as an expert in the field. Lastly, the author is currently carrying out his doctoral research on this topic using the theoretical lenses of language policy and planning and heritage language teaching. During field work, the author attended several meetings of the *Kurdisch AG* before and after the introduction of the lessons in schools; participated in meetings with officials responsible for planning and implementing heritage language instruction in Berlin; did participant observation in meetings of the Association of Kurdish Teachers in Europe (YMK); had informal meetings with KHL instructors, board members of YMK, as well as parents whose children attend KHL lessons; and, finally, did document analysis and utilised secondary sources.

70 Yekîtiya Malbatên ji Kurdistanê li Almanyayê (Yekmal), *Kurdischunterricht beginnt offiziell an drei Schulen in Berlin*, 9 December 2019. Online at <https://yekmal.com/kurdischunterricht-beginnt-offiziell-an-drei-schulen-in-berlin> (last accessed on 24-9-2022).

71 Online at <https://www.facebook.com/KurdischAG> (last accessed on 24-9-2022).

### *Inauguration of the Lessons*

There were three major developments behind the introduction of the KHL lessons. First of all, the Kurdish language became much more visible after thousands of Kurdish refugees from Syria were settled in Berlin and other regions of Germany following the large-scale war in 2011. Consequently, many public institutions including schools were forced to find ways of providing services to the new Kurdish-speaking inhabitants of the city. What differentiated these new inhabitants of the city from the largest Kurdish community already settled in Berlin, was their primary language of communication, as the Syrian Kurds were using predominantly Kurdish in their everyday life as opposed to those Kurds originally from Turkey, who declare that they speak German and Turkish almost as much as Kurdish.<sup>72</sup> In other words, Kurds from Turkey were largely considered to be Turkish speaking; an assumption with a certain truth, albeit exploited by state offices using the multilingualism of Kurds as a pretext for not providing services in Kurdish.

Secondly, the normally close relations between the governments of Germany and Turkey were destabilised due to a number of political conflicts, including the imprisonment of German journalists in Turkey, manipulation of Turkish heritage lessons in German schools for a political agenda, and free speech and human rights violations in Turkey. Therefore, the status of HLT by Turkish consulates started to be scrutinised and the Berlin Senate declared that they were planning to take over all the HL lessons from consulates.<sup>73</sup> This change helped lift one of the critical barriers preventing the teaching of Kurdish in schools, because previous demands from the Kurdish community organizations were turned down by the Berlin Senate on the grounds that it was the responsibility of consulates, in this case those of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, or Syria.

Thirdly, the formation of Kurdish AG as a community initiative was instrumental in putting pressure on the Senate for introducing Kurdish lessons in schools.<sup>74</sup> The initiative started a campaign, prepared flyers, and organised meetings with parents in order to raise awareness as well as to inform the parents about HL lessons. The primary demand of Kurdish AG from the

<sup>72</sup> Derince, *Kurdisches Leben in Berlin*.

<sup>73</sup> Susanne Vieth-Entus, "Muttersprachlicher Unterricht: Scheeres will eigene Türkischlehrer ausbilden", *Tagesspiegel*, 15 October 2019. Online at <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/muttersprachlicher-unterricht-scheeres-will-eigene-tuerkischlehrer-ausbilden/25117604.html> (last accessed on 24-9-2022).

<sup>74</sup> Yekmal, *Veranstaltungsdokumentation: Muttersprachlicher Einfluss auf die Entwicklung der Kinder* (Berlin: Yekmal, 2018). Online at [https://yekmal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/fachtagung\\_tagdermuttersprache\\_dokumentation.pdf](https://yekmal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/fachtagung_tagdermuttersprache_dokumentation.pdf) (last accessed on 29-9-2022).

city administration was the introduction of Kurdish lessons in schools. An informative brochure including a petition was prepared in the Kurmanji and Kirmancki/Zazaki dialects of Kurdish as well as in German to collect support from parents who had children in primary schools. After a short time, more than 300 signatures were collected from Kurdish parents in favour of starting Kurdish lessons in their children's schools. In the fall semester of 2017, Kurdish AG succeeded in starting the first elective Kurdish class in a primary school thanks to the collaboration of the school administration. However, this class was not officially organized by the Berlin Senate, but rather by the coordinator of the initiative, namely the Union of Families from Kurdistan in Germany (Yekîtiya Malbatên ji Kurdistanê li Almanyayê, Yekmal). In the meantime, a number of meetings were held with the education department of the Senate, as a result of which elective Kurdish lessons were officially introduced by the Senate administration as HL in three primary schools starting from September 2019. Two of the schools were in the Kreuzberg district and one was the school in which Kurdish lessons were already being offered as an after-school activity by Yekmal. In the beginning of the school year of 2021–2022, KHL lessons were introduced in three more schools in Berlin; however, the number of students attending these lessons was not made public.

### *Challenges and Limitations*

Considering oppressive language policies towards the Kurdish language in Turkey, Iran, and Syria, the introduction of KHL lessons in more cities and regions in Germany may especially be celebrated since there are not many examples of such a recognition. However, despite its importance, this step came along with its own limitations and challenges as to the status, teacher recruitment, materials, as well as parents' participation, most of which have been reported in the cases of other HL lessons in Germany<sup>75</sup> and in other European countries.<sup>76</sup> However, KHL teaching experiences the existing limitations and challenges even more severely because of its status at the bottom of

75 Küppers, Schroeder, Gülbeyaz, "Languages in transition"; Olfert and Schmitz, "Heritage language education in Germany", among others.

76 Peter Broeder and Guus Extra, *Language, Ethnicity, and Education: Case Studies on Immigrant Minority Groups and Immigrant Minority Languages* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1998); Anne Reath Warren, "Constructions of Kurdish in mother tongue instruction in Sweden: Defining and redefining linguistic authority, authenticity and legitimacy", in *Klassrumsforskning och språk(ande): Rapport från ASLA-symposiet i Karlstad, 12–13 april, 2018*, eds. Birgitta Ljung Egeland, Tim Roberts, Erica Sandlund, Pia Sundqvist (Karlstad: Karlstad University Press, 2019), 111–135.

linguistic hierarchies in Germany. This low status has a number of ramifications for the teaching of KHL in Berlin too.

The greatest challenge faced by Kurdish instruction in Berlin arises from the disabling language policy framework in operation because there is not a meaningful role and place for HL lessons within the educational structure of Berlin schools. HL lessons are merely available as elective courses and they are offered two hours a week, mostly after regular class hours. Students have to choose between either a HL lesson (if it is available at all) or another elective activity offered at the same time. The alternatives are usually activities such as music, dance, or sports, which are chosen by the majority of the students. Another deficit of the policy in question is related to the model of HLT, which has been claimed to be “outdated” and contributing to further ethnicisation and marginalisation of the students taking these lessons.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, the number of students taking HL lessons across Germany as well as in Berlin is already decreasing gradually each year. This means that KHL lessons in Berlin might not attract enough students to continue for long.

Secondly, there is a discrepancy between policy and implementation when it comes to offering HL lessons. The reasons behind such discrepancy are on the one hand bureaucratic, because a tiresome and long process of communications takes place between several actors involved in starting a HL lesson, and, on the other hand, logistic, because there are not enough personnel to prepare the ground for initiating the lessons. In the case of KHL lessons in Berlin, *Kurdisch AG* had to mobilise parents to claim the lessons, initiate dialogues with school administrations, and put pressure on the Senate in order to ensure the lessons start without further delays. However, KHL lessons could start only in three schools despite all efforts, and none was in Neukölln, the district in which resides the largest Kurdish community.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, there is a structural discordance in the cooperation between the Berlin Senate and *Kurdisch AG*, because the latter is not a recognized interlocutor in the organization of KHL lessons. The lack of such accordance poses further hurdles in creating the necessary conditions for teaching Kurdish more effectively and in a greater number of schools. Additionally, not all the school administrations are cooperative enough for Kurdish language lessons to be started in their schools. On the contrary, in a number of cases, the school administrations, who were contacted on behalf of *Kurdisch AG*, refrained from giving an appointment, using as a basis the disproven claim that learning a mother tongue hinders children from

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77 Küppers and Schroeder, “Warum der türkische Herkunftssprachenunterricht”.

78 Derince, “Kurdish elective language lessons”.

excelling in the language of instruction, which in turn allegedly results in poor academic achievement.

Thirdly, there is a lack of support both policy-wise and financially for using appropriate and attractive learning materials in HL lessons. Students taking HL lessons are not usually provided coursebooks or other supporting materials, but rather teachers are supposed to prepare worksheets and bring mostly black-and-white photocopies of worksheets to distribute to the students. These worksheets are generally neither engaging nor motivating for the students, especially when they are compared with the materials in German or languages like English, French, and Spanish. The situation is even more severe for underrepresented languages like Kurdish, since teaching materials for KHL lessons are not readily available either in Berlin or in Germany.

Another major challenge arises due to the bureaucratic formalities and regulations hindering committed and skilful teachers to teach Kurdish in schools. It has already been reported above that teacher qualification and recruitment is one of the major obstacles experienced in the case of other HLLs. The situation is even more complex and unfavourable in the case of Kurdish, because historically it has not been a language of teacher training in Kurdistan, amid continued state oppression towards the language both historically<sup>79</sup> and in recent years.<sup>80</sup> As a result, the number of trained teachers of Kurdish is limited. Moreover, those who are experienced enough to teach the language do not usually own a state-approved certificate. They are also required to certify their proficiency level in German and sometimes in Kurdish, which becomes a further constraint, given that there are no officially recognised institutions providing such services in the case of Kurdish.

The high intra-linguistic diversity among the speakers of Kurdish languages and dialects poses another challenge to KHL teaching. There are at least five main dialectical divisions within Kurdish<sup>81</sup> and three of them, namely Kurmanji, Kirmancki/Zazaki, and Sorani are already spoken in Berlin.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, there are further variations within Kurmanji, both in oral and written forms of the language.<sup>83</sup> An additional factor contributing to the already existing variation might be caused by the influence of German on the type of

79 Geoffrey Haig, "The invisibilisation of Kurdish: The other side of language planning in Turkey" in *Die Kurden: Studein zu ihrer Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur*, eds. Stephan Conermann and Geoffrey Haig (Schenefeld: EB-Verlag, 2004), 121–150.

80 Şehmus Kurt and Nurettin Beltekin, "Türkiye'de Kürtçe öğretmeni: Yetiş(tir)me ve Kürtçe öğretim deneyimine ilişkin bir çözümleme", *Şarkiyat* 12 no. 3 (2020): 819–839.

81 Öpengin and Haig, "Regional variation in Kurmanji".

82 Derince, *Kurdisches Leben in Berlin*.

83 Geoffrey Haig and Ergin Öpengin, "Introduction to Special Issue – Kurdish: A critical research overview", *Kurdish studies* 2 no. 2 (2014): 99–122.

Kurdish emerging in the migration context, yet there is to date no systematic research focusing on this issue.

Last but not least, the involvement of Kurdish parents in the KHL lessons is seriously limited. There are three main reasons hindering parents from sending their children to HL lessons. One is that most parents do not have the proper means to reach the information that they can opt to register their children for KHL lessons. Due to the negative attitudes towards HLLs, they are not encouraged, and are even sometimes discouraged, by the school administrations and teachers to register their children for HL lessons. Additionally, especially those Kurdish parents who are originally from Turkey fear that they may face difficulties when they go to the Turkish embassy or if they go to Turkey for holidays.

### Discussion and Prospects

The findings of the research detailed above illustrate that, despite all the positive attributions to multilingualism, a hierarchical language policy is at play both in Germany and in Berlin, and this is clearly reflected in languages taught in schools. The recently introduced KHL teaching in Berlin faces the constraints of the said language policy as well as difficulties concerning actual implementation of the lessons. At this point, it is indispensable to call for a discussion of the existing language policy and practices with a view to future directions for KHL teaching.

First of all, it must be highlighted that the difficulties and limitations reported in this article disclose the hierarchical order in which languages are regulated in the country and how this creates a structural disequilibrium, which favours certain languages over others in education context. Building on the critical research on multilingualism, language policy, and heritage language teaching as well as previous research on HLT in Germany referred to above, it can be claimed that the traditional model of teaching immigrant languages as elective heritage lessons in schools remains ineffective and counterproductive in promoting a more comprehensive and egalitarian multilingualism and challenging the hierarchical language policy in operation.

The constraints start with adhering to the term “heritage language” since the term confines the language within a geographical, ethnic, and national frame that is not congruent with the context in which the students and their parents actually live, in this case Germany.<sup>84</sup> This model is problematic because it contributes to further ethnicisation of students and the marginalisation

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84 Küppers and Schroeder, “Warum der türkische Herkunftssprachenunterricht”.

mechanisms associated with it.<sup>85</sup> The pedagogical effectiveness of the HL lessons remains yet another controversial aspect of the model, since such issues as learners' motivation, learner differences, and encouraging environments are usually lacking.<sup>86</sup> In the absence of a clear and consistent framework concerning HL lessons, the instructors teaching HL s, the students taking these lessons, as well as the parents opting for the lessons are in many cases left in limbo as to the method, purpose, and meaning of the activity they are engaged in.<sup>87</sup> Last but not least, in its current format, the practice of HLT seems closer to contributing to the reproduction of the linguistic hierarchies in effect than to transforming the structural disparities preserving them.

In an attempt to bring alternative approaches in lieu of the outdated HL instruction, Küppers and Schroeder proposed several measures at the European, the German national as well as the public level.<sup>88</sup> Their suggestions include developing a clear commitment in language policy to the educational value of the languages of migration in Europe; "upgrading" the status of migrant languages to "modern foreign languages"; using them as educational resources in bilingual programmes; creating wider financial opportunities both for research initiatives as well as for the development of special programmes focusing on the topic; creating sustainable spaces for teacher training, development of materials, and regulation of certifications; and, finally, supporting activities, campaigns, as well as informative materials aiming at raising awareness as to the added value of diversity and multilingualism for individuals and society. It has also been suggested that bringing critical pedagogy into HL classrooms may promote a critical understanding of the complex and multiple relationships between such issues as language hierarchies and identity development, in addition to questioning the social, economic, and political inequalities the students and their parents might go through.<sup>89</sup>

As for the new dimensions and aspects brought into the picture by the case of Kurdish HLT, it must be asserted that some of the structural constraints that stateless immigrant languages such as Kurdish experience in their homelands

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85 Küppers and Yağmur, "Why Multilingual Matters".

86 Montrul, *The Acquisition of Heritage Languages*.

87 Hans H. Reich, "Über die Zukunft des Herkunftssprachlichen Unterrichts. Überarbeitete Fassung eines Vortrags bei der GEW Rheinland-Pfalz in Mainz am 31.01. 2012", proDaZ: Deutsch als Zweitsprache in allen Fächern. Online at [https://www.uni-due.de/imperia/md/content/prodaz/reich\\_hsu\\_prodaz.pdf](https://www.uni-due.de/imperia/md/content/prodaz/reich_hsu_prodaz.pdf) (last accessed on 24-9-2022).

88 Küppers and Schroeder, "Warum der türkische Herkunftssprachenunterricht".

89 Panayota Gounari, "Rethinking heritage language in a critical pedagogy framework", in *Rethinking Heritage Language Education*, eds. Peter P. Trifonas and Themistoklis Aravossitas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 254–269.

might follow them in the migration context. First of all, the *invisibilisation*<sup>90</sup> of the Kurdish language continues to a certain extent in Germany. This is evident not only in school regulations and educational administration treating Kurdish students as Turkish or Arab simply based on their passport status or their backgrounds, even though they are second or third generations in Germany. It also becomes apparent in the absence of the Kurdish language and its speakers in academic research and public discussions. Secondly, there is a lack of officially-binding communications between educational authorities and the Kurdish community as Kurds are not represented by recognized institutions such as consulates and embassies. As a result, both initiating as well as sustaining KHL lessons remains largely on the shoulders of community organisations with limited resources, and these organisations are not usually treated as proper interlocutors by government offices. Thirdly, the Kurdish language is also deprived of external support mechanisms potentially available for the other immigrant languages represented by home countries. This support might be in the form of organising teacher training activities, providing materials, creating funding and other financial opportunities, planning activities towards elevating the prestige as well as mobilizing their communities for the promotion of their languages. To what extent these mechanisms are being effectively used by the actors in question is still controversial, as seen in the case of Turkish HLT, but the point here is that, for Kurdish, these are non-existing.

Closely related to the challenges mentioned above is the fact that there is no academic institution at tertiary level which focuses on the Kurdish language in Germany, despite Germany hosting the largest Kurdish diaspora in the world. Furthermore, the highly diverse nature of Kurdish languages and dialects, including dialectical variations and alphabetical differences, could bring additional theoretical and methodological dimensions to the emerging field of HLT in general. Reaching out to Kurdish parents in order to encourage them to ask for Kurdish language lessons in schools and to claim the existing lessons if they are available is another challenge. Difficulty arises both because there are issues to do with privacy and security of personal information, as well as the fear of being marginalised further by other parents from Turkish or Arabic backgrounds.<sup>91</sup> Considering the agency of parents in the continuation of HL lessons, it is vital to find ways and means of reaching out to the parents and involving them in the process.

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90 Haig, "The invisibilisation of Kurdish".

91 Derince, *Kurdisches Leben in Berlin*.

As a result of the issues highlighted above, even a seemingly positive step taken by the Berlin administration to introduce Kurdish as HL in schools might prove to be counterproductive when other factors such as the existing linguistic hierarchies and various challenges including being a stateless language are not taken into account. One may claim that the teaching of Kurdish in Berlin is still in infancy and more time is needed in order to see its actual participation in the polyphony of public life in the city. However, considering the troubled experiences of HLT in several other languages, as well as the hierarchical language policy framework followed by the authorities, there is not much prospect for either the language or its speakers.

Still, it must be noted that the limited data and restrictions of the eclectic methodology employed for this research do not allow for conclusive analyses and absolute arguments regarding teaching of Kurdish in schools to be reached. To this end, more exploratory studies have to be carried out looking into the teaching of Kurdish not only in Berlin and other regions of Germany, but also in other countries where Kurdish HLT exists at schools. These new studies should contribute to developing more refined understandings of both the theoretical aspects of the topic and pedagogical considerations concerning learners and instructors of Kurdish lessons, as well as the curricula and teaching materials utilised. Such new research may challenge hierarchical and counterproductive models of language teaching on the one hand, and help develop more effective pedagogies that respond to the needs of students, instructors, and parents on the other hand. In doing so, future research would need to explore such issues as motivation,<sup>92</sup> identity construction,<sup>93</sup> and the dynamic interplay of various languages of the learners, i.e. practices of translanguaging.<sup>94</sup> Likewise, it is equally important to explore how these themes are shaped by factors including diverse settings, policies, and contexts in which learning and teaching of Kurdish in institutional settings takes place. Additionally, more studies adhering to formal linguistic methodologies exploring such themes as syntactic, morphosyntactic, and lexical variations in Kurdish(s) being spoken and taught in different settings are needed in order to challenge and go beyond the idealised understandings of the kind of Kurdish being promoted in classroom instruction and teaching materials. Finally, more comparative studies linking

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92 Zoltán Dörnyei and Ema Ushioda, eds. *Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2009).

93 Nancy H. Hornberger and Shuhan C. Wang, "Who are our heritage language learners?: Identity and biliteracy in heritage language education in the United States", in *Heritage Language Education: A New Field Emerging*, eds. Donna M. Brinton, Olga Kagan, Susan Bauckus (New York: Routledge, 2017), 3–36.

94 García and Wei, *Translanguaging*.

different experiences of teaching Kurdish in various contexts should be carried out in an attempt to provide a comprehensive perspective and to contribute to developing a theoretical framework in locating Kurdish language teaching within the broader field of linguistic and educational theory.

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# Kurdish Power Holders in Seventeenth-Century Bidlīs: a Brief Introduction

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## Abstract

This article reconsiders the political organisation of Bidlīs, a leading Kurdish emirate of the Ottoman Empire, during the seventeenth-century, mainly on the basis of Ottoman archival documents. It scrutinises the conventional depiction of Bidlīs as lacking any effective central authority and shows that the Ottoman Kurdish officials in fact exercised significant power. However, there were recurrent conflicts, both between the emir of Bidlīs and the tribal chiefs in the emirate, and also between the emirate and the central power in Istanbul. These tensions were situated within the context of Ottoman-Safavid frontier conflicts, and endemic local warfare, which generated new resources that upset the existing balance of power.

## Keywords

Bidlīs – early modern history – Ottoman Empire – Safavids – Kurdish emirates

• • •

To Thomas A. Sinclair

şāhib al-‘aqlayn



## Di sed sala 17an de li Bidlîsê xwedan-hêzên kurd: destpêkeke kurt

Ev gotar rêkxistinbûna siyasi ya Bidlîsê, mîrektiyêke kurd a sereke ya împaratoriya osmanî, ya dema sed sala 17emîn, bi esasî li ser bingeha dokumentên arşîva osmanî ji nû ve dinirxîne. Gotar, pênaseya giştî ya Bidlîsê wek mehrûmbûyîna ji hêzeke navendî ya bibandor ji nêzik ve dikole û nişan dide ku ya rast memûrên kurd ên osmanî hêzeke girîng temrîn kirine. Lê, pevçûnên berdewam hebûne hem di navbera mîrê Bidlîsê û serokeşîrên di mîrektiyê de, hem jî di navbera mîrektî û hêza navendî ya Stenbolê de. Ev nerihetî di nav çarçoveya pevçûnên sînorî yê osmanî-safewiyan û şerên herêmî yê endemîk de bi cih bûne yê çavkaniyên nû afrandine ku hevsengiya hêzê ya heyî berevajî kirine.

### خاوهن دهستهلاتدارانی کورد له سهدهی ههفته ههمدا له به دلیس: پیشهکێهکی کورت

به پشبهستن به بهلگه نامه ئه رشيفيه كاني عوسمانيه كاندا، ئهم ووتاره پيداچوونهوه به ريكخستنى سياسى به دلیسدا دهكات، كه ميرنشينيكي پيشهنگى كوردى ئيمپراتوريه تى عوسمانى بوو له سهدهى ههفته ههمدا. به ليكوئينهوهى وورد له وینه كردنى باوى به دلیس وهكو ميرنشينيكي بيهش له دهستهلاتى كاريگهري ناوهندا، ئهم ووتاره ئهوه نيشان دادهت كه به پيرسانى كوردى عوسمانى له راستيدا دهسهلاتىكى بهرچاويان په پیره و كردوووه. به لام ناكۆكى بهردهوام هه بووه له نيوان ئه ميرى به دلیس و سهروك خپله كان له ميرنشينه كه دا، وه له نيوان ميرنشينه كه و دهسهلاتى ناوهندا له تهسته نبول. ئهم گرژيانه له چوارچيوه مملائى سنوورى نيوان عوسمانى و سهفهويه كان و شهري دريژخايه نى ناخۆيى دا روويانداوه و بوونه ته هوكارى دهركهوتنى سهراچاوه نوى، و تيكچوونى هاوسهنگى هيزى ليكه و تۆتهوه.

## Hukmdarê kurdî yê Bidlîsê seserra hewtêsine: destpêko kilmek

Na meqale awanîya Bidlîsî ya sîyasîye, yew mîreyîya serekî ya Împeratorîya Osmanîyan, bi bingeyê belgeyanê arşivkîyan ê osmanîyan ra newe ra erjnena. Teswîro tradîsyonel o ke Bidlîs wayîrê otorîteya merkeziya tesîrdare nêbîyo, yeno cipersayene. Ser o kî yeno nawnayene ke raştîye de memurê osmanîyan ê kurdî wayîrê hêz û selahîyetêkê muhîmî bîyî. Labelê, hem mabênê mîreyê Bidlîs û sereşîranê mîreyîye hem kî mabênê hukmê Îstanbulî yê merkezî de têkewtişê tekrarı qewimîyayêne. Nê tengijîyayîşî zereyê kontekstê têkewtişanê osmanî-sefewîyan û cengdarîya cayîya zereyîye de ca gênê ke înan çimeyê neweyî yê ke hemsencîya hêzdarî ya ê wextî herimnaye, viraştî.

### Introduction

Located in eastern Anatolia, in the steep valley of the Bidlîs River, a tributary of the Tigris, Bidlîs was one of the most important Ottoman Kurdish emirates, which also included the districts of Mush and Akhlâţ.<sup>1</sup> Through the supply of agricultural products, it played a significant part in sixteenth-century Ottoman trade,<sup>2</sup> and became even more prominent in Armenian trade in the seventeenth-century, as the Armenian community constituted the emirate's main minority population and its members were the main actors in the expansion of trade into Eastern Anatolia.<sup>3</sup> The Bidlîs emirate was also a significant military power, engaging in both Ottoman and Safavid expansionist wars, and

1 For more geographical data on these areas, see Shihâb al-Dîn Abî 'Abd Allâh Yâqût b. 'Abd Allâh al-Hîmawî, *Mu'jam al-Buldân, Jacut's Geographisches Wörterbuch*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Leipzig: In Commission bei F. A. Brockhaus, 1866–1873), i, 526; Zayn al-'Âbidîn Shîrwânî, *Bustân al-Siyâha* (Tehran: In'îbâ'ât, 1891), 132; H. Hübschmann, "Die altarmenische Ortsnamen", *Indogermanische Forschungen* 16 (1904): 324; and Orhan Kılıç, *730 Numaralı Van, Âdilcevâz, Muş ve Bitlis Livaları Tımar İcmal Defteri* (MA dissertation, Elazığ Fırat Üniversitesi, 1989).

2 See Emine Altunay, *1540 (H.947) Tarihlî Tahrir Defterine Göre Bitlis Sancağı* (MA dissertation, Samsun Ondokuz Mayıs Üniversitesi, 1994); and Ahmet Yılmaz, *413 Numaralı Mufassal Tapu Tahrir Defterine Göre Bitlis Sancağı (1555–1556)* (MA dissertation, Konya T. C. Selçuk Üniversitesi, 2010); both should be used with great caution.

3 Compare Vahe Baladouni and Margaret Makepeace, *Armenian Merchants of the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries: English East India Company Sources* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1998), 246–247 and Johannes Preiser-Kapeller, "Liquid Frontiers. A Relational Analysis of Maritime Asia Minor as Religious Contact Zone in the 13th–15th

extending its control over several frontier districts.<sup>4</sup> But while the history of Bidlis in the sixteenth-century has been the subject of a fair amount of academic study, including most recently by Sacha Alsancakli, and the authors of this work,<sup>5</sup> the seventeenth-century has not attracted comparable attention.

During the sixteenth-century, a growing number of chronicles and documents related to Bidlis started being produced. There were countless letters, including those of Idrīs-i Bidlīsī, written about the political situation of Bidlis, transitions of power, or the proper way to ask the sultan for an instruction, often considered a symbol of status.<sup>6</sup> Historical accounts by Sharaf Khān Bidlīsī, the author of the *Sharaf-nāma*,<sup>7</sup> and Shukrī Bidlīsī, the author of the *Selīm-nāme*,<sup>8</sup> and the Ottoman *taḥrīr* registers of Bidlis<sup>9</sup> can give us a clearer

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Century”, in *Islam and Christianity in Medieval Anatolia*, eds. Andrew Peacock, Bruno De Nicola, Sara Nur Yıldız (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015), 117–146.

- 4 For details, see Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont, “Un rapport de Fil Ya’kūb Paşa, beylerbey du Diyār Bekir en 1532”, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 76 (Festschrift Andreas Tietze) (1986): 35–41; idem, *Les Ottomans, les Safavides et leurs voisins : contribution à l’histoire des relations internationales dans l’Orient islamique de 1514 à 1524* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1987); idem, “Cinq lettres de Hüsrev Paşa, beylerbey du Diyār Bekir (1522–1532)”, *Journal Asiatique* 289 (1991): 239–265; idem, “Quinze lettres d’Uzun Süleymân Paşa, beylerbey du Diyār Bekir (1533–1534)”, *Anatolia Moderna* 1 (1991): 137–186; idem, “Quatre lettres de Bıyıklı Mehmed Paşa”, *Bellefen* 56 (1992): 703–725.
- 5 For a general study of Kurdish emirates, see Metin Atmaca, “Negotiating Political Power in the Early Modern Middle East: Kurdish Emirates between the Ottoman Empire and Iranian Dynasties (Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)”, in *Cambridge History of the Kurds*, eds. Hamit Bozarslan, Cengiz Gunes, Veli Yadirgi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 45–72. For the emirate of Bidlis in particular, see Sacha Alsancakli, “Matrimonial Alliances and the Transmission of Dynastic Power in Kurdistan: The Case of the Diyādīnids of Bidlis in the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries”, *Eurasian Studies* 15/2 (2017): 222–249; idem, “Historiography and Language in 17th-century Ottoman Kurdistan: A Study of Two Turkish Translations of the *Sharaf-nāma*”, *Kurdish Studies* 6/2 (2018): 171–196, especially for the Ottoman Turkish translation of the *Sharaf-nāma* produced in Bidlis. The translator was Muḥammad Bayg b. Aḥmad Bayg, a great-great-grandson of Sharaf Khān. Also, Mustafa Dehqan and Vural Genç, “Darwīsh Maḥmūd: An Unknown Sixteenth Century Kurdish Notable”, *Journal Asiatique* 306/1 (2018): 35–39; idem, “Mīrlivā of Malāṭya: A Correction of Sharaf Khān’s Statement Concerning his Father”, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 169/1 (2019): 235–238. The work by Sedat Ulugana, “Bitlis Mirliḡi Tarihinde Abdal Han Dönemi (1618–1664)”, *Kürt Tarihi* 20, 52–57 should be used with great caution, as dating and the use of some historical materials therein are particularly problematic.
- 6 See TSMA, E. 3165, TSMA E.5675, TSMA E.6627; TSMA E.8333; and Vural Genç, “İdris-i Bidlīsī’nin II. Bayezid ve I. Selim’e Mektupları”, *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 47 (2016): 147–208.
- 7 See Scheref, Prince de Bidlis. *Scheref-nameh ou Histoire des Kourdes*, ed. V. Véliamīnof-Zernof (Saint-Petersbourg: Commissionnaires de l’Académie impériale des sciences, 1860–1862).
- 8 See Şükri-i Bitlisī. *Selīm-nāme*, ed. M. Argunşah (Kayseri: Erciyes Üniversitesi, 1997).
- 9 See Mustafa Dehqan and Vural Genç, *Surveying an Ottoman Borderland: The Registers of Bidlis* (forthcoming).

picture of the sixteenth-century political and social history of Bidlīs, as well as inform us about Ottoman-Safavid frontier conflicts.

After the end of the sixteenth-century, the number of primary sources penned about the Bidlīs emirate began to decline rapidly, dropping by 70 per cent between 1601 and 1697. The post-sixteenth century decline in primary sources was part of a broader pattern of reduced political frontier violence that went unnoticed in the Ottoman and Safavid sources. This period only includes Evliya Çelebi's detailed account on the social and cultural life of Bidlīs under the rule of Abdāl Khān.<sup>10</sup> But our lack of knowledge on events before and after Abdāl Khān reminds us that there is no significant primary source on the political history of Bidlīs in that period. This article seeks to address this neglect by exploring the contexts discussed in archival documents on Bidlīs in the seventeenth-century.

It should be noted that non-archival sources are also important for writing the seventeenth-century history of Bidlīs. However, it must be admitted that these non-archival sources of the seventeenth-century are fewer in number and more superficial compared to those of the previous century. First of all, the interest of the imperial authorities decreased because the emirate no longer constituted a "border" between Ottomans and Safavids as it was in the previous century. Likewise, Safavid court historians almost never mentioned the Bidlīs principality, since it had ceased to be a regional power party to the Ottoman-Safavid conflict and was fully integrated into the Ottoman administration. This naturally led to a decrease in the number of documents produced on Bidlīs in the Safavid realm.

*Mühimme*, *Şikâyet*, *Ruus*, *Timar & Ruznamçe* and *Tahrir* registers in the Ottoman Archives and the documents belonging to various sections affiliated with the Imperial Council (*Divan-ı Hümayûn*) constitute our main archival resources. *Mühimme* and *Şikâyet* registers, which constitute the principal *deFTER* series of the Ottoman bureaucracy, form the main backbone of the existing documents on seventeenth-century Bidlīs. Various issues raised in petitions from Bidlīs to the Imperial Council were recorded in these registers. It is seen that these records sometimes cover the various problems connected with the rulers of Bidlīs, their political conflicts, preparations for war and

10 For example, see Evliya Çelebi, *Seyahatname*, vols. I–VI, ed. A. Cevdet; vols. VII–VIII, ed. K. Rif'at; vols. IX–X, ed. Anonymous (Istanbul: İkdâm, 1896–1938); Richard Hartmann, "Zu Ewlija Tschelebi's Reisen im oberen Euphrat und Tigrisgebiet", *Der Islam* 9 (1919): 184–224; Robert Dankoff, *Evliya Çelebi in Bitlis. The Relevant Section of the Seyahatname* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 53–54; and Christiane Bulut, *Evliya Çelebis Reise von Bitlis nach Van: ein Auszug aus dem Seyahatname; interpretierende Transliteration, kommentierte Übersetzung und sprachwissenschaftliche Bemerkungen* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997).

expeditions, and the petitions of their subjects. Such registers can be expected to contain more detailed information about certain localities. Without these registers, it would probably not be possible to fully understand the relations of the Bidlīs emirs with the center and the periphery. Tribal activity, internal conflicts, and the debts incurred by the rulers with various circles are reflected in these documents. *Ruus* registers, which include the dates of appointment and dismissal of rulers of Bidlīs and the motives behind these decisions, are essential to establish a proper chronology. A few *icmal tahrir* registers from the beginning of the seventeenth-century uncover the nature of the principality's revenues, and thanks to *Niṣan Tahvil*, *Maliyeden Müdevver* and *Timar Ruznamçe* registers, we also have information about the emirate's expenses. In these records, the bestowal of *timar* and *ze'amet* among the emirate's ruling class is documented, as well as the ruler's and the sultan's own portions from these revenues. A better understanding of the struggle over sources of income and the financial frictions visible in the seventeenth-century depends on the careful examination of these registers, which indicate among which powers the principality's revenues were divided. The control established by the ruler over the emirate's sources of revenue, and the efforts made to gain political influence through this control, are indeed one of the most contentious issues arising between the principality and the central authorities in this period.

Archival registers dealing with seventeenth-century Bidlīs mostly focus on the emirate's rulers, their politics, and relations with the center and periphery. The lack of *'avāriz* and (*şer'iyye*) court registers of Bidlīs prevent us from presenting a more colourful picture that includes the social and economic life of the principality.

The documents that are used here are located in the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi in Istanbul. Most of the documents were written in a script known as *sīyākat* and *diwānī*, although the script of some documents cannot be considered *diwānī* in the full sense of the word. These are rather semi-*diwānī* and, in some cases, are *sīyākat*. A peculiarity of the documents' script used here is a deviation of the *diwānī* standard (for example roundness in the curves of several letters) as well as absence of strict horizontality of lines. Most often in such documents there is no indication of where the copy was made, but, judging by the paper, the script and other indirect evidence (for example, seals and datings), it is possible to say that they were produced in Istanbul, Vān, Diyārbakır, and Bidlīs. Lesser numbers of documents are given in separate collections, including many documents from earlier and later centuries. Delving more into these collections, we came to identify some patterns of bindings which constitute a veritable body of characteristics. The most striking feature of these types of bindings is the suppression of the whole background with

closely set small circular stamps (not bigger than 2 mm), which render the actual design in bold relief.

While we lack any broader statistics, we can present some characteristics of the collections of the Ottoman Archives related to the emirate of Bidlīs in the seventeenth-century: among 12,754 unpublished documents we considered there are fewer than 200 copies with *basmalas*, no more than 2.1% of the entire collection. The paper appears to be somewhat thin and finely made but, as most are mounted, a complete examination was not possible. Most papers were made from linen or linen and hemp, with exceptions made from an unidentified material. The length of these documents differs according to the contents and importance. The main physical size of the documents, however, is almost the same in both the early and later decades of the century: 23 × 34 cm. Pigments and inks used in the documents were not very diverse. The main ink was carbon-based black which was always applied as black ink, while vermilion, a mixture of vermilion and red lead, and, in some cases, organic red, were rarely used as red ink. Some documents are rather translucent, which is typical of degradation in historical and archival documents. These rare cases were caused by transparency or seeping of ink from the reverse side of the folio.

At present, the collection in question numbers about 20,000 items, although the number of documents' titles has never been counted. Needless to say, the cataloguing of such a significant number of documents is a difficult and time-consuming work.

### Power Transition

One of the problems posed by power transitions in late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century Bidlīs was the emergence of major power challengers who felt that the status quo of their relations with the Ottoman central authorities did not correctly represent their rising position in the power hierarchy. This gap could generate, or exacerbate, grievances that encouraged the challenger to seek changes to that status quo, just as their growing power gave them the capacity to try and modify it. As this dynamic continued and the challenger rose to a power almost equivalent to that of the Ottoman hegemon, the risk of a hegemonic war grew closer and closer. The underlying logic of power transitions in Bidlīs, however, does not necessarily apply only to hierarchical relations. The archival documents that detail the dangers of power transitions within the hierarchical order can equally apply to power transitions among the

elder members of a family.<sup>11</sup> In other words, when a power transition occurred between the Ottoman and Safavid representatives of these two empires, the risk of conflict would increase. The people of Bidlis alone, independently from the greater politics of the two empires in the region, were better able to take power and overcome the chaos that occurred. In fact, whether the succession had been previously applied to regional Turkish hierarchies,<sup>12</sup> the succession this time was couched in the interactions between Khalaf Bayg<sup>13</sup> and Ḍīyā' al-Dīn Bayg, who were the brother and the son of Sharaf Khān, the author of *Sharaf-nāma* and the last emir of sixteenth-century Bidlis. In other words, the succession remained in Sharaf Khān's family and the Ottoman and Iranian official representatives were removed from power. Also, we would argue that the power transition from the sixteenth-century to seventeenth-century, in its earliest couple of years, helped the Ottomans to gradually and imperceptibly expel the Safavids from this region. After about a few years, the Safavid Empire lost its influence and the Ottoman Empire played a more important role in regional politics.

### Khalaf 's Shaky Period: 1601–1605

Any discussion of the early seventeenth-century emirs of Bidlis would be difficult without understanding the historical ties entertained by the emirs with Sharaf Khān, the author of the *Sharaf-nāma*. When Sharaf Khān was killed by the governor of Vān, Aḥmed Pasha,<sup>14</sup> sometime between late 1599 and early 1600,<sup>15</sup> the city of Bidlis was plunged into chaos. Interestingly, Sharaf Khān was first succeeded by a certain Farhād Bayg, who was directly appointed by the

11 See A.DVN. 3/95.

12 Compare the sixteenth-century interregnum period of Bidlis (43 years) and the Turkish Ottoman representatives as emirs of Bidlis. For example, see KK 1764, 249, 253.

13 He was the second son of Shams al-Dīn Bayg and a brother of Sharaf Khān, author of the *Sharaf-nāma*. During the rule of Shah Tahmāsp, he was a *qūrchū* and emir of some frontier districts. This is why Ottoman documents present him as “a former beg of the Ajam” (“*sabika Acem'de bey olan*”). In August 1591, he was the Ottoman emir of Malāzgird, and also responsible for collecting *cizye* from the Armenians; see A.RSK.d.1473, 118, 150; MAD.d.7439, 16–17.

14 He had also attacked and looted Arabgir; see Vural Genç, *Kim Bu Mülke Kondu Bundan Ezeli: Arabgir (Yerleşim, Vakfı, Toplumsal Hayat ve Ekonomi 1518–1874)* (Istanbul: Kerem Aydınlar Vakfı, 2020), 114.

15 See Mustafa Dehqan and Vural Genç, “Why Was Sharaf Khān Killed?”, *Manuscripta Orientalia*, 21/2 (2015): 14–15, 19, n.15.

sultan as *beylerbeyi* of Bidlīs.<sup>16</sup> Farhād Bayg had the misfortune to be killed by Celalī rebels in Kayseri when he was travelling to Bidlīs in order to succeed Sharaf Khān.<sup>17</sup> From 1598 to 1601, there was a series of Ottoman raids by Aḥmed Pasha against the region of Bidlīs, during which he plundered and burned the city, took prisoners and slaves, and killed Sharaf Khān and many members of the Rōzhikī tribal confederacy.<sup>18</sup> Some documents portray the shock and horror felt at the Ottomans' arrival at a series of places in Bidlīs.<sup>19</sup> Khalaf Bayg, as temporary emir and responsible for the affair of Bidlīs in early 1601, also records Ottoman incursions by "the cruel Aḥmed Pasha," and some other local rebellions in Mush.<sup>20</sup> However, he seems to regard the Ottomans as a passing threat and not as permanent conquerors, saying, in the context of a request to the sultan, that the people of the city must keep their heads down and wait for the passing of the storm.<sup>21</sup> Khalaf Bayg was clearly on cordial terms with both the Ottomans and the people of Bidlīs, his ancestral town. It is unclear however what role he had played in the conflict between Sharaf Khān and the sultan. After the murder of Sharaf Khān, he was the first to succeed his brother, and so became the first Kurdish emir of seventeenth-century Bidlīs after a temporary (less than eight months) loss of control.

For two months, command of the emirate was also in the hands of Ḍiyā' al-Dīn Bayg. But this does not mean that Khalaf Bayg was fully out of power. Both the son and the brother of Sharaf Khān had control over some distinct districts of Bidlīs, but the sultan refused to award Ḍiyā' al-Dīn the right to rule Bidlīs as this right (as a *hükümet* emirate) had been granted for life to the brother of the previous emir.<sup>22</sup> It is true that after the murder of Sharaf Khān, Bidlīs became a normal *sancak* with no *hükümet* status, and among Sharaf Khān's supporters, reactions may have varied from anger and defiance to disappointment and resignation. There were probably a number of reasons

16 See MAD 7439, 20.

17 See A.DVN.8/15, dated May 1601.

18 See the account of the fall of Bidlīs in BOA A.AMD 1/4, dated 1601. For details on the Rōzhikī, the main Kurdish tribe of Bidlīs, see Scheref, *Scheref-nameh ou Histoire des Kourdes*, 1, 431–438; L. S. Xaç'ikyan (ed.), *XV Dari Hayeren Jeřagreri Hiřatakaranner 1401–1450* (Yerevan: Haykakan SSH GA Hratarakch'ut'yun, 1955), 1, 329, 331–333.

19 For example, BOA A.DVN, 12/54; A.DVN, 12/85; and A.NŞT, 9/26.

20 In September 1601, Khalaf Bayg defeated a certain Aḥmad in Mush who rebelled against his emirate: A.NŞT, 9/26. For some economic activities of Khalaf Bayg in Bidlīs, and the castles of Mush and Küfündür, especially on the improvement of their military capabilities, see MAD.d.7316, 9.

21 See Mustafa Dehqan and Vural Genç, "Reflections on Sharaf Khān's Autobiography", *Manuscripta Orientalia* 21/1 (2015): 46–61.

22 See A.DVN.MHM.d.32/168.

that Dīyā' al-Dīn lost the emirate in a dyadic competition with Khalaf Bayg. The most important one was legitimacy: if Dīyā' al-Dīn, who was not the elder son of Sharaf Khān, emerged as the emir of Bidlīs, thousands of Bidlīsīs would likely have believed that the elder son and the hereditary successor of the great Sharaf Khān had been robbed. However, the legitimacy of Khalaf Bayg's very short-lived rule in the earliest months of the seventeenth-century was increasingly seeping away, and the question of who to appoint in Bidlīs was, for the Ottoman court, even more problematic. They tried to invest Farhād Bayg as their own loyal representative, but, after the latter's murder, they finally designated Khalaf Bayg as the legal emir of Bidlīs.

There was no other rival to the throne of Khalaf Bayg, as Dīyā' al-Dīn was not the elder son of Sharaf Khān. Hence, mention of Sharaf Khān's elder son, Shams al-Dīn Bayg, is necessary. Of all the sons of Sharaf Khān, it is only Shams al-Dīn Bayg whose name is mentioned in the *Sharaf-nāma* as the legal successor to his father.<sup>23</sup> It is, however, unclear what happened to Shams al-Dīn, as we were unable to locate him in the Ottoman archives, which means that he might have passed away before his father.

Aḥmad Bayg, another influential son of Sharaf Khān, was the emir of Mush, a dependency of Bidlīs. Aḥmad is first mentioned as the *sancakbey* of Mush on 24 February 1579,<sup>24</sup> but it seems that, from 1584 onwards, the *sancak* of Mush was only considered as a kind of adjunct of Bidlīs. In that year, Aḥmad was called *mīr-i liva-ı Şeref Han* or *veled-i Şeref Han*, but he is simply called the *sancakbey* of Mush in 1585. Details on what happened in Mush are given elsewhere,<sup>25</sup> the point is that Aḥmad is unrelated to the succession of his father in Bidlīs, as he was dead in 1588.<sup>26</sup> In other words, Aḥmad and Shams al-Dīn were naturally removed from the list of Khalaf Bayg's rivals to gain central power in the emirate.

23 See Scheref, *Scheref-nameh ou Histoire des Kourdes*, i, 456: *ḥukūmat-i murūthī dar taşarruf-i faqīr ast agar chi bi al-ṭab' az in amr-i khaṭīr ijtināb nimuda ishtighāl-i ān rā dar 'uhda-yi walad-i arshad wa farzand-i amjad muvaffaq bi akhlāq-i nik Abu al-Ma'ālī Shams al-Dīn Bayg ṭawwala Allāh ta'ālā umruhū wa dā'afa jalāla qadruhū karda.*

24 See Kāmil Kepeci Tasnifi 262, 186.

25 See Dehqan & Genç, "Reflections on Sharaf Khān's Autobiography"; Kılıç, 730 *Numaralı Van, Âdilcevâz, Muş ve Bitlis Livalârı.*

26 According to a tombstone inscription at the Sharafiya Complex in Bidlīs, Aḥmad passed away in 1588. The inscription reads: اللهم اغفر وارحم الساكن هذا المقبر [كذا] المرحوم المغفور احمد بك ابن الحاكم الاعدل الاشرف الاكمل شرف خان عمدة الامرا خلف العظام الحكام الكرام في شهر ٢٨ ذى الحجة لسنة ٩٩٦. Based on field work at Sharafiya Complex, Bidlīs, November 2020. For other tombstones of Bidlīs, the reader may refer to a general study by Kadir Pektaş, *Bitlis Tarihi Mezarlıkları ve Mezar Taşları* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 2001); it should be noted, however, that it is quite erroneous and defective.

As the last possible reason for the Ottomans to choose Khalaf Bayg as the emir of Bidlīs, one may mention the latter's governorship in 'Adiljawāz.<sup>27</sup> 'Adiljawāz, Mush and Akhlāt were all counties in Bidlīs, but their early-modern populations did not have a sense of their Bidlīsiness (however one may define it), and it is thus not the reason for grouping them together. They did share certain terms, including elements of a legal vocabulary, that point to common institutions, but one cannot posit a relationship in any real sense.<sup>28</sup> They were different societies with shared experiences that lived in close geographical contact, but reacted diversely to political events, all the while profoundly influencing each other. Also, all experienced Ottoman aggression as a decisive force in their history. As a former emir of 'Adiljawāz, Khalaf Bayg was able to extend his influence and power over all of the emirate's districts; thus, his power was distributed territorially but articulated hierarchically, and derived from a single source – the murder of Sharaf Khān. The complex mixture of exhortation to rule firmly, injunction to be a loyal Ottoman representative, to extend royal power and income, and the constant harping on the potent model of Ottoman governorship would have had a strong impact on the successful succession of Khalaf Bayg, who was then building up the provincial governorship that dominated Ottoman policies towards Bidlīs from January 1601 until 1605. During his four-year governorship, Khalaf Bayg tried to keep the peace in Bidlīs, and he especially strived to bring back the looted properties of his defunct brother, Sharaf Khān.<sup>29</sup> He had close relations with the Ottoman court and he tried to make use of them to restore what Bidlīs had lost, and even sent his *kethüda*, Budak Çavuş, to Istanbul in order to reclaim Sharaf Khān's properties, goods, and library.<sup>30</sup> He did this in vain and Dīyā' al-Dīn succeeded him in 1605.

### Dīyā' al-Dīn (1605–1618): Maker of Seventeenth-Century Bidlīs

Any leader depends on supporters to perform his role and stay in power, but these supporters are also possible challengers and potential successors. Thus, Dīyā' al-Dīn Bayg and his supporters, who had initially protected his brother Shams al-Dīn Bayg, could also use these very resources to overthrow him and install Dīyā' al-Dīn as successor to his father. As the most powerful member of the political elite in Bidlīs, Dīyā' al-Dīn not only defeated his uncle Khalaf Bayg

27 See MAD.d.7316, 9.

28 See MAD.d.7319, 11; MAD.d.9825, 53; A.DVN.15/81.

29 See MAD.d.7439, 16–17; A.NŞT.d.1171, 71; A.NŞT.d.1172, 6; A.DVN.3/95.

30 See A.DVN.14/70; A.DVN.14/72.

but also planned to usurp the legal succession of Shams al-Dīn Bayg and other possible rivals. Similar relationships existed in local organisations between chief ʔōzhikī officials and other tribesmen lower in Bidlis's hierarchy. To maintain his position, then, ʔīyā' al-Dīn and his supporters had to find the right balance and compensate their tribal officials sufficiently so that the temptation to overthrow him remained without an incentive.<sup>31</sup>

There were two cases of political succession in late sixteenth-century Bidlis: Shams al-Dīn Bayg succeeding Sharaf Khān and Khalaf Bayg succeeding Sharaf Khān. Because of his more influential role and power, however, it was ʔīyā' al-Dīn who was selected as the successor to the chaotic early seventeenth-century Bidlis emirate in Istanbul, in 1605, and the succession became public as a final imperial decision for the strategic emirate of Bidlis. Thus, after a period of regional conflicts and struggle by political supporters of either Khalaf Bayg or Shams al-Dīn Bayg, ʔīyā' al-Dīn became the only Kurdish power holder in Bidlis to rule in hereditary succession accepted by both the Ottoman Empire and the main part of the Bidlisī population.

During the career of Sharaf Khān, the author of the *Sharaf-nāma*, ʔīyā' al-Dīn was the *timar* holder of Kārchikān, in Bidlis.<sup>32</sup> For some time ʔīyā' al-Dīn was a symbol of barbaric mayhem and murderous plunder, and a threat to the tradesmen and sedentary population of Bidlis.<sup>33</sup> The following years demonstrate that this early depiction of ʔīyā' al-Dīn as the enemy of tradesmen and merchants of Bidlis is simply erroneous. ʔīyā' al-Dīn did achieve the distinction of uniting the Kurdish tribes under his rule and was able to bend them to his will and he attained the status of undisputed and indeed unchallenged ruler of the Bidlis emirate from 1605 and for many years hence.

The first of his actions that is recorded took place in the ʔazzō emirate.<sup>34</sup> Tensions had been brewing throughout Bidlis, especially in the troubled final years of the sixteenth-century and for some years before the transition of power actually began. The Kashāghī Kurdish tribe of Bidlis had no choice but to seek safety and immigrate to ʔazzō. With the support and help of ʔīyā' al-Dīn, the Kashāghī tribe and other emigrants returned home to Bidlis, where they were known as 'original residents'.<sup>35</sup>

31 See A.DVN.MHM.d.79, hkm.1228.

32 See Dehqan and Genç, "Reflections on Sharaf Khān's Autobiography", 52–53.

33 See A.DVN.14/72.

34 On ʔazzō, also known as Şaşun, which is overlooked from the north by Mush and the south and east by Bidlis, after crossing the river of Batman bridge, see Wilhelm Tomaschek, "Sasun und das Quellengebiet des Tigris", *Sitzungsberichte AdW, Philosophisch-historische Klasse AdW* 133 (1896): 1–44.

35 See A.DVN.MHM.d.79, hkm.1228.

One of the other tasks upon which ʔiyā' al-Dīn set his heart was the restoration of Bidlis's economy as the capital of a frontier emirate. For over half a century, Bidlis had been subjected to progressive economic development strategies through the efforts of Sharaf Khān, the author of the *Sharaf-nāma*, and several *hass* and financial advantages he had received from the Ottoman sultan.<sup>36</sup> After decades of well-intentioned economic developments, the emirate had suffered heavily from the Ottoman invasion and the murder of Sharaf Khān, and it then continued to exhibit widespread poverty. According to a 1610 financial report, more than half of the military officials of Bidlis, Mush and the castle of Kūfündür were low-income or poor.<sup>37</sup> With regard to the Armenians of Bidlis, the Ottoman archives reveal that some Armenians lived in economically distressed conditions and were unable to pay the *cizye* to ʔiyā' al-Dīn.<sup>38</sup>

The imperial financial crisis, made worse by Ottoman-Habsburg conflicts and the Celalī rebellions, badly hit the economy of Bidlis as a remote frontier area. These sharp effects were unexpected and Bidlis was not prepared for this contingency. In fact, ʔiyā' al-Dīn sensed a state of emergency and empowered himself to provide a process of economic mobilisation. It is clear that he succeeded to reach what he was looking for. But it was not an easy case. In January 1615, ʔiyā' al-Dīn put pressure on Hāce Lālā and Can Beg, two merchants related to the governor of Diyārbakr, Naşūh Pasha, and his *kethüda* Bahrām Bayg, who complained to the Ottoman court about ʔiyā' al-Dīn.<sup>39</sup> Another case was the economic struggle between ʔiyā' al-Dīn and the governor of Vān, who twice attacked Bidlis in 1620. The main goal of Vān's governor was to achieve good economic growth in Amurik and especially in Mush.<sup>40</sup>

Bahā' al-Dīn Bayg, the very capable ruler of Bārgīrī at this time, became responsible for some districts in Mush. He dominated the wealthy districts of Mush, the most important economic part of the emirate,<sup>41</sup> and used their revenues and their cavalry to make himself more powerful as emir of Bārgīrī. On 14 August 1613, ʔiyā' al-Dīn led his troops to Mush, seized the districts of Bahā' al-Dīn Bayg, killed his *kethüda*, Aḥmed, and as emir of the emirate attached them to the centre in Bidlis.<sup>42</sup> Such wealthy districts where the sultan's rep-

36 On some financial advantages gained by Sharaf Khān, see Scheref, *Scheref-nameh ou Histoire des Kourdes*, i, 445ff.; Dehqan and Genç, "Reflections on Sharaf Khān's Autobiography", 52ff.

37 See MAD.d.3781, 8.

38 See A.DVN.MHM.d.79, hkm.1195.

39 See A.DVN.MHM.d.80, hkm.1028.

40 See MAD.d.9825, 40.

41 On the economic importance of Mush, see Fatih Gencer, *Bitlis ve Muş'un Son Beyleri: Alaaddin Paşazadeler* (Istanbul: Libra Kitap, 2019).

42 See KK.d.71, 471.

representatives lived and enjoyed a good situation would have royal counselors, military officers, and royal mistresses. It is noteworthy that Ḍīyā' al-Dīn was recognised by the Ottoman sultan and that, when he returned to Bidlīs, he was not challenged by Ottoman forces.

The window of opportunity for a successful resolution of Bidlīs's economic problems was closing, and it seems that this situation could halt further development of Bidlīs's economic capabilities. Even Ḍīyā' al-Dīn's initiatives to meet and talk with officials of the Ottoman court in Istanbul, and ostensibly to explore a resolution to the poverty of Bidlīs, were received with a great dose of skepticism.<sup>43</sup> There is a list of his *hass*, including an enormous amount of 487,000 *akçes*, which is extremely close to that held by his father, the author of the *Sharaf-nāma*.<sup>44</sup>

Through the military and diplomatic efforts of Ḍīyā' al-Dīn, the sultan officially recognized the economic rights of Bidlīs. Ḍīyā' al-Dīn's officials possessed some significant *timars* in Tātṽān, Amurik, and especially Mush, and in the struggle for the governorship of Mush, its possession became an economic and political prize.<sup>45</sup> The sixteenth-century Mush-Tātṽān axis brought commercial urbanism to Bidlīs, the seventeenth-century emirs used its resources to fund their ambition to rule the entire emirate of Bidlīs, and this great struggle was the leitmotiv of the economy of Bidlīs until the Ottoman attack. The main parts of Bidlīs, however, had come under Ḍīyā' al-Dīn's rule well before 1608.<sup>46</sup>

The last point to be made about Ḍīyā' al-Dīn's rule is that he was an Ottoman representative local figure in Bidlīs for much of the time when rival political trends, and specifically Safavid sympathies, were in steep decline there. By choosing the Ottomans, Ḍīyā' al-Dīn made a political choice, all the while not remaining completely loyal to the Porte, as he sometimes acted against Ottoman interests in alliance with the Safavids. In many ways, it would not be untrue to say that in the first years of his emirate Ḍīyā' al-Dīn was a Safavid agent. According to Peçevi<sup>47</sup> and Turkamān,<sup>48</sup> insecurity in the Ottoman Kurdish frontiers and the role of Kurdish emirates in defense of the Ottoman

43 See A.DVN.14/72, where the *kethüda* of Ḍīyā' al-Dīn, Sülaymān, and other Bidlīsī officials were involved in lobbying for economic advantages.

44 See MAD.d.7439, 20; MAD.d.3781, 8.

45 See MAD.d.32, 326–327; KK.d.71, 595.

46 See MAD.d.7439, 20: "*mukata'a-yı hassha der kaza-i Bitlis der 'uhde Ziyaeddin hakim-i liya-yi Bitlis, ber vech-i maktu' 487.000*". Ḍīyā' al-Dīn enjoyed this *mukata'a* by March 1611. See MAD.d.3781, 8.

47 See İbrahim Peçevi, *Tarih* (Istanbul: Amire, 1866), ii, 258.

48 See İbrāhīm Bayg Turkamān, *Tāriḳh-i 'Ālam-ārā-yi 'Abbāsī*, ed. Ī. Afshār (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 2008), ii, 860.

Empire may have caused the defeat in the battle of Şufiyān in November 1605.<sup>49</sup> In March 1605, the Ottoman sultan sent a decree to Bidlīs asking ʔiyā' al-Dīn to play a more important role in the Ottoman conflicts against the Safavids.<sup>50</sup> That Sharaf Khān's request for ʔiyā' al-Dīn's *müteferrika* position was rejected by the Ottoman sultan was probably because of his contacts with the Safavids. In 1606, he played a part in the Nakhchiwān conflicts and paid homage to 'Abbās I.<sup>51</sup> Also, there was the question of acculturation in Bidlīs and Ḥakkārī, so deep that neither history nor linguistics is enough to untangle the dynastic skein. We know that ʔiyā' al-Dīn and Yaḥyā Bayg, the emir of Ḥakkārī, formed an alliance in defense of Safavid interests.<sup>52</sup>

The Bidlīs emirate, however, had come under the rule of the Ottomans, an established 'superpower', under ʔiyā' al-Dīn. He had been somewhat cautious about contacting the Safavids. Chighālazāda executed the Kurdish emir of Kilīs Jānpulādoghlū Ḥusayin Bayg in Vān, in 1605; the Kurdish emir of Khōshāb and Māzgird, Allāhvirdī Bayg, experienced the same fate at the hands of Ottoman regional troops.<sup>53</sup> Although there was some collaboration between ʔiyā' al-Dīn and the Safavids, he continued to hold onto his border emirate despite the aggression of the Safavid Empire.<sup>54</sup> For example, Ottoman documents point to a settlement of Kurdish emirs in Chāldirān and Sökman Ābād in September 1610, and subsequently to a union of the Kurdish emirs, including ʔiyā' al-Dīn, against the Safavids.<sup>55</sup> In the same year, Murād Pasha began a new campaign against Safavid Iran in which ʔiyā' al-Dīn was the main provider of supplies for the Ottoman army in Erzurum.<sup>56</sup>

49 See Colin Imber, "The Battle of Sufiyan, 1605: A Symptom of Ottoman Military Decline?", in *Iran and the World in the Safavid Age*, eds. Wilhelm Floor and Edmund Herzig, 96–97 (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012).

50 See A.DVN.MHM.d.77, hkm.85. Compare also Pietro della Valle, *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle, il pellegrino, descritti da lui medesimo in lettere familiari all'erudito suo amico Mario Schipano, divisi in tre parti cioè: la Turchia, la Persia, e l'India, colla vita e ritratto dell'autore, volume primo* (Brighton: G. Gancia, 1843), 125.

51 See Turkamān, *Tārīkh-i Ālam-ārā-yi 'Abbāsi*, ii, 721; Dehqan and Genç, "Reflections on Sharaf Khān's Autobiography", 49.

52 See ibn Nūḥ, *Van Tarihi*, MS 630, Ali Emiri Tarih Kitapları Koleksiyonu, Millet Yazma Eserler Kütüphanesi, İstanbul, flos.88r.-90v.

53 See A.RSK.d.1478, 66, 70.

54 When the troops of Shah 'Abbās were much more active in the Bidlīs and Mush areas (in 1607 and 1609), the Ottoman sultan sent a *kha'at* to ʔiyā' al-Dīn. See A.DVN.MHM.d.78, hkm.1247: "*Ekrad-ı sadakat-nihadın eban ceddin Devlet-i Aliyye'ne sadakatta sabit kadem üzere sarf-ı iktidarların gelmiş ocak ihtiyârî*".

55 See A.DVN.21–41; compare also A.DVN.MHM.d.79, hkm.1194.

56 See A.DVN.MHM.d.79, hkm.1061.

What we know about the fate of Ḍīyā' al-Dīn is very little and vague. What is certain is that he was executed by the Ottomans in late 1618. The reason clearly was his cooperation with the Safavids alongside the emir of Ḥakkārī, who was himself executed by the governor of Vān for the same reason, in 1617.<sup>57</sup> Ḍīyā' al-Dīn's sympathies for Safavid Iran, especially as a frontier commander of a strategic emirate, was not a forgivable offense. In early 1617, he fled from Tekeli Mehmed Pasha, the governor of Vān, but the sultan's regional officials finally arrested him and executed him.

### Sharaf Khān b. Ḍīyā' al-Dīn (1619–1622)

According to the tombstones of the Sharafiya Complex in Bidlīs, Ḍīyā' al-Dīn had three sons: the elder son Sharaf (known as *Şeref Han*), Shams al-Dīn, and Abdāl. In the seventeenth-century, Ottoman officials from Istanbul played crucial roles in establishing the legitimacy of the Bidlīs emirate, bolstering political opposition to the Safavid agents, and fostering the political development in Bidlīs of a substantial Ottoman agent like Sharaf Khān. With the acknowledgement of the Ottoman sultan and Ḥusayin Pasha, the *beylerbeyi* of Vān, who once mentioned *Şeref, hükûmet-i mezbûra müstehakdır*, he appointed him as ruler of the emirate some months after his father's execution, in the early summer of 1619.<sup>58</sup>

After the execution of Ḍīyā' al-Dīn, the sultan took all the *hass* of Bidlīs (including Mush, Tātvan, and Amurik) back from Sharaf Khān. As the state of Bidlīs's economy was very worrying, Sharaf Khān sent his senior *ağa* to Istanbul for a final effort at getting it back. That hope was in vain: the sultan clarified that the *hass* of Bidlīs and other benefits would never be bestowed upon the emirate.<sup>59</sup>

In Sharaf Khān's times, the only pious foundations which had enjoyed relative independence were those of Bidlīs. For the rest (Mush, Tātvan and Amurik), Kurdish officials held sway over Ottoman representatives within their ancestral territories. Sharaf Khān was responsible for internal discipline, which meant that he still supervised some significant *hass*,<sup>60</sup> but not the appointment of new Ottoman representatives. Moreover, as administrator of emirate property he had to oversee the economic management of urban and

57 See ibn Nūḥ, *Vān Tarihi*, fol.91r.-v.

58 See DFE. RZ.d.381, 681.

59 See DFE.RZ.d.381, 680. Also compare Gencer, *Bitlis ve Muş'un Son Beyleri*, 23–26.

60 See DFE.RZ. d. 381, 678, 683, 693.

tribal possessions, though Ottoman orders prohibited his outright ownership of some lands, in June 1620.<sup>61</sup>

Sharaf is mentioned on a funerary inscription in 1622 as *al-amīr al-kabīr al-shahīd Sharaf b. Ḍīyā' al-Dīn*.<sup>62</sup> According to another reliable record, we know that Sharaf Khān did not live long, dying of natural causes in the early summer of 1622.<sup>63</sup> Thus, it is unknown why his epitaph includes the term *al-shahīd*.

### Abdāl Khān (1622–1664): a Scholar-Rebel

After the demise of Sharaf Khān, Abdāl Khān emerged as a powerful figure on 15 June 1622,<sup>64</sup> personifying the possibility for a junior son of his father to attain prominence within the local state structure of the nascent Bidlīs emirate. Previous researchers who have worked on Abdāl Khān all thought of him as a grown man ruling Bidlīs. However, documents reveal a different story about his governorship, with Abdāl Khān as an emir being crowned as young as about eight to ten years old.<sup>65</sup> After Abdāl Khān, the next powerful member in line to rule over Bidlīs was Abdāl's *kethüda*, 'Othmān. Interestingly, he was a *çavuş* of the central court, which means he was appointed by the sultan to curb the influence of the rulers of Bidlīs. The *kethüda* was the second person in the political line of Bidlīs but he traditionally was a Rōzhiki official with no affiliation to the central Ottoman government.<sup>66</sup> Ottoman officials believed that 'Othmān was, in fact, the main ruler of Bidlīs.<sup>67</sup> We will return to 'Othmān, who helped rule Bidlīs until Abdāl Khān was old enough to do it himself. But what was Abdāl Khān's occupation at the time?

Traditionally, heirs to the throne were educated privately by tutors. It is certain that Abdāl Khān, as a possible heir to the Bidlīs throne, had received a

61 See MAD.d.9825, 40. Since the period of rule of Ḍiyā' al-Dīn, Abdāl Khān, the younger brother of Sharaf Khān, was a *ze'amet* holder in Akhlāt and Mush. See DFE. RZ. d. 381, 691–692, which is entitled *Ze'amet be-nām-ı Abdal 'an tahvil-i Şeref b. Ziyaeddin*.

62 Based on personal field work, Bidlīs, Sharafiya Complex, December 2020.

63 See DFE.RZ.d.412, 376.

64 See KK.d.257, 105, where it is confirmed that ... *Diyarbakir muhafazasında olan Vezir Ahmed Paşa'nın arzı mucibince emekdarlardan olan Abdal Beg'e Bidlis hükümeti verildi. ...*

65 See A.DVN.MHM. d. 941.4, hkm.74, which reads ... *Bitlis hâkimi sağır olmağla. ...*

66 It should be mentioned that the *beylerbeyi* of Vān had provided political support to Osman Çavuş as the *kethüda* of Bidlīs. He was also a former *ze'amet* holder in Mush. See DFE. RZ. d. 412, 383–384; DFE. RZ.d.412, 413; DFE. RZ. d. 437, 554, 561, 579.

67 See DFE. RZ.d. 412, 375–377.

good education including all Islamic traditions when his father was still alive. In the early years of his governorship, however, Abdāl Khān received a new education, especially in the years preceding the siege of Baghdad (1638), during which the emirate was primarily under ‘Othmān’s rule. In other words, this political challenge made education increasingly important for the young Abdāl Khān.<sup>68</sup>

He balanced a number of influences, most particularly his Kurdish ethnicity,<sup>69</sup> his Muslim background, and his belief in the objectives of the Ottoman system.<sup>70</sup> We may, however, agree with Evliya Çelebi that Abdāl Khān was a cultured emir, and Na’îmâ also considered him to be a distinguished scholar in 1635.<sup>71</sup> He initiated some philanthropic institutions offering help in the fields of education and development in Bidlīs. Some of the *medreses* established by his ancestors and the incomes paid to them were determined and recorded in the Sharafiya Complex.<sup>72</sup> Evliya notes that Abdāl Khān was fluent in Persian, Kurdish, Turkish, and Arabic, and that he commissioned several translations of Persian works into Ottoman Turkish, some of which are extant.<sup>73</sup> Based on Evliya’s description of daily life of Bidlīs and Abdāl Khān and also his mention of the *Sharaf-nāma* among the books looted from the library of Abdāl Khān, one may easily guess that the emir of Bidlīs was a very highly educated emir.<sup>74</sup> The library’s stacks were filled with classical works on *hadīth*, the Qur’ān, *tafsīr*, literature, logic, natural sciences, and other subjects. Its empirical standards

68 See A.DVN.MHM. d. 941.4, hkm.74.

69 See what Evliya Çelebi says on his interest in the Kurdish language: Marin van Bruinessen, “Les Kurdes et leur langue au XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècle : Notes d’Evliya Çelebi sur les dialectes kurdes”, *Studia Kurdica* 5 (1998): 13–34.

70 Abdāl Khān had wed a woman bearing the title Khānim Sultān, great-granddaughter of the Ottoman Sultan Selīm II, which indicates that he was aware of the importance of a good relationship with the Ottoman court. See Dankoff, *Evliya Çelebi in Bitlis*, 76–77, 154–155, 262–263, 303–313, 318–319, 326–327, 336–339, 342–354, and 352–355.

71 See Na’îmâ, *Tarih-i Nāima*, ed. M. İpşirli (Ankara: Turk Tarih Kurumu, 2007), iii, 822.

72 Based on a personal visit to the Sharafiya complex. See also Birgül Açıkyıldız, “Sharafiyya Complex in Bidlis: Rethinking of Local History in Islamic Architecture”, *e-Şarkiyat İlmî Araştırmalar Dergisi* 10/3 (2018): 1183–1196, though the author does not provide information on the seventeenth-century tombstones and other inscriptions there.

73 See Dankoff, *Evliya Çelebi in Bitlis*, 96–97.

74 See Wilhelm Köhler, *Die Kurdenstadt Bitlis nach der türkischen Reisewerk des Evliyâ Tschelebî* (München: Roth, 1928); Armenak Sakisian, “Abdal Khan, seigneur kurde de Bitlis au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle et ses trésors”, *Journal Asiatique* 229 (1937): 252–270; Martin van Bruinessen, “Kurdistan in the 16th and 17th Centuries, as Reflected in Evliya Çelebi’s Seyahatname”, *The Journal of Kurdish Studies* 3 (2000): 1–11; and Haydar Işık, *Bitlis Bey Abdal Han’a Gönderilen Kanlı Ekmek* (Istanbul: Peri Yayınları, 2005).

were applied in one of the first and certainly strongest homes of serious textual criticisms in Kurdistan.<sup>75</sup>

It is also interesting that Ḥamd Allāh Mustawfī's groundbreaking book, *Nuzhat al-Qulūb*,<sup>76</sup> was translated by Abdāl Khān from Persian into Ottoman Turkish. According to Abdāl Khān, he was interested in providing a significant text for a considerable Ottoman audience who were unable to read Persian.<sup>77</sup> The translation captures the energy, texture, and voice of Mustawfī and replicates them in Ottoman Turkish. It is also certain that he translated *Şanāyi' al-Şunū'āt* 'The Compendium of the Arts' into Ottoman Turkish, as Evliya does speak of him as a prolific author and versed in alchemy and magic and several hundred occult philosophical sciences.<sup>78</sup> The manuscript's copyist writes in red ink, ahead of the main text, that: this book is the *Şanāyi' al-Şunū'āt*, written by Abdāl Khān who was a Turkish [*sic*] Bayg.<sup>79</sup>

Throughout the early years of Abdāl Khān, 'Othmān defeated all rivals and established his master's power in Bidlīs. He also maintained a local military rivalry with Istanbul for a large part of his career from 1622 to 1625. In July 1625, 'Othmān as the ruler of Bidlīs, expelled the Ottoman representatives (i.e. the Janissaries) from the castle of Bidlīs.<sup>80</sup> He protested vigorously against the Ottomans, but his upheavals attracted no effective attention from the sultan; hence 'Othmān made more allies among regional power holders. For example, he loaned money to the emir of Khīzān,<sup>81</sup> but the latter refused to pay back both the money and his own share of imperial taxes. 'Othmān's letter of complaint to the sultan opened the whole question of the emirate's future. The emir of Khīzān was deposed and 'Othmān apparently gave a pledge to pay Khīzān's taxes as well.<sup>82</sup> Even after 'Othmān won the conflict, peace was

75 For the list of books gathered in Abdāl Khān's library and more details, see Ziya Avcı, "Evdal Xan (...-1657)", *Kovara Lêkolîn û Lêgerîne Bîr* 9 (2008): 27–34; Yasemin Beyazıt, "Evliya Çelebi'nin Sunduğu Önemili Bir Portre: Bitlis Hanı Abdal Han", *Pamukkale Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 10 (2011): 67–82.

76 For this, see Ḥamd Allāh Mustawfī Qazvīnī, *The Geographical Part of the "Nuzhat al-Qulūb"*, ed. G. Le Strange (Leiden: Brill, 1915).

77 See Ḥamd Allāh Mustawfī Qazvīnī, *Nuzhat al-Qulūb*, MS A 957, Milli Library, Ankara, fol.1v., 7–8); idem, *Nuzhat al-Qulūb*, MS A 979, Milli Library, Ankara, f.1r., 12–13.

78 See Dankoff, *Evliya Çelebi in Bitlis*, 92–105.

79 See Abdal Khān (fol.1v., 1–3). According to Alsancaklı, "Historiography and Language in 17th-century Ottoman Kurdistan", 177, n.25, on the book's fore edge, we also read the mention صنایع الصنوعات لابدال خان.

80 See A.RSK.d.1492, 32.

81 For Khīzān or Eski Hizan, a few miles northeast of the modern town of Hizan (to the south of Bidlīs and west of Muks), see Şemseddīn Sâmi, *Kāmusü'l-A'lām* (Istanbul: Mihran, 1889–98), ii, 1240.

82 See A.DVN.MHM.d.941.4, hkm.38.

a long time coming. ‘Othmān never tried to make good his politics as Bidlīs’s head and as frontier protector of the empire. How was he able to expel the Yeniçeris and kill the *dizdar* of Bidlīs castle? The details of the boundary line between the Ottoman and Safavid empires, with its abrupt shifts of direction, can sometimes be attributed to particular interests: for instance, it was probably Safavid help and supplies that made ‘Othmān able to attack Ottoman regional representatives. In the summer of 1625, the Ottoman sultan tried to capture ‘Othmān but he fled from Bidlīs.<sup>83</sup> It is unclear what happened to him, as Murād IV dispatched a *müteferrika* named ‘Alī to Bidlīs in order to take possession of ‘Othmān’s property.<sup>84</sup>

These developments support the opinion according to which Abdāl Khān and his *kethüda*, from the beginning, never tried to be honest Ottoman followers. The main reason for Bidlīs’s expansion can be considered a joint result of Abdāl Khān’s social dynamics, legitimacy, the domestic relations of the political system, and a conviction of inner strength in Bidlīs.<sup>85</sup> In 1635, the military conquests of Abdāl Khān extended the frontiers of the Bidlīs emirate, which by then stretched formally from the emirate to Khīzān, thus ensuring the status of Abdāl Khān as the emir of Khīzān as well.<sup>86</sup>

Abdāl Khān had joined the sultan in 1632 during the siege of Vān, which had long been a strategic locale in Eastern Anatolia. On this campaign, Murād IV and the dominant figures in his *serdars*’ entourage had received some help from Bidlīs,<sup>87</sup> in the form of a relief operation in which Abdāl Khān tried to keep imperial unity.<sup>88</sup>

Abdāl Khān’s prestige remained high in the eyes of Ottoman and provincial neighbours; archival evidence shows that he provided food supplies for the Ottomans or increased the amounts of food given to those who could make little contribution to the war effort, so that the Janissaries and those who supported the fighters continued to have the health and energy necessary for efficient performance. It is hard to say for which part of the Ottoman mobilisation

83 The huge *hass* of Abdāl Khān, which is similar in size to those of Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn, is also a proof of his extensive regional power. See MAD.d.3458, 50; MAD.d.3458, 77; and DFE.RZ.d.675, 197.

84 See A.DVN.MHM.d.941.4, hkm.43, 74–75.

85 Compare the *ferman* A.DVN.MHM.d.941.4, hkm.36, in which the Sultan commands the tribal *ağas* of Bidlīs to obey *cenâb-ı emâret-meâb Abdal Han* (dated 1625).

86 See C.DH.122/6095, 5, which reads: ... *Hükümet-i Bitlis der tasarruf-ı Abdal b. Ziyaeddin. Hükümet-i Hizân der tasarruf-ı Abdal el-mezbûr. ...*

87 This happened after a *ferman* from the Sultan to Abdāl Khān which warned him about the importance of Vān. See A.DVN.MHM.d.942.1, hkm.10: ... *Van serhaddinin hüfz u hraseti ehemmi mühimât-ı din ü devletten ...* (dated 1634).

88 Especially during the restoration of the Vān castle, see A.DVN.MHM.d.942.1, hkm.102–103 (dated April 1634).

in Vān Abdāl Khān was responsible. It is, however, possible that Bidlīs's supply of food was adequate for the needs that were apparent at the time. On the other hand, there was the seditious Abdāl Khān whose prime interest was possibly in either a more independent emirate or in rallying the Safavid Empire. In 1636, Abdāl Khān disobeyed the Sultan several times and refused to send wheat and oat to the castle of Vān. The Sultan felt extremely angry that he had refused his orders. In his letter to the *beylerbeyi* of Diyārbakr, Murād IV asked the latter to consider what Abdāl's reason was for disobeying him.<sup>89</sup>

In late 1637, Abdāl Khān also became the strongest enemy of the Kurdish emirs of Khīzān. With the help of the emir of Ḥakkārī, the emirs of Khīzān and its dependencies, that is Sayyid Khān of Muks and Qūrchī Bayg of Karnī, initiated a military operation against Khīzān and laid siege to the region which traditionally was an independent Kurdish emirate (not a dependency of Bidlīs). In response to a letter by Abdāl Khān, the Sultan commanded the Kurdish emirs of Shirwī, Zirqī, Girdikān and Ḥazzō, and the *beylerbeyi* of Diyārbakr to help him. Together, they crushed the Kurdish rebels who were trying to reach the castle of Khīzān.<sup>90</sup>

After several fruitless attempts since 1624, in 1638, Sultan Murād IV decided to recapture Baghdad from the Safavids. How much had Abdāl Khān's governorship, and in the longer run the Bidlīs emirate in general, been influenced by the events of 1638? Abdāl Khān's absence in the Ottoman campaign against Baghdad was noticed by Ottoman officials throughout the empire; and the absence of any taxes for the same year in Bidlīs has been taken to show a loss of imperial authority. On his return from Baghdad, however, as Murād IV stayed in Diyārbakr, Abdāl Khān refused to go and tell the Sultan that he was pleased about his achievements in Baghdad, as other Kurdish emirs had done. Murād IV was greatly saddened by his act. He ordered Melek Aḥmad Pasha<sup>91</sup> to take his revenge on Bidlīs's disloyal emir. For Abdāl Khān, possibilities for plunder by the Ottoman army, which was very close to the gates of Bidlīs, seemed to remain open on the negotiations with the Ottoman *serdârs*. He gave a huge bribe to the *serdârs* in return for keeping their army back: Abdāl Khān's excuse was that Bidlīs was part of Vān and not Diyārbakr, where the sultan stayed after the siege of Baghdad.<sup>92</sup>

89 See A.DVN.MHM.d.86, hkm.38–39, 94.

90 See DFE.RZ.d.206, 284–285; A.DVN.MHM. d. 86, hkm.136–139; A.DVN.MHM.d.87, hkm.344.

91 For more information on him, see Robert Dankoff, *The Intimate Life of an Ottoman Statesman: Melek Aḥmed Pasha (1588–1662) as Portrayed in Evliya Çelebi's Book of Travels* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Fikret Sarıcaoğlu, "Melek Aḥmed Paşa", *Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* 29 (2004): 42–44.

92 See A.DVN.MHM.d.87, hkm.343, 406–422.

According to archival evidence, Abdāl Khān was still emir of Bidlīs and Khīzān in 1642. He continued to rule not only Khīzān but also some of its dependencies, especially Karkar. In the same year, he appointed his young son, Mīrzā Muḥammad Bayg, as viceroy in Karkar.<sup>93</sup>

### The Great *Rebellion*: against and inside Power

In the early spring of 1655 and prior to Abdāl's great rebellion, the famous traveler Jean-Baptiste Tavernier visited Bidlīs and was entertained upon Abdāl's expenses. There he finds himself describing Abdāl's intention to a circle of listeners: "Abdāl Khān feels no fear of the Sultan," says Tavernier, "he is able to offer resistance to [him]."<sup>94</sup> This description immediately reminds us of the scribe of a *Sharaf-nāma* manuscript produced with the support of Abdāl Khān, who wrote of him, "God may prolong his government and sultanate."<sup>95</sup> Along with Tavernier's evidence and other seditious acts of Abdāl, another spur to this (possibly) independent desire and *sultanate* was an event that occurred in a neighbouring emirate. Given the wealth of independent echoes that existed throughout Kurdish emirates, it does not seem unlikely that Abdāl Khān should also have considered the Khōshāb emir's rebellion in a Kurdish context when he responded to his quest for help. In response to the Ottoman attacks against the Kurdish emir of Khōshāb, Abdāl Khān conducted a military campaign against the *beylerbeyi* of Vān. After several struggles, however, the Ottoman army defeated Abdāl in Bārgīrī and he was forced to flee to Bidlīs.<sup>96</sup>

Yet as Evliya Çelebi and the Armenian chronicles disclose, this position was sometimes unstable. Evliya Çelebi visited some Kurdish emirates but he spent most time in, and writes most about, Bidlīs, suggesting that Bidlīs was the most advanced of the emirates. Also, Evliya's most elaborate description of a Kurdish emirate is that of Bidlīs, which has become well-known through Dankoff's translation.<sup>97</sup> During his third trip, in 1655, Evliya went to join his

93 See KK.d.266, 97.

94 See Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Les six voyages de Jean-Baptiste Tavernier* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2010), 246; idem, *Tavernier Seyahatnamesi*, ed. A. Berktaş, trans. T. Tunçdoğan (Istanbul: Kitap Yayınları, 2010), 289.

95 See Alsancaklı, "Historiography and Language in 17th-century Ottoman Kurdistan", 176. It should also be mentioned that a contemporary Armenian chronicler, Davit Bališets'i, also writing in the 1650s, complains of Abdāl Khān's depredations "for the past forty-three years". See M. Zulalyan (ed.), *Arevmtyan Hayastanē XVI–XVIII DD* (Yerevan: Haykakan SSh GA Hratarakch'ut'yun, 1980), 213–214.

96 See ibn Nūḥ, *Van Tarihi*, f.l.104.

97 See Dankoff, *Evliya Çelebi in Bitlis, passim*.

uncle Melek Aḥmed Pasha, who was appointed as the governor of Vān. When Evliya reached Bidlīs, he was the guest of Abdāl Khān, whom he highly praises. Later he accompanied a punitive expedition from Vān against Abdāl Khān, observes how the khan is deposed, his rich library looted, and his son elected in his stead. A year later Evliya passes another time through Bidlīs, finds Abdāl Khān at the head of the emirate again and spends some time with Abdāl Khān as a hostage. What is not mentioned in the *Seyahatname*, however, is the interesting and important account by Aṛak'el of Tabriz. In his report on the year 1655, Aṛak'el writes that in that year, the governor of Baghesh (Armenian for Bidlīs), Abdāl Khān, rebelled and wanted to become a Celalī.<sup>98</sup> The pasha of Vān came to Baghesh with a large army, put Abdāl Khān to flight, and placed Abdāl's son, named Diadin (Dīyā' al-Dīn),<sup>99</sup> in his place. According to Aṛak'el of Tabriz, Abdāl Khān came and, through trickery, killed his own son, Diadin, and once again became the *khān* of Baghesh.<sup>100</sup>

The Armenian allusions to the Celalī tendencies of Abdāl Khān might strike outsiders as an *ad hoc* patchwork of ill-fitting and sometimes senseless details. Celalī, as far as we understand it, was a general label attached to a wide range of unruly people in the provinces away from the capital and does not refer to a specific religious conviction. However, if analysed with regard to the chaotic history of the region, and especially the Celalī encounters of Abdāl Khān's grandfather, Sharaf Khān,<sup>101</sup> this account proves to be a repository of the chaotic religious inheritance of seventeenth-century Bidlīs. The *Seyahatname* is also a good source for seeing how Abdāl Khān was viewed at the time of his rebellion by Evliya Çelebi and possibly some of the religious authorities of the Empire. According to Evliya, Abdāl Khān was a *rafizi*, which refers to the Shiites who refuse to accept the legitimacy of the first caliphs. Therefore, the Armenian claims that Abdāl Khān was a Celalī, in its religious sense are not based on a misinterpretation of the available evidence. Information from the

98 That prior to his revolt there were many regional complaints against Abdāl Khān may indicate his seditious character, and he has been described as a Celalī. See A.RSK. d. 1529, 39; A.DVN.MHM.d.90, hkm.246; A.DVN.ŞKT.d. 2, hkm.1555.

99 He was appointed emir of Bidlīs on 11 January 1656. See A.RSK.d.1529, 166.

100 See Aṛak'el of Tabriz, *The History of Vardapet Aṛak'el of Tabriz (Patmut'awn Aṛak'el Vardapeti Dawrizhets'woy)*, trans. G. A. Bournoutian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2005–2006), ii, 531. Two other seventeenth-century Armenian chroniclers, David Baghishets'i and Vardan Baghishet'si, have the same information but they put the story under the years 1657 and 1654, respectively. See V. A. Hakobyan (ed.), *Manr Zhamanakagrut'yunner XIII–XVIII DD.*, 2 vols. (Yerevan: Haykakan SSR Gitut'yunneri Akademiai Hratarakch'ut'yun, 1951), i, 395–396; ii, 361.

101 See Dehqan and Genç, "Why Was Sharaf Khān Killed?", 18.

Ottoman archives makes it clear that Abdāl Khān was at different points in his life an anti-Ottoman Kurd, and probably a Safavid follower as well. His religious affiliation secretly served him well in his career as the temporary Safavid representative of frontier areas.<sup>102</sup>

Abdāl Khān's "independent-mindedness finally seems to have cost him his position" as, according to Köhler, he was demoted in 1665 and exiled to Istanbul, where he was executed in 1667, at the command of Meḥmed IV.<sup>103</sup> The reason for his demotion is unknown, although "it might be related to the ousting of Abdāl Khān's son, Badr al-Dīn Khān, nominated in his stead by the Porte in 1076/1665, and the coming to power of his other son, Sharaf Khān III, possibly as a result of a revolt against Badr al-Dīn Khān".<sup>104</sup> According to Alsancakli, some support for this assumption is provided by the inscription on Badr al-Dīn Khān's tombstone, in which the word *shahīd* ('martyr') has been written next to the prince's name.<sup>105</sup> We mentioned, however, that the word *al-shahīd* sometimes had a useless meaning in the case of Bidlīs tombstones. It is also not easy to accept this assumption as there are so many tombstones of the emirs of the Bidlīs's ruling family bearing the word *al-shahīd*.<sup>106</sup> Is it possible to accept all these princes were killed in local wars? There are many usages of the epithet *al-shahīd* in the Qur'ān, not all of which refer to people who may have been killed in defense of God. Meanwhile, some important tombstones inscriptions of Bidlīs indicate *al-marhūm al-shahīd*, indicating that the prince in question has first died of natural causes. It is clear that *shahīd* here means a simple ideological good personality whose relative tried to connect him to the followers of the

102 For the Ottoman-Safavid borders as potential places where Ottoman subjects forged alternative identities under the influence of Safavid disciples, or *halifes*, eventually tying their loyalties to the Safavid shah, see Dehqan and Genç, "Kurds as Spies: Information-Gathering on the 16th-Century Ottoman-Safavid Frontier", *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 71/2 (2018): 197–230, esp. 202 and the references there; Ayşe Baltacıoğlu-Brammer, "Those Heretics Gathering Secretly ...: Qizilbash Rituals and Practices in the Ottoman Empire according to Early Modern Sources", *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 6/1 (2019): 39–60.

103 See Alsancakli, "Historiography and Language in 17th-century Ottoman Kurdistan", 173; Köhler, *Evlīya Çelebi Seyahatnamesinde Bitlis ve Halkı*, 39–40; Dankoff, *Evlīya Çelebi in Bitlis*, II, n. 2.

104 See Alsancakli, "Historiography and Language in 17th-century Ottoman Kurdistan", 173. This is the version given in the *Seyahatname*. He is only known as *Badr Han* in the Ottoman archives.

105 See Alsancakli, "Historiography and Language in 17th-century Ottoman Kurdistan", 173, n.8. Compare also Ulugana, "Bitlis Mirliği Tarihinde Abdal Han Dönemi", 53–54.

106 Based on field study in the castle of Bidlīs, Sharafīya, Gökmeydan, İkhlāşīya *medrese* and other historical sites. Compare also Pektaş, *Bitlis Tarihi Mezarlıkları ve Mezar Taşları*.

Prophet and Islamic *sunna*.<sup>107</sup> In terms of exceptions, there are a few cases in which it has been used in the same classical meaning, ‘martyr’.

The period after Abdāl’s rebellion is convoluted but it is possible to address the claims made by former scholars and restore its true history. Köhler claims to have found the final destiny of Abdāl Khān in the form of his execution in Istanbul. There is a general wish in his report to be able to present an “end” to Abdāl Khān, just like other seditious emirs. It is true that the Sultan ordered for him to be arrested and sent to Istanbul, but he was never killed in Istanbul. From the Ottoman archives we learn more on what was the reason of his rebellion, some more details on its process, and what happened to him thereafter.

As it is well-known for all researchers of Bidlis history, the most characteristic feature of its ruling family is the simultaneous existence of independent tendencies in Bidlis’s ruling style. This holds, or at least used to hold, true for Abdāl Khān as well, as some Ottoman allusions to his activities confirm, and travelers of the past have noticed. With the beginning of Abdāl’s rebellion a new development appeared. Ottoman records started to indicate the independent tendencies of Abdāl Khān as the only correct and authentic reason. Abdāl Khān acquires the nature and reputation of a Kurdish powerful emir known as *Kürdistan beglerinün buzurgvârı*.<sup>108</sup>

According to Ottoman interpretations, when Abdāl Khān refused to obey the Sultan, despite having been ordered to do so, he rebelled against regional Ottoman officials and went to Hazzō, where his son-in-law Murtaḍā Khān was the formal emir. For two months, the Kurdish troops were relatively isolated and had limited contact with hostile Ottoman officials, and even less with the world outside the Hazzō mountains. With the help of the emirs of Khizān, Khoshāb, and Hakkāri, Yūsuf Pasha, the *beylerbeyi* of Vān, made an expedition against Hazzō and arrested Abdāl Khān. Murtaḍā Khān and his father-in-law both were deposed from power but there is no mention of their murder. It is very interesting that Abdāl Khān came back to Bidlis, after having become the emir of Partak (a dependency of Chamishgazak). His third son Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn (younger than Badr al-Dīn and Nūr al-Dīn) was killed<sup>109</sup> and the latter’s son, ‘Izz al-Dīn (surprisingly not mentioned in the *Seyahatname*), was appointed

107 Aside the Qur’ān and its several allusions to the term *al-shahīd* in different meanings, see ibn Mājjā, *Sunan ibn Mājjā*, ed. M. Fuad ‘Abd al-Baqī (Cairo, Turāth, 1954), i, 68; Muslim b. Ḥajjāj, *al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), vi, 33–34.

108 See A.RSK.d.1529, 320.

109 Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn’s *kethüda* was Ḥaydar Ağa. For his *hass* which was the same as Abdāl Khān, see Kumiko Saito, “16. ve 17. Yüzyıllar Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu’sunda Timarların Çeşitli Biçimleri: Farklı Uygulamalara Tek İsim Koymak”, *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 51 (2018): 63–113, esp. 95.

as emir of Bidlīs.<sup>110</sup> Some months later Abdāl Khān again was appointed as the emir of his own ancestral emirate, Bidlīs. In this manner, the Ottomans not only forgot Abdāl's rebellion and all of his anti-Sultan activities but also related that Abdāl Khān had a deeper understanding of the emirate that had only just become known to the greater masses. The Ottomans even lied by presenting him as a Kurdish emir who participated in the conquest of Baghdad.<sup>111</sup> It is clear that there were some questions on Abdāl Khān's legitimacy and actions but he was the person who, in regard to his abilities in the Bidlīs area, received the emirate for a second time.<sup>112</sup>

There is another striking motif in the rebellion of Abdāl Khān which is fully neglected in Evliya Çelebi's text. It is an unknown fact that it was Melek Aḥmad Pasha and not the Sultan who decided to attack Bidlīs. The Ottoman archives recount that Abdāl's legal authority over the Bidlīs emirate had been acknowledged by Istanbul exactly at the time Melek Aḥmad Pasha and his army were at Rahvā (near Bidlīs), in the middle of July. Even after the governor of Vān defeated Abdāl and forced him to flee to Mudkī (31 July), the central Ottoman government was unaware of Melek Aḥmad Pasha's personal act against Abdāl. It is interesting that the Sultan had again appointed Abdāl as the emir of Bidlīs on 13 August of the same year.<sup>113</sup> It is possible to say that there was a personal enmity between Abdāl and Melek Aḥmad Pasha, of which the latter tried to keep himself away by describing Abdāl as an infidel who did not believe in *ṣerī'at* and Islam.<sup>114</sup>

Of the salient features of the second period of Abdāl Khān is the "loss of Khīzān."<sup>115</sup> For long years, he had a full political and economic control over Khīzān, and even over the dependencies of Khīzān. The Sultan's decision on Khīzān affected the economy of Bidlīs but Abdāl Khān was forced to accept the bad things which happened as the consequence of his rebellion.

Economic failure aside, Abdāl's political attempt to bolster his regional power was successful. For example, when Yūsuf Pasha attacked (for unknown reasons) Bidlīs and especially the mountainous district of Nimrud, Abdāl Khān defeated him and his Ottoman troops. That Abdāl Khān enjoyed the help of

110 See A.RSK.d.1526, 320.

111 See A.RSK.d.1529, 320.

112 In his second period of governorship, he is normally mentioned as *cenâb-ı emâret-meâb* from 1660 to 1667. See DFE.RZ.d.737, 260–261; A.DVN.ŞKT.d.5, hkm.406–408.

113 See A.RSK.d.1529, 67.

114 See A.RSK.d.1529, 166. This reminds us of Abdāl's Celalî tendencies mentioned by Evliya Çelebi.

115 See A.DVN. ŞKT. d. 5, hkm.406–408 (dated October 1666).

Khōshāb's Kurdish emir at the battle against the Ottomans confirms the importance and crucial role of Bidlīs amongst frontier Kurdish emirates.<sup>116</sup>

The last reference to Abdāl Khān comes from 1673. The Ottoman sources fail to give precise details of what happened to him but it is likely that he passed away from natural causes. We know that he was a co-emir of Bidlīs along with his son Sharaf Khān during his last two years of life.<sup>117</sup> This may indicate that Abdāl Khān was not in the best of health.

### The Last Three Decades: from Badr Khān to Nūḥ Khān

The rule of Abdāl Khān is depicted in Ottoman documents, which stress his economic successes and military victories that concluded in tremendous territorial expansion. Abdāl's rule lasted for 42 years, approximately in the timespan from 1622 to 1664. This marks a period long enough for experiencing political and economic stability in seventeenth-century Bidlīs. In truth, once the Ottoman references in this regard and their proper juxtaposition with Armenian colophons are exhausted, the likely conclusion might be drawn that the decline of Abdāl's dominion was confined to its final years only. Investigation may, on the other hand, indicate that Abdāl's great power and influence did not remain intact for the last three decades following his death.

The last three decades of seventeenth-century Bidlīs, although not so marked, include four separate and sometimes semi-independent emirs: Badr al-Dīn, Sharaf Khān, Muḥammad Sa'īd Khān, and Muḥammad Nūḥ Khān, better known as Nūḥ Khān.<sup>118</sup> We know very little of what may have actually happened in the decades after Abdāl Khān, but it is certain that this turbulent period, which was characterized by political instability and lack of central rule, was favorable to the unchecked growth of Ottoman influence and power in Bidlīs.

116 See ibn Nūḥ (fols.106r-107v.); 1660–1664 *Tarihli Ordu Mühimmesi*, Sächsische Landesbibliothek – Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden (SLUB) Eb. 387, fol.152r.

117 See A.DVN.ŞKT.d.7, hkm.222.

118 All were sons of Abdāl, except Muḥammad Sa'īd Khān, who was a grandson of Abdāl and son of Sharaf Khān. For a complete list of Abdāl's sons, including Badr Khān, Sharaf Khān, 'Izz al-Dīn, Nūr al-Dahr/Sayf al-Dīn, Shams al-Dīn, Ismā'īl, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, Arslān, Amīn and Nūḥ, see C.ML. 307/12539. Arslān is only mentioned on a tombstone of Şerefiye Külliyesi: *Arslan Bey b. emîrül-ümerâ'ül-'izâm Abdal Han* (d. June 1708).

As a *ze'amet* holder of Mush in 1632, 1646 and 1649,<sup>119</sup> Badr Khān succeeded his brother Sharaf Khān and his father Abdāl Khān when he was still alive. Abdāl was formally removed from power in 1664<sup>120</sup> and left his seat to his son. In 1665, Istanbul awarded Badr Khān the emirate mainly because Abdāl showed ingratitude by leading several uprisings and rebellions.<sup>121</sup> The relationship between Badr Khān and his brother Sharaf Khān was not very amicable; thus, conflict broke out between them. In the end, they ruled Bidlīs together for a year. As was the case with the co-governorship of Sharaf Khān and his father Abdāl, there were two separate rulers during this short period. Perhaps the sultan had wanted to encourage his local opponents to divide the Bidlīs realm so that each faction had its emir: this indeed was the outcome.

After the short period in question, Badr Khān and Sharaf Khān, a former *ze'amet* holder of Tātṽān in 1648,<sup>122</sup> twice ruled over Bidlīs separately and in order.<sup>123</sup> Their periods brought a marked economic decline in Bidlīs. The turbulent period brought on by the destructive Ottoman invasion of 1655, accompanied by political uncertainty and a power vacuum was drawing to a close. Between 1666 and 1677 Bidlīs experienced a dramatic financial crisis. In some desperate attempts to pay Ottoman taxes Badr Khān and Sharaf Khān changed their place as emirs who claimed ability to pay the tax. Both borrowed several times from regional wealthy officials and they also requested and received large additional loans from Jewish and Armenian merchants and even the *tūpchī* of the Safavid Shah Sulaymān (r. 1666–1694).<sup>124</sup> Interestingly, while there was great economic confusion, the courts of Badr Khān, who passed away in February 1674,<sup>125</sup> and Sharaf Khān, especially the first one, enjoyed several official positions of which we have only heard in the last three decades. Such positions, as *çaşnigir*, *silahdar*, *mirahur*, *hazinedar*, and *mühürdar* are somewhat misleading as previous emirs of Bidlīs never used them extensively.

119 See DFE. RZ. d. 619, 346; also Saito (2018, 109), where his *ze'amet* is mentioned as “Bitlis Bedir veled-i Abdāl Bey (1) Bitlis (Muş) 50,000 1632; Bitlis Bedir (2) Bitlis (Muş) 49,300 1646; Bitlis Bedir (3) Bitlis (Muş) 49,400 1649”.

120 See 1660–1664 *Tarihli Ordu Mühimmesi*, Sächsische Landesbibliothek – Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden (SLUB) Eb. 387, fol.152r; MAD.d.9848, 97.

121 See 1660–1664 *Tarihli Ordu Mühimmesi*, fol. 152r; MAD. d. 9848, 97.

122 See DFE.RZ.d. 631, 668.

123 See A.DVN.ŞKT.d.5, hkm.406–408; MAD.d.9848, 97; İE.TCT.1/85.

124 A Jewish merchant named Kemal, and Armenian merchants named Ohan, Andreyra, İskender, Dunabed. See A. DVN.ŞKT.d.8, hkm.115; MAD.9855, 72; A.DVN.ŞKT.d.8, hkm.271; A.DVN.ŞKT.d.7, hkm.222, 342; A.DVN.MHM.d.104, hkm.111–113, 118–119.

125 His tombstone in İhlasiye Medresesi reads “Bedreddin Han b. Abdal Han b. Ziyaeddin Han b. Şeref Han, vefatı evâil-i Zilkadde 1084/February 1674”.

However, they are also inevitable for describing a full ceremonial administration in terms understandable to sons of Abdāl.

The rulership was possible only by the power of the economy; the power of the economy by wealth; wealth by agriculture; agriculture by peace and security; and peace and security by the justice and rectitude of the Ottoman sovereign. If an emir of Bidlīs wished to keep his rulership, he needed to maintain a prosperous economy. In this circular chain of interdependence, all links were equally the cause and the effect of the preceding and proceeding links. Therefore, the economic decline mentioned above caused a very huge demise of Bidlīs.

Sharaf Khān's second period of rulership began on 6 March 1676.<sup>126</sup> Whereas Sharaf Khān could not pay the salary of the troops of Vān, Muslı Pasha, the governor of Vān, invited him to Vān, in 1680, but the latter refused to go. In his letter to Shams al-Dīn, Sharaf Khān's brother, Muslı Pasha indicated, "we just want to make a cessation of hostilities, no worries". Realizing the Ottoman intention, Sharaf Khān fortified the castle of Bidlīs and also defeated the Kurdish emir of Maḥmūdī, who was directing the Ottoman vanguard against Bidlīs. As a consequence of the Ottoman defeat and at the command of the Ottoman sultan, Sharaf Khān came to visit the pasha of Vān. After a couple of sessions in Vān, Sharaf Khān and Muslı Pasha longed for no peace. In brief, the Ottomans undertook the demolition of Bidlīs, setting fire to its houses and killing a large number of people at Meydan-ı Kebûd or Gök Meydan. Likewise they plundered the properties of the people of Bidlīs.<sup>127</sup>

Ruling from 1666–1672 and 1674–1686, Sharaf Khān died some months before 1687.<sup>128</sup> Muḥammad Sa'īd Khān's succession to the whole of what had been Sharaf Khān's emirate was not really so fortuitous. After the demise of Sharaf Khān, by a decree of the sultan he became the emir of Bidlīs in 1689.<sup>129</sup> It is tempting to view Muḥammad Sa'īd Khān's attack against the fortress of Shīrwān as an action which led directly to his deposition. Ḥasan Pasha, the *beylerbeyi* of Vān, who persuaded Muḥammad Sa'īd Khān into plundering Shīrwān and provided him guns and weapons, was not able to protect his emirate. With a number of complaints about his massacre in Shīrwān, the Sultan deposed him in 1691.<sup>130</sup>

126 See A.DVN.76/30. For his *hass* defined in the same year, see DFE.RZ.d.852, 220.

127 Details in A.DVN.117/38; A.DVN.145/1, 11, 43–44; A.DVN. 157/7.

128 See A.DVN.193/42, dated Evâil-i R. 1100, where his name is mentioned as *müteveffa Şeref Han*.

129 See A.DVN.MHM. d.98, hkm.784; A.DVN.193/42.

130 See A.DVN.254/95; A.DVN.MHM.d.100, hkm.540–541.

In the year 1691, Nūḥ Khān took over the emirate of Bidlīs. In view of Murād Khān, the emir of Ḥazzō, who was a relative of the Bidlīsī emirs, Nūḥ Khān was not legitimate and his rejection opened the floodgates of battle between Ḥazzō and Bidlīs. Neither in 1691 nor in later years did Murād Khān succeed in defeating Nūḥ Khān.<sup>131</sup>

Also, the tribal confederations of Bidlīs did not act as supporters of Nūḥ Khān. Kurdish tribal chieftains and their supporters chose a 'new khan' (whose name is not mentioned) and asked Nūḥ Khān to turn over the fortress of Bidlīs. Out of necessity, he consented to giving up the fortress, but demanded the Sultan's help at the same time. According to the Sultan's decree, the *beylerbeyis* of Vān and Erzurum came upon the 'new khan'. After a battle they defeated him, and thus the Bidlīs emirate came again under Nūḥ Khān's jurisdiction.<sup>132</sup>

It is also said that in his period Muḥammad Khalaf Khān (a brother of Muḥammad Sa'īd Khān) set out for the Zirqī area to plunder it in 1697. He fought Jahānshāh, the emir of Zirqī, defeated him, and ruled over Zirqī for three years. Not listening to the Sultan's decree to recognize Jahānshāh as true emir of Zirqī, Muḥammad Khalaf Khān killed large numbers of people in the region.<sup>133</sup>

When the years of Nūḥ Khān's reign reached nine in the year 1700, he passed away. After his death, his son Muḥammad 'Ābid Khān quarreled over the emirate with Muḥammad Sa'īd Khān. By a decree of the sultan, Muḥammad 'Ābid Khān was known as emir of Bidlīs but the rule of Bidlīs was finally conferred on Muḥammad Sa'īd Khān, whose tribal supporters were more effective. He ruled until the year 1715 and passed away.<sup>134</sup>

## Conclusion

In the previous pages we have shown that the 'silent' history of the seventeenth-century rulers of Bidlīs, which simply failed to arouse interest because it seemed too vague and confused, can be traced back to the same political issues visible in sixteenth-century Ottoman-Safavid frontier conflicts. Placed in context, the history of seventeenth-century Bidlīs no longer seems vague or senseless and confusing, but makes up a coherent, valid system,

131 See A.DVN.252/76; A.DVN.NHM (Nāme-i Hümâyûn Defteri), d.5, 5–6; A.DVN.MHM.d.98, hkm.308; A.DVN.ŞKT.d.12, hkm.933.

132 See A.DVN.MHM.d.102, hkm.199, 807.

133 See A.DVN.MHM. d.110, hkm.1362, 1439, 1519; A.DVN.MHM.d. 111, hkm.697.

134 See C.DH. 29/1430; A.DVN.MHM. d.112, hkm.210; A.DVN.MHM.d. 112, hkm.36; A.DVN.MHM. d.114–1, hkm.1455.

making it obvious that the Bidlīs emirate, just like any other, had its own inner power able to exert influence on Ottoman frontier issues.

If we consider how very little is known about the political history of seventeenth-century Bidlīs and about the economy and society of Kurds in the region, it must be concluded that even these few archival examples of the history of Bidlīs (not taken from the *Sharaf-nāma* or the *Seyahatname*) are very significant. The Ottoman administrative references to the history of seventeenth-century Bidlīs allow us to speculate on a neglected period that is not accessible from other sources, such as Armenian colophons representative of the situation of the population of the region in general.

The seventeenth-century developments also reflect long-running debates about Kurdish semi-independence. Chief among them is the central tension between Ottoman management and Kurdish decisional independence. On the one hand, Ottoman regional heads, such as the *beylerbeyis* of Diyārbakr and Vān, have long sought means of ex ante control over their Kurdish administrative dependencies, aware that their ability to review and reverse Kurdish decisions ex post is a resource-limited one. On the other hand, the Kurdish emirs of Bidlīs have often insisted on their right to have more political and economic advantages. Brought under Ottoman control, in the course of the seventeenth-century Bidlīs turned into one of the most independent frontier emirates, sometimes connected through frontier regions with the Safavid state via Ādharbāyjān.

Finally, and most egregiously, one of the biggest issues is the fact that seventeenth-century emirs of Bidlīs earned less of a wage for the same job as their sixteenth-century ancestors. Compared to many Ottoman-Safavid struggles in the sixteenth-century, seventeenth-century Bidlīs was quite peaceful. Bidlīs did not get much benefit from her strategic situation as it would have been more valuable had there been fighting between Ottoman and Safavid forces in the region.

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A.DVN.MHM	Bâb-1 Asafî, Divân-1 Hümâyûn Mühimme Kalemi
A.NŞT	Bâb-1 Asafî Nişân (Tahvil) Kalemi
A.RSK	Ruus Defteri
BOA	Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi
DFE.RZ	Timar Ruznamçe Defteri
KK	Kâmil Kepeci Tasnifi
MAD	Maliyeden Müdevver Defterler
ŞKT	Şikâyet Defteri
T SMA	Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Arşivi

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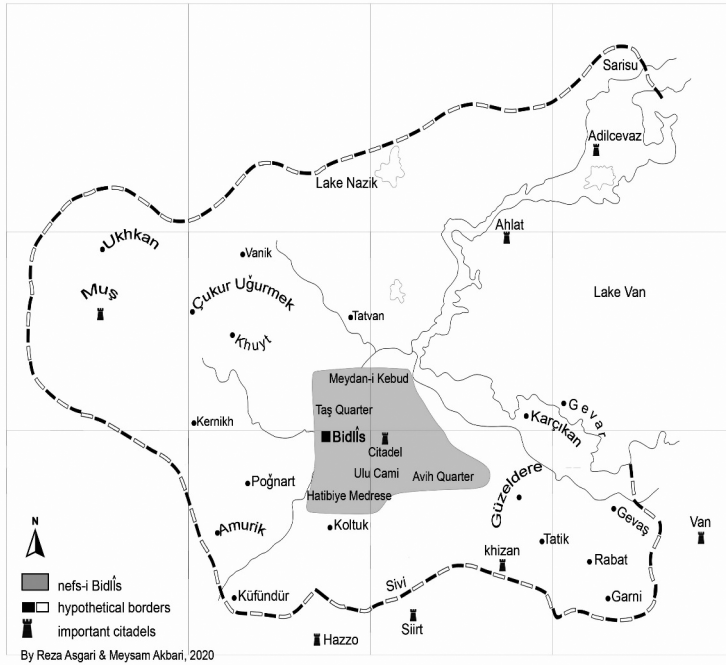
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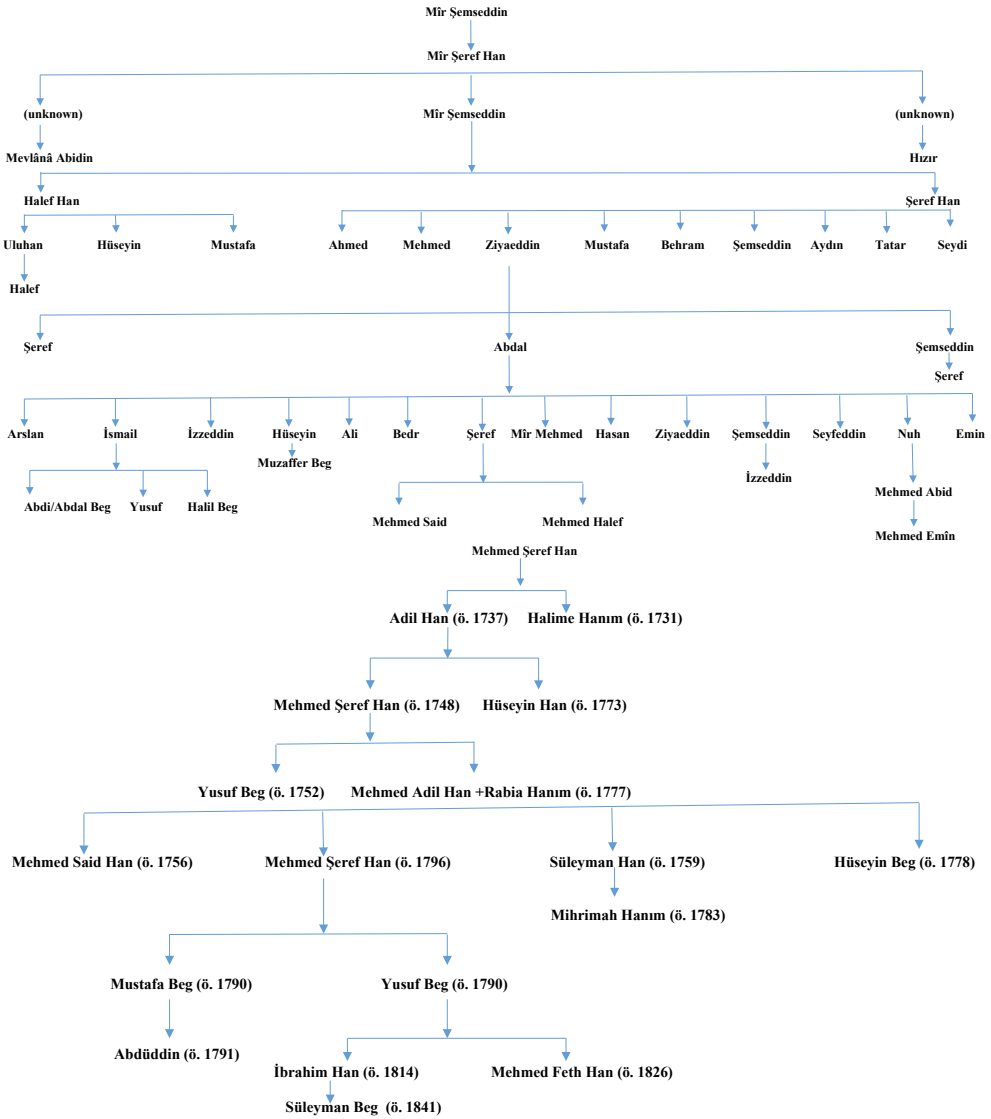
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### The Bidlis Emirate: Central Quarters and Rural Districts



## Bidlis Family Tree, 16th–18th Century





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# Democratic Innovations in Mexico and Kurdistan: the Revival of Assemblies and Councils as Traditional Democratic Institutions

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## Abstract

This article offers a comparative analysis of the origins, political concepts, and institutions of three autonomous administrations in Mexico and Kurdistan: the town of Cherán, the Zapatista region, and Rojava. These autonomous administrations are based on popular assemblies and delegatory councils. The article is inspired by Hannah Arendt's council system and categorizes them as council autonomies, i.e., non-state variations of council democracy. Drawing on qualitative data and recent scholarship, the article argues that council autonomies innovate democracy through renovating and reinventing Mesoamerican and Mesopotamian traditions of democracy. The article urges scholars of democratic theory to engage non-Western origins, traditions, and versions of democracy.

## Keywords

Cherán – Zapatistas – Rojava – council democracy – representative democracy – Hannah Arendt

## Nûjeniyên demokratîk li Meksîka û Kurdistanê: Vejîna civat û konseyan wekî saziyên kevneşopî yên demokratîk

Ev gotar analîzeke berawirdî ya rayek, têgehên siyasî û saziyên sê rêveberiyên xweser ên li Meksîka û Kurdistanê dike: bajarê Cherán, herêma Zapatista, û Rojava. Ev rêveberiyên xweser xwe dispêrin civatên gel û konseyên delegeyan. Gotar ji pergala konseyan ya Hannah Arendt îlham digire û van rêveberiyên wekî xweseriyên konseyî, angoguhertoyên demokrasiya konseyan yên ne-dewletî binavdike. Gotar ji daneyên kalîteyî û lêkolînên dawîn birêdikeve û amaje dike ku xweseriyên konseyî bi nûvekirin û vejan-dina kevneşopiyên demokrasiyê yên Mezoamerîkî û Mezopotamya demokrasiyê nûjen dikin. Gotar teoriya demokratîk dazirîne ku rayek, kevneşopî û cûreyên demokrasiyê yên li derveyî Roavayê jî tevli bike.

### تازه‌گه‌ریه دیموکراسیه‌کان له مه‌کسیک و کوردستان: بوژانه‌وه‌ی ده‌سته و ئه‌نجومه‌نه‌کان وه‌ک نه‌ریتی دامه‌زراوه‌ی دیموکراسی

ئهم توێژینه‌وه‌یه لیکۆلینه‌وه‌کی به‌راوردکاری بو‌ سه‌رچاوه و چه‌مکه سیاسیه‌کان و دامه‌زراوه‌کانی سه‌ ئیداره‌ی سه‌ربه‌خۆ له مه‌کسیک و کوردستان پێشکەش ده‌کات: له شارۆچکه‌ی چیران، هه‌ریمی زاپاتیستا و رۆژاڤا دا. ئهم داموده‌زگا سه‌ربه‌خۆیانه له سه‌ر بنه‌مای ده‌سته‌ی جه‌ماوه‌ری و ئه‌نجومه‌نی نوێنه‌رایه‌تی دامه‌زراون. به‌پشتبه‌ستن به‌ سیسته‌می ئه‌نجومه‌نی هانا ئارینت، ئهم توێژینه‌وه‌یه، ئهو ناوچانه وه‌ک ئه‌نجومه‌نی ئۆتۆنۆمی پۆلین ده‌کات، واته‌ جۆره‌کانی ئه‌نجومه‌نی ناده‌وله‌تی دیموکراسی. به‌ پشتبه‌ستن به‌ داتای چۆنایه‌تی و زانستی نوێ، توێژینه‌وه‌ که ده‌یسه‌لمینیت که ئه‌نجومه‌نه ئۆتۆنۆمیه‌کان له ریگه‌ی تازه‌گه‌ری و بوژاندنه‌وه‌ی نه‌ریتی دیموکراسی میزۆئه‌مریکی و میزۆپۆتامیادا، گۆرانکاری له نه‌ریتی دیموکراسی دا ده‌کهن. توێژینه‌وه‌ که داوا ده‌کات که تیۆری دیموکراسی به‌ شداری له‌ گه‌ل بنه‌چه و نه‌ریت و جۆره‌کانی دیموکراسی نا رۆژئاوا بیدا بکات.

# Meksîka û Kurdîstan de înovasyonê demokratîkî: Neweraganîkerdişê konsey û kongreyan ê sey sazgehanê tradîsyonelanê demokratîkan

Na meqale analizêkê têveronayîşî yê ristim, konseptanê sîyasîyan û sazgehan yê hîrê îdareyanê Meksîka û Kurdîstanî yê otonoman, şaristanê Cherânî, herêma Zapatîsta û Rojawanî pêşkêş kena. Bingeyê nê îdareyanê otonoman kongreyê şarî û konseyê delegeyan ê. Bi îlhamê sîstemê konseyan ê Hannah Arendte, meqale nê îdareyan sey konseyanê otonoman kategorîze kena, yanî sey varyantanê demokrasîya konseyanê neresmîyan. Pê dayeyanê kalîtatîfan û cigêrayîşê peyênî, meqale musnena ke konseyê otonomî bi rayîrê newekerdiş û neweraicadkerdişê urf û adetanê demokrasîya Mezoamerîka û Mezopotamya ra demokrasîye bi xo newe ra virazenê. Meqale han kena ke teorîya demokrasîye bireso ristim, tradîsyon û şekîlanê demokrasîye ke teberê rojawanê dinya de qewimîyayî.

## Introduction

This article is an exercise in engaging non-Western traditions of democracy in democratic theory. It presents a discussion on innovations initiated by democratic experiments in Mexico and Kurdistan.<sup>1</sup> The article engages in a comparative analysis of three autonomous administrations that managed to establish the only council democracies since the Hungarian Revolution of 1956: the Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities (*Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes Zapatistas*) in Chiapas, Mexico; the Communal Government of Cherán (*Gobierno Comunal de Cherán K'eri*) in Michoacán, Mexico; and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES, *Rêveberîya Xweser ya Bakûr û Rojhilatê Sûriyê*), aka *Rojava*, in Syria.

In January 1994 the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN, *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*), based in the Indigenous communities of the Lacandón Forest (*Selva Lacandona*) located in Chiapas, Mexico, launched an armed rebellion with the overall aim of revolution in Mexico and autonomy for

<sup>1</sup> All forms of government are experiments. See John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009), xxii.

Indigenous communities.<sup>2</sup> The EZLN declared autonomy in five zones in 2003. They maintain a *de facto* self-rule.

In April 2011, led by women, the P'urhépecha people of Cherán, a town in the state of Michoacán, Mexico, drove organised crime, the police and political parties out of the town.<sup>3</sup> They decided to elect public officers through the P'urhépecha tradition of decision-making. A council of twelve people, comprised of three delegates elected by each of the four neighbourhood assemblies, took over the administration of the town. They then initiated a process of litigation. The Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (SCJN, *La Suprema Corte Justicia de la Nación*) ruled in their favour in 2014.<sup>4</sup> Public offices are now run by The Major Council of Communal Government (*Consejo Mayor de Gobierno Comunal*) and eight other councils, which include a Women Council (*Consejo de Las Mujeres*) and a Youth Council (*Consejo de Jóvenes*).

In July 2012, the Syrian regime withdrew from Western (Syrian) Kurdistan. Kurdish political organisations controlled by or affiliated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD, *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*) took over public offices and declared an autonomous administration. They have managed to maintain self-rule in a territory that has expanded beyond Kurdish-majority areas to include one third of Syria and four to five million people.<sup>5</sup>

There are significant overlaps between the cases, even though there had not been, to my knowledge, any direct communication between the three autonomous administrations or the movements prior to proclamations of autonomy. The first direct communication between the Kurdish and Zapatista women combatants took place in 2021 in France during the Zapatistas' *The Journey for Life* activities in Europe, although messages of support and solidarity had been issued by both sides on various platforms.<sup>6</sup> The political movements

2 Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy*, Second Ed. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 121.

3 Felipe Orlando Aragón Andrade, *El Derecho En Insurrección. Hacia Una Antropología Jurídica Militante Desde La Experiencia de Cherán, México* (Morelia: Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores Unidad Morelia, 2019).

4 Alejandra González Hernández and Víctor Alfonso Zertuche Cobos, "Cherán: Cinco Años de Un Gobierno Autónomo," in *México En Movimientos: Resistencias y Alternativas*, ed. Geoffrey Pleyers and Manuel Garza Zepeda (CDMX: Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca, 2017), 34.

5 Rojava Information Center, "Beyond the Frontlines: The Building of the Democratic System in North and East Syria" (Qamişlo, 2019), 13, <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/background/political-sys-tem-documents>.

6 Daliri Oropeza, "Zapatistas, Women, and Gender Dissidents: On the Encounter in Notre Dame Des Landes," *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 9-9-2021. Online at <http://www.cnsjournal.org/zapatistas-women-and-gender-dissidents-on-the-encounter-in-notre-dame-des-landes/> (last accessed 18-10-2022).

that established them originate in the 1968 generation's Marxist-Leninist and Maoist revolutionary politics. They pursued a politics of revolution and/or national liberation, seeking the capture of political power until the late 1980s. Influenced by post-Marxist, decolonial, and anarchist literature and re-directed by input from communities, they began seeing claims to sovereignty as the will to domination and started promoting the concept of autonomy as the foundation of the political community. By the same token, defying the monistic definition of the nation as a single, *unified* sovereign subject, they pluralised the political subject as *peoples* and/or *communities*. They have been building autonomy *from below*, institutionalising popular assemblies and councils as potent organs of self-government. They have been establishing political institutions that enable direct-democratic participation and setting up regional political institutions through which power flows the other way too.

Nevertheless, the context in each case is different, and so are the administrations' approaches to national identity, symbols, and constitutions. The cases in Mexico operate within the constitution, for the Mexican constitution internalizes the United Nations (UN) treaties on human and indigenous rights and autonomy (with exception of Article 27, which legalised the partition and sale of community lands), although they supersede the state-centric UN treaty framework in their direct democratic aspirations and practices. While both the Zapatistas and Chéran challenge the notions of monistic national identity, other components of Mexican nationalism are comparatively less problematized.<sup>7</sup> Also, the federal state in Mexico appears more "tolerant" to the autonomous administrations there, particularly so in the case of Cherán. That is because indigenous claims are more 'manageable' than national claims. The vessel tailored by the UN treaties for indigenous peoples to voice their claims to autonomy is not the principle of "self-determination" (which is reserved for previously independent peoples colonized during the era of imperialist expansion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) but the category of "indigenous rights," which conceptually does not pose the same threat as a claim to national sovereignty or self-determination.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is relatively 'harmless' for indigenous peoples to claim autonomy because the assumption is that their

7 Lynn Stephen, *Zapata Lives! Histories and Cultural Politics in Southern Mexico* (London: University of California Press, 2002).

8 Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Odysseys: Navigating the New International Politics of Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Pekka Hämäläinen, "Can Colonial Nations Truly Recognise the Sovereignty of Indigenous People?," *Aeon Essays*, 2-10-2019. Online at <https://aeon.co/essays/can-colonial-nations-truly-recognise-the-sovereignty-of-indigenous-people> (last accessed 19-6-2020); Adam J. Barker, "A Direct Act of Resurgence, a Direct Act of Sovereignty': Reflections on Idle No More, Indigenous Activism, and Canadian Settler Colonialism," *Globalizations* 12, no. 1 (2015): 43-65.

autonomy won't shake the foundations of the national order. Claims to autonomy made by national minorities like the Kurds, on the other hand, are perceived as a genuine and immanent threat by the four national states they live in, namely Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria. Hence, Rojava operates outside the Syrian Arab Republic's constitution. Accordingly, while the cases in Mexico are relatively friendly to contemporary Mexican national symbols, identity, and borders, the same would be unthinkable for the Kurds because it would mean the erasure of Kurdishness.

Conditioned by Eurocentric narratives of democracy, I had assumed that any experiment of direct democracy would inevitably take the Athenian democracy as *the* point of reference. And indeed, the first Rojava constitution made a direct reference to Athenian democracy.<sup>9</sup> In Mexico, the Spanish colonial administration has been credited with “re-settling” Indigenous communities in towns to impose a version of the Aristotelian utopia – creating political communities of active citizens – through Christianising and “civilising” them.<sup>10</sup> More specifically, the origins of community assemblies and councils that underpin the autonomous administrations in Cherán and Chiapas have been identified in the institution of *ejido*, “a communal form of land tenure” that also “refers to territory, actual land tied to the community”<sup>11</sup> that was introduced after the Mexican revolution of the 1910s.

More importantly, I also observed something that I had not expected: the autonomous administrations invoke communal values and institutions they associate with ancestral and ancient civilisations as the bases of democracy. I collectively refer to those values and institutions as *tradition*, be they invented or inherited. As recent literature suggests, despite widespread ideas about democracy as a European invention, democracy was not born in Athens, and democratic forms of government have been global phenomena. For instance, Keane notes that democracy was born in ancient Mesopotamia at least two millennia before the emergence of Athenian democracy.<sup>12</sup> Graeber and Wengrow, among others, have pointed out that not only democratic popular assemblies and republican governments existed in a variety of forms, but also

9 The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, “Charter of the Social Contract,” *Peace in Kurdistan*, 29-1-2014. Online at <https://www.peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/> (last accessed 19-11-2022).

10 Bernardino Verástique, *Michoacán and Eden: Vasco de Quiroga and the Evangelization of Western Mexico* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010).

11 Stephen, *Zapata Lives!*, 9.

12 Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*.

that neighbourhood assemblies and city councils have been a constant feature of democratic politics throughout history and across the globe.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the main objective of this paper is engaging *tradition* in democratic theory. Contrary to the Eurocentric narrative of democracy which depicts it as a Western invention, democracy emerges and re-emerges as a local phenomenon. Community values and institutions around the world, i.e., *traditions*, have been among the repositories of democratic politics.<sup>14</sup> Although they embrace the legacies of modern democratic and socialist revolutions, the autonomous administrations that this article focuses on break away from Western-centric narratives of democracy by invoking community values and institutions. To underpin this argument, this article examines which political concepts, organisations, processes, and institutions have contributed to the emergence of direct democratic experiments in Mexico and Kurdistan. In a second step, it will then ask what contributions these cases offer to democratic theory. Here I will argue that the cases contribute to democratic consolidation in their communities, regions, countries, and perhaps across the globe, via challenging exclusively modern(ist) and representative foundations of democratic politics. The cases offer a potential to vertically deepen and horizontally spread political participation. This can alleviate political alienation and empower individuals and communities alike in local and regional politics. Exercising political power and experiencing public freedom through assemblies and councils also have the potential to restore dignity to politics and public offices, for politics ceases to be the prerogative of the elites.

### Methodology

The paper is based on qualitative data gathered through online interviews on Rojava; fieldwork I conducted in Mexico for more than two months in 2021; and participant observation. I conducted forty-three semi-structured expert and elite interviews with high-ranking and high-profile office holders, political leaders, professionals, volunteers, and organisers. Most research participants

13 David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Penguin, 2022); Jean-Paul Gagnon, "Words of Democracy: Rescuing an Abandoned Science," *ABC Religion & Ethics*, 14-6-2021. Online at <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/words-of-democracy-an-abandoned-science/13386940?fbclid=IwAR3rOLomd3YhF2X8bqNfARGvvoB6rNXBHlxB4VrgyPCiZt94FDcAxNCM14> (last accessed 18-11-2022).

14 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 30, 215, 309–12, 350.

were informed enough to comment on theoretical aspects of the political projects and the institutional design of the administrations.

I also used primary sources, e.g., constitutions, laws, statutes, communiqués, founding documents, published interviews, speeches, lectures, self-made videos, public and private events on social media platforms, and secondary sources. I focused on political concepts, organisations, and decision-making mechanisms *qua* council autonomy. I do not provide a detailed critique of the political ideologies and their praxis, but dwell on the democratic innovations introduced by the cases.

There are methodological limitations. I could not conduct fieldwork in Rojava and the Zapatista region due to the Covid-19 restrictions, although I travelled to *Caracol Oventic*, a Zapatista community located about 37 kilometres to the north-west of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas. As a *caracole*, Oventic is one of the twelve administrative centres where public offices in the Zapatista zone are located. But the offices were closed, and I was told they would not be open until February or March (I was there in December 2021). I then conducted interviews with scholars and civil society organisers in San Cristóbal de las Casas. I spent a rather short time in the research locations I was able to go to, although a second or even third round of fieldwork would have been ideal.

Also, my personal position as a left-leaning Armenian-Kurdish researcher from North Kurdistan (Southeast Turkey) should be considered as an ingredient. Positionality “is rooted in Feminist scholarship” and urges researchers to acknowledge that “position is partial, locatable, and critical,” and that “the personal experiences through which that positionality is shaped, may influence what researchers bring to research encounters, their choice of processes, and their interpretation of outcomes.”<sup>15</sup>

Positionality is fluid and individuals do not occupy a fixed state of being and of thought, but it was my social and professional background that set me on the research path. As a lawyer with a focus on human rights, I was conditioned, like many others, by the idea of finding a model of minority rights applicable to Kurdish politics in Turkey. After my previous research on Kurdish politics in Turkey, realizing that the Kurdish political movement there has developed a home-grown model of autonomy, I shifted my focus from studying democracy through Eurocentric national and international law to studying democratic initiatives introduced by non-state political communities.

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15 Mary Q. Foote and Tonya Gau Bartell, “Pathways to Equity in Mathematics Education: How Life Experiences Impact Researcher Positionality,” *Educational Studies in Mathematics* 78, no. 1 (2011): 46.

## The Revival of Council Democracy

There are several comparative studies on the Zapatista and Kurdish movements. Gambetti compares the politics of constructing places in Diyarbakır and Chiapas, arguing that “appropriation of places” enables them to “acquire significance” within local, national, and global politics.<sup>16</sup> Al-Ali and Tas have noted that the Zapatistas have served as a source of inspiration for the Kurdish movement.<sup>17</sup> Al compares the Kurdish armed movement in Turkey and the Zapatistas within the global justice movements, focusing on the question of why the latter is not as “successful” as the former in harnessing global solidarity.<sup>18</sup> Also, numerous magazine articles have drawn attention to the similarities between the Rojava and Chiapas revolutions. Notably, Stanchev dwells on all major similarities, including but not limited to “self-governance and revolution from below” being the products of “long historical evolutions” of the two movements; a “fusion between Western Marxism and the experience and knowledge of the native” communities; “rejection of vanguardism”; a quest for greater self-determination that is “based on their traditions as well as communal control over land and local resources”; a holistic approach based on ecological sustainability; and “the development of grassroots democracy, communal economic structures and the participation of women.”<sup>19</sup> Rebrii and Patchen, on the other hand, have emphasised women’s central roles in both revolutions, arguing that they “have shown that the internal transformation of unequal gendered power relations within communities in struggle is of no lesser importance than resistance to external capitalist, colonial, and statist powers.”<sup>20</sup>

Building on and expanding this literature, this paper draws on extensive qualitative data to offer a discussion of political concepts, mechanisms, and institutions that catapulted the three cases to the forefront of the political and theoretical search for alternatives to representative democracy.

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16 Zeynep Gambetti, “Politics of place/space: The Spatial Dynamics of the Kurdish and Zapatista Movements,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 41 (2009): 43–87.

17 Nadjé Al-Ali and Latif Tas, “Reconsidering Nationalism and Feminism: The Kurdish Political Movement in Turkey,” *Nations and Nationalism* 24, no. 2 (April 1, 2018): 458.

18 Serhun Al, “Local Armed Uprisings and the Transnational Image of Claim Making: The Kurds of Turkey and the Zapatistas of Mexico in Comparative Perspective,” *Globalizations* (2014): 677–94.

19 Peter Stanchev, “From Chiapas to Rojava: Seas Divide Us, Autonomy Binds Us,” *ROAR Magazine*, 17-2-2015. Online at <https://roarmag.org/essays/chiapas-rojava-zapatista-kurds/> (last accessed 22-10-2022).

20 Anna Rebrii and Ariella Patchen, “Celebrating Zapatista and Kurdish Women’s Struggles, on International Women’s Day,” *The Nation*, 8-3-2022. Online at <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/zapatista-rojava-womens-movement/> (last accessed 22-10-2022).

Organs of decision-making in the Zapatista region are public assemblies and delegatory councils organised in three layers. The grassroots organs are community assemblies, each comprising about 300 households and are open to the participation of all over twelve years old.<sup>21</sup> The assemblies send delegates to the regional Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committees (CCRI, *Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena*), “organized around the four Zapatista language groups” of the Ch’ol, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, and Tzotzil.<sup>22</sup> Regional committees send delegates to the CCRI-General Command (CCRI-*Comandancia General*). The CCRI-General Command is the highest political authority, although not the supreme authority in the sense of a sovereign parliament in a typical nation-state. The CRIC-General Command primarily functions as a coordinating entity throughout the region.

The administrative units are *Los Caracoles* (snails). They also include three levels of autonomous self-government: the community, the municipality and the Council of Good Government (*Las Juntas de Buen Gobierno*). The first two are based on grassroots assemblies. The Council of Good Government is elected but with the intention to get as many people as possible to participate in the councils over the years through a principle of rotation.

Organs of decision-making in Cherán are public assemblies organised in three layers. *Fogatas*, i.e., two-street intersections open to the participation of all, are the basic deliberative organs, convening whenever the need arises. *Los Barrios*, i.e., neighbourhood assemblies in each of the four neighbourhoods in the town are the principal decision-making organs. They are open to the public and convene every week. They also elect council members for the eight executive councils that administer the town. The third organ is the general assembly of the town that convenes twice a year and is the highest political authority.

Organs of decision-making in Rojava are organised in four layers. The basic organs are communes (*komîn*), each comprising between 100 and 300 households, and neighbourhood assemblies (*tax*). They send delegates to subdistrict (*belde*), district (*navçe*), cantonal (*kanton*), and regional (*herêm*) delegatory councils.<sup>23</sup> The AANES coordinates governance throughout the region, while The General Council (*Meclîsa Giştî/Zagonsaz*) acts as the general legislative, which is the highest political authority but does not function like parliaments, i.e., as *the* supreme authority of the realm, for legislation must ideally be passed with the consensus or at least the consent of the parties that are affected by it.<sup>24</sup>

21 Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 198.

22 Stephen, *Zapata Lives!*, 131.

23 Rojava Information Center, “Beyond the Frontlines,” 21.

24 Rojava Information Center, “Beyond the Frontlines,” 30.

In all three cases: (i) the main decision-making organs are public assemblies; (ii) delegates and council members are elected and recallable by the assemblies; (iii) decisions are made through consensus as much as possible, but majority vote prevails if no consensus is found;<sup>25</sup> (iv) the overall form of administration is based on small-scale assemblies and councils organised around the logic of community autonomy, which is in direct opposition to the logic of national or monarchic sovereignty. Therefore, I categorise the autonomous administrations as *council autonomies*, for they are variations of *council democracy*, i.e., non-state forms of self-government based on direct democratic and delegatory decision-making organs.

An in-depth discussion on council democracy versus representative democracy is beyond the scope of this paper. I will briefly discuss why I categorise the three autonomous administrations as council autonomies through the literature on council democracy and Hannah Arendt's council system. In Western political theory, council democracy is "a pyramidal structure of voluntary associations organised through workplaces and barracks with a national executive council composed of directly elected and recallable delegates."<sup>26</sup> Councils appear as the organs of working-class interests, primarily aligned with processes of economic production in the literature on the socialist tradition.<sup>27</sup> But for Hannah Arendt, who promoted council democracy more than any of her contemporaries and whom I draw most extensively on in my references to council democracy, councils cannot be limited to being organs of class interest,<sup>28</sup> as they are "the new revolutionary organs of self-government."<sup>29</sup> As the autonomous administrations in this paper are built by movements for self-determination on communal and territorial bases,<sup>30</sup> I refer to council democracy in its Arendtian version in this paper.

Also, there is an institutional convergence between the Arendtian council system and the empirical cases: they provide the citizenry with public

25 Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 4; Stephen, *Zapata Lives!*, 116; Rojava Information Center, "Beyond the Frontlines."

26 James Muldoon, "Hannah Arendt and Council Democracy" (PhD diss., Monash University & University of Warwick, 2016), 20–21.

27 James Muldoon, *Council Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Benjamin Ask Popp-Madsen, "Between Constituent Power and Political Form: Toward a Theory of Council Democracy," *Political Theory* 49, no. 1 (2020): 54–82.

28 Margaret Canovan, "The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought," *Political Theory* 6, no. 1 (1978): 5–26.

29 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1963]), 247.

30 Cihad Hammy and Thomas Jeffrey Miley, "Lessons From Rojava for the Paradigm of Social Ecology," *Frontiers in Political Science* 3 (2022): 1–13.

venues of exercising freedom, i.e., *constitutio libertatis*. As Arendt writes, “what was actually revolutionary in modern revolutions was the repeatedly failed attempt of a ‘constitutio libertatis’ – the attempt to establish a political space of public freedom in which people as free and equal citizens would take their common concerns into their own hands.”<sup>31</sup> The cases examined here have succeeded where modern revolutions failed: providing political spaces, e.g., potent assemblies and councils, for public freedom to flourish (notwithstanding the level and intensity of citizen participation). I therefore categorise these autonomous administrations as council autonomies.

Categorizing the three autonomous administrations as council autonomies also functions as a marker that helps distinguish them from other modes of minority autonomy based on liberal multiculturalism.<sup>32</sup> Liberal multicultural models of minority autonomy are inspired by nationalism and are nation-states in small-scale or in the making, whose political institutions are modelled on representative democracy and state sovereignty. The cases, however, steer away from nationalist politics and consider the logic of sovereignty as domination. This is also in line with the tradition of council democracy in general and with Arendt’s promotion of the council system as an alternative to the party system.

Inspired by the tradition of council democracy, Arendt exposes the inadequacy of minority rights regimes derived from state sovereignty and the risks of depending on the global human rights regime for the protection of minorities. She was keenly aware that minorities with no political community of their own have to flee their “home” countries as the nation-state system constantly creates new categories of refugees and stateless peoples. As Arendt put it, “the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them.”<sup>33</sup> She noted that minorities and stateless peoples were also aware that the “loss of national rights was identical with loss of human rights, that the former inevitably entailed the latter. The more they were excluded from right in any form, the more they tended to look for a reintegration into a national, into their own national community”.<sup>34</sup> The therefore suggested the establishment of potent and autonomous political

31 Albrecht Wellmer, “Hannah Arendt on Revolution,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 53, no. 208 (1999): 207.

32 Sarah Song, “Multiculturalism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 24-9-2010. Online at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/multiculturalism/> (last accessed 18-11-2022).

33 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1951), 291–92.

34 Arendt, *The Origins*, 192.

communities based on small-scale councils within federative structures in Palestine, as an alternative to a Jewish or Arab majority nation-state that would inevitably oppress the other group.<sup>35</sup> This is the kernel of Arendt's argument for the council system. Arendt objected to the dominant idea of creating a Jewish nation-state and proposed an alternative to avoid "the troublesome majority-minority constellation, which is insoluble by definition." Additionally, a federal structure

would have to rest on Jewish-Arab community councils, which would mean that the Jewish-Arab conflict would be resolved on the lowest and most promising level of proximity and neighborliness. A federated state, finally, could be the natural stepping stone for any later, greater federated structure in the Near East and the Mediterranean area.<sup>36</sup>

At the end of the essay, Arendt lists several recommendations, the fifth of which would reappear in her later works as the council system: "Local self-government and mixed Jewish-Arab municipal and rural councils, on a small scale and as numerous as possible, are the only realistic political measures that can eventually lead to the political emancipation of Palestine".<sup>37</sup>

Thus, council democracy à la Arendt detaches politics from nationalism via anchoring political organisations in small-scale communities of space and the concept of autonomy, rather than in national communities and the concept of sovereignty. Federated small-scale councils serve as the bulwark against (total) domination.<sup>38</sup> Domination is the eradication of individual and communal differences, the destruction of plurality that is the basic human condition, and the suppression of human capacities of action and speech. The fundamental value that council democracy cherishes is this "[h]uman plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech."<sup>39</sup> The centralised, hierarchical, and bureaucratic states, with their claims to sovereignty, pose the greatest threat to the human condition of plurality.<sup>40</sup> As such, council democracy is an alterna-

35 Hannah Arendt, "To Save the Jewish Homeland: There Is Still Time," *Commentary Magazine*, 1948, 9–10. Online at <https://www.commentary.org/articles/mortbarrgmailcom/to-save-the-jewish-homelandthere-is-still-time/> (last accessed 19-11-2022).

36 Arendt, "To Save the Jewish Homeland".

37 Arendt, "To Save the Jewish Homeland", 10.

38 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 439–57.

39 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1998 2nd ed. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 175.

40 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 234–35.

tive to the dominating and homogenising effects that the concept and institutions of sovereignty have on political life.

We will see in the sections below that like in the literature on council democracy, a commitment to the concept of autonomy versus the concept of sovereignty as the foundational principle of political organisation, to the plurality of group identities versus the homogenising effects of a single national identity, and to political institutionalisation based on community assemblies and councils rather than centralised parliaments is also reflected in the cases of Chiapas, Cherán, and Rojava. As such, literature on council democracy provides us with a framework to conceptualise and categorise salient political concepts and institutions adopted by the autonomous administrations, which helps us distinguish them from exclusively representative systems. Accordingly, Çiçek<sup>41</sup> and Jongerden<sup>42</sup> have pointed out that there are conceptual and institutional connections between Arendt's council system and the Rojava model. I can draw a conceptual parallel between the council system and Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's *Mexico Profundo*,<sup>43</sup> in which the Zapatista notion of *building many worlds within one world* comes to the fore strongly.<sup>44</sup> That being said, literature on and experiments of council democracy part ways when it comes to the origins of the council system. And this is where the cases' contributions to decolonising democratic theory becomes relevant.

Literature on council democracy, to which Hannah Arendt is the most influential contributor, so far conveys mostly a Eurocentric and modernist story,<sup>45</sup>

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41 "The Party of Kurdistan's 'Third Revolution,'" *Komun Academy*, 2-11-2018. Online at <https://komun-academy.com/2018/11/02/the-party-of-kurdistans-third-revolution/> (last accessed 18-1-2021).

42 Joost Jongerden, "Radicalising Democracy: Power, Politics, People and the PKK," *Centre for Policy and Research on Turkey* 4, no. 3 (2015): 64–78.

43 Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996).

44 Rodrigo Ibarra, "Mexico Profundo: Building a New Way of Doing Politics," *Left Turn – Notes from the Global Intifada*, 1-2-2007. Online at <http://leftturn.org/mexico-profundo-building-new-way-doing-politics/> (last accessed 1-8-2022).

45 James Muldoon, "The Lost Treasure of Arendt's Council System," *Critical Horizons* 12, no. 3 (2011): 396–417; Shmuel Lederman, "Councils and Revolution: Participatory Democracy in Anarchist Thought and the New Social Movements," *Science & Society*, vol. 79, 2015; Shmuel Lederman, "Hannah Arendt, the Council System and Contemporary Political Theory," in *Council Democracy*, ed. James Muldoon (New York: Routledge, 2018), 150–67; James Muldoon, "The Origins of Hannah Arendt's Council System," *History of Political Thought* 37, no. 4 (2016): 761–89; James Muldoon, "Arendt's Revolutionary Constitutionalism: Between Constituent Power and Constitutional Form," *Constellations* 23, no. 4 (December 2016): 596–607; John F. Sitton, "Hannah Arendt's Argument for Council Democracy," *Polity* 20, no. 1 (1987): 80–100; Joel Olson, "The Revolutionary Spirit: Hannah

which I intend to complicate. Arendt traces the origins of council democracy back to the French and American revolutions and neither she nor other contributors engage with traditions of democracy outside Europe or before modernity. Modern revolutionary tradition, thus, has shunned *tradition* from democratic theory, as the ideas of the European Enlightenment run supreme.<sup>46</sup>

Recent literature, on the other hand, shows that direct democratic organs of self-government, i.e., councils and assemblies, are ancient and global.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, councils and assemblies emerge as traditional institutions of decision-making in Mexico and Kurdistan. While the cases have one foot in modern revolutions,<sup>48</sup> they also invoke tradition and ancient civilizations – Indigenous in the case of Mexico, Mesopotamian and Neolithic in the Kurdish case. The seeming contradiction that arises with regard to the genealogy of council democracy necessitates decolonising our understanding of democracy, as Bussu<sup>49</sup> puts it. Engaging tradition while examining democratic self-governments in Mexico and Kurdistan in this way contributes to the efforts of decolonising democratic theory. Democracy is no longer a form of government to which a particular political culture or tradition can lay claim.

### Research Findings and Analysis

This section will discuss research findings on the democratic innovations that are now the pillars of the three council autonomies. These are (i) abandoning the goal of seizing state power or founding a new one and instead building

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Arendt and the Anarchists of the Spanish Civil War,” *Polity* 29, no. 4 (1997): 461–88; Popp-Madsen, “Between Constituent Power and Political Form”; Roger Berkowitz, “Protest and Democracy: Hannah Arendt and the Foundation of Freedom,” *Stasis* 6, no. 1 (2018): 36–55.

46 Ian Shapiro, “The Burkean Outlook,” Yale Courses, 6-4-2011. Online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkDqadw-fjE&list=PL2FD48CE33DFBEA7E&index=19> (last accessed 22-10-2022).

47 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, Chapters 8&9; Ronald M. Glassman, *The Origins of Democracy in Tribes, City-States and Nation-States*, vol. 1 (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2017).

48 Stephen, *Zapata Lives!*; Denisse Román-Burgos, “‘We Are Indigenous of the Purhépecha People’ Hegemony, Multiculturalism and Neoliberal Reforms in Mexico,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 43 (2019): 259–77; Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, “Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the Project of Radical Democracy,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14, no. April (2012): 1–16.

49 Sonia Bussu, “Democracy as a Way of Living,” *The Loop*, 20-9-2022). Online at <https://the-loop.echr.eu/democracy-as-a-way-of-living/> (last accessed 15-10-2022).

autonomy from below; (ii) women's struggles for freedom, equality and autonomy that helped the concept of autonomy to take precedence over sovereignty; (iii) the practices of self-criticism, consultation, and deliberation that led to the establishment of direct democratic institutions; (iv) innovations in leadership that created pluralistic and horizontal political organisations; and (v) the practices of consensual and reconciliatory decision-making. The discussion will help us understand how certain practices initiated by and emergent within the movements culminated in the establishment of autonomy based on grassroots democracy. I will discuss each innovation in a subsection.

### *Replacing Vanguardist Revolutionary Goals with Building Council Autonomy*

The transformation of the liberation movements in Mexico and Kurdistan from vanguard revolutionaries to builders of direct democratic autonomy helps us understand why and how building a bottom-up autonomy replaced the top-down revolutionary goals. Tracking the change in the telos of the movements is important in determining how tradition makes its way into the ultimate outcome that I call council autonomy.

Although autonomy was on their agenda from the beginning,<sup>50</sup> the Zapatistas started focusing on strengthening grassroots autonomy and restructuring their political institutions in 2003. Their efforts to bring about a negotiated reform in Mexico were not reciprocated by the Mexican state. The restructured administration would better coordinate social and political activities within the autonomous zones. "Instead of each autonomous municipality governing itself separately, the pro-Zapatista communities would be grouped into five regional units known as *caracoles* (snails), each with its own *Junta de Buen Gobierno* (Council of Good Government)."<sup>51</sup> In the Kurdish case, the goal of founding a socialist Kurdish nation-state was transformed into defending the society against the state.<sup>52</sup> In Cherán, the leadership gave up on pursuing solutions for their major issues via joining national political parties because parties and factions created divisions and sowed conflict within the town and between the town and neighbouring communities (interview XXC6, 6.11.2021).

50 Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 121.

51 Raúl Benítez Manaut, Andrew Selee, Cynthia J. Arnsen, "Frozen Negotiations: The Peace Process in Chiapas," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 22, no. 1 (2006): 151.

52 Abdullah Öcalan, "My Solution for Turkey, Syria, and the Kurds," *Jacobin*, 8-7-2020. Online at <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/08/ocalan-turkey-syria-kurds-op-ed> (last accessed 18-6-2022).

Three main factors have brought about this transformation in the three cases. First, the overall revolutionary agenda on national scales and national liberation through the foundation of a socialist state had become increasingly beyond reach, due to the withering away of external support in a unipolar world (interview XXXVIZ3).<sup>53</sup> Revolutionary and liberation struggles around the world either had to withdraw from the scene or adopt different strategies following the fall of the Soviet Union. The three movements chose or had to undergo radical transformations in subsequent decades: the Zapatistas in the 1990s, the Kurds and Cherán in the 2000s. Second, national politics and coalition with sympathetic nationwide opposition were not delivering any solutions to the problems on the ground, due to the ineffectiveness of the coalition with allies and the indifference and/or hostility of powerful national political actors.<sup>54</sup> Third, relying on local communities and building autonomy from below emerged as an alternative, thanks to the movements' close contact with communities.<sup>55</sup> This aspect of transformation is well-researched in the cases of Chiapas and Cherán,<sup>56</sup> although studies to date do not put it the way I do here, i.e., as "contact" with communities.

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- 53 Kumru F. Toktamış, "(Im)Possibility of Negotiating Peace: 2005–2015 Peace/Reconciliation Talks between the Turkish Government and Kurdish Politicians," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 21, no. 3 (2019): 286–303; Román-Burgos, "We Are Indigenous of the Purhépecha People"; Neal Harvey, "Globalisation and Resistance in Post-Cold War Mexico: Difference, Citizenship and Biodiversity Conflicts in Chiapas," *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 6 (2001): 1045–61.
- 54 Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, "The Kurdistan Workers Party and a New Left in Turkey: Analysis of the Revolutionary Movement in Turkey through the PKK's Memorial Text on Haki Karer," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012): 1–18; Shannan Mattiace, "Social and Indigenous Movements in Mexico's Transition to Democracy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mexican Politics*, ed. Roderic Ai Camp (Oxford: Oxford Handbooks Online, 2012), 1–26; Giovanna Gasparello, "Análisis Del Conflicto y de La Violencia En Cherán, Michoacán," *Relaciones Estudios de Historia y Sociedad* 39, no. 155 (2018): 77; Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 165.
- 55 Mariana Mora, "Zapatista Anticapitalist Politics and the 'Other Campaign': Learning from the Struggle for Indigenous Rights and Autonomy," *Latin American Perspectives* 34, no. 2 (2007): 64–77; Mazloun Abdi and Polat Jan, *Practical Projects for Building the Autonomous Administration: Rojava* (Qamishlo: Independently published, 2020 [2011]) Kindle edition; Lorena Ojeda Dávila, "Cherán: El Poder Del Consenso y Las Políticas Comunitarias," *Política Común* 7 (2015).
- 56 Antonio García de León, "From Revolution to Transition: The Chiapas Rebellion and the Path to Democracy in Mexico," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 32, no. 3–4 (2005): 508–27; Ojeda Dávila, "Cherán"; Felipe Orlando Aragón Andrade, "¿Por Qué Pensar Desde Las Epistemologías Del Sur La Experiencia Política de Cherán? Un Alegato Por La Igualdad e Interculturalidad Radical En México," *Nueva Antropología* 29, no. 84 (2016): 143–61;

Claiming that the political movements that managed to establish the first council democracies since the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 did not have contact with base communities from the outset seems counterintuitive. Nevertheless, this common factor emerged very forcefully during the field work. I shall therefore contextualise this finding for the three cases. Two participants in Chiapas responded to my question of why revolutionaries would leave Mexico City and come to Chiapas to organise a guerrilla movement with the same answer: they were invited to Chiapas (the question of who invited them is a matter of interpretation and I will not dwell on it) (interviews XXXVZ2, 2.12.2021; XXXVIZ3, 6.12.2021). Obviously, there were revolutionaries from Chiapas, but the guerrilla struggle was initiated by a group of Maoists who, as revolutionaries, previously had no contact with Chiapanecas or with the communities in the Selva Lacandona. The impact of this contact on the revolutionaries has been professed on many occasions by Subcomandante Marcos, who refers to the ideological transformation they went through during the decade after the contact as their “first defeat.”<sup>57</sup> Here, “defeat” is of course symbolic, as it means that the revolutionaries underwent significant change as they encountered Indigenous communities and opened themselves to input from them. It is telling that one of the latest books published by the Zapatistas was not an exercise in revolutionary prose, but the stories distilled from the encounters of three *Subcomandantes* with *Viejo Antonio* (Old Antonio), who appears in many interviews and essays as a member of an Indigenous community in the *Selva Lacandona*, with whom the guerrillas have had profound conversations on politics and life.<sup>58</sup> After this process of transformation, they were no longer the Maoist revolutionaries who set out to realise the mission of carrying out a top-down revolution via “enlightening,” organising, and mobilising “the masses” who “lacked” class consciousness. Along with their goals, their perspective also changed, transforming them from vanguard revolutionaries to those who not only “walk with the people,” but also those who “follow the people.” The Zapatistas’ widely cited mantra *mandar obedeciendo* (to lead by following or to rule by obeying) reflects this transformation.

The impact of contact with and input from communities on the transformation of the Kurdish movement does not come to the fore in scholarly literature,

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Mariana Mora, “The Imagination to Listen: Reflections on a Decade of Zapatista Struggle,” *Social Justice* 30, no. 3 (2003): 17.

57 Subcomandante Marcos and Yvon Le Bot, *El Sueño Zapatista* (Mexico City: Plaza y Janes, 1997).

58 SCI Marcos, SCI Moises, and SCI Galeano, *Los Relatos Del Viejo Antonio* (Enlace Zapatista, 2020).

as the main attention is paid to the ideological transformation of the leadership after the 2000s. In the interviews, participants have reiterated that the radical transformation of the Kurdish liberation movement in Rojava owes much to their close contact with and input from communities (interviews IIR1, IIR2, VIIR7). A participant in Mexico who has been doing research on Rojava responded to my question about the most important similarity between the Kurdish and Zapatista movements:

The Kurdish and Zapatista movements differ from other revolutionary or national liberation movements in their inclination to listen to the people. Both movements are very good in consulting with and listening to the people. The encounter with the people and abandoning [classical] leftist perspectives are decisive for the two movements. Both do this around the same time, in the early 1990s, but the Zapatistas do this earlier. They do not deny people's voices, they listen to them. [There is a] mutual listening and hearing on the part of the movement and the people. *Escucha mutual*. People have their own autonomous forms and mechanisms. Both movements discover this and instead of erasing or dominating this they prefer to adapt themselves to that (interview VIIIR7, 5.3.2021).

In the case of Cherán, participants told me that political activists of all persuasions and professionals in the sectors of law and education who advocated for autonomy for the P'urhépecha communities but lived in the state capital Morelia, Michoacán, poured into Cherán to contribute to the discussions on determining the direction that the community should take in the days following the uprising on 15 April 2011 (interviews XXIC7, 10.11.2021; XXXC16, 20.11.2021). The way forward was determined through debates and deliberations amongst the townspeople with the participation of those arriving from Morelia. The result was that an autonomy based on traditional institutions of decision-making prevailed, thanks to the input from the townspeople.

Thus, in all three cases political activists and core revolutionary cadres became more receptive to input from communities and as a result they revised their vanguard positions. Contact and consultations took place in open and secret community meetings in the forest, in the mountains, in villages and neighbourhoods, and on street corners, but also through door-to-door household visits in the Kurdish case.<sup>59</sup> In Cherán, the community's input was

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59 Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, *The Daughters of Kobani: The Women Who Took on the Islamic State* (London: Swift Press, 2021); Azize Aslan, "Casa Por Casa' la autonomía kurda," *Desinformémonos*, 23-11-2021. Online at <https://desinformemonos.org/casa-por-casa>

processed through consultations on a daily basis, on every street corner, i.e., *fogatas* (interview XXIVC, 10.11.2021). In the case of the Zapatistas, initial clandestine meetings with communities have been replaced by routine community assemblies and formal *consultas*.<sup>60</sup>

The Zapatistas are known for their local, regional, national, and global consultation practices.<sup>61</sup> For instance, the decision to commence the armed rebellion of 1994<sup>62</sup> and the rejection of “the Mexican government’s first 34-point peace plan” in June 1994<sup>63</sup> were the outcome of such consultations that lasted for months. Local and regional consultations have taken place in community and municipal assemblies for political decision-making purposes. The objectives of national and international Zapatista *consultas* are different:

Zapatista representatives fanned out across the country visiting 1,299 municipalities and making contact with 64,598,409 Mexicans. Of course, the Zapatista cause had always been strong in Chiapas, neighboring Oaxaca, and among the more progressive elements of large cities such as Mexico City and Guadalajara, which had a considerable student population. The Consulta, however, forced Mexicans in many other places, very much re-moved ethnically, socially, and geopolitically from Chiapas, to think about indigenous rights. [...] The Consulta also provided many Mexicans with their first opportunity of seeing and meeting a Zapatista. As Marcos put it, “The people are going to get to know the Zapatistas, not just through the television or newspapers, but in the flesh.” In certain suburbs of certain cities, few had ever met and talked with an indigenous person. Now, people were forced to form an opinion based on fact and in some instances to come to terms with their own prejudices.<sup>64</sup>

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-la-autonomia-kurda/?fbclid=IwAR281mvPtqw33Otg48m9rVp-weKSNeqadapwIetP7xEQgHszyJyKVajZdo (last accessed 26-11-2021); Abdi and Jan, *Practical Projects*; Nicholas Ross, “Authority, Legitimacy, and Support for Armed Groups: A Case Study of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional,” *Civil Wars* 21, no. 3 (2019): 303–28.

60 Andrew Flood, “What Is It That Is Different about the Zapatistas?,” *The Anarchist Library*, 3-9-2001. Online at <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/andrew-flood-what-is-it-that-is-different-about-the-zapatistas> (last accessed 18-11-2022); Mora, “The Imagination to Listen”; Víctor Alfonso Zertuche Cobos, “¡Arriba Pichátaro! Resistencia y Lucha de Una Comunidad Indígena En Michoacán, México,” *Revista Mexicana de Estudios de Los Movimientos Sociales* 2, no. 2 (2018): 75–94.

61 Flood, “What Is It That Is Different about the Zapatistas?”

62 Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 198.

63 Stephen, *Zapata Lives!*, 159.

64 Nick Henck, *Subcommander Marcos: The Man and the Mask* (Duke University Press, 2007), 330.

As in the case of the Zapatistas, Kurdish political and military leaderships in Rojava have conveyed that they decided to establish self-defence forces and the autonomous administration after a series of consultations throughout the region. A recently published book co-authored by two top military commanders in Rojava lays bare the process through which they introduced their movement to the people in towns and cities and how their political project was shaped through input from communities:

To draw the executive plan and lay the actual projects for the implementation of the Autonomous Administration, deep discussion took place after conducting a comprehensive tour in all the Kurdish cities and regions in Afrin, Derik, Aleppo, Raqqa, Hasakah. The Theoretical Principals and The Practical Projects were written 2011 and 20,000 copies were distributed throughout Kurdistan and Syria.<sup>65</sup>

In all three cases, input from communities has facilitated a shift from grand revolutionary and state-centric agendas to searching for and offering solutions to immediate socio-political problems. For instance, in Rojava, solutions to salient problems such as the absence of a political subject that could represent the Kurds in Syria and the defence of Kurdish communities were formulated after clandestine consultations with grassroots communities,<sup>66</sup> while in Chiapas and Cherán offering solutions to the problems such as internal conflict, exploitation and the extraction of natural resources by multinationals and organised crime became the focus of movements and the autonomous administrations.<sup>67</sup> The cases thus turned away from primarily nationalist and nationwide revolutionary agendas and reliance on external support and national alliances to the objective of building autonomy through self-reliance and a wider mobilisation of their base communities around solving the salient problems faced in and by communities. This does not mean that they stopped being revolutionary, but that they no longer invested primarily in installing a top-down national revolution and started building council autonomy not only as a new form of government, but also as a new revolutionary praxis. This praxis can be defined as removing the gap between the movements and communities, both practically and ideologically, uniting them through humbling the movements.

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65 Abdi and Jan, *Practical Projects*, 13.

66 Abdi and Jan, *Practical Projects*, 26.

67 Ojeda Dávila, "Cherán," 2; Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 83.

“Accompanying” the Indigenous peoples in their quest for democracy and social justice, rather than trying to “educate,” “civilise,” and “liberate” them was reflected in *Liberation Theology*<sup>68</sup> in the 1970s in Chiapas. But the doctrine failed to articulate, in my opinion, that the Church also learned from and was transformed by their encounter with the grassroots communities. In the encounter of the revolutionaries and the communities, however, the leadership of the three cases discussed here openly express that they learn from and are transformed by one another (see the subsection on *Innovations in Leadership* below). The latter is more mutual and reciprocal. We now seldom hear the trope “creating a new subject,” that revolutionary movements embraced since Lenin.<sup>69</sup> That is how *tradition* not only made its way to the agenda of national liberation and revolutionary movements but transformed them into the democratic innovators that they are.

#### Renovating/Reinventing Mesopotamian and Mesoamerican Traditions of Democracy

An important aspect of closer contact with and input from local and cultural communities is reflected in the efforts to study, uncover, and search for alternative narratives, origins, and versions of democratic practices and institutions. As noted above, in Rojava and Chiapas, revolutionaries transformed themselves and their political goals through closer contact with and input from Mayan and Kurdish communities. Subcomandante Marcos refers to this phenomenon in one of his interviews as their “first defeat,”<sup>70</sup> while Jongerden<sup>71</sup> refers to this phenomenon in the Kurdish case as “learning from defeat.” The “defeat” was ideological in the case of the Zapatistas, military in the case of the Kurdish movement in Northern Kurdistan, and political in the case of Cherán. The people who directed the movement towards autonomy in Cherán had withdrawn from political parties in the run up to the 2008 municipal elections amidst a violent competition that caused murder and disappearances, as they became convinced that party politics was not only failing to offer any solutions to the issues of illegal resource extraction and the violence that accompanied

68 Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 10–11.

69 Ryan Chapman, “Socialism: An In-Depth Explanation,” YouTube, 28-8-2022. Online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrBRV3WK2x4> (last accessed 15-9-2022).

70 Marcos and Le Bot, *El Sueño Zapatista*, 63.

71 Joost Jongerden, “Learning from Defeat: Development and Contestation of the ‘New Paradigm’ within Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK),” *Kurdish Studies Journal* 7, no. 1 (2019): 72–92.

it, but also creating, exacerbating, and perpetuating division and conflict within the town.<sup>72</sup>

This should not be interpreted as the elevation of *the folk* to a mythical position in which they possess a superior form of wisdom. Neither should it be interpreted as if the connection of local communities with nature put them in a position where only they could inspire holistic political programs and actions. It should be taken as an account of how political action ceased to be only about abstract ideals, universal goals, and national revolutions once members of the movements realised that they must offer solutions to the problems on the ground and started developing the capacity to do so, but only in ever closer cooperation and collaboration with the wider sections of the society to which they belonged.

The Kurdish movement, for instance, reached back to “their” (be it invented or inherited) Mesopotamian and even Neolithic roots to develop a home-made model of political community.<sup>73</sup> This undertaking reflects the conviction that the Kurdish model is and should be based on a democratic revolution rooted in community values and institutions. “The Rojava revolution,” a participant notes, “springs from its own roots” (*kökleri üzerinde yeşeren bir devrim*, interview IIR1, 06.12.2020). The participant noted that the Rojavans have been receptive of the model of Democratic Confederalism because they see its architect, the leader of the Kurdish movement Abdullah Öcalan, not exclusively as a leader but as *one of them*, for he lived there for decades and took the contemporary and historical socio-political structures in Kurdistan into account while developing the model.

Participants in Rojava conveyed their accounts of how communities, especially women, were enthusiastically embracing the Rojava model because they found the promotion of women’s emancipation and of decision-making via public assemblies familiar and empowering. Kurdistan and Mesopotamia, according to these accounts, already had practices and institutions of governance through public assemblies and a gender-balanced co-chairpersonship. One participant, a scholar from the Academy of Jineolojî who spent three years in Rojava to do research and partake in academic activities gave three examples to illustrate how the people in Rojava have likened existing or historical social

72 Ojeda Dávila, “Cherán,” 9.

73 Eleonora Gea Piccardi and Stefania Barca, “Jin-Jiyar-Azadi. Matrilineal Culture and Democratic Confederalism in Rojava,” *Sustainability Science* 17 (2022): 1273–1285; Marlies Casier, “Beyond Kurdistan? The Mesopotamia Social Forum and the Appropriation and Re-Imagination of Mesopotamia by the Kurdish Movement,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 13, no. 4 (2011): 417–32; Abdullah Öcalan, *Kapitalist Modernitenin Aşılma Sorunları ve Demokratikleşme* (Unspecified: Sterkaciwana, 2012).

practices and institutions to the newly installed ones. First, the large houses in villages where people used to gather to address social and political issues are deemed as institutions of direct democratic self-rule and are considered the equivalent of *mala gel*, i.e., the institution of the “public house,” now open to all in villages and neighbourhoods in Rojava. Second, gathering beneath trees under the guidance of prominent women to address certain issues, I was told, used to be a common practice in Rojava. This practice is deemed as the institution of women’s agency and autonomy and the predecessor of autonomous women’s organisations. And third, the concepts of *por sipî* and *rû sipî* (Kurdish for community elders, literally white-haired [women] and white-bearded [men]), along with a figurine of a woman and a man unearthed in Tell Halaf (Kurdish Tel Xelef; Arabic حلف تل), an archaeological site in the Al Hasakah region, constitute the equivalence of co-chairpersonship of women and men, as evidence of the existence of gender-balanced leadership (interview IIR1, 6.12.2020).

Kurdish movements in Turkey and Syria have been actively creating new narratives of Kurdishness and alternative political spaces, with references to Mesopotamian traditions and institutions, to surpass the contemporary configurations of identity and political space established by nation-states.<sup>74</sup> As Hammy and Miley have observed, Öcalan has made great efforts to

unearth and revive libertarian and communal traditions in the Middle East in general and in Kurdistan in particular [...] to revive, and democratize, the legacy of resistance and rebellion of the “elements of democratic civilization,” in a democratic confederalist model, opposed to the model of the nation-state, since the nation-state seeks to assimilate and eradicate the ethnic and religious diversity of the region.<sup>75</sup>

The accounts above reflect these attempts initiated by the political leadership. While further research must be done to establish these historical connections more robustly, their political significance lies in the fact that they inform us about how the Rojava model comes to be seen as legitimate on the ground.

Participants in Cherán and Chiapas pointed out, without hesitation, that the direct democratic institutions they set up were traditional mechanisms of decision-making that had been swept away by colonisation. A participant in Chiapas, who had come from Mexico City to assist the Zapatistas in technical issues, reiterated that decision-making through community assemblies has

74 Piccardi and Barca, “Jin-Jiyar-Azadi”; Casier, “Beyond Kurdistan?”; Hammy and Miley, “Lessons From Rojava”

75 Hammy and Miley, “Lessons From Rojava,” 3.

been an Indigenous practice throughout Mexico since time immemorial, and that they either survived despite the continuous threat of erasure posed by institutions and practices of colonial and national politics or are being revived in Chiapas and elsewhere (interview XXXXIZ8, 22.12.2021). Members of the *Consejo Mayor* in Cherán were adamant, upon my specific inquiry into the origins of councils and assemblies there, that the institutions of the autonomous administration were not inspired by colonial or national templates but that the decision-making institutions were excavated from their traditions (interview XXC6, 6.11.2021). Another participant conveyed that the *fogatas* are not just public spaces where people gather to light bonfires, consult, and protect the town when the need arises, but that this institution has a special place in the P'urhépecha culture as the fire and the life that is established around it used to be sacred (interview XXIVC10, 10.11.2021). The *fogata* is now renovated as the basic social and political institution through which certain elements of the P'urhépecha culture survive and perhaps flourish. The *fogatas* and neighbourhood assemblies in Cherán and the community assemblies in Chiapas must be seen in this light, as traditional institutions of democratic decision-making of the Indigenous communities.

### *Women's Struggles and the Emergence of Council Autonomy*

The role of women's struggles for freedom, equality, and justice in the establishment of council autonomies helps us track how the concept and institutions of *autonomy*, the fundamental principles and institutions underpinning council autonomy, replaced those of *sovereignty*. We will see that this is a major transformation that has helped the movements locate democratic politics in practices of pluralistic autonomy based on direct democracy rather than the monistic effects of sovereignty based on representative democracy.

The salient common dynamic that enabled the movements to prioritise autonomy over sovereignty is the crucial role women played. In Rojava, there are women-only armed forces and councils, veto rights for women's organizations during legislation, and equal representation of women in public offices and administrative positions. As Gunes and Bayır note, "crimes against women are prosecuted by women, women-only peace committees deal with family issues, gender-based violence, domestic violence and forced marriage," and a women-only police force (*asayîşa jinê*) was established to enforce progressive laws on women rights.<sup>76</sup>

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76 Cengiz Gunes and Derya Bayır, "Democratic Autonomy in Kurdish Regions of Syria," in *Non-Territorial Autonomy and Decentralization: Ethno-Cultural Diversity Governance*, ed. Tove H. Malloy and Levente Salat, First (London: Routledge, 2020), 127.

Similar developments are observable in Cherán and Chiapas, although structurally they have not adopted the same institutional framework. There are shortcomings in implementation, though. In Rojava, non-Kurdish communities and communities that are not affiliated with the Kurdish movement may not be receptive to gender equality, but door-to-door visits, academic activities, and consensus building on gender equality are some mechanisms geared to carry out changes on the ground. In Rojava, Cherán, and Chiapas, just as in the rest of the world, patriarchal gender roles still hinder women's participation in certain spheres of life. In Rojava and Cherán, LGBTQI+ and non-binary individuals are still invisible, although "the perception among the legal parties of the [Kurdish] movement has shifted considerably."<sup>77</sup> The Zapatistas have lately been more specific about addressing this invisibility. Their journey to Europe known as *El viaje por la Vida* (The Journey for Life) in the fall of 2021, the 500th anniversary of the colonization of Mexico, started with a group of seven designated as the Zapatista Maritime Delegation/the 421st Squadron travelling from Mexico to Spain and beyond via the sea. The 421st Squadron had a non-binary member, Marijose, who was introduced as "one *other (unoa otroa)*" on the Zapatistas' website and would be the first to disembark when their boat *La Montaña* arrived in Spain:

Thus, our first footstep on European soil (assuming of course they even let us disembark) will not be that of a man, nor that of a woman, but that of an *other [otroa]*. In what the late SupMarcos would have called a "slap in the face of the hetero-patriarchal left," it has been decided that the first person to disembark will be Marijose.<sup>78</sup>

In 1994, together with their first declaration, the Zapatistas passed a Women's Revolutionary Law comprised of ten articles, proclaiming that "women have all the rights and obligations set out by the revolutionary laws and regulations."<sup>79</sup>

How does women's struggle factor in democratic innovations? The struggles of women within the movements created a path-dependency towards the primacy of autonomy. This is particularly palpable in the Kurdish case, where women actors and organisations challenged the domination of men throughout decades, risking backlash from their male comrades and even expulsion

77 Nadjé Al-Ali and Isabel Käser, "Beyond Feminism? Jineolojî and the Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement," *Politics and Gender*, 2020, 24.

78 SupGaleano, "421st Squadron," *Enlace Zapatista*, 20-4-2021. Online at <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2021/04/20/421st-squadron/> (last accessed 18-9-2022).

79 Stephen, *Zapata Lives!*, 156.

for pushing agendas of women's emancipation.<sup>80</sup> In time, though, the dominant Kurdish political movements in Northern and Western Kurdistan "started a process of 'double liberation' (national and women's)."<sup>81</sup> This is particularly important for the replacement of centralised institutions of sovereignty with those of autonomy. Although "female combatants state that their participation in armed struggle is in itself an example of their liberation from patriarchal control,"<sup>82</sup> centralised political and military institutions continued to be dominated by men until women started organising themselves autonomously within the institutional structures of the Kurdish movement (interview VR4, 12.2.2021). As Graeber points out rather playfully, thanks to the struggle of the women in their ranks, the Kurdish movement, as an anti-capitalist struggle, has come to the realisation that: "You can't get rid of capitalism without getting rid of the state, and you can't get rid of the state without getting rid of patriarchy. Well, how do you get rid of patriarchy? Well, making sure that all women have access to automatic weapons is one place to start. You really can't push people around when they are armed."<sup>83</sup> This realisation was reached partly due to women's insistence on having their autonomous organisations in military, social, and political spheres.

Graeber and Wengrow's emphasis on "the feminist anthropologist Eleanor Leacock's suggestion that most members of what are called egalitarian societies seem less interested in equality per se than what she calls 'autonomy'" is instructive here: what might matter for women in the communities Leacock drew on was "not so much whether men and women are seen to be of equal status but whether women are, individually or collectively, able to live their lives and make their own decisions without male interference."<sup>84</sup> A similar but more nuanced insight was conveyed in my interview above, where the participant stated that during her stay with the Kurdish guerrillas, she witnessed that with regard to certain aspects of the guerrilla life, women and men were organised separately; because, for a variety of reasons, autonomous organisation of women and men took on a rhythm of its own, indicating that certain analysis of gender relations and roles are done better autonomously by both sides (Interview VR4, 12.2.2021).

80 Sakine Cansız, *Sara: My Whole Life Was a Struggle* (London: Pluto Press, 2018); Aysel Tuğluk, "Where Will You Find That Many Women?," *Middle East Report* 295 (2020).

81 Nazand Begikhani, Wendelmoet Hamelink, Nerina Weiss, "Theorising Women and War in Kurdistan: A Feminist and Critical Perspective," *Kurdish Studies* 6, no. 1 (2018): 13.

82 Begikhani, Hamelink, Weiss, "Theorising Women and War in Kurdistan," 10.

83 David Graeber, "Syria, Anarchism and Visiting Rojava," YouTube, 30-5-2017, 06:00. Online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqfoJvD0Ifg> (last accessed 18-4-2022).

84 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 139.

Thus, the struggle of women to organise autonomously within the Kurdish movement created a path dependency, which implies that “choices formed when an institution is being formed, or when a policy is being formulated, have a constraining effect into the future.”<sup>85</sup> Autonomous women’s organisations have thus led to the entrenchment of the principle of autonomy because once it emerged, its practice became norm-setting (see Çağlayan<sup>86</sup> about how discussions within the Kurdish movement were first *about* and then *with* women, until finally women started speaking and acting *as* women). This norm-setting culminated in the institutionalisation of autonomy by the Rojava administration. This policy is now turning into a constitutional principle, replacing the concept and institutions of sovereignty with those of autonomy.<sup>87</sup>

In Cherán, the sense that autonomy of the community is more important than equality in existing institutions also came to the fore in my interviews with women participants. A civil society organiser reflected the common sentiment amongst the participants when she spoke of the pain and suffering they had endured throughout decades because they strived for self-determination (interview XXVIIIIC5, 5.11.2021). Physical assaults against and disappearances of the townspeople by organised crime, the security apparatus of the state, and those controlling political institutions, the participant said, were daily atrocities, demonstrating the inability or unwillingness of the pre-2011 political institutions to provide the townspeople with a sense security and dignity. Community self-rule and collective control and use of natural resources were the main concerns for women who spearheaded the mobilisation of 15 April 2011, which led to the formal declaration of autonomy in Cherán. An

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85 Ian Greener, “The Potential of Path Dependence in Political Studies,” *Political Studies* 25, no. 1 (2005): 62.

86 Handan Çağlayan, *Women in the Kurdish Movement: Mothers, Comrades, Goddesses* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 69–71.

87 While in the 2014 version of the Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (see footnote 10) the concept of sovereignty was mentioned several times in references to provinces and the Syrian state, in the 2016 version there is no reference to it. Article 3 says that “The democratic federalism of northern Syria draws its legitimacy from the will of peoples and groups through free and democratic elections.” It refers to legitimacy only, and not to ‘the sovereignty of the nation’ or ‘of the people’. Article 7 says that “‘The Democratic Federalism of Northern Syria’ consists of cantons based on democratic self-administrations, which depend on the democratic organizations of ideological, ethnic, feminine, cultural groups, and all social segments.” Here, democratic self-administrations refers to the concept and institutions of autonomy, indicating that autonomy now replaces sovereignty in the document. See *Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria*, 2014. Online at <https://internationalistcommune.com/social-contract/> (last accessed 20.11.2022).

autonomous women's organisation has not emerged yet, partly because safeguarding and strengthening communal autonomy remains the priority. A participant told me that although they would not necessarily call themselves feminists, there are several women organised with the agenda of discussing gender equality. However, she added that they have not decided to make themselves known publicly yet, and that "gender inequality is always there, palpable in the air during council and assembly meetings, but no one speaks about it" (interview XXXIVC20, 26.11.2021). Also, the members of the Women's Council (*Consejo de las Mujeres*) I interviewed defined their roles as supporting families and providing social care and services to those in need, thus indicating that the Women's Council was not primarily tasked with representing women's interests within the administration. Rather, their responsibility was providing care for the family and the community (Interview XIXC5, 6.11.2021). In an interview with members of the High Council (*Consejo Mayor*), they noted that the number of women in the High Council increased to five in 2021 (the council has twelve members), a considerable rise in comparison to the previous terms during which there were two women in the council (interview XXC6, 6.11.2021). Upon the question how gender inequality was viewed and addressed by the administration, they said that there was no proactive approach in that regard, as members of the councils were serving "the community as a whole and in unity and agreement." They stated that women were previously relegated to private spaces, "used to tend to their houses and families" and were not working in public offices; but that as the administration was now more open to the participation of women in public offices, this was changing (interview XXC6, 6.11.2021). It is noteworthy that the female member mentioned the existence of *machismo*, after noting that women were much freer in the town compared to before 2011 (interview XXC6, 6.11.2021). Taken together, my interviews with the Women's Council and the High Council indicate that as there was no proactive policy towards addressing gender disparity, women's participation in the administration lagged behind men's. While all councils had women members, the ratios favoured men. Also, public posts involving care and family support were predominantly occupied by women. This is unlikely to change unless a proactive approach to gender inequality is adopted.

### *Consultation and Self-Criticism*

I discussed the practices of consultation and deliberation between the movements and communities above. Here, I would like to analyse how hierarchical and militaristic organisations in Chiapas and Rojava managed to establish autonomous administrations based on horizontal and pluralistic institutions of direct decision-making. Direct democratic practices and processes were

neither simply imported from other democracies, nor were they exclusively traditional practices and institutions. They were, at least partly, also modelled upon guerrilla practices and institutions.

All three autonomous administrations adopted mechanisms of consultation and self-criticism into institutions of decision-making after proclaiming autonomy.<sup>88</sup> The point here is that direct democratic institutions within the autonomous administrations bear the mark of movement practices and institutions that existed before the proclamations of autonomy. In other words, democratic institutions were not completely installed anew after proclamations, but are, to some extent, adaptations of movement and leadership practices.

The positive effect of this aspect is that it facilitated the transition to democracy. But there are negative effects, too. To what extent participants can feel free about speaking their mind is the first question that needs to be addressed. In representative democracies, there are remedies such as legislative immunity. It remains to be seen what remedies direct democratic institutions within the autonomous administrations will offer to counter the negative effects of peer pressure, expectations of ideological and organisational loyalty, and the domination of the majority opinion. These dynamics do not apply in the same manner to Cherán as they did not have a military organisation prior to the proclamation of autonomy. But peer pressure and the domination of majority opinion are issues to be addressed there too.

### *Collective Leadership and the End/Weakening of Political Party Rule*

The movements explored here initiated a different understanding of political leadership and organisation that culminated in reducing the role of political parties in autonomous administrations, giving primacy to organs of self-government based on direct democracy. Popular assemblies and delegatory councils started channelling the political will of the citizenry directly into self-government, instead of confining the exercise of political will within representative institutions, political parties, and electoral processes.

When asked “Why do the Zapatistas wear ski masks?” Subcomandante Marcos replied, “We have to be careful that nobody tries to be the main leader.

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88 Cihad Hammy, “The First Commune in Kobane: Construction and Challenges,” *Open Democracy*, 3-9-2018. Online at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/first-commune-in-kobane-construction-and-challenges/> (last accessed 12-5-2022); Hammy and Miley, “Lessons From Rojava”; Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 75.

Our leadership is a collective.”<sup>89</sup> In Cherán a council of twelve, the *Consejo Mayor de Gobierno*, leads the town. There is no single leader. In Rojava, Öcalan is the spiritual leader, but no one else assumes the role of a permanent leader, and term limits and rotations create a circulation.<sup>90</sup> Collective leadership appears to take precedence over one-leader/one-party rule. Collective leadership might not appear as much of an improvement in democratic politics at first glance, but this form of leadership should be evaluated with the context in mind, where leadership has traditionally been determined by the privileges of birth, wealth, and power, depending on whether the salient form of leadership is *caudillismo*,<sup>91</sup> nobility, or clientelism.<sup>92</sup>

One mechanism designed to stamp out political careerism is non-paid public office. In the case of the Zapatistas, public offices rotate and there is no regular payment as a wage, but those who serve are compensated.<sup>93</sup> In Cherán, members are not paid wages but are compensated for their time and efforts via the distribution of the budget that used to be paid to a single officer amongst all member of the councils. Additionally, council members can be recalled any time if they do not perform their duties well. Indeed, two had been relieved of their duties in previous years (interview XXIVC10, 10.11.2021). In Rojava, with a view to “preventing careerism and power concentration, people performing administrative functions tend to be remunerated in kind instead of salaries.”<sup>94</sup> However, paid office has become much more common since 2015 and there is increasing criticism about the risky direction the economy has taken towards reliance on oil revenues.<sup>95</sup> Political regimes that depend on oil revenues for public spending tend to fall into a vicious cycle of authoritarianism, corruption, economic instability and civil wars. This phenomenon is known as the “oil curse” in the literature.<sup>96</sup> Norway and Scotland, the only two oil-rich countries that have not succumbed to the oil curse, arguably owe this to their strong democracy and a diversified economy. In Rojava, where democracy is under construction and the economy is not diversified, dependency on oil revenues would pose a grave risk.

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89 Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 6–7.

90 Ali B., “Eroding the State in Rojava,” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 1 (2016): 4.

91 Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, 374–454.

92 Matthieu Cimino, *Syria: Borders, Boundaries, and the State* (Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 210.

93 Flood, “What Is It That Is Different about the Zapatistas?”

94 Unspecified, “Rojava,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 26, no. 1 (2015): 3.

95 Hammy and Miley, “Lessons From Rojava for the Paradigm of Social Ecology.”

96 Sarah Peck and Sarah Chayes, *The Oil Curse: A Remedial Role for the Oil Industry* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015).

Of the three cases, the Zapatistas, and the town of Cherán have completely ousted political parties. The Zapatistas were not involved in party politics from the onset, while the town of Cherán leadership used to be in party politics until 2008.<sup>97</sup> In Rojava, Allsopp and Wilgenburg note that “the public involvement of the PYD in decision-making itself diminished and, in its place TEV-DEM, the institutions of state and local communes assumed primary decision-making roles.”<sup>98</sup> Self-rule is exercised through a variety of institutions and mechanisms made up of three columns and dual mechanisms.<sup>99</sup> The columns are civil society organizations and political parties who participate in decision-making processes from sub-district councils upwards. Delegates are sent directly from communes and neighbourhood assemblies to councils and can be recalled any time. Also, women’s councils have the right to veto laws in cantonal and regional legislatures. In other words, political parties have limited power due to quotas, councils with veto privileges, and direct participation of civil society in the decision-making processes. Nevertheless, studies also document that the PYD is criticised for imposing a one-party rule.<sup>100</sup>

It is important to stress that while political parties are not ruling at all or alone in the three cases, there is state presence in the autonomous regions, like schools, other bureaucratic offices, an airport in the city of Qamishli in Rojava, and political party offices etc. This is due to the paradigm of coexistence with the state, rather than the negation of it (interview VIR5, 2.3.2021). In Cherán and Chiapas, too, the understanding is not that of complete isolation from and negation of the state, but not submission to it. In Cherán several participants felt the need to emphasise that their struggle was not against the state. However, neither the federal nor the state authorities enter Cherán without informing and seeking consent of the town administration, a member of the Council of Procurement, Mediation, Surveillance and Justice (*Consejo de Procuración, Mediación, Vigilancia y Justicia*) told me in an interview. In criminal justice matters, they cooperate with the federal and state governments but do not allow law enforcement from outside the town enter Cherán (interview XXVC11, 12.11.2021).

97 Diana Guillén, “Societies in Movement vs. Institutional Continuities? Insights from the Zapatista Experience,” *Latin American Perspectives* 44, no. 4 (2017): 114–38; Román-Burgos, “We Are Indigenous of the Purhépecha.”

98 Allsopp and Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria*, 64.

99 Rojava Information Center, “Beyond the Frontlines.”

100 Allsopp and Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria*, 74.

*Pluricentralisation, Consensus Building, and Reconciliation*

To avoid the emergence of a sovereign entity that might lay claim to being the supreme authority, council autonomies arrange political institutions in a manner to allow three mechanisms of generating authority: bottom-up grassroots organs, layered delegatory organs, and top-down representative organs. Thus, in council autonomies, authority neither *only* flows from bottom to top, nor *only* the other way around, nor is it *only* generated at every layer of the administrative pyramid. Authority is generated at every layer *and* flows from both ends of the administrative pyramid, thus combining the three loci and two directions of generation and flow of political authority.

Council autonomies prioritize consensus while making decisions, rather than enabling certain authorities to assert supremacy. While technical matters can be left to the care of committees of experts and individuals with relevant skills, political issues have been subject to deliberations and consensus-building.<sup>101</sup> Councils and assemblies higher on the chain of political institutions ideally cannot unilaterally impose rules and regulations on grassroots assemblies without their approval, save the cases where human rights, for instance of women and children, are at stake (interview IVR3, 31.3.2021). But consensus here does not imply that decisions are made by unanimous vote, which is the shortcut to the tyranny of one person. Rather, decisions are made through a process of discovering an “overlapping consensus” à la Rawls, which “includes all the opposing philosophical and religious doctrines”<sup>102</sup> in the process of discussion and deliberation. A decision is made nonetheless to move forward with the issue at hand, through finding a common ground.

Consensus building is not confined to the political sphere in Rojava. It permeates the justice system through peace committees and platforms that mediate solutions and seek reconciliations for conflicts. These roles have traditionally been played by community leaders, elders, members of the religious establishment, and other notables in Kurdistan. The first peace committees in Rojava appeared during the 1990s, initially dealing “with cases of theft and violence, accidents and blood feuds,” and finally becoming “the ‘go-to’ places for obtaining justice” after the autonomous administration was established.<sup>103</sup> As part of the administrative structure, the peace committees

101 Graeber, “Syria, Anarchism and Visiting Rojava.”

102 John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1985): 225.

103 Michael Knapp and Joost Jongerden, “Peace Committees, Platforms and the Political Ordering of Society: Doing Justice in the Federation of Northern and Eastern Syria (NES),” *Kurdish Studies* 8, no. 2 (2020): 301.

can start a mediation process or make binding decisions on the condition that both parties agree beforehand to bring the case to the committee. The commune and neighbourhood peace committees generally do not issue fines or punishments; they function with the intention of conflict mediation and resolution, within which context financial compensations may be agreed. After a case has been accepted, the committee hears the parties involved, organises a hearing at which both parties are present, listens to any witnesses and examines documents and any other information related to the case before it takes a decision. Decisions made can be appealed by either of the parties.<sup>104</sup>

Analogous to the framework of political reconciliation devised by Özçelik,<sup>105</sup> the justice system in Rojava reflects an inclusive pluralism. Instead of rigidly implementing the standard criminal procedure in a typical legal order that is comprised of investigation by law enforcement, prosecution by state attorneys, and trial in courts, justice is also sought through cultural and traditional mechanisms and procedures.<sup>106</sup> The practice and process bring together political and judicial procedures and mechanisms of decision-making, mediation, and reconciliation. In that sense, the practice meets “the needs of transitioning, conflict-prone, or postconflict societies” via “[r]endering reconciliation meaningful [...] through adopting the agonistic view of [...] the ever-present reality of pluralism in public life.”<sup>107</sup> In other words, by adopting a pluralistic justice procedure to address conflict and crime, Rojava offers “a practicable, creative, problem-oriented approach” to criminal justice that promotes “a new collective ‘we’ that is inclusive and representative.”<sup>108</sup>

Thus, the justice system offers more than implementing the law of the victor and at least in certain matters, a plurality of values and procedures take precedence. This plurality is also reflected in the reports on religious freedom and cultural autonomy, which demonstrate that religious communities are either protected by the armed forces in Rojava, or they are encouraged to defend themselves, as the administration offers to provide them with means of armed

104 Knapp and Jongerden, “Peace Committees, Platforms”, 303–4.

105 Burcu Özçelik, “What Can a Political Form of Reconciliation Look Like in Divided Societies?: The Deliberative ‘Right to Justification’ and Agonistic Democracy,” *Democratic Theory* 9, no. 1 (2022): 52–72.

106 Knapp and Jongerden, “Peace Committees, Platforms”; Gunes and Bayır, “Democratic Autonomy.”

107 Özçelik, “What Can a Political Form of Reconciliation Look Like?,” 54.

108 Özçelik, “What Can a Political Form of Reconciliation Look Like?,” 55.

self-defence.<sup>109</sup> Exceptions are violations of fundamental human rights and crimes against women (investigated by all-women councils and committees) and children, which are investigated and prosecuted without room for reconciliation otherwise.<sup>110</sup>

### Arguments and Critiques

My research findings allow me to draw a few generalisations informed by the cases. First, council autonomies have innovated democracy through renovating traditional and communal mechanisms and institutions of decision-making, thanks to input from local and cultural communities. Arendt's account of the council system and relevant scholarship negates non-Western repositories of democratic politics. This is due to the Western-centric narratives of democracy built on the assumption that the Enlightenment ushered in an era of scientific discovery in which universal and abstract notions of rights and freedoms rendered traditional foundations of political organisation obsolete and irrelevant.<sup>111</sup> Hence, modern and pre-modern contributions of colonised peoples and minorities to democratic theory have largely been absent in scholarship.

However, recent scholarship demonstrates that democracy was not born in ancient Athens, as it emerges in all continents in its direct and representative forms throughout history.<sup>112</sup> Graeber and Wengrow point out that because Western notions of equality and freedom were developed as a response to the "Indigenous critique" of European societies, they have not taken "seriously contributions to social thought that come from outside the European canon, and in particular from those [I]ndigenous peoples whom Western philosophers tend to cast either in the role of history's angels or its devils."<sup>113</sup> Following this contribution to scholarship, the main argument of this paper is that the three

109 Nadine Maenza, "Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria" U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 10-6-2020. Online at [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Nadine Maenza Updated Hearing NE Syria Opening Remarks June 2020\\_0.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Nadine%20Maenza%20Updated%20Hearing%20NE%20Syria%20Opening%20Remarks%20June%202020_0.pdf) (last accessed 18-11-2022).

110 Rojava Information Center, "Beyond the Frontlines"; Graeber, "Syria, Anarchism and Visiting Rojava."

111 Ian Shapiro, "Introductory Lecture," *Yale Courses*, 5-4-2011, 35:40. Online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u3-naV8kF2g&list=PL2FD48CE33DFBEA7E&index=2> (last accessed 18-11-2022).

112 Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, x; Glassman, *The Origins of Democracy in Tribes, City-States and Nation-States*, 706-707; Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 30.

113 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 19.

cases investigated here bring non-Western origins, concepts, and institutions of democratic politics back to life and to the discussion. As Mesoamerican and Mesopotamian democratic traditions helped build council autonomies, democratic theory must engage non-Western versions of democracy.

Second, council autonomies are based on direct political participation through communes, assemblies, and councils as plural and horizontal political institutions. This is at odds with the principle of parliamentary sovereignty based on a single, monistic supreme authority nationwide and a vertical organisation of hierarchical state bureaucracy. Yet, council autonomies seek reconciliation with Mexican and Syrian political orders. Therefore, the secondary argument of this paper is that council autonomies have the potential to contribute to democratization in their respective regions. For instance, Cherán is not an isolated case – although there are reasons for it becoming the most celebrated one – but a link in a chain that has been in the making by the P'urhépecha communities throughout the state of Michoacán in Mexico. The communities of Nurio and Santa Fe in Michoacán established communal forms of government before Cherán, while more than a dozen P'urhépecha towns, inspired by Cherán, have been striving to establish their forms of communal government since the early 2010s (interview XXXC16, 20.11.2021). Also, cultural revival and solidarity between communities have gained ground. The Rojava and Zapatista autonomies also have served as models and inspirations for direct democratic endeavours since their emergence.<sup>114</sup>

Third, while the project of liberal multiculturalism creates nation-statelets and nation-building enclaves out of permanent minorities through territorial and cultural autonomy, the politics of the Zapatistas and Rojava question the majority-minority divide itself. This is a promising attempt to alleviate the tensions that arise from competing claims to sovereignty inherent in nationalist projects and identity politics.

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114 Mehmet Altan, "Ortadoğ'u'nun Yeni Modeli: Kürtler," *Ilke Haber*, 24-11-2014. Online at <http://www.ilkehaber.com/yazi/ortadogunun-yeni-modeli-kurtler-12260.htm> (last accessed 18-11-2022); June Nash, "The Fiesta of the Word: The Zapatista Uprising and Radical Democracy in Mexico," *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 2 (1997): 261-74; Stephen E. Hunt, "Prospects for Kurdish Ecology Initiatives in Syria and Turkey: Democratic Confederalism and Social Ecology," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 30, no. 3 (2019): 7-26.

## Critiques

Problems with direct democratic decision-making have been well-articulated by critics of democracy since Plato's *The Republic*, chief among them being the tyranny of the majority.<sup>115</sup> Notably, James Madison, Alexis De Tocqueville, and Hannah Arendt discuss common issues associated with democratic government in detail.<sup>116</sup> The main issues are that individuals can (i) feel the weight of the prevailing/majority opinion in public deliberations, or worse, (ii) be or feel pressured into submission to the prevailing/majority opinion, (iii) feel that meetings are formalities only and that the decision has already been made, (iv) feel that what they have to say is not going to matter anyway because the supporters will overwhelm opposition by force if necessary, (v) feel overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the supporters of the regime, (vi) feel that some very active individuals take more time and speak more frequently than others, (vii) feel that good speakers/demagogues and charismatic individuals or those commending significant wealth, support, power, and prestige bend the process towards their interests, (viii) the voices of women and youth might be suppressed due to patriarchy and tradition.

Another important issue is that the mechanism of self-criticism in the Kurdish case was designed to ensure conformity with the movement's ideology and loyalty to the leadership(s). The mechanism can weigh heavily on unconvinced individuals and communities due to the risk of peer pressure and ideological inflexibility, and hence might discourage free speech. I was not able to dwell on this issue in my interviews, but I experienced both pressures as a participant observer.

Symptoms of the issues mentioned above can be observed in all cases. In Rojava, issues such as the perception that the communes "forced" participation through the control of "subsidized products such as sugar, fuel and aid", that communes appear to local residents interviewed and surveyed by the authors "as means of social control rather than of liberation", that participants did not believe that they had influence on the outcomes of decision-making processes or that "some people did not feel free to express their opinions"

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115 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001[1859]); James Madison, "No. 47," in *The Federalist*, ed. George W. Carey and James McClellan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 249–55; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010[1835]), 410–15.

116 Arendt, *On Revolution*, 239–48.

come to the fore in a recent study.<sup>117</sup> Further empirical research will be needed to see how the autonomous administrations will address the issues and criticisms above.

### Concluding Remarks

The Mayan, the P'urhépecha, and Kurdish autonomous administrations have innovated democracy partly by renovating and reinventing traditional and ancient democratic institutions such as communal and neighbourhood assemblies and delegatory councils, communal care for and use of natural resources, and self-defence. Practices such as self-criticism (primarily in Kurdistan) and public consultation (primarily in Mexico) enabled the political leaderships to adapt to the new geopolitical realities after the end of the Cold War. They strengthened self-reliance through closer contact with and input from grassroots communities thanks to public gatherings and consultations. On the one hand, closer contact with and input from communities enabled the revolutionary cadres to access traditional repositories of democracy dormant within communal practices and institutions. The by-product of this process was that the liberation movements started to exercise a form of decision-making based on deliberation long before proclaiming autonomy. Thus, democratic decision-making became part of the *modus operandi* of the movements, rather than being solely the end product of the political struggle for liberation. On the other hand, the emergence of autonomous women's organisations within the liberation movements ushered in a political culture that prioritised autonomy over sovereignty as the foundational political principle. Ultimately, a form of government based on communal autonomy and control over natural resources, self-defence, public freedom, women's emancipation, and direct democracy has taken shape, culminating in the establishment of council autonomies. In the face of these developments, democratic theory must engage non-Western traditions of and experiments with democracy to account for their contributions.

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117 Allsopp and Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria*, 145.

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## Book Reviews



Marouf Cabi, *The Formation of Modern Kurdish Society in Iran: Modernity, Modernization and Social Change 1921–1979*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2022, vi + 217 pp., ISBN: 9780755642243.

*Modernity* and *Modernization* are two central analytical themes in the study of contemporary Iran. They are employed to describe a range of social and political transformations in between two momentous revolutions of the 20th Century: The Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911 and the 1979 Revolution. Though there is some consensus on the social and political transformational power of the *modernity* and *modernization* projects, their impacts and robustness are nevertheless contested. The Constitutional Revolution delineated Iran's modern national identity, though it remained unfinished, especially in the separation of state and religion; in guaranteeing the full citizenship rights; in ending the despotic monarchical rule, and in promoting a mode of secular and rational thinking and governance. Nonetheless, it is agreed that even its incomplete success eased the process of *modernization* in the early Pahlavi era (1921–1941) as a centralized state plan to reform penal and civil codes, education, health, social welfare, military, and to expand urbanization, railroad system, and other infrastructural developments. Urban and middle-class women became one of the largest beneficiaries of such broad reforms. Reza Shah, the first king of the Pahlavi dynasty, forcefully banned the veil in 1936 and three decades later, in 1963, women gained the right to vote as part of the second Pahlavi Monarch's (1941–1979) massive social and economic *modernization* reform called the White Revolution. In this context, it is judicious to conclude that Iran has experienced a fragmentary *modernity* and *modernization* where neither its *modernity* was fully supplemented by *modernization*, nor its *modernization* embodied philosophical, political, and cultural thought and praxis of *modernity*.

*The Formation of Modern Kurdish Society in Iran: Modernity, Modernization and Social Change 1921–1979* is analytically and historically situated in this

context and presents us with a set of new arguments through the experience of Kurdish society. The key argument is the 'dual process' characteristic of socio-economic *integration* of Kurdish society into modern Iran and the process of cultural and political *resistance* of the Kurds to the homogenizing modernization plan. Cabi contends that understanding this duality will help us avoid the ubiquitous adversarial approach of the Kurds to the modernization policy and suggests instead that "we need to look at the dialectics of the dual process, because the Kurdish society of the second half of the century is effectively a synthesis of the multifaceted process" (p. 168). In this articulation, Cabi critiques the Iranian state's nationalist, integrationist and centralized plan as well as the Kurdish nationalism that has overlooked the impact of modernization on the social, cultural, and economic life of the Kurds. He argues that the "political landscape of the Kurdish region was profoundly altered in the decades following the Constitutional Revolution" (p. 18). However, he adds, it was during the reign of Reza Shah that Kurdish "tribes' military and political power declined as the result of a centralizing and modernizing state's oppressive policies, as well as socio-economic transformation" (p. 22). He shows that the shift in power did not result in change in the class composition of feudal Kurdish society and that most peasants remained under the oppressive rule of the *aghas* and *sheikhs* (landlords and religious leaders). Cabi argues a more substantial social and economic change ensued as a result of the large-scale modernization plan of the White Revolution in the 1960s.

Cabi advances several important arguments on the paradoxical consequences of the forced state modernization of Kurdish society. First, in this process the Kurdish region of Iran was separated from "other Kurdish communities in adjacent regions" (p. 22). Second, this process invented Kurds as 'ethnic minority' or *aqaliat-e qaumi* which justifies "the Kurds' marginalized position in the modern nation state of Iran, as well as political suppression and militarization" (p. 167). These paradoxical tendencies were expressed in "autonomy *within the framework of Iran* and not *independence* in different historical conjuncture, and the intensified social change during the era of the White Revolution ..." (p. 22, emphasis in original). They were also manifested in the inseparability of political and cultural demands of the Kurds, that is *Kurdayetî*, from the state integration policy; a characteristic that Cabi articulates as a "paradox of socially integrating but ethnically resisting" (p. 23). He contends that *Kurdayetî* is not a "fixed term", rather it is a "politico-cultural stance and a practice" (p. 23) that continued "to reshape according to historical conjunctures and intellectual transformations in the second half of the century" (p. 52).

Drawing from critical theories of “social change and transformation” and “nation and nationalism” (p. 4), Cabi takes a critical approach to Kurdish and Iranian national narratives, to modernization theories and to Orientalism. He tries to go beyond the prevalent historical and anthropological approaches to the study of Kurds and uses a critical “multidimensional approach” to read through the lives of the Kurds as embodied actors/subjects of history and society. The book is a welcome departure from the Iranian nationalist social historiography where the experience of national minorities in encountering the dominant culture and often suppressive and uneven nation-state building is erased and/or rendered irrelevant. The image on the cover, of Nahid Primary School in Saqqez in 1973, could represent any primary girls’ school anywhere in Iran. It is a rare image to depict the experience of public schooling and urbanization of the Kurds in Iran. The empirical evidence presented throughout the book explains the social and political meaning of the image.

The strength of the book stands in its attempt to use the political economy analysis of the Kurdish society, in particular during the less-studied historical period of 1940s–1979.<sup>1</sup> This analysis is partially used to discuss the rise of capitalism in the 1960s in Iran, the shift in class structure of Kurdish society, and the formation of a new group of radical intellectuals who paved the path for the emergence of the left movement in the revolutionary years of the 1970s. Cabi recognizes the limits of the explanatory power of some theoretical paradigms such as development and modernization theories or the discourse of nation and nationalism. However, he fails to develop and maintain a political economy framework that is informed by a Marxian historical materialist analysis to support the empirical evidence that he has carefully crafted to explore the dual process of *integration* and *resistance* of the Kurdish society.

Cabi argues that *The Formation of Modern Kurdish Society* is a product of the modernization process, in particular, through the White Revolution since the 1960s which initiated a massive nation-wide industrial and infrastructural development, land reform, the implementation of a planned economy, expansion of educational and health sectors, urbanization, and institution building. Three chapters (3, 4, and 5) are dedicated to analyzing the White Revolution as it coerces through Kurdish society. The empirical evidence in these chapters is valuable and they leave readers with clues for further in-depth class analysis of contemporary Kurdish society. Chapter 3 covers the “The Social Consequences of Modernization” focusing on land reform, that is the large

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1 Abbas Vali covers mostly a political analysis of this period in *The Forgotten Years of Kurdish Nationalism in Iran* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

migration of peasants to “unbridled” (p. 76) urban areas, where the unskilled Kurdish wage labourers settled in the booming construction projects in major urban areas throughout Iran. Urbanization and modernization increased child labour (mostly young boys) and the migration of seasonal workers left women as the head of the household under the rapidly deteriorating village life. Displaced peasants were forced to work under exploitative economic conditions and faced oppressive cultural conditions (mainly their unfamiliarity with Persian language). Public schooling, healthcare, and a limited social welfare program expanded in the growing urban centres in the Kurdish region. The White Revolution programs transformed the class structure of Kurdish society. A new urbanized, educated, middle-class emerged who benefitted from the modernization plan while their political and cultural awareness made them conscious of the regional economic disparity and the underprivileged condition of life which lasted until the 1979 Revolution. This heightened political consciousness was a continuation of the era of 1946–68 that Cabi considers “the formative years of the Kurdish modern opposition” (p. 105) and is covered in Chapter 4, “The Political and Cultural Consequences of Modernization.”

Chapter 4 is a departure from the dominant historiography of the rise and fall of the 1946 Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad. Cabi queries the “consequences” of the political suppression of the Kurds in the 1940–1970s in their “collective memory”. Through the memoirs of political leaders and interviews with activists and intellectuals, he sketches a brief regional and transnational history of these years, from the political split in Iraqi Kurdistan, to the rise of armed struggles in Iran and globally, and the growing influence of Marxism, socialism, and communism – in particular in response to the US imperialist aggression in Vietnam. A brief section is dedicated to the 1968–79 “intellectual transformation” (pp. 109–111) and the formation of student groups, mostly Marxist intellectuals at Tehran and Tabriz universities. Amir Hassanpour’s writing on the influence of Amir-Hossein Aryanpour, a prominent Marxist sociologist, on Kurdish students’ organizing is important, but not included in the analysis.<sup>2</sup> The activism of the Kurdish students in the two major universities of Tehran and Tabriz and later, their expansion in Europe and the creation of the Association of the Kurdish Students Aboard (AKSO) implores further studies. In Cabi’s book, we can find traces of these development but they need

2 Amir Hassanpour, “AH Aryanpour and Teaching Marxist Sociology during the 1960s”, *Iran Nameh*, 30/1 (Spring 2015): 1–56 (in Persian) [۱۳۴۰ در دهه مارکسیستی در دهه ۱۳۴۰]; Amir Hassanpour, *Aryanpour and Marxist Sociology: History, Class, and Dialectic*. Toronto, University of Toronto: Iran Namag Books (in Persian) [دنیالکتیک و آریان اجتماعی پور و جامعه شناسی مارکسیستی: تاریخ، طبقه] [۱۳۴۰ در دهه مارکسیستی در دهه ۱۳۴۰]

to be further explored. The chapter also discusses the ‘cultural’ consequences of the modernization project in the realms of language, theatre, cinema, music, secularization, all of which were profoundly influenced by the Persian cultural hegemony.

Chapter 5 focuses on the “Modernization of Gender Relations.” What is notable in this book is the integration of gender analysis throughout, though Chapter 5 centres on the impact of the centralized modernization policy on Kurdish women. Cabi contends that his analysis “deliberately stresses the *modernization of gender order* against the notion of the *emancipation of women* to maintain a critical approach towards development theories that perceive women as a category for ‘secularisation’, regarded as a prerequisite to becoming ‘modern’” (p. 3, emphasis in original). The chapter also provides a critique of the Kurdish national narrative, which promotes the notion of women as a *national asset* (p. 3). Women’s presence in public life is taken as the sign of the creation of a ‘new Kurdish woman.’ Kurdish women joined the nation-wide increase in mostly ‘feminized’ occupations such as teachers, nurses, civil servants, and later, lawyers and doctors. The modernization ethos of the White Revolution deeply changed the dynamic of gender relations and family structure in Iran, though it failed to profoundly alter patriarchal relations. To comprehend the complex gender impact of this process within Kurdish society, a Marxist feminist analysis is required to explicate the ways *capitalist patriarchal modernization* subsumed the remnants of feudal patriarchal relations and masculine nationalism to create the ‘women of the nation’ and attempted to ‘culturalize’ their struggle within the discourse of nationalism. Those women teachers, students, nurses, and doctors mostly broke away from these relations and joined the Kurdish and non-Kurdish radical and left movements during the revolutionary years of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The struggle of Kurdish women in this moment of history is yet to be fully written.<sup>3</sup> This experience is still vivid in the memories of that generation, and some participants are writing their memoirs, valuable sources for gleaning details in all aspects of life and struggle in Kurdish society.

The book offers an extensive literature review and covers a range of key theoretical debates on modernization and modernity in Iran, on nationalism and

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3 One exception is the study by Fatemeh Karimi, *Genre et militantisme au Kurdistan d’Iran*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2022. It is based on her doctoral thesis; see Fatemeh Karimi, “Les rapports sociaux de sexe dans les forces politiques kurdes en Iran entre 1979 et 1991 : le Komala”, EHESS (Paris), 2020. See also Fatemeh Karimi, “Les militantes kurdes du Komala. De l’espace domestique à la lutte armée : motivations et obstacles”, *Les cahiers du CEDREF* n° 24 (2020): 45–67.

struggle for social justice, on the limits of modernity when it involves culture, education, language, politics, diversity, identity, and ethnicity. Through unique tables, figures, and photos, the study depicts the nature of uneven modernity and development. It takes us over the social history of Kurdistan through the rise of *modernity* and *modernization* in Iran. Thus, it is a reflection and a critique of Iranian nationalism and (often violent) state-centralized modernization policies. The Kurdish actors, such as women, intellectuals, landlord, peasants, workers, migrant and seasonal workers, bourgeoisie and trades people appear in different historical conjunctures. A much-understudied experience of urbanization, the transformation of village life, and the creation of the Kurdish migrant workers in Iran is detailed. Thus, it would seem salient to wonder why the Kurds, their land, politics, history, and culture, have not been considered as a place of theorization. Cabi, like most scholars of Kurdish society, does not break away from the application of a melange of grand theorizations or an eclectic theoretical approach. His theories take him through Iran to reach Kurdistan mainly because he struggles with a Marxian materialist dialectical analysis of capitalist social relations, both in Iran and Kurdistan. Surely, the Kurdish encounter with *modernity* and *modernization* cannot be disarticulated from the historical, social, and cultural conditions and relations in which it took place, but the experiences should be the ground to explore the explanatory power of theoretical frameworks and help us (re)articulate and deepen the theories which were used to frame the study to begin with. The study of Kurdish society, culture, and history requires a robust critical political economy approach. Cabi refers to the rise of capitalism and its impact on the class structure of Kurdish society, but his analysis is partial and falls short of integrating the demise of feudalism, the rise of capitalism, the imperialist rivalries in creating a sphere of influence in the region, and the emergence of new forms of class struggle in Kurdish society.<sup>4</sup> The book utilizes diverse sources of archival materials, oral history, memoirs, literary works, folktales and photos to

4 For a critique of the historiography of the peasant movement see Amir Hassanpour, "The Absence of Peasant Revolts in the Middle East: A Historiographic Myth," in Amir Hassanpour, *Essays on Kurds Historiography, Orality, and Nationalism*. New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publisher, 2020, pp. 39–70. For an excellent and thorough study of the 1952–53 peasant uprising in the Mukriyan region see, *The Peasant Uprising of Mukriyan, 1952–1953*. Volume 1. Toronto, University of Toronto: Iran Namag Books, 2021 and *The Peasant Uprising of Mukriyan, 1952–1953: Consulate Documents, Diplomatic Correspondence and the Press Coverage*. Volume 2. Toronto, Asmana Publications 2022 (in Persian):

امیر حسن پور (۱۴۰۰). شورش دهقانان مکریان ۱۳۳۱-۱۳۳۱ ش. جلد اول، انتشارات ایران نامگ، تورنتو، دانشگاه تورنتو] و امیر حسن پور (۱۴۰۲). شورش دهقانان مکریان ۱۳۳۱-۱۳۳۱ ش: اسناد کنسولگری، مکاتبات دیپلماتیک و گزارش روزنامه ها. جلد دوم، تورنتو، انتشارات آسمانا.

guide the readers through Kurdistan as it was transformed in the 20th Century with the persistence of resistance until today. The book is an important contribution to the expanding academic literature on the Kurdish region in Iran, which in comparison to other Kurdish regions remains relatively limited in the English language. Cabi has left us with traces of concrete ideas and evidences that can be further developed to theoretically and empirically enhance the study of the Kurds and Kurdish society in Iran.

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Mari R. Rostami, *Kurdish Nationalism on Stage: Performance, Politics and Resistance in Iraq*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2019, 249 pp., ISBN: 9781788318693.

In Kurdish studies, theatre has not exactly received the attention it deserves. Earlier discussions on the role of Kurdish culture in the development of nationalism, and on Kurdish – and other – cultural nationalism more generally, have tended to focus on poetry, and to assume that theatre has been a marginal factor in this process. Moreover, they generally focus on the contents of these works at the expense of questions concerning their performance, their intended audience, and so on. Thus, there has long been a disproportionate attention for the few chapters in the *dîbaçe* or preamble of Ehmedê Xani's *Mem û Zîn* that overtly discuss the author's innovative or heretic use of vernacular Kurdish for writing learned *mathnawî* poetry, and the plight of the Kurds under Ottoman and Persian rule.

Conversely, in drama studies, even works that deal with the Arab world have hardly if at all addressed the specific experience of Kurdish drama production in countries like Syria and Iraq. In recent decades, Arab theatre has increasingly, and deservedly, drawn the attention of drama scholars (witness, for example, Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson's masterly 2011 study, *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia*); but the concomitant increase in interest in performance traditions among non-Arab ethnic groups in Northern Africa, like the Berbers in particular, has hardly been matched by an increased interest for Kurdish theatre in the Eastern Arab world.

For these reasons alone, the appearance of Mari Rostami's *Kurdish Nationalism on Stage: Performance, Politics, and Resistance in Iraq* is greatly to be welcomed. Rostami's study marks a major step forward in our knowledge of Kurdish theatre and its importance for the articulation and public assertion of Kurdish (national) aspirations. Her book is a revised version of a PhD dissertation defended at the University of Exeter in 2016, for which the current reviewer acted as an external examiner. Although she focuses on the cultural rather than the political expressions of Kurdish nationalism, Rostami argues that ultimately, "there was no divide between cultural and political nationalism in Iraqi Kurdistan—this was a reflection of the fact that the ultimate aim of theatre artists was an independent and free Kurdistan" (p. 217). Especially during the 1975–1991 period, she concludes, the performance of Kurdish theatre plays definitely contributed to the collective mobilization of resistance to the Baathist regime.

The book does not pretend to be a general historical overview of Kurdish theatre. It deals almost exclusively with Iraq, focusing on plays and performances

in the Sorani dialect in the years between the establishment of a British mandate in 1919 to the emergence of de facto Kurdish self-rule in 1991. Thus, early efforts like Evdirrehîm Rehmî Hekarî's 1919 *Memê Alan* in Kurmancî – a play clearly indebted to Namık Kemal's *Vatan yahut Silistre* (1872) as much as to any French or Italian model – are discussed only in passing (pp. 7–8); and Kurdish drama production in the Soviet Union and its successor states is not mentioned at all.

Plainly, much more work deserves to be done in these directions, the more so as it is very well possible that there are substantial points of comparison, if not direct influences, between Kurdish drama produced in the Soviet Union and in Baathist Iraq, given the decades-long political and cultural ties, and given the strong structural similarities, between both one-party states.

After an introductory chapter on traditional performance forms in Kurdistan (including an all-too brief discussion of the recently revived *dengbêj* tradition in Bakur), Rostami zooms in on the development of modern theatrical performance during the British mandate period and in monarchical Iraq. The main protagonist of this period is Pîremerd (Tawfîq Mahmud Hamza, 1867–1950), who pioneered the popularization not only of poetry, but also of theatrical performances, in Sorani. Although initially performed in front of the more affluent local notables, this Sorani theatre soon developed into an art form that could also appeal to, or was in fact intended to reach, the poorer and often illiterate masses. In 1935, Pîremerd staged his theatrical version of *Mem û Zîn*, in a deliberate attempt to get a Kurdish public interested in theatre based on their own stories and traditions. Thus, theatre soon proved an effective instrument not just for producing Kurdish nationalism, but also for addressing women's rights and promoting working-class consciousness.

Despite the importance of Pîremerd's and others' efforts, it was only after 1970 that Kurdish theatre started to flourish, in the newly declared autonomous Kurdistan region in Baathist Iraq – suggesting that here as elsewhere, the development of local theatrical traditions requires particular political preconditions. The two final chapters present a detailed discussion of the two most important authors and directors of Kurdish theatre of this period, Talat Saman and Ahmad Salar. The former, Rostami argues, primarily expressed socialist and modernist ideals in his plays and stagings, whereas the latter tried to develop a purely Kurdish nationalist theatre in the face of increasing Baathist violence. Thus, Saman's theatrical adaptation of *Mem û Zîn*, written in 1968 but first staged only in 1976, shortly after the collapse of the Kurdish insurgency, reflects a critique of feudalism and tribalism in Kurdish society as much as an assertion of Kurdish aspirations. Even more remarkable was Salar's 1987

staging of *Nalî w xewnêkî erxewanî* ('Nalî and a Violet Dream'), which depicts a mythical 'Kurdish Golden Age' under the autonomous Baban principality. Following Moroccan theorist Abdelkarim Berrechid's call for a 'ceremonial theatre' (*al-masrah al-ihitfali*), which searches for specifically Moroccan drama forms, Salar aimed at creating a form of theatre based on Kurdish traditions, characters, and instruments rather than Western models. Although not overtly addressing Baathist repression, Salar's plays were recognized as clearly dealing with the Kurdish plight in Iraq by both audiences and authorities, and – surprisingly perhaps – well received by Arab as well as Kurdish spectators.

With their plays, Rostami argues, both directors not only helped to mobilize resistance against the regime, but also helped to create a sense of Kurdish nationhood. According to Salar himself, theatre artists actually replaced the peshmerga as the most prominent advocates of Kurdish patriotism and resistance after the 1975 collapse of the armed Kurdish insurgency. The fact that both theatre artists courageously continued their 'Theatre of Resistance' even in the worst years of Baathist repression makes their work all the more remarkable and worthy of attention, not only in Kurdish studies but also for students of theatre in conflict zones more generally. Rostami also devotes a number of particularly fascinating pages – partly based on Zangana's earlier study (2002) – to the 'guerrilla theatre' of the later 1970s and 1980s, which was performed clandestinely, and in part by Kurdish peshmerga fighters, in areas outside government control.

Apart from a few earlier studies on Kurdish theatre in Iraq, like those by Hasan Tanya (1985), Hawre Zangana (2002), and Ferhad Pirbal (2001), Rostami's book is the first major discussion of modern Kurdish theatre. Unlike these earlier works, it also devotes at least as much attention to the performance and to the conditions of production as to the textual content of the plays discussed. As such, it fills a huge gap in our knowledge, and at the same time raises new questions about periods, areas and dimensions not covered. For example, what exactly were the antecedents and inspirations of Kurdish drama in late Ottoman times? What forms of Kurdish theatre do we find in other regions and other dialects, and can we find any contacts, convergences and/or contrasts between them? Another set of questions revolves around the influence of Leninist party organization as a tool for both political domination and cultural production. In both Iraq and (post-) Soviet Armenia, for example, one would expect Kurdish drama to have been shaped by Soviet and Eastern German models – witness, for example, the enormous influence of Brecht's 'epic theatre' in the post-World War II Arab world at large. And finally, one would like to know in greater detail how theatre developed after the 1991 uprisings, and in

the wake of the quickly developing local Kurdish television and transnational television channels.

These are but a few of the many topics one would hope to see addressed in more detail someday. It is but one of the many merits of Rostami's superb study that it triggers such and other questions. It is greatly to be hoped that research into this fascinating but sadly neglected aspect of Kurdish cultural life can be continued and expanded.

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Mari Toivanen, *The Kobane Generation: Kurdish Diaspora Mobilising in France*.

Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2021, 294 pp., ISBN: 9789523690431.

Throughout history, Kurds encountered various tragedies, starting with the division of Kurdish land or 'Kurdistan' by the imperial powers to the political alienation, discrimination, and genocide by the dominant nations, including the Arabs, Turkish, and Persians. Moreover, the persistent political insecurity in the region resulted in an influx of migrant waves toward the West and the world. In the last decade, and especially starting at the beginning of 2014, Kurds have faced quite a virulent and destructive threat by the Islamic State (ISIS), which utterly shattered the lives of tens of thousands of people. Consequently, the Kurdish political and cultural life in Iraq and Syria has been deeply impacted and, in some places, completely destroyed. At the time, Western allies supported the Kurdish troops in fighting against the Islamic State in the region, and Kurdish activists in the diaspora across many European countries also provided support. Ever since, voluminous books have been published on nationalism (Gunes, 2019; Vali, 2020), migration (Bocheńska, 2018), mobilisation (Schøtt, 2021; Zalme, 2020), and the Kurdish diaspora (Keles, 2015; Mahmud, 2016). *The Kobane Generation: Kurdish Diaspora Mobilising in France*, by Mari Toivanen, is one of these books.

*The Kobane Generation* is an interesting and well-written book that recognizes and addresses the experiences and real-life problems of second-generation Kurds in France. Throughout the book, Mari Toivanen explains a series of events that facilitated the formulation of Kurdish transnational participation in the diaspora. As a start, Toivanen highlights the role of the Kobane region in dispersing mobilisation in several Middle Eastern countries: Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. She also considers how the siege of Kobane put the Kurds more into the spotlight internationally, strengthened the bond between the Kurdish people in the diaspora and the region, and helped create a united Kurdish community in Europe. By combining unique empirical evidence and contemporary sociological theories of diaspora and transnationalism, the author addresses multiple themes and events concerning second-generation Kurdish migrants – the 'Kobane generation'.

Overall, the book can be seen as a significant theoretical contribution to Kurdish diaspora studies, as it offers comprehensive literature and observation on the Kurdish diaspora, transnationalism, mobilisation, and second-generation Kurdish migrants in France and across many European countries. Besides, it contributes to our understanding of mobilisation and national

identity formation in the periphery of the Kurdish diaspora by examining the small but well-established second-generation Kurdish community in France.

The book is divided into three main parts containing seven chapters in total. The first section, titled 'background', consists of two chapters. In the first chapter of the book, Toivanen introduces her motivation and aims for writing this book. Next, she provides insights into the recurring and principal key concepts and themes she uses. Further in the chapter, she explains the necessity of having a book that concentrates on the 'diaspora's transnational engagement with the focus on the second generation's transnational participation from the perspective of diaspora contribution' (p. 16). Then, in chapter 2, she discusses the recent historical events in Kurdistan and the diaspora, followed by an 'overview of the related theoretical and empirical debates concerning diaspora mobilisation and transnational participation towards the 'homeland' (p. 19).

The book's second part is about providing background and contextualising the Kurdish population's underlying 'geopolitical tensions and divisions' in the Middle East and in the diaspora under the title 'Here and There: Between Kurdistan and Europe'. Starting from the history of the Kurds, the historical division of Kurdish-inhabited regions, and the political consequences of being a stateless nation, Toivanen goes on to discuss the history of majority-minority affairs related to Kurds in three national contexts, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. She further confers the current political situation in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, followed by an overview of the current situation in Kurdistan in the new millennium (p. 69). Finally, in chapter 4, she explains the intersection between individual life stories and major historical events and contextualises the Kurdish diasporic mobilisation in Paris in 2010.

The third part, titled 'Mobilization and Participation towards Kurdistan', is designed to present the empirical data and collected materials, including interviews with first- and second-generation diaspora members and non-diaspora activists, observations, and related online materials. The section is divided into three chapters – chapters 5, 6, and 7. Chapter 5 examines the 'mobilization and transnational participation of Kurdish diaspora communities in France in 2010'. Toivanen explains how the 'transformative events' (e.g., the Kobane Siege and the assassination of three activists in Paris) have united the Kurdish communities across Europe and increased the 'passive' and 'silent' modes of mobilisation among diaspora members (p. 128). She further draws our attention to the impact of the political changes that shaped Kurdish national identity and the views of Western societies towards the Kurdish case.

In chapter 6, Toivanen extends her discussion to the second generation of Kurdish parentage. She critically addresses a series of questions: 'How did a series of events shape mobilisations in Paris?' 'What repertoire of actions does the mobilisation entail?' 'What factors shaped the observed mobilisation?' In the later part of the chapter, she debates the mobilisation in Paris in the context of political ambivalence towards the Kurdish question, namely concerning the criminalisation of certain Kurdish political parties, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) in Europe generally and in France specifically.

In chapter 7, Toivanen explores how the second generation of Kurdish parentage perceived the battle of Kobane and the Paris assassinations and notes the importance of the Kobane siege for the second generation. Next, she pays attention to the differences between mobilisation experiences and transnational activities among first and second generations individuals and the outcome of mobilisation connected with global and diasporic activities and engagement between the two generations. Besides, she explains how second-generation participation in Kurdish-inhabited areas should be understood as a form of ethnonational participation or manifestation of diasporic belonging. Finally, in the last section of the chapter, Toivanen discusses the prominence of the Kobane siege and the Kurds' combat against ISIS in the international media, the significance of Kobane in shaping and reshaping the national identity of the second generation, and the importance of understanding their 'Kurdishness'. Likewise, she discusses the role of the online dimension in constructing the 'homeland'.

Overall, this book is a compelling and much-needed reflection on the topics of transnationalism and second-generation migrants. It is an opportunity to explore the Kurds' political issues and a wide range of topics around France's Kurdish diaspora and second-generation and transnational individuals. In other terms, the book can be used as a 'guide-post' or a 'map' for studying the Kurds in other parts of the world due to the presence of rich data.

Furthermore, the book provides essential reading for anybody looking for a comprehensive view of the Kurdish diaspora, mobilisation, transnationalism, and second-generation Kurds. It also contains a practical and theoretical framework for studying the Kurds as a diaspora and transnational community. To make the book even more interesting, the author employs multiple data collection methods and cohesively presents numerous examples with a flawless writing style. However, it would make all the qualitative case studies more conclusive if the author examined some quantitative data or equally drew on the quantitative method(s).

To sum up, as a linguist and an avid Ph.D. researcher working on a multidisciplinary topic on the Kurdish diaspora in the UK, I find this work to be seminal in the developing field of Kurdish studies. Moreover, the well-organised data chapters, and the main structure of the book from start to end, form a bridge that connects the relevant theories and practices with the contemporary and topical Kurdish question. For these reasons, I highly recommend it to everyone who desires to generate an understanding of the Kurds and the lived experiences of the Kurdish diaspora. This book should be particularly beneficial to university students at all levels and early career researchers who seek to understand diaspora, mobilisation, and transnationalisation in the Kurdish context.

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Michael Knights and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies: The U.S. – Syrian Democratic Forces Partnership Against the Islamic State*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2022, 277 pp., ISBN: 9780755643066.

This book is not so much an analysis of U.S. support for the Syrian Kurds (although it is) or therefore U.S. opposition against its supposed NATO ally Turkey (although it is), but more how the U.S. used minimal support for the Syrian Kurds (particularly the YPG/YPJ and then its successor the SDF) to achieve maximum gains for itself against the Islamic State (IS/ISIS). This opening sentence already presents the reader with a barrage of acronyms, which fortunately is interpreted by a helpful list on opening pages xv–xvii. Thus, for the uninitiated, SDF refers to the Syrian Democratic Forces, the alliance between the Syrian Kurds (People’s Defense Units or YPG and its sister Women’s Protection Units or YPJ) and sympathetic Arabs, among others, successfully patched together in a largely unsuccessful attempt to satisfy Turkey that the SDF was not closely allied to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Kurdish organization considered a terrorist group by both Turkey and the U.S.

This review’s befuddling opening paragraph also partially illustrates the legend the U.S. successfully carried out, as described in this well written study based largely on interviews and on-sight observations as well as other academic books and articles. One wonders, however, why numerous other academic studies of these events went unmentioned by the authors. Likewise, the reference on at least two occasions (pp. 8 and 14) to the book as a mere “paper” speaks to the need for more careful editorial work. Throughout all this analysis, the authors provide useful, detailed maps and lists of figures.

The authors are particularly impressed with the U.S. military operational phrase “by, with, and through” (p. 1) to refer to “a partner force ... to operations [that] are led *by* our partners, state or nonstate, *with* enabling support from the United States or U.S.-led coalitions, and *through* U.S. authorities and partner agreements” (p. 1). They return to this phrase repeatedly and even use it as part of the title of their last two of seven total chapters. However, to quibble, this reviewer was not as impressed with the insights this “uniquely tailored” phrase (p. 1) supposedly gave. More enlightening perhaps is the further explanation that the phrase “involves attaining a degree of control over a partner force ... but with reduced risks and costs to the United States, and with lessened U.S. responsibilities in the aftermath of the conflict” (p. 1) or what is also “characterized as a fascinating quest for influence without authority” (p. 1).

The two authors do make the excellent point that the U.S. “effort in north-east Syria succeeded as an economy-of-force effort that marked a clear contrast

to the costly commitments in Afghanistan since 2001 and in Iraq in 2003–11” (p. 9). Not only did the U.S. spend a mere fraction of the money and commit a much smaller contingent of its troops, but “over a fifty-four-month period, [only] seven U.S. combatants were killed in action” (p. 9). Moreover, in the summer of 2021, the entire Afghanistan mission proved a dismal failure, while the final outcome of the continuing Iraqi venture remains very problematic. Of course, one must also admit that the situation in northeast Syria stands as a continuing process yet to reach its final denouement.

Chapter 1 reviews the SDF’s basic components. The authors note that “the military expertise used to develop a Syrian Kurdish self-defense force was mostly drawn from PKK veterans from the 1980s and 1990s” (p. 24). They explain how “this PKK-based grassroots network was particularly strong in the more Ocalanist (a rather awkward neologism coined by the authors to refer to Abdullah (Apo) Ocalan, founder of the PKK in 1978, and imprisoned in Turkey since 1999) communities in Afrin and Kobane, which were connected through familial and tribal links to Kurdish communities across the border in south-east Turkey” (p. 25). Knights and van Wilgenburg further detail that Mazloum Kobani Abdi, the “commander of the SDF ... was the recently returned Syrian PKK member” (p. 27) and that his force included “men and women operating in mixed-gender units, which are very atypical of the Middle East, but standard practice in the PKK” (p. 27). (Interestingly, “Mazloum ... was also being actively courted by Iranian intelligence officers at the time” (p. 37), but clearly chose to throw in his lot with the Americans.) Further, “a number of senior leaders of the YPG were drawn from the PKK cadres. ... The PKK veterans also shaped the YPG’s military culture” (p. 33). “Also inherited from the PKK was a focus on discipline, which was mentioned prominently by almost every YPG and non-YPG interviewee” (p. 34). “Key members of the founding cadre of the YPG had been trained in the PKK and had fought Turkey under it” (p. 39). “The ultimate goal of the YPG was to establish a contiguous [Kurdish] territory on the Syrian-Turkish border, spanning from Afrin to Iraq” (p. 29). No wonder Turkey forcibly objected!

The authors then explain that the “episode, in which PKK veterans helped to defend Sinjar [and its surrounded Yazidis] at a time when most other potential allies were in disarray, left the U.S. government impressed and intrigued” (p. 36). The resulting “vetting was minimal because of the urgency of the matter and the [U.S.] desire to be working with [the YPG]” (p. 38). This was in stark contrast to earlier, failed U.S. attempts to find allies on the ground. For example, “in mid-September [2015] U.S. military leadership admitted to Congress that the \$500 million effort to train Syrian forces against the Islamic State had

resulted in just 'four or five' individual fighters being deployed to the battlefield" (p. 82). The YPG was "the only fighting force in the counter-IS war to deliver battlefield victories" (p. 82). "The program with the SDF rose out of the ashes of the failed-train-and-equip effort with Turkey. This was much thriftier. By design, we didn't go big" (p. 85). Thus, "it was ... accepted that supporting the YPG ... would anger Turkey" (p. 39). The authors also dismiss allegations that the SDF/YPG was guilty of ethnic cleansing of Arabs.

With this background, the authors move on in Chapter 2 to analyze the epic "Stalingrad-type fighting" (p. 67) in Kobane on the Turkish border that began in mid-September 2014. "The siege of Kobane marked the first real battlefield defeat for the Islamic State. ... The Kurds had seen what American airpower could do, and the United States had witnessed the Kurds hang on while they defended other frontlines" (p. 67). Although the Kurds lost more than a thousand fighters, "Kobane raised the morale of all forces fighting the Islamic State" (p. 67). From Kobane, the YPG, with its not so subtle U.S. support, moved on to the border town of Tal Abyad (Girê Spî in Kurdish) to "quickly shut down an important foreign fighter entry point to the Syria-Iraq theater – something that Turkey, a NATO ally, had refused to do, despite repeated entreaties from the United States" (p. 75).

Chapter 3 narrates how the U.S. continued to bolster the development of the SDF and support its capture of the Manbij area west of the Euphrates River, action which quickly offended Turkey and eventually resulted in its military intervention first in Afrin to the west in January 2018 and maybe even more notoriously to the east between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn (Serêkaniyê) in October 2019 when U.S. president Donald J. Trump suddenly withdrew most of his few supporting troops. The Turkish intervention led to widespread condemnation in the United States that the U.S. had dishonorably deserted its Syrian Kurdish ally.

Chapter 4 goes on to assess the SDF campaign to expel IS from Raqqa, one of its so-called capitals in Syria, the other being Mosul in Iraq. The authors scrutinize the accelerating U.S. aid as well as the resulting escalation of tensions with Turkey. Chapter 5 then considers the complex and slower operations to seize further IS-held territory in the Deir al-Zour province and the inherent difficulties entailed in operating in a largely Arab province. Chapter 6 furthers this scrutiny to the post-conflict stabilization challenges caused by the Turkish incursions in 2018 and 2019 already mentioned above.

The final, seventh chapter reviews the main questions, controversies, and findings of this U.S. campaign in northeastern Syria to use the Syrian Kurds to bring down IS with minimal cost to the U.S. Despite accusations this U.S.

partnership with the SDF/YPG “cost the United States a great deal in terms of weakening ties to a longstanding NATO ally, Turkey” (p. 10), “the formula of drip-feeding perishable U.S. intelligence and firepower was, in fact, extremely effective at limiting the risk of overdeveloping the YPG and SDF partner force in a way that could threaten Turkey” (p. 17). Although “such high-quality partner forces are rare” (p. 17), the authors find a few other possible analogies with how the U.S. engaged the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan and some Iraqi Kurdish forces. In addition, they argue that “Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have arguably developed Lebanese Hezbollah and Yemen’s Houthis in a similar manner” (p. 17).

In a period when U.S. foreign policy successes seem few, this timely analysis of its successful partnership with the SDF/YPG is welcomed. This book will prove useful to civilian and military policy practitioners, academics, and the interested lay public.

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