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Editorial

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In 2022, *Kurdish Studies* will enter its tenth year of existence. During this first decade, our field has continually evolved and diversified and, as we face new challenges and invest in original approaches, it has also become possible to start addressing a few ‘blind spots’ and neglected topics of research on the Kurds. The experiences of Kurds in the former Eastern bloc, and the important scholarship and literature they produced, represent such neglected topics of inquiry. This is a regrettable oversight, notably because these scholars, journalists, and artists played a crucial role in maintaining a tradition of Kurdish knowledge and erudition at a time when the study of the Kurds was hindered in the Middle East and underrepresented in the West.

From the *Rîya Teze* newspaper, founded in 1930 in Yerevan, to the ‘Kurdish Cabinet’ in Leningrad/Saint Petersburg (active 1959–2005), some of the focal points of Soviet-based scholarship on the Kurds are now better known; yet, many fascinating figures of this era have remained in the shadow of the iron curtain, their names unknown, their contributions untaught, and their histories unwritten.

It is the story of such a scholar, Abdullah Jalal Fatah (1936–1985), that is examined by Joanna Bocheńska and Karwan Fatah-Black in our opening article for this issue. Fatah was a Kurdish student from Sulaimani who went to Poland in the 1960s, and eventually wrote a dissertation on the ‘Development and Dissemination of the Kurdish Culture in Iraq’ (Warsaw University, 1978), the first thesis on the Kurds written at a Polish university. This unpublished work is, for the first time, presented to a scholarly audience by the authors, who also provide us with an in-depth analysis of Fatah’s vision of culture and the role of intellectuals in society.

Indeed, many Kurdish intellectuals felt that, beyond carrying out scholarly work, they had a duty to enlighten their fellow Kurds and work for the advancement of the Kurdish nation. These ideas often developed outside of Kurdistan, particularly in the countries of the former Eastern bloc, where Iraqi

Kurdish students were sent in the 1970s. One of the countries that hosted some of these students was Bulgaria, and its Kurdish policy in the years 1940s–1980s is the object of Étienne Peyrat's article.

In this piece, published in the framework of the RUSKURD program on Kurdish-Russian and Soviet relations, Peyrat shows how these students tried, alongside other exiles, to campaign for Kurdish rights and sway Bulgarian policy towards the Kurds. Yet, they were, in this pursuit, no match for the governments of the states ruling over Kurdistan, and the Kurdish issue remained, in the Central European countries, a 'sub-piece' of Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian, and Turkish politics.

Kurdish relations with another superpower, the US, are at the centre of Özüm Yeşiltaş's article, which examines the question of state and non-state relations through a case study of US attitudes towards Rojava and, later, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. Yeşiltaş shows that while the Kurds 'successfully capitalized on the regional structural changes to advance their political agenda', they were faced with an incoherent US policy, as the US 'cooperates with the Kurds militarily, yet refuses to recognize the political consequences of this military alliance'. This is an important article on a subject that, in light of the recent withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and its dire consequences, is critical to the future of both the DFNS and the KRG.

In our last article, Serena Hussain draws on her fieldwork in a small city in the UK to show how migrant Kurds in this diaspora community primarily identify with their ethnic Kurdish identity, rather than adopting a unified Muslim identity. She emphasises, however, that this is by no means a reflection on how religious these individual Kurds may be; rather, she finds, it is due to the political repression they have faced in their home countries, leading to a 'greater politicisation of ethnicity'. This is a welcome article which reminds us that the question of religious and ethnic identity, and the way they interact and intertwine, is more complex than is often portrayed and considered.

Throughout history, Kurds have made important contributions to Islamic thinking and scholarship, and they continue to do so, as attested by the life and career of Qedrî Yildirim (1959–2021), a modern-day Taftazanî who had studied in the traditional system of Kurdish madrasas and went on to become a prolific writer on matters related to Islam and the Kurds. He passed away in March of this year, and is remembered by Mehmet Kurt, one of his former students, who has written an obituary in memory of his *seyda*.

In the same month of March 2021, the Kurdish scholarly community suffered another tragic loss with the passing of Kamal Mazhar Ahmad (1937–2021), the 'doyen of Kurdish historians'. Similarly to Abdullah Jalal Fatah, Kamal Mazhar Ahmad had spent the 1960s studying in Baku (Azerbaijan), defending his

doctoral dissertation in 1963, and he went on to become a towering figure in the study of Kurdish history. His life and works are memorialised in an article by Martin van Bruinessen.

Both Qedri Yildirim, who was Siirt's HDP member of parliament from 2015 to 2018, and Kamal Mazhar Ahmad, a former secretary general of the Kurdish Academy in Baghdad, demonstrated how academic work could go hand in hand with political activities and community service. Such was also the case of two important figures of the Kurdish community in Kazakhstan, Kinyazê İbrahim Mirzoyev (1947–2021) and Nadir Nadirov (1932–2021), who both passed away in August 2021. They will be remembered by their indefatigable efforts, through Soviet-era deportations and economic hardships, to pass on Kurdish culture and keep it alive far away from Kurdistan, setting an example for new generations of Kurdish scholars to follow.

Acknowledgments

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An Intellectual on a Mission: Abdullah Jalal Fatah, His Dissertation on Kurdish Culture (1978) and Heritage Making Inspired by Józef Chałasiński and Polish academia

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Abstract

The paper presents a previously unknown doctoral dissertation prepared in the 1970s in Polish by Abdullah Jalal Fatah under the guidance of Polish sociologist Józef Chałasiński. The thesis, entitled ‘Development and Dissemination of the Kurdish Culture in Iraq’, bears the mark of communist ideology but also of Polish heritagisation, in which culture and intellectuals became an important driving force in the process of nation-building and in seeking international recognition. Following David C. Harvey’s definition of heritage, and focusing primarily on its intangible aspects, we suggest that Fatah’s thesis can be read today as an interesting document of Kurdish heritage-making inspired by Polish experience and academic tradition.

Keywords

History of Kurdish studies – Kurdish culture – Iraqi Kurdistan – communism

Rewşenbîrekî bi peywîr: Evdîla Celal Fetah, teza wî ya li ser çanda kurdî (1978) û mîratsazkirina bi îlhama Yuzêf Xalasînskî û akademisyenên polonî

Ev nivîsar tezeke doktorayê ya nenas pêşkêşî xwendevanan dike ku di salên 1970î de, ji hêla Evdîla Celal Fetah ve û bi çavdêriya civaknasê polonî Yuzêf Xalasînskî, bi polonî hat nivîsandin. Di bin navê ‘Pêşketin û belavbûna çanda kurdî li Iraqê’ de, ev tez nîşanên bandora îdeolojiya komunîst di xwe de vedihewîne, digel mîratsaziya polonî ya ku çand û rewşenbîr tê de rola hêzeke çalakger û bingehîn dileyizin di pêvajoya netewesazkirin û pesenda navneteweyî de. Li gorî pênaseya mîratê ya David C. Harvey, ku bi taybetî li ser aliyên wê yên neguhêrbar radiweste, em pêşniyazî vê yekê dikin ku teza Fetah wek belgeyê balkêş a mîratsazkirina kurdî bi îlhama tecrube û adeta akademîk ên polonî bê xwendin.

Rewşenbîrêk be peyamêkewe: ‘Ebdullah Celal Fetah, doktoranamekey le ser keltûrî kurdî (1978) û kelepûrsazî le jêr karîgerî Yuzêf Xallasînskî û ekadîmyay pollend de

Em nûsîne basî le doktoraname nenasrêwekey ‘Ebdullah Celal Fetah dekat ke le sallenî 1970 da be zimanî pollendî û be serpereştî komellnasî pollendî Yuzêf Xalasînskî bû. Nawnîşanî doktoranameke, ‘Geşesendin û bellawbûney keltûrî kurdî le ‘Îraq’, karîgerî aydolojyay komînîzîm û kelepûrî pollendî le ser diyar e. Têda keltûr û roşnbîran bûn be hêzêkî cullêner bo proseya nîştîmansazî û danpyananî nêwdewletî. Bepîşbestin be pênasey kelepûrî Devîd Harvî we be giringîdan be layene bercestenekrawekani, pişnyardekeyn ke doktoranamekey nawbraw le êsta da babetêkî benîrx debêt leser kelepûrsazî le jêr karîgerî ezmûnî ekadîmyay Pollenda de.

Roşnvîrêko bimîsyon: Ebdullah Celal Fatah, bi îlhamê Józef Chałasiński akademîsyenanê Polonya tezê ey ê doktora derheqê kulturê kurdan (1978) û mîrasviraştoxîye de

No nuşte tezê doktora ke verê cû nêamebî zanayene û 1970an de binê rayberîya sosyologê polonî Józef Chałasiński de hetê Ebdullah Celal Fatahî ra bi zîwanê polonkî ameyo nuştene, ey pêşkêş kenê. Tezê bi sernuşteyê “Îraq de Aversîyayîş û Vilabîyayîşê Kulturê Kurdan” hem wayîrê nîşanê îdeolojîya komunîstan o hem kî yê mîrassazîya polonan o ke tede kultur û roşnivîrî benê hêzê averşîyayîşî yo muhîm seba prosesê neteweviraştîşî û girewtîşê tesdiqê mîyanneteweyî. Goreyê tarîfê mîrasî yê Davîd C. Harveyî û bi giranîya hetanê ci yê nemađîyan ser o, ma pêşnîyaz kenîme ke tezê Fatahî yo ke hetê tecrube û edetanê akedemîsyananê polonan ra îlham girewto, ewro sey belgeyê mîrasviraştoxîya kurdan o balkêş bêro wendene.

Introduction

This paper introduces Abdullah Jalal Fatah, a Kurd from Sulaimani, and analyses his doctoral dissertation on Kurdish culture and its links with Polish sociology. The thesis was written in Polish and defended at Warsaw University in 1978. Inspired by the works of Józef Chałasiński, it can be considered an interesting example of cultural planning and heritage-making. Although the words *heritage*, *heritagisation* and *heritage-making* are often associated with contemporary cultural policies and capitalist economies, these terms can also be applied to the past in those cases when specific heritage-making practices led to the remodelling of cultural artefacts from previous generations to better fit new ideologies and contemporary social needs. As stressed by David C. Harvey (2001: 327), heritagisation cannot be linked exclusively to the modern ‘heritage industry’ nor the ‘economic practices of exploitation’. Rather, the more inclusive definition describing heritage as ‘shaping modernity from the past’, or ‘a process related to human action and agency and an instrument of cultural power in whatever period one chooses to examine’ should be considered. These ideas are in line with the many perspectives that appreciate intangible aspects of heritage, such as oral tradition or customs, that are sometimes ascribed to Eastern cultures in contrast to the supposedly more materialistic approach of Western societies (Ahmad, 2006; Vecco, 2010; Meutia, et al., 2018).

Abdullah Jalal Fatah came to Poland in the 1960s to continue his education and develop his interests in communism and in what he regarded as its successful social and national policies. His thesis, entitled ‘Development and Dissemination of the Kurdish Culture in Iraq’ (‘Problemy rozwoju i rozpowszechniania kultury kurdyjskiej w Iraku’),¹ was the first doctoral dissertation devoted to Kurdish issues defended at a Polish university. Fatah left Poland soon after defending his thesis in 1978, and his supervisor died a year later. Due to the profound political and social transformations that shook Polish reality at the end of the 1980s, leading to the collapse of the communist regime and to the mass rejection of anything communist, the work remained forgotten. Unpublished and hidden in the Warsaw University library in the form of a hardly readable typescript, it has never been mentioned by any of the Kurdish or Iraqi friends of Fatah who remained in Poland and were in touch with Polish academics. Only in 2018 did Fatah’s son contact me, sending a scan of his father’s work.

The history of Kurdish studies in Poland dates to the 19th century. However, the Polish state did not exist at that time, and thus, works by Poles are usually presented as a part of Russian Kurdology (van Bruinessen, 2014; Omarkhali and Mossaki, 2014; Leezenberg, 2015, 2016). The Poles visiting Kurdistan and the Middle East were usually diplomats serving Tsarist Russia, like August Kościeszka-Żaba² and Aleksander Chodźko,³ or, in contrast, ex-rebels fleeing the persecutions that followed the collapse of different Polish uprisings, like Karol Brzozowski.⁴ These Poles were exploring Kurdistan and wrote about the Kurdish language, culture, and geography. After 1918, when Poland gained

1 All translations from Polish were made by the author.

2 August Kościeszka-Żaba (1801–1894), also mistakenly known as Alexander Jaba, was a Polish-born Russian diplomat and translator. Between 1848 and 1866, he served as Russian consul in Erzurum, where, with the help of the Kurdish scholar Mela Mahmud Bayazidi (1797–1867), he learned Kurdish and collected Kurdish manuscripts and oral stories. Some of the stories, in addition to his commentary, were published in 1860 in Saint Petersburg. He is also the author of the first French-Kurdish dictionary (1879; Paradowska, 1971).

3 Aleksander Chodźko (1804–1891) was a Polish romantic poet, Russian diplomat in Iran, professor of Slavic Literatures in Collège de France and an orientalist. He was one of the first to write about Kurdish language and grammar (Sulaimani dialect). His paper ‘Études philologiques sur la langue kurde’ was published in the *Journal Asiatique* (No 4, 1857). For further information, see Calmard, 1991; Krasnowolska, 2013.

4 Karol Korab Brzozowski (1821–1904) was a Polish engineer and geographer. He took part in the Polish uprisings of 1840 and 1863. He migrated to the Ottoman Empire, where he became responsible for building telegraph lines in the Balkans and charting maps in Kurdistan in the Sulaimani area (1869). He discovered and described one of the ancient rock drawings in Kurdistan. After returning to Poland in 1884, he wrote about Kurdistan in several popular magazines (Paradowska, 1967).

independence, and until 1939, when it was invaded by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, there was little interest in the Kurds. In the new communist Polish state established in the aftermath of the Second World War (1945) under the patronage of the Soviet Union, the Kurdish topic appeared in some articles from the second half of the 1960s onwards. The first Kurdish students arrived in Poland at the beginning of the 1960s. Between 1960 and 1970, there was a group of around 25 Kurds in Poland, who mainly came from Iraq and Syria, but there were also individuals from Iran, Turkey, and Jordan.⁵ The students were supported either by the Iraqi Communist Party⁶ or by the Kurdish Students Society in Europe (KSSE),⁷ whose Polish branch was established in 1963.⁸ The number of Kurds studying in Poland increased considerably in the following decades, constituting a group of around 100 people in the 1980s and 200 in the 1990s.⁹

The first Polish academic interested in the Kurdish topic was Maria Paradowska,¹⁰ who analysed the works by Żaba and other Polish 19th-century travellers (Paradowska, 1967, 1968, 1971). Hence, Fatah's master's, and especially his doctoral, dissertations were the first scientific works on Kurdish culture and society prepared and defended at a Polish university. Interestingly, Fatah's research was conducted far from the centres of orientalist knowledge, such as the institutes of Oriental Studies in Warsaw and Kraków, and the Soviet

5 Personal communication with Faraidoon Said and Amir Girgies, September 2020. As there are no official statistics, the data in this paper are supplied from the memories of the Kurds who studied in Poland and were active members of the Kurdish Students Society in Europe (KSSE).

6 The Iraqi Communist Party was established in 1934, and especially in the 1950s became popular among the Kurds.

7 The first KSSE was established in 1949 in Lausanne, Switzerland by a group of Kurds from different parts of Kurdistan on the initiative of Nouredine Zaza. However, this group ceased to exist after several months. Attempts to reestablish the KSSE were made in 1956. The new organisation was initially called The Cultural Association of Kurdish Students, but during the third congress was renamed the KSSE. It published a magazine entitled *Kurdistan* and, in the following years, became very popular among the students. In 1964, the KSSE became a member of the International Union of Students and, between 1956 and 1975, held many international congresses in different European Cities (Sheikhmus, 2019; Jafar, 2016).

8 Personal communication with Amir Girgies, September 2020.

9 Personal communication with Amir Girgies, Sidqi Hirori, and Faraidoon Said, September 2020.

10 Maria Paradowska (1932–2011) was a Polish ethnographer and professor at Poznań University. Among other topics, she studied the reality of Germans assimilated to Polish culture and the image of the Middle East in the writings of Polish travelers and journalists (Podlasiński and Sopata, n.d.).

Kurdology departments in Leningrad and Moscow.¹¹ The theoretical background rooted in social sciences and the wider scope of presented topics distinguish this dissertation from the works of Soviet Kurdologists, who focused predominantly on folklore and linguistics (Leezenberg, 2015, 2016). Following his supervisor, Józef Chałasiński, Fatah paid special attention to the role of intellectuals and their reformist passion, as well as to the role of the institutions, the University of Sulaimani and the Kurdish Academy of Science (KAS).

Fatah, His Polish Adventure, International Engagement, and Doctoral Dissertation

Abdullah Jalal Fatah was born in 1936 in Sulaimani in Iraqi Kurdistan. After finishing high school, he studied in Baghdad and, around 1960, graduated from the Preparatory Technical School, Electricity Section. He was interested in continuing his education abroad. Initially, he went to study in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1961 but moved to West Germany. This was the period when the Iron Curtain was being enforced more strictly and the Berlin Wall was built (1961), which might have affected his decision. Instead of studying, Fatah began his training as an electro-technician with the Ingenieurschule in Hannover. At the time, there was a shortage of labour in West Germany and companies were eager to attract workers, primarily from Mediterranean countries. Although there was no direct recruitment agreement with Iraq, skilled and semi-skilled workers were in great demand. During his time in West Germany, Fatah had internships at various companies, both the private company Reinhardt Lindern and the municipal *stadtwerk* Elektrizitätswerk. However, being a worker at a company was probably not the height of his ambition. Judging by the photographs from that period, Fatah continued visiting libraries and liked taking pictures of himself reading or studying. In 1964, the KSSE organised a congress in Hannover, and Fatah met an old friend from Sulaimani, Ali Ghafour, who was visiting West Germany as the President of the Union of Kurdish Students in Poland. Ghafour encouraged Fatah to move to Poland and promised him help in enrolling at university.¹²

11 Although Fatah mentions the outstanding output of Soviet Kurdologists, he only briefly refers to the Armenian scholar Khachatur Abovian (1809–1848), and to Tatiana Aristova's publication on the Caucasian Kurds (*Kurdy zakavkaz'ia: Istoriko-etnograficheskii ocherk*, Moscow, 1966) in Kurdish translation (Fatah, 1978: 39). Obviously, he had access to the Soviet Kurdologists' works only through the books that were published in Iraq.

12 Personal communication with Ali Ghafour, May 2019.

In October 1965, Abdullah Fatah travelled to Warsaw. Initially, from 1968 to 1969, and then in 1971–1972, he studied economic sociology in Łódź. The power-grab by the Ba'ath in Iraq in 1968 passed Fatah by, as did the new round of persecution against the members of the Iraqi Communist Party and the uprising of the Kurds the following year. However, despite his physical absence from the struggle, Kurdistan remained foremost in his mind.

He received his MA on 3 March 1973. His thesis, supervised by the Polish sociologist Jan Lutyński,¹³ was entitled 'The Determinants of the National Consciousness of the Kurds'. Certainly, the thesis prepared the ground for his doctoral dissertation. Fatah received a letter of recommendation to begin a PhD at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Warsaw, and he moved to the capital. He remained very involved in student politics, joining the International Union of Students and being present at international cultural events. Furthermore, at that time, he seemed optimistic about Iraq's future and the place of the Kurds within it. When, in 1973, the non-aligned nations met in Algiers for their fourth summit, Fatah, introduced by an anonymous Polish journalist as 'an Iraqi', commented in a newspaper that 'the summit presented a great occasion for nations still wrestling with the remains of colonialism in their fight for independence' (Fatah, 1973). It is unclear whether his remark was a covert reference to the place of the Kurds in Iraq, or should be taken as a general comment on the postcolonial condition.

Fatah defended his doctoral dissertation in 1978. According to Ali Ghafour, his thesis meant a great deal for other Kurds studying in Poland, and they tried to support Fatah morally to continue with his work.¹⁴ 'The Development and Dissemination of the Kurdish Culture in Iraq' ('Problemy rozwoju i rozpowszechniania kultury kurdyjskiej w Iraku') consists of 349 pages organised in an introduction, four thematic chapters, and a fifth chapter summarising conclusions: Introduction, I: The Socio-Cultural Development of the Kurdish Nation, II: The Elements of Kurdish Culture, III: The University of Sulaimani and the Kurdish Academy of Science and Their Role in Developing the National Kurdish Culture, IV: Forms and Methods of Disseminating the Kurdish National Culture in the Autonomous Region of Iraqi Kurdistan, V: Summary and conclusions. The chapters are followed by a bibliography, which contains 23 publications in Kurdish, 36 in Arabic, 74 in Polish, 45 in English, and 20 in German. At the end, three appendices in Arabic were added: the laws of the University of Sulaimani, the Kurdish Academy of Science, and the Iraqi

13 Jan Lutyński (1921–1988) was a student of Józef Chałasiński and professor at Łódź University.

14 Personal communication with A. Ghafour, May 2019.



FIGURE 1
Abdullah Jalal Fatah's student card
from Łódź University

Academy of Science. One document ('The Law on the Kurdish Academy') is also provided in English.

Judging from a letter in Fatah's small archive, in May 1978, Andrzej Zaborski,¹⁵ from Jagiellonian University, invited him to lecture at a meeting of the Kraków Branch of the Polish Orientalist Society. However, the session never took place, which to some extent explains why there was no sign left of Fatah's dissertation among Polish scholars working on the Middle East and Kurdistan.¹⁶ Soon after defending his PhD, Fatah moved to the University of Algiers, where he was contracted as a lecturer at the Department of Sociology from December 1978 to September 1981.

15 Andrzej Zaborski (1942–2014) was a Polish philologist, specialist in Arabic and African studies, and professor at Jagiellonian University (Kraków).

16 The first scientific publication on the Kurdish subject written by a Polish scholar was *The rural community of contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan facing modernisation* by Leszek Dzięgiel, at the Jagiellonian University (1981). However, in 1978, Dzięgiel was probably in Iraqi Kurdistan, where he conducted field research between 1977 and 1980 as a worker for a Polish company (Dzięgiel, 1992: 14). Fatah's dissertation is not mentioned in any of his works.



FIGURE 2 The defence of Fatah's dissertation, 1978, University of Warsaw. First on the left – Abdullah Jalal Fatah (standing), third from the left – Prof. Józef Chałasiński

Around 1983, an opportunity arose for Fatah to make his education and knowledge useful in Kurdistan. In 1968, the first university had been established in Sulaimani. In 1981, the university transferred to Erbil and was renamed Salahaddin University. Two years later, Fatah joined the university. The social and political conditions in Iraqi Kurdistan were, however, not welcoming under the rule of Saddam Hussein. Fatah was put under pressure by the university leadership to join the Ba'ath party, which he refused to do. Moreover, considering his reformist zeal, he might not have been welcomed. Saddam was far from implementing any of the promises made to the Kurds in the 1970 March Manifesto.¹⁷ Fatah decided to flee and find a way back to Europe. Like many other Kurds persecuted by the Ba'athist regime, he crossed the mountains to Iran and finally arrived in a refugee camp in Karaj, near Tehran. There, he was

17 The March Manifesto, declared on 11 March 1970, was an accord reached between the ruling Ba'ath party and the Kurdish movement. On paper, it granted the Kurds many cultural and political rights, including the provision for Kurdish to become the second official language of Iraq and the language of instruction in the areas inhabited by a majority of Kurds. The Kurds should have been given posts in the cabinet and army and allowed to establish their own cultural and social organisations. The Constitution was to be amended to declare Iraq the country of two nationalities: the Arabs and the Kurds. However, the March Manifesto was never fully implemented. Rather, it helped Saddam Hussain to win some time to consolidate power. In 1974, the war between the Central Government and the Kurds erupted again (McDowall, 2006: 323; Lalik; 2009: 72).

an outlier; the camp was full of Iraqi deserters who were much younger than him. Along with a Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) guerrilla, he made a plan to depart to Europe. However, on 17 April 1985, the day before they were to depart, Fatah suffered a stroke and died.

Carving a Modern Socialist Nation with the Help of Intellectuals and Cultural Heritage: Józef Chałasiński and Abdullah Jalal Fatah

Józef Chałasiński and His Output

Józef Chałasiński was an intriguing and controversial figure in Polish academia of the socialist period (1945–1989). He was born in 1904, the son of an educated peasant. He received his education in the new-born Polish state (1918–1939), and though considered a radical leftist, he remained greatly in debt to the young state's independent spirit and the 19th-century Polish intellectual tradition. Throughout his life, he was affiliated with a few different academic institutions. Between 1923 and 1934, he completed his MA, PhD, and habilitation at Poznań University, where he studied under the guidance of Florian Znaniecki,¹⁸ focusing on the sociology of education and the reality of peasants and workers. Between 1931 and 1933, he was awarded the Rockefeller scholarship to conduct research within the United States and Great Britain, where he investigated the American schooling system and Polish work migration (Winclawski, 1989). He became widely known for his work *Młode Pokolenie Chłopów* (*The Young Generation of Peasants*, 1938), which was based on biographical studies – mainly autobiographies written by Polish peasants (Chałasiński, 1938; Czyżewski, 1992). From 1935 until the outbreak of the

18 Florian Znaniecki (1882–1958) was a Polish philosopher and sociologist. He became well known for his English-language publication, co-authored with William I. Thomas, and entitled *The Polish Peasants in Europe and America. Monograph of an Immigrant Group* (1918–1920). He established the first Polish department of sociology at the Adam Mickiewicz's University in Poznań, where he worked between 1920 and 1939, and he is considered the founder of Polish academic sociology. He worked as a visiting professor at American universities and, following the outbreak of the Second World War, he remained in the US. His works were condemned by the new Polish communist regime in 1945, which is why he never returned to Poland. Being a radical leftist, Józef Chałasiński criticised him for his highly elitist approach to research and academia, but on many other occasions he remained in debt to his 'master', referring to his works during many of his classes. According to an anecdote, the students of the Jagiellonian University (Kraków), where Chałasiński lectured in the 1960s, used to joke asking each other if during his classes Chałasiński quoted from Znaniecki or from Karl Marx. Personal communication with Andrzej Stembarth-Sawicki, December 2020.

Second World War, he worked at Warsaw University. Known as a fierce critic of the elitist and aristocratic model of Polish intellectual life and academia, in the new communist reality, he became the perfect candidate for President of Łódź University, which was established in 1945 by the communist authorities in the 'city of workers' to counterbalance the existing traditional intellectual centres, such as Kraków and Poznań (Piskała and Zysiak, 2013: 279). However, his 'democratic populism' (Kłoskowska, 1992: 11), and the idea of the university being open to social needs (or the so-called 'social university'), (Winławski, 1992; Piskała and Zysiak, 2013) were not welcomed by the regime, which was not interested in implementing any profound social reforms, but rather in keeping the universities under strict bureaucratic control. Initially, Chałasiński managed to preserve some form of independence for the university. However, after criticising the involvement of the state bureaucracy in the affairs of the universities and cultural institutions, which, to him, endangered free intellectual life, independent public opinion, and the process of democratisation (Chałasiński, 1957, 1959), he was forced to resign from the post in 1961 (Kłoskowska, 1992: 19). Paradoxically, at the same time, he was able to make concessions and present so-called self-criticism. Therefore, he remained an active member of academic life and was even able to travel to the West,¹⁹ which for many other Polish citizens remained an unattainable desire. In the following years, he became the Vice-Secretary of the Polish Academy of Science and, in 1966, he was restored as a professor at Warsaw University (Winławski, 1989: XLVI–LV).

In some of his works, Chałasiński puts forward the idea of building a 'modern socialist Polish nation', which, to him, should tear down borders between different classes (Chałasiński, 1966, 1968; Kłoskowska, 1992). It is important to stress that intertwining communist and national ideology and vocabulary, sometimes described as 'national communism', was a feature of many socialist countries (Fragner, 2001; Tyszka, 2004). Bert Fragner proposed the term 'Soviet nationalism', claiming that 'the aim of Soviet policies was not to root out nationalism but, instead, to dominate it and to monopolise the hegemony within nationalist discourses' (Fragner, 2001: 18). Merging communism with nationalism can also be linked to the many aspects of communist ideology represented especially in followers of Marx and Engels, such as Eduard Bernstein, Otto Bauer, or Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz, who, in different ways, tried to incorporate national sentiments into the communist discourse (Tyszka, 2004: 53–77). From the perspective of many communist intellectuals, socialism was supposed to contribute to building and transforming the

19 In 1958, he visited the US again after many years.

new 'socialist nations', and not to annihilating them. In the Polish People's Republic, 'national' and 'ethnic' sentiments became important from the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and the disaster it brought. Sadly, this policy resulted in creating a very monolithic state that would eradicate or assimilate minorities (Tyszka, 2004: 134–135). The national lexicon may also be linked to the Stalinist era (1929–1953) and to the new attempts made, in Poland (especially after 1956), to build the socialist order in close connection with national tradition. This approach entailed criticising Polish dependency on the Soviet Union and, thus, postulating more collaborative relationship (Tyszka, 2004: 142–143).

For Chałasiński (1968: 127), the nation was the modern concept 'which offered moral meaning to the different forms of human activity and life'. Hence, the nation-building process was inextricably linked to the 'democratization of intellectual life', which was no longer only a feature of the elite (Chałasiński, 1968: 438). Interestingly, the notion of humanism occupied a central place in Chałasiński's understanding of the nation, according to which the successful nation-building project and its cultural heritage needed to be accompanied by a 'longing for the greater human brotherhood' (Chałasiński, 1968: 45).

A special place in Chałasiński's writings is devoted to the role of culture and intellectuals, whom he perceived as leaders of society. To him, intellectual activity played a crucial role in integrating the nation; yet, he maintained that intellectuals should be recruited 'from the masses', and not only from the elite. At the same time, he remained highly critical of Polish intellectuals. He called for recognition of the role of peasants in Polish heritage-making and, therefore, was often perceived as representing their interests and culture (Nowakowski, 2016: 189–190). His interest in intellectual life was accompanied by his attention toward universities. He could not, however, criticise the institutions of communist Poland, which is why he often wrote about Western – mostly British and American – universities (Winclawski, 1992: 48). He also studied the realities of non-European lands, especially the US and African countries. In 1962, he published the book *Kultura Amerykańska (American Culture)*, and, in 1965, with his wife, Krystyna Chałasińska, *Blżej Afryki (Closer to Africa)*, and many other papers touching upon the processes of nation-building, integration and what he called 'the crises of European consciousness' in Africa (1973, 1974). Until his death in 1979, he supervised many PhD students from Africa as the Director of the Doctoral Seminar at the Department of Non-European Countries at the Polish Academy of Science (Nowakowski, 2016: 192). Finally, Chałasiński's essays on Polish culture represent a very engaging style of writing, in which the important aspect is not just critical analysis, but also a call for the profound social changes that should ensue.

Fatah's doctoral dissertation follows many of his supervisor's interests and approaches, and it is also a passionate manifesto advocating for change in Iraqi Kurdistan's social reality. Every analysis of the contemporary situation of the cultural reality of Kurdistan, for example, in reference to the University of Sulaimani, the KAS, the press, radio, or fine arts, is followed by a long list of firm proposals for transformation. However, Fatah's inspiration does not seem to be simple borrowing. We know little about the relationship between Fatah and his supervisor but, according to Ali Ghafour, they were 'very friendly'. With their zeal to work for the furtherment of their nations and marginalised classes, and their involvement in social and political life, both Chałasiński and Fatah represented a very engaged type of intellectual. Some of the ideas propagated by Chałasiński were not entirely new for Fatah. The Kurdish poets, writers, and journalists involved in the cultural and political life in the period of changes in the late Ottoman Empire also called for the social engagement of Kurdish intellectuals (Pertev, 2018: 167). Fatah's contact with Chałasiński helped him to develop the many views they already shared.

At the beginning of his dissertation, Fatah contends that thinking about and analysing the role of Kurdish culture has been a neglected topic (Fatah, 1978: 4). He defines his main research tasks as: '1. analysing the main problems of the development of Kurdish culture in postcolonial Iraq, 2. exposing the Kurdish culture's uniqueness, and 3. formulating the main postulates and proposals for social policy with regard to disseminating the Kurdish national culture in Iraqi Kurdistan' (Fatah, 1978: 1). According to Fatah, his research method was mainly based on the analysis of source materials, such as documents and various Kurdish publications, on existing publications about the Kurds, on Iraqi statistics, and on interviews conducted with representatives of Iraqi public life, including politicians and cultural workers (Fatah, 1978: 5–6). However, nowhere do we find a direct reference to an interview, which may be explained by the author's reluctance to reveal the names of Kurdish politicians and activists.

In the second chapter, Fatah presents his theoretical approach and different definitions of culture by referring directly and indirectly to works by many scholars (Alfred Kroeber, Clyde Kluckhohn,²⁰ Bronisław Malinowski,²¹

20 Alfred Louis Kroeber (1876–1960) and Clyde Kluckhohn (1905–1960) were American anthropologists who collected and analysed the many different definitions of culture in *Culture. A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (1952).

21 Bronisław Malinowski (1884–1942) was a Polish social anthropologist; between 1914 and 1920, he conducted research in the Triobriand Islands. One of his most famous books was *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1929). In the 1920s, he taught at the London School of Economics, and later at Yale University.

Stanisław Ossowski,²² Jan Szczepański,²³ Ruth Benedict,²⁴ and Antonina Kłoskowska),²⁵ but especially to Józef Chałasiński's publications. As stressed by Fatah, this is because Chałasiński 'worked extensively on the national culture, the links between culture and nation, and the role of culture in integrating the nation' (Fatah, 1978: 65). He directly quotes from Chałasiński, who defines the nation as 'the socio-cultural phenomenon, the internal integrity of which is rooted in the system of values acknowledged by individuals'. Hence, 'nation is the unity based on culture' and, therefore, the leading role in the nation-building process is assigned to intellectuals and intellectual centres that produce ideas (Fatah, 1978: 66).

Following Chałasiński, Fatah gives priority to the 'integrating' role of culture in building the modern nation. To him, contemporary culture is the result of the activities of many previous generations and, at the same time, 'the present stage of cultural development conditions its future' (Fatah, 1978: 63–64). At first, it seems that the main focus in his 'heritagisation project' is one of continuity, which proves the durability of communities (Fatah, 1978: 63). However, it is clear from his many remarks that not all 'cultural inheritance' can be applied for that purpose and, thus, any 'shaping from the past' is a selective process that must accommodate progress and new social needs. This way, although Fatah uses the word 'heritage' (*dziedzictwo* in Polish) mainly to talk about the traditions of the past, his entire project for Kurdish culture corresponds with the modern definitions of heritage, which entail not only passive inheritance but also active selection and modification according to the needs of society (Harvey, 2001; Ashworth, 2015). However, in Fatah's view, these needs cannot be defined by the capitalist desire for profit. It is no accident that he stresses that the Bedirxans were not interested in earning money by selling the *Kurdistan* newspaper, and that their main aim was to serve the Kurdish people. Cultural heritage is perceived by Fatah as responding to the current and future needs of the nation. To achieve this goal, the state should provide financial support, and intellectuals should be responsible for interpreting the world, researching

22 Stanisław Ossowski (1897–1963) was a Polish sociologist and social psychologist, specialist of culture and social science theory, and professor at Łódź University.

23 Jan Szczepański (1913–2004) was a Polish sociologist, professor at Łódź University, and between 1977 and 1982, a member of the Polish People's Republic's State Council. His works touch upon the social role of intellectuals and of Polish higher education.

24 Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) was an American anthropologist and folklorist, and author of *Patterns of Culture* (1934).

25 Antonina Kłoskowska (1919–2001) was a Polish sociologist, student of Józef Chałasiński, professor at Łódź and Warsaw universities, and author of publications on culture and national identity.

social needs, providing ideas, and guiding people to implement them. If we compare the title of Fatah's dissertation with the titles of other scientific works related to the Iraqi Kurds published around that date, such as the renowned *Agha, Sheikh and State* by Martin van Bruinessen (1978), or the *Rural community of contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan facing modernisation* by Leszek Dziegiel (1981), it is evident that what Fatah proposed was to look at Kurdish society not through its traditional social structure or rural environment, but through the lenses of developing modern Kurdish culture and its creators. Fatah frequently claims that there are numerous intellectuals in Kurdistan, and even suggests that the emerging Kurdish press, 'which requires many educated people', is proof of this (Fatah, 1978: 183). Following Chałasiński's vision of the modern Polish nation and culture, Fatah ascribed a special role to intellectuals, and, in every chapter of his dissertation, he calls attention to their importance and the crucial role they are meant to play.

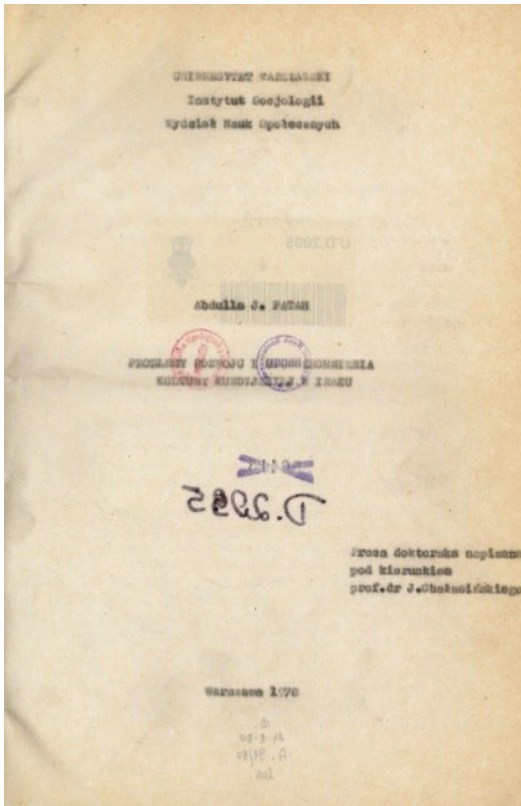


FIGURE 3
The first page of Abdullah Jalal Fatah's dissertation

The Main Tasks and Theoretical Assumptions of Fatah's PhD thesis

Intellectuals and Their Institutions

In the second chapter, Fatah identifies actors of the past, such as the classical poets, and calls them 'progressive'. The best example is Ehmedê Xanî, who is called 'the inventor of the national school of poetry', and 'the first poet and intellectual who raised the flag of the positive Kurdish nationalism and patriotism' (Fatah, 1978: 74). According to Fatah, Xanî as a poet 'made Kurdish literature live the life of the nation' (Fatah, 1978: 72), 'presented all the potential for dreaming in the Kurdish nation', and, 'with the mastery of a philosopher, managed to describe all the reasons for backwardness and to provide solutions for them' (Fatah, 1978: 75). However, Fatah's quotations from Xanî's *Mem û Zin* are scarce, and in no place does he identify any source.

In the third chapter, Fatah focuses on the role of the University of Sulaimani and the KAS, which were created based on the March Manifesto and which he perceives to be crucial intellectual and cultural centres in the new reality of Kurdistan and Iraq. Following Chałasiński, Fatah regards academics as men on a mission, who are not just specialists in a field, but active and devoted agents of moral, cultural, and social transformation. After presenting the history of Sulaimani, he deals with the history of schooling and education in Iraq as a whole (Fatah, 1978: 134). He presents statistics indicating the general situation of schools in Iraq in 1920–1932 (Fatah, 1978: 132),²⁶ and the numbers of schools and kindergartens in Kurdish provinces, including Sulaimani, Erbil, Duhok, Kerkuk, and Ninova in 1973–1974 (Fatah, 1978: 136–137).²⁷ He describes the infrastructure and activities of the University of Sulaimani in great detail,²⁸ highlighting its crucial role not only in educating the Kurdish masses, providing qualified staff, textbooks, and dictionaries, but also in developing and popularising Kurdish culture (Fatah, 1978: 141). He mentions the opening of the Cultural Centre at the university (1975), and contends that a very important achievement of the Centre was establishing the Museum of Ethnography. He regards the Centre as an important bridge between the university and society, allowing 'for society to become familiar with the activities of the university, and for the university to know the needs of society' (Fatah, 1978: 148). Moreover, this connection 'fosters the dissemination of progressive views and Kurdish culture' (Fatah, 1978: 148). Similar tasks are assigned

26 Based on Philip W. Ireland's book *Iraq: A Study in Political Development* (1938), published in Arabic translation in Beirut in 1949.

27 Based on official Iraqi statistics published in the Yearbook of 1974.

28 Most of the information was probably taken from the bulletin published by the University.

to the university publishing house, established in 1976, the Central University Library, the magazine *Zanko* (University), and the *Bulletin of the University of Sulaimani*, which was one of the important sources of Fatah's knowledge about the university. Discussing the library, he stresses that its role should be the integration of academic society and search for knowledge (Fatah, 1978: 153). However, he also highlights the university's shortages, such as the lack of qualified staff and equipment (Fatah, 1978: 142).²⁹ Finally, he criticises the university for its lack of planning, its inability to harness its full potential, for using Arabic and English instead of Kurdish, and for 'still being a home for backward elements that are against the desires of the Kurdish nation' (Fatah, 1978: 156).

Fatah is much more critical regarding the role of the KAS, which he criticises for its narrow interest in language, literature, and history, as well as for being located in Baghdad and not in Kurdistan (Fatah, 1978: 171–172).³⁰ He notes that the laws of the KAS are a copy of the laws of the Iraqi Academy of Sciences (IAS), established in 1948. He argues that times have changed, and that Kurdish and Iraqi society deserves more progressive and socially engaged thinking that would help develop research in fields such as sociology, economics, and modern technology (Fatah, 1978: 175). To Fatah, one of the main tasks of the KAS was to be the standardisation of the Kurdish language, so that it could serve modern purposes and help integrate the nation (Fatah, 1978: 164). In another section, Fatah presents the different Kurdish dialects as a source of richness, but also as remnants of feudalism and as obstacles to integration and the nation-building process (Fatah, 1978: 116). He elevates the role of the Sulaimani dialect of Sorani Kurdish, calling it 'the language of poets and writers', suggesting that this dialect could be accepted as the language of all Kurds (Fatah, 1978: 117). He also opines that the KAS entirely depends on the IAS for establishing contacts with many institutions in Iraq and abroad, and thus cannot develop proper international links in the field of Kurdish studies.

It is fairly surprising that, in his dissertation, Fatah does not mention many political leaders of that period. The only political figure who is frequently mentioned is Mahmud Barzinji, whom Fatah talks about when discussing the British mandate in Iraq. Neither Mela Mustafa Barzani nor Ibrahim Ahmad, nor even the Iraqi Arab leaders, are mentioned. However, judging from the two

29 Based on the statistics of the University of Sulaimani University, published in Arabic in 1976.

30 As stressed by Leezenberg (2016: 15), the Soviet-trained specialists constituted an important part of the staff of Kurdish departments in Baghdad, Sulaimani and the KAS, which may explain the scope of interests Fatah criticised.

works by Jalal Talabani listed in Fatah's bibliography, and from Fatah's ideas, we may assume he had a close relationship with the Ahmad-Talabani wing of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which, in 1975, established the PUK. The name of the KDP appears only once when Fatah talks about the *Khabat* newspaper (Fatah, 1978: 196). In other places, he refers enigmatically to the 'Kurdish movement' and, surprisingly, never mentions the Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan (1946), even though he frequently refers to Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou's *Kurds and Kurdistan*.³¹ Avoiding political context might have also been a strategy advised by Chałasiński to evade trouble. Nevertheless, considering the main ideas expressed in the thesis, it is likely that being silent about the politicians and elevating the role of intellectuals was by design.

Oral Tradition and Modern Kurdish Culture

Although Fatah regards Kurdish folklore as the core of the national Kurdish heritage, contrary to Soviet Kurdologists, he does not focus on its morphology and content, but rather on the place of folklore in contemporary Kurdish society. He quotes from the Bulletin of the KAS and defines oral poetry as 'simple transparent words, which reach the heart and make people connected to life, earth, and work'.³² Fatah adds that folklore is a product of a society of different classes (Fatah, 1978: 86). His appreciation of the role of folklore may be considered both an obvious feature of Kurdish nationalism and an inspiration from Chałasiński, with his close attention to the culture of Polish peasants. Chałasiński's approach to peasant culture was very different from the 19th-century Polish romantic tradition, with its dwelling on the spiritual aspects of life and the call for heroic sacrifice to liberate the nation. Chałasiński's interest was rooted in his own childhood experience and 19th-century Polish positivism, with its attention to organic work, understood as being crucial to the liberation of the nation. Fatah stresses that Kurdish folk stories possess fantastic features, but they 'are not disconnected from reality' (Fatah, 1978: 87). To the contrary, these stories reflect human desires and the struggle for a better future. The characters in folk stories usually have a common goal in life, which is earning a living through hard work and struggle (Fatah, 1978: 87). Fatah pays attention to the folkloric motives in modern Kurdish painting, such as portraits of Kurds in traditional costumes and during their work (Fatah, 1978: 207), and advocates establishing open-air museums that could protect and expose material Kurdish culture in a changing environment (Fatah, 1978: 256). He states with joy that the Folk Song and

31 The book was published in Poland in 1969.

32 Bulletin of the Kurdish Academy of Science, 11/1 (Baghdad 1974), 742.

Dance Ensemble of the University of Sulaimani had recently won first prize at the Festival of Iraqi Universities in Mosul, 'which was of great moral meaning for the Kurdish youth' (Fatah, 1978: 147). Finally, he often highlights the need to invite Kurdish villagers to participate in and contribute to Kurdish cultural life, and criticises Kurdish intellectuals and journalists for being locked in their offices and unable to establish contacts with Kurdish villagers. Hence, in line with Chałasiński, his attention to folklore is connected with the idea of the democratisation of intellectual life, and of inviting the masses to take part in modern cultural life, which he believes can help integrate the nation.

The fourth chapter of Fatah's dissertation contains information on Kurdish modern activities, such as the press, literature, fine arts, theatre, cinema, radio, and libraries. These elements are presented as useful instruments for disseminating Kurdish culture and, thus, are important in a modern 'socialist' nation-building process. He refers to the first initiatives made to publish Kurdish journals in the late Ottoman Empire, stressing that, from the very beginning, they focused not only on national but also on social struggles and, thus, integrated the work of different classes (Fatah, 1978: 185). When Fatah discusses Kurdish modern literature, he offers no textual analysis and only refers to Kurdish literary works he read as a youth in Kurdistan or found in cultural magazines. He provides no sources, and these literary works are not mentioned in the bibliography. Accordingly, we find some inaccuracies. For example, the poet Sheikh Nuri Sheikh Salih³³ is claimed to be the author of the work *Le xewma* (*In my dream*, 1925), which, as we know, was a short story by Jamil Saib.³⁴ Following Chałasiński, Fatah focuses on the social roles of modern writers, suggesting that they differ from those of poets in the past. While literature has lost its position as the main source of information about the world, writers are no longer only 'the authors of texts', but they are strictly connected with society through the media and must provide it with interpretations of the surrounding reality (Fatah, 1978: 203). He gives an overview of painters, including Simko Tofik, Shakir Atif, Lala Abda, Azad Ahmad, Jamal Bakhtiyar, Muhsin Mohamed Amin, Dara Mohamad Ali, Mohamed Arif, Omar Tofik, and

33 Shekh Nuri Shekh Salih (1896–1958) was a Sulaimani-born Kurdish poet and thinker, manager and editor of the newspaper *Roji Kurdistan* (*The Sun of Kurdistan*), and considered one of the modernisers of Kurdish poetry. His complete works were published only in the 1980s (Mirawdeli, 2006: 132).

34 Jamil Saib (1887–1951) was a Sulaimani-born writer, author of the story *Le xewma*, first published in the *Jiyanewe* and *Jiyan* magazines between 1925 and 1926. The story is a heavy critique of the rule of Mahmud Barzinji (Ahmedzadeh, 2018).

Tabir Fatah,³⁵ describing them as ‘not separated from the masses’ (Fatah, 1978: 205–207). He stresses that ‘a work of art is alive if it finds its reception among the masses’ (Fatah, 1978: 208). Fatah is also an enthusiast about radio and its role in popularising knowledge and Kurdish culture, ‘especially in a country where there are so many illiterates’. He criticises the Kurdish language broadcast from Baghdad for ‘not fulfilling the needs of Kurdish people’. He also finds radio useful in the lives of farmers, suggesting that it can be listened to ‘while working in the fields’ (Fatah, 1978: 210). Television and cinema are considered new media with great potential. He complains about the very few Kurdish language programmes on Baghdad, Kerkuk and Mosul televisions (Fatah, 1978: 215), yet, elsewhere, he highlights that Kurdish writers and the University of Sulaimani were engaged in producing the first programmes and documentaries (Fatah, 1978: 148). Regarding film, he proposes organising a travelling cinema to make it accessible to many (Fatah, 1978: 230).

No less interesting is the information given about theatre. Fatah refers to the plays staged in Sulaimani by teachers and students in 1926, and presents short biographies of Rauf Yahya³⁶ and Omar Ali Amin,³⁷ whom he considers ‘very important figures’ in the history of Kurdish theatre. He describes *The Government Inspector* by Nikolay Gogol, which he watched in the last months before the revolution of 1958, when the police arrested many actors (Fatah, 1978: 221).³⁸ He also pays attention to the situation of Kurdish libraries, providing statistics regarding the number of libraries and books in Arabic, Kurdish, and English in the cities of Sulaimani, Erbil, and Duhok (Fatah, 1978: 239).³⁹ To borrow a book from these libraries, a pledge of twice as much as the value of the book needed to be paid (Fatah, 1978: 237). In the final section of Chapter 4, Fatah suggests establishing open-air museums of folk culture and cultural centres for young and old, and discusses the importance of educating cultural

35 Fatah provides no detailed information about these artists. He refers to them only as authors of certain works or topics. Only with regard to Shakir Atif do we learn that he was born in 1937 in the village of Guwar in the Erbil area, and that he graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in 1957. In 1974, he presented his works at the exposition of Kurdish artists in Baghdad (Fatah 1978: 206).

36 Rauf Yahya (1926) was a Sulaimani-born actor and theatre director who played in more than 20 different parts.

37 Omar Ali Amin (1926–2009) was born in Sulaimani into a poor family, graduated from teacher school and worked for many years as a teacher. He staged and directed many plays in different Kurdish cities and on radio and tv, and authored many children’s plays.

38 This information needs to be verified. According to Rostami, the interruption of the performance and the arrests of Kurdish actors took place in May 1948 when *Têkoşanî Rençberan* was staged (Rostami, 2019: 89).

39 Based on the Cultural Statistics of the year 1975, published in Baghdad in 1976.

workers and activists to work in such institutions. He stresses that cultural workers should know Kurdish and be recruited from the regions in which they would work, in order to know their specific characteristics (Fatah, 1978: 248). Many of Fatah's remarks and suggestions were inspired by Polish culture and the communist policy of that period, as he frequently quotes from publications on cultural planning.

The Interconnectedness of Kurdish Culture and Kurdish-Arab Relations

Interestingly, Fatah perceives the dependence on Arabic or Persian classical patterns visible in Kurdish classical poetry as 'the desire of Kurdish poets to understand the literature and spiritual development of their neighbours' (Fatah, 1978: 73). In this way, from the very beginning, he evaluates the interconnectedness of Kurdish culture positively, and this is also a feature distinguishing his dissertation from the Soviet tradition, which to Leezenberg tended to essentialise the Kurdish nation and people and avoided discussing broader contacts with Muslim and non-Muslim neighbours (Leezenberg, 2016: 16).⁴⁰ A desire to belong to the world's cultural heritage and to be a part of global developments is repeated throughout Fatah's work, in addition to an emphasis on the uniqueness and originality of Kurdish culture. For example, when Fatah talks about the need to translate publications into Kurdish, he also calls for translating Kurdish works into other languages to 'make others understand the problems of the Kurdish nation' (Fatah, 1978: 231). When discussing the University of Sulaimani, he calls for the participation of its members in international conferences and for organising exchange programmes (Fatah, 1978: 154). Regarding the KAS, he advocates establishing more contacts with other socialist countries, not just with the Soviet Union. He also calls for the KAS and the IAS to establish contacts with Turkey and Iran due to their considerable Kurdish populations, but stresses that he is 'aware of the very negative approach of both states toward the Kurdish nation' (Fatah, 1978: 168). Fatah's openness to the outside world and his repeated calls for interconnectedness may be also ascribed to the influence of Chałasiński, whose concept of nation was deeply rooted in humanism. Moreover, Chałasiński followed and studied

40 One may agree with Leezenberg that this approach dominated Soviet Kurdology. However, there are works by Soviet scholars in which we find references to the wider Middle Eastern context. For example, commenting on the chronicle of Mastûrey Ardalan, Evgeniya Vasilyeva places it firmly in the wider tradition of historiography in the Muslim world (Vasilyeva, 1990: 39).

the reality of Western countries and Africa and regarded Poland as having strong connectedness with the West, as well as with the Eastern bloc. It is important to stress that, in many cases, Poland became a link to the West even for Soviet citizens, such as the famous poet and literary Nobel Prize winner Iosif Brodski (1940–1996) and many others.⁴¹

Furthermore, the thesis reflects an enthusiasm for the Peace Accords signed between the central Iraqi authorities and Kurdish leaders in March 1970, and it frequently refers to the Autonomy Law of 1974. On paper, this law granted many rights to the Kurds, such as that of establishing political autonomy and vast cultural rights. However, these declarations were never fully implemented and, in 1974, the war between the central government and the Kurds erupted again. Following the signing of the Algiers Agreement between Iraq and Iran in 1975, the Kurds lost Iranian support, which resulted in a heavy defeat, many civilian casualties, and in the dividing of the Kurdish movement into two separate political bodies (McDowall, 2007: 339). Thus, in 1978, there was little cause for optimism, and it seems that this dissertation, or at least some of it, must have been finished earlier and only defended in 1978.⁴² Moreover, being far from his homeland, Fatah might not have been fully informed about the situation. Taking into account the obvious tensions between the Baghdad authorities and Kurdish leaders and their possible effect on the atmosphere among Iraqis studying in Poland, Fatah might likely have been advised not to get into trouble with his dissertation. In any case, his historical narration ends in 1974.

Nonetheless, Fatah's dissertation also features bitter comments on Arab-Kurdish relations. For example, when he speaks about television in Iraq, he stresses that:

the content of the Mosul tv is not in line with the spirit of brotherhood between the Arab and Kurdish nations, nor with progress and with the policy of Iraqi authorities and the general interests of the Iraqi nation. (Fatah, 1978: 216)

Obviously, 'the lack of brotherhood' was interpreted by Fatah as 'being against the policy of Iraqi authorities'. This interpretation helped him to present his

41 Personal communication with Elena Tverdislova, well-known translator of Polish philosophy into Russian, September 2020. Tverdislova stressed that, for many, including Iosif Brodski and herself, learning Polish in the Soviet era was important to obtain access to different publications – including by Russian poets and writers – that were banned in Soviet Union but could be published in Poland.

42 The latest sources are dated 1976.

criticism as a form of loyalty toward the state and was a strategy known from Chałasiński's publications. Finally, when reading about the many shortcomings of institutions such as the KAS or the University of Sulaimani, it is evident that what he covertly criticised was, in fact, the Arabisation policy.

Conclusions

Fatah's thesis provides interesting material for studying the effects of communist ideology on Kurdish intellectuals and for reflecting on the diverse aspects of Kurdish studies in socialist countries. The thesis bears the mark of communism but also of Polish heritagisation, in which culture and intellectuals became an important driving force in the process of nation-building and in seeking international recognition. Although the Soviet Union was the main place where Kurdology flourished, offering space to many Kurdish students, it was not the only such location in the communist bloc. Fatah's thesis is, to a great extent, different from the works written in the Soviet Union, as the socialist reality of the Polish People's Republic was rooted not only in communist ideology but also in the 19th- and early 20th-century Polish intellectual tradition, and was likewise greatly inspired by the West. Instead of discussing language, literature, and history, Fatah followed Chałasiński's ideas and sought a modern sociological approach, wishing to offer new solutions to influence the reality in Iraqi Kurdistan, which he felt responsible for. Like Chałasiński, Fatah perceived intellectuals as the main actors behind the socialist nation-building process. Accordingly, the main preconditions for a successful cultural policy on the part of the intellectuals were their recruitment from different classes, their non-elitist but popular approach to culture, understood as a product of all the society members, and their engagement and devotion to the introduction of reforms. Despite the many ideological and political difficulties, Fatah managed to be critical of the shortcomings he observed, yet idealistically believed in a better future to come. Furthermore, Kurdish nationalism suffuses every part of the dissertation. Nevertheless, Fatah believed in and tried to construct an open vision of a Kurdish nation that could jointly participate in 'the bright socialist future' along with many other nations.

Although some of Fatah's ideas may today sound naïve, especially when we consider the genocide committed by the Iraqi regime in 1988, they still have something to offer. The two main messages he wanted to deliver were as follows: first, Kurdish intellectuals must be in touch with the people, and their activities must be based on field research, and not on paperwork in distant

offices. Second, the Kurds and Kurdish institutions must cooperate, because this is the basis for any successful policy. Fatah believed that establishing modern cultural institutions and international networks can help overcome many obstacles, including the oppressive policy of states and governments.

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Communist Europe and the Kurdish Question During the Cold War (1940s–1980s)

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Abstract

While abundant scholarship has been produced concerning the Kurdish diaspora in Western Europe, little is known about the development of Kurdish communities in Central and Eastern Europe, especially during the Cold War. This paper analyses the specific situation of the Kurds in Communist Europe through the prism of Bulgaria, a frontline country in direct contact with the Middle East from the 1940s until the end of the 1980s. It demonstrates the weight of diplomatic and economic factors in explaining the persistent difficulty faced by Central European regimes in conceiving of the Kurdish issue beyond separate national fighting grounds.

Keywords

Cold War – Kurdish diaspora – East-West contacts – Balkans – Turkish-Bulgarian relations

Ewropaya komunîst û pirsgirêka kurd li serdema Şerê Sar (salên 1940î–1980î)

Li gel berdariya xebatên akademîk ên li ser diyasporaya kurd li Ewropaya rojava, em xwediyên agahiyên pir kêma in li ser pêkhatina civatên kurd li Ewropaya naverast û rojhilat, nemase li serdema Şerê Sar. Ev nivîsar li rewşa taybet a Kurdên Ewropaya komunîst dikole û bi xusûsî li ser Bulgaristanê disekine, ku welatekî li ser sînor e û, ji

salên 1940î ta dawîya salên 1980î, rasterast bi Rojhilata Navîn re di nav têkiliyan de bû. Bi vî hawî, nivîsar giraniya faktorên aborî û dîplomatîk derdixe pêş bo ravekirina zehmetiyên mayînde yê rejîmên Ewropaya naverast di ponijîna pirsgrêka kurd li derveyî meşdanên ceng ên neteweyên cihê de.

Ewropayê komonîst û dozê Kurdekan le serdemî cengê sarda (sallekanî 1940–1980)

Le katêk da twêjînewey zor le ser Kurdekan le Ewropayê rojava, le tarawge berhemhênrawe, zanarî kem le ser geşesendinî komellgeyê kurdî le Ewropayê nawerrast û rojhelatî da heye, be taybetî le serdemî Cengî Sar da. Em twêjîneweyê şiroveyê barudoxî taybetî Kurdekanî Ewropayê komonîst le rêgayê Bulgaryaweyê, ke dewlletêkî bereyê cengê bû û peywendî rastewxoyê legellê Rojhelatî Nawerrast da le sallanî 1940eweyê ta 1980eweyê hebûwe. Twêjîneweke qursayî faktore dîplomatî û abûriyekan derdaxat, be rûnkirdineweyê astengî hewlê berdawemekanî rûberruwî rijêmekanî Ewropayê nawerrast botewe le têgeştinê le dozê Kurdekan be der le kêşeyekî rûberrûbuneweyê neteweyî serbexoyê.

Ewropaya komonîste û wextê Cengê Sardinî de (1940an–1980an) mesela kurdan

Herçiqas ke derheqê dîyasporayê kurdanê Ewropayê Rojavayê de xeylê eserê zanarî ameyê dayene kî, derheqê averşîyayîşê komelanê kurdanê Ewropayê Mîyanên û Rojhelatî de zanayîşê hîna kêmtir ye, bitaybetî demê Cengê Sardinî ser o. No nuşte rewşa taybetî yê kurdanê Ewropayê Komonîste analîzê keno. Analîzê pê prîzmaya Bulgarîstanî yeno kerdene: welatêkê serê cebheyî ke 1940an ra heta peynîya 1980an Rojhelatê Mîyanên de têkiliya xo ya rasteraste estbî. Bi musnayîşê giraniya faktorên ekonomîk û dîplomatîkan ra îzahê beno ke rejîmanê Ewropayê Mîyanên cenggehanê neteweyîyanê cîyakerdeyan ra teber fehmkerdişê mesela kurdan de tim zehmetîye antêne.

The public mobilization of Kurdish migrants and exiles in Western Europe has been rightly considered, since its first manifestations in the early 1960s, as a major element in the defence and assertion of Kurdish political demands and cultural identities. The intensified political activism of the late 1970s and

the emergence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) increased the attention paid to connections between the Western European diaspora and Kurdish movements in their four home states (Rigoni, 1998; Sirkeci, 2006). By contrast, little is known concerning the role of Kurds that lived on the Eastern side of the Iron curtain, although recent scholarship has emphasized the existence of cross-curtain networks in student activism (Saint Martin, Scarfò Ghellab, Mellakh, 2015; Slobodian, 2015), as illustrated by the geographical span of the Kurdish Students' Society in Europe (KSSE) (Tejel-Gorgas, 2018; Sheikmous, 2020).

A partial exception to this grey area is the Soviet Union, which has attracted consideration as an important actor and venue in the contemporary history of the Kurds (Bugaj, 2012; Bugaj-Mamaev, 2014). This is connected to the well-known role of Tsarist and Soviet orientalists in the production of Kurdish Studies as a separate field, distinct notably from Iranology, and the translation and publication of classical texts such as the *Sharafnāme* in Saint-Petersburg in the 1860s–1870s (Leezenberg, 2015). This also has to do with the interest for Russian power games in the Near and Middle East since the 19th century and the role they assigned to Kurdish leaders and movements in their forward march in the region, especially in the years preceding the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Lazarev, 1972; Reynolds, 2011), under the Soviet occupation of Northern Iran during the Second World War (Vali, 2011; Gasanly, 2017), and in recent years (Mosaki, 2011). Ultimately, it is also connected with the existence of an autochthonous Kurdish-speaking population settled in the South Caucasus since the early modern period and partially deported to Central Asia under Stalin (Pohl, 2017; Peyrat, 2020). Their intellectual and cultural contribution to a shared Kurdish legacy (Yüksel, 2013) as well as the question of identity rifts between Muslim and Yezidi Kurdish speakers (Dalalyan, 2011: 177–201) have recently drawn increased interest.

While the idea of “perforating the Iron curtain” is now a routine part of political, cultural, and economic analyses of Cold War Europe (Péteri, 2004; Loth, Soutou, 2008), the way such an approach can be used to further an understanding of connections between Kurdish activism and the Eastern bloc still has to be found (Forestier-Peyrat, 2019). Easier access to official and private archives through Central European countries in the last two decades means new possibilities for this study of inter-bloc mobilities and exiles, although the lack of proficiency in Central and Southeastern European languages may continue to be a hindrance. Going beyond the situation of the Kurds in the Soviet Union and a discussion of Soviet international projection is an additional challenge, which means giving more agency simultaneously to Kurdish and Central European players, who were not passive satellites, as amply demonstrated by

recent Cold War studies (Marès, 2007). The aim of this paper is thus to make an inroad into the way the Kurdish question was perceived and handled by Central European communist regimes.

Although countries such as Poland, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Hungary featured on maps of Kurdish activism in communist Europe, three locations obviously stood out. East Germany, a political and economic heavyweight of the bloc, held a prominent position as the shelter of the Turkish and Iranian communist parties in exile and a convenient window on West Berlin, a major venue of student activism since the 1960s (Nûr Mohammadi, 2006). Czechoslovakia and its capital city, Prague, also attracted many communist exiles and reformers, most prominently Abdol Rahman Ghassemlou, head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, who married Hélène Krulich, a Czech citizen (Krulich, 2011). As the headquarters of the World Marxist Review (known in Russian and most languages as Problems of Peace and Socialism), Prague was the place of a buoyant and sometimes uncontrollable internationalist milieu, a fact characterized by the participation of many of its members in the Prague Spring in 1968 and, later on, the Perestroika (Brown, 2007: 162–163). In each of these countries, Kurdish activities started to grow on an informal basis in the 1960s and were submitted to close intelligence and police monitoring, especially as diplomatic relations with Iran, Iraq, and Turkey were progressively established (Trentin, 2008; Sittman, 2018).

In this paper, we will focus on an apparently less conspicuous case, Bulgaria, a frontline of the communist bloc in Southeastern Europe and a direct neighbour of Turkey as well as an early member of NATO (1952) and the Baghdad Pact (1955). Starting from the late 1950s, the country was home to a tiny but active community of mainly Iraqi Kurds. In many regards, this small group could be compared to other Kurdish microcosms in the East. The 'Kurdish question' was, however, perceived in a particular light by a regime that was directly confronted by its multiple facets. Traditionally considered as the most loyal vassal of the USSR – 'Moscow's loyal flag-bearer', a 'sixteenth republic', or a 'branch of the KGB', as the word goes in contemporary debates in Bulgaria (Baev, 2009: 17) – Bulgaria also had its own interests connected to a special position on the chessboard of the bloc (Dragostinova, 2021) and in the Balkans, a region where binary Cold War divisions were increasingly challenged by countries like Yugoslavia, Romania, and Greece (Rajak, Botsiou, Karamouzi, Hatzivassiliou, 2017).

On the one hand, due to its position on the Black Sea and geographical proximity to the Middle East, Bulgaria quickly developed ties with countries like Syria and Iraq, in manners recently studied by Nadja Filipova (Filipova, 2008;

Filipova, 2017). On the other hand, Kurdish affairs were also dealt with in light of the tense relations that existed with Turkey. Although these relations underwent a noticeable improvement in the 1960s–1970s, the 1980s brought about an abrupt deterioration related to the treatment of the Muslim and Turkish communities in Bulgaria and the mass exodus it produced (Neuburger, 2004; Ragaru, 2010). Over time, the Kurdish question was successively framed as an ‘Iranian’, ‘Iraqi’, and ‘Turkish’ issue by the Bulgarian authorities in response to ongoing political and diplomatic events. The recent disclosure of former Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP), State security (DS), and diplomatic archives now makes possible a direct study of this intricate relationship and the way Kurdish students and exiles in Bulgaria turned out to be, in Sara Pugach’s phrase, ‘agents of dissent’, endangering the increasingly pragmatic approach of communist bloc diplomacy in the Middle East by their claims and activism (Pugach, 2019).

Enters the Kurdish Question

If we except the sporadic coverage of Kurdish revolts by the Bulgarian press in the 1920s, the first contacts of communist Bulgaria with the Kurdish question was the direct product of political and military confrontation in the Black Sea at the end of the Second World War. Irked by Turkey’s ambiguous neutrality during the war, Stalin and his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Viacheslav Molotov, pressed for territorial concessions in Eastern Anatolia and a new Straits regime in 1945–1946 (İşçi, 2019). These demands dramatically worsened Soviet-Turkish relations, opening the way for a clear alignment of Ankara along US lines, and even its military participation in the Korean war (Brockett, 2004). Tensions grew on Turkish borders with the USSR and Bulgaria, a country that also shared a frontier with civil war-torn Greece. In the late 1940s, the Southeastern Balkans thus became a place of transit and exile for left-wing activists escaping political repression in these two countries, notably in Turkey where anticommunism became a staple of Cold War politics (Meşe, 2016). Foremost among these exiles was Nâzım Hikmet, who decided to flee Istanbul on a boat, and reached Romania in June 1951 (RGASPI, 82/2/1330/66-70).

A majority of these activists were ethnic Turks, some of whom, like Bilal Şen and Fahri Erdinç, helped Bulgarian authorities in their ‘affirmative action’ policies directed at the Turkish-speaking and Muslim minorities living in Bulgaria in the 1950s (Tata, 1993; Akpınar & Köksal, 2016). Yet, a lot of them

could also have an interest in Kurdish issues as part of a broader criticism of Turkish policies, in the same manner as Iranian exiles to the Soviet Union lambasted Iranian oppression of the Azeri and Kurdish communities. İsmail Bilen – ‘Comrade Marat’ –, a veteran of the Turkish Communist movement, spoke on Radio Moscow’s Turkish-language broadcasts about the mistreatment of national minorities in Turkey in the early 1950s in such a strident tone that Soviet leaders had to ask him to avoid deliberate provocations (RGASPI, 17/137/752/67-71). Initially, though, Bulgaria was not a place of Kurdish exile in the sense the Soviet Union could be for Mustafa Barzani and his associates during this decade (Hevramî, 2002; Udilov, 1994: 54–55).

While Kurdish activists were seen exclusively through the prism of Communist or leftist organizations in the 1950s, an interest in the Kurdish movement per se started in 1959, due to Mustafa Barzani’s return to Iraq and an increasing awareness concerning the geopolitical role of the Kurds in the Middle East. First contacts between Bulgaria and the Kurds apparently transited through the Bulgarian embassy in Berlin and the bons offices of the East German ruling party, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). Communist countries had initially bet on a lasting coalition between Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the new Iraqi regime of Abd al-Karim Qassem, but they instead witnessed the progressive worsening of their relations. Qassem’s regime became increasingly weary of the influence of the KDP and of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) after unrest erupted in Kirkuk in July 1959, and Barzani himself had trouble maintaining his control over Kurdish social and political forces (Rubin, 2007: 365–367).

The conflict eventually led to military consequences in September 1961, when violent hostilities started between Barzani’s forces and Baghdad. These hostilities did attract attention in Eastern European capitals: starting in early 1961, the KGB toyed with the idea of using the Kurdish operational theatre and other geopolitical hot spots to distract US attention and forces away from the tensions arising from the Berlin Wall crisis (Zubok, 1994: 28–33). During the Autumn of 1961, Iraqi Kurds tried to liaise with Bulgarian diplomats in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to gain financial and political support. Despite a noticeable disillusionment with Qassem, however, communist countries adopted a course of non-interference that looked quite similar to the line they followed when newly independent African regimes displayed increasingly authoritarian features and cracked down on student, trade union, and left-wing activism (Pugach, 2019: 94–96).

While Kurdish ‘dissent’ could still be controlled in 1961, it flared up again after another turn of events – the Baath’s first coming to power in February 1963.

Communist and Kurdish Iraqis living in Eastern Europe publicly demonstrated against mass repression and KDP representatives – notably Murad Aziz Barzani and Jalal Talabani – tried to get in touch with Bulgarian authorities to have them join the public denunciation of the Baath regime (van Rooy, 1963; TsDA, 1B/81d/303/30). Their requests now had the advantage of referring to the presence in almost all Central European countries of small groups of Kurdish activists who could promote their cause locally, as Talabani wrote in September 1963 to Bulgarian diplomat Misho Nikolov (TsDA, 1B/33/1128/2).

In Bulgaria, Sabir Khoshnaw, a member of the KDP and head of the local branch of the KSSE, was particularly active, and other Kurds settled in the country could increasingly rely on the cross-bloc networks of the KSSE. Silvio van Rooy's archives in Amsterdam testify to this new ability to mobilize local figures in defence of the Kurds (Çelik, 2020: 72). For the first time, Khoshnaw and his friends received support from members of the Bulgarian establishment. Boris Temkov, a well-connected journalist and former collaborator of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, had spent two years in Iraq (1960–1961) and became an ardent supporter of the Kurds. His efforts allowed for the publication by a 'civil society' organization, the Bulgarian Fatherland Front (Otechestven Front), of a booklet entitled *Kurdistan* (Temkov, 1964). The parallel between the personal experience of many Bulgarian communists and the fight of the Kurds led to a powerful emotional connection. In December 1965, after Temkov had been arrested for his alleged participation in a coup attempt against the new Bulgarian leader, Todor Zhivkov, Temkov's wife, confirmed in a message to van Rooy that: "The eight years of illegal revolutionary activity at the time of the fascist regime, the participation in the partisan movement in 1944, and in the antifascist war during which he was heavily wounded, all brought him closer to the Kurdish comrades who [were] fighting for the liberty of their people" (IISG, Van Rooy/1SK).

From that moment on, the sympathy that could be expressed for the Kurds in Bulgaria led, at some points, to criticism being raised against Sofia by the Iraqi government. In a pattern that became quite common in later years, Bulgaria became the ideal scapegoat every time Baghdad wanted to condemn the attitude of the communist bloc without attacking the Soviet Union directly (Filipova, 2008: 165–166). Being both perceived as a devotee of the USSR and a minor player, Bulgaria could be bullied without serious diplomatic consequences. This was first directly expressed in 1966, when Bulgaria was severely attacked for allegedly supporting the Kurds with weapons transiting through Beirut and seized by Lebanese authorities (Al-Zahîrî, 2012: 59).

Radio Politics in the Black Sea Space and the Kurds

The growing transnational network of Kurdish activism in the East was not, however, an autonomous structure, and was largely intertwined with other political organizations which enjoyed official support from communist countries beyond the short-lived support for the Kurds in 1963. Many members of the Turkish, Iranian, and Iraqi communist parties were ethnic Kurds, and their political activity often involved some interest in the Kurdish question. In the Cold War context, these parties invested in the creation of propaganda radio broadcasting to the Near and Middle East as part of the global rivalry to win hearts and minds (Roth-Ey, 2011). Germany – East and West – was a favourite spot for propaganda broadcasts in the 1950s. In April 1958, the Communist Party of Turkey (TKP) launched Bizim Radyo ('Our Radio', based in Leipzig), and the Iranian Tudeh also established its own radio in the same year (Açıkgöz, 2002). Many Kurds were involved in the activity of these parties, although they were not necessarily identified as such and did not always act out of national concerns. However, archival sources and testimonies increasingly mention nationality as a factor during this period.

Smaller communist countries, such as Bulgaria and Soviet republics like Armenia and Azerbaijan, gained a particular place in the history of Kurdish radio activism. In September 1954, the Communist Party of Armenia decided to add Kurdish-language broadcasts to Radio Yerevan and they soon became a reference for the Kurds of Eastern Anatolia (HAA, 1/34/31/30; İnanç, 2016). Technical as well as symbolic elements shaped the geography of radios and transmitter stations across the region. In January 1961, Iraj Eskandari, a prominent member of the Tudeh Central Committee, visited Sofia with a proposal to move the site of the Party's clandestine radio, Peyk-e Iran ('The Courier of Iran'), to Bulgaria. Distance and interference complicated the efficiency of broadcasting from the GDR to the Middle East. The presence in Bulgaria of Iranian exiles would provide local staff for the radio and add Azeri-language and Kurdish-language programs. This initiative, approved by the Politburo of the BKP on 2 March 1961, after a consultation with Moscow, demonstrated a desire to better use national minorities in communist propaganda directed at Iran (TsDA, 1B/64/281/1-2). The first official implantation of Kurdish media propaganda in Bulgaria was thus made under the umbrella of the Tudeh Party, at a moment when its relations with the Azerbaijani Democratic Party and Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) were intensely discussed.

Employment in the radio maintained a steady flow of collaborators and visitors to Sofia, even more so as tensions grew worse in the party. When Iraj Eskandari took over as first secretary, a fight ensued for control over the

radio – one of the Party's key assets – as its director, Hamid Safari, was transferred to Prague (TsDA, 1B/81g/337/45-48). Because of these inner tensions, one of the members of the Kurdish-language editorial team, Karim Khosami, who had come to Bulgaria from Czechoslovakia in 1965, progressively switched to work for the KDPI. In 1972, he was transferred to Baghdad, where Ghassemlou was trying to develop a basis for action in the immediate neighbourhood of Iran. As part of party cooperation, the BKP continued in the 1970s to pay his family an allowance and Khosami visited Bulgaria several times a year (TsDA, 1B/81d/172/41-43). Khosami was, however, trapped in competing allegiances between the Tudeh and the KDPI, accused of condoning nationalistic tendencies and being disloyal to the Soviet line because of Ghassemlou's critical behaviour during the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 (Prunhuber, 2009: 181).

Tensions between the Tudeh leadership and Kurdish activists who looked for new political opportunities were but one aspect of the overall crisis of the Tudeh Party, which had lost grassroots support in Iran and was deeply divided in the diaspora. From 1969 onwards, Bulgarian authorities suggested Peyk-e Iran be moved to another socialist country. The rising economic difficulties of Eastern European countries raised the stakes of relations with Iran and, when relations soured between Bulgaria and the leaders of Tudeh, Sofia became more clearly intent on getting rid of the radio. After years of resistance, Tudeh leaders had to give in to the pressure and the radio was closed in November 1976. By then, however, the Kurdish question was almost exclusively perceived through the prism of the rapidly evolving political situation in Iraq.

Bulgarian Diplomacy in the Middle East and the Kurds

Since the early 1970s, Bulgaria and other communist countries had been put to contribution in order to consolidate the March 1970 autonomy agreement between the Baath and the Iraqi KDP, a major objective of Soviet diplomacy (Smolansky & Smolansky, 1991: 73–75). The agreement laid out a roadmap for improved relations between the Kurds and Baghdad through political, cultural, and economic measures to increase the autonomy and prosperity of the Kurdish provinces. Relations had to be developed with government and Kurdish actors in Iraq in order to promote peace in the country and strengthen the influence of socialism, especially as the USSR signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Iraq in April 1972 (Franzén, 2011: 200–206). Konstantin Tellalov, head of the BKP International Department, reported in May 1970 that contacts were made between the Bulgarian ambassador to Iraq, Nikolaj

Bojadzhiev, and the Kurdish state minister Saleh al-Yusef, concerning sponsorship for Kurdish Iraqi students to study in Bulgaria (TsDA, 1B/36/978/2). Financial and humanitarian aid was also provided through different channels to KDP-controlled areas of Iraq as part of an effort to stabilize the situation and get all Iraqi forces to support the Eastern alliance. In order to avoid too strong a commitment of Bulgarian authorities to Kurdish forces, the Bulgarian Fatherland Front was once again made the main interlocutor of the Kurds, as also reported by Tellalov (TsDA, 1B/36/1410/3-4).

The number of Iraqi Kurdish students, while remaining small, grew progressively in the 1970s thanks to appointment quotas from the KDP and ICP. Political and personal reasons could guide their presence in Bulgaria, but economic and professional factors also played a considerable role. Since the 1960s, Bulgaria had clearly become one of the world's largest producers and exporters of tobacco, Bulgartabak – the state tobacco trust – being one of the largest currency-bringers in the country (Neuburger, 2013: 200). Bulgarian agricultural institutes, faculties, and experimental stations were particularly attractive considering Northern Iraq's focus on agricultural development. Iraqi state institutions themselves used nominations to Bulgaria as a way to gain the loyalty of Kurdish students in this field.

However, the increasingly obvious failure of the implementation of the March 1970 agreement led to worsening relations between Iraqi authorities and Kurdish students. The latter overwhelmingly sided with autonomist claims, although not all of them were keen on Mustafa Barzani's leadership and many had sympathies with the ICP. The relationship between Iraqi embassies and Iraqi Kurdish students soured and created diplomatic tensions with the host countries. Bulgaria was submitted to vicious attacks from Baghdad, which implied indirect criticism against the Soviet Union and other members of the Warsaw Pact. Simultaneously, though, attempts to mend the rift with Baghdad exposed Bulgarian authorities to renewed attacks by Kurdish students who denounced the hypocrisy of Eastern European countries in their relations with authoritarian regimes (Pugach, 2019: 105).

In Bulgaria, the Iraqi embassy sent a series of notes in August-September 1974 to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs demanding the forced repatriation to Iraq of six Iraqi Kurdish students accused of belonging to the KDP (Shirzad Abdul Fatah, Rashid Miran, Azad Mohamed Amin, Talib Rashid Jadkar el-Kakai, Shirko Khamza Rasul, and Ali Mirza Feli) (TsDA, 1477/31/1588/12-13). Iraq's request led to an inquiry into the activities of Kurdish students in Bulgaria who were assembled in a student organization. Their activities did not really extend to publicly reaching out to other foreign students or to Bulgarian citizens, but included numerous contacts with Kurds in the Soviet Union and other socialist

countries. Moreover, the Kurdish student organization mixed KDP sympathizers and Communist Kurds, giving further legitimacy to its presence on the territory of a socialist country (TsDA, 1477/31/1588/1-2).

Practical problems emerged due to the financial troubles some students experienced with the termination of their stipends by Iraqi authorities, notably the Iraqi state tobacco company. The main difficulty for Bulgarian authorities, though, was the pressure put on them by Iraqi authorities, which threatened in a barely veiled manner political and economic countermeasures if Kurdish and Communist militants were not excluded from public activism. In a moment when economic stagnation and rising energy costs meant increasing tensions in the foreign trade and external debt of Bulgaria, the country could not write off relations with a major oil-producing country (Avramov, 2008).

Some visible aspects of the Kurdish students' activity, such as their relations to the KSSE and a splinter organization, the Association of Kurdistan Students Abroad (AKSA), illustrated by trips to West Germany to take part in the unions' conferences, could be particularly problematic for Bulgarian-Iraqi relations by the late 1970s. This new awareness of East-West connections coincided with the feeling that Eastern Europe could not be hermetically cordoned off from trends unfolding in the West, especially the rise of political violence and terrorism. Traditionally accused of condoning leftist terrorist groups, Central European regimes were actually wary of their potential destabilizing effects – as demonstrated in June 1978 by Bulgarian cooperation with West Germany against Till Meyer's group (Nehring, 2015) – and started to consider the domestic and international consequences the activity of groups such as the KSSE, or another student organization like AKSA, could have for their own interests (Droit, 2019: 182–183).

Tensions culminated in 1978–1979 when, due to deliberately provocative actions on the part of Baath militants, clashes occurred between pro- and anti-Baath activists in Bulgaria. In early December 1979, a few months after Saddam Hussein's definitive consolidation of power, two students – one Baathist and one Communist – were killed in a deadly brawl in Sofia (AMVnR, 35/1544/88-97). The incident was fully instrumentalized by Baathist propaganda in a move to bully Bulgaria to not welcome any more Communist and Kurdish students on its soil. While Iraqi diplomats had been routinely accusing Bulgaria and other communist countries of welcoming Kurdish delegations and selling them arms, the incident brought about a new flare of propaganda. Other people's democracies were alarmed by the incident, which incited them to adopt measures to protect key figures of Kurdish emigration against assassination attempts (BstU/HA-II/23588/27-32; Sassoon, 2014: 9–11).

Bulgarian-Turkish Tensions and the Kurds

While Kurdish mobilization had hitherto been approached through the prism of Iranian and Iraqi politics, the 1980s led to its first direct collision with Bulgarian-Turkish relations. Contrary to what occurred for Western Europe, where the September 1980 coup led to mass immigration of Turkish and Kurdish left-wing activists, socialist countries did not become home to large émigré communities. Despite rumours that the Black Sea served as a smuggling hub for weapons sent to the Kurds in Anatolia, Bulgaria was not significantly involved in support to armed resistance against the Turkish authorities (Szatkowski, 2016: 26–28). Since the late 1970s, diplomatic and commercial relations had improved, and Sofia paid more and more attention to trade and maritime and economic cooperation with Turkey as an important source of currency income. High-level Bulgarian delegations travelled to Turkey in 1983–1984, in an effort to embody a trend that contributed to the Soviet policy of appeased relations in the Black Sea region.

This neglect changed in November 1984 when the ВКР decided to launch a mass campaign to change Turkish names in the country, the so-called ‘Revival Process’ (*Vizroditelnijat Protsets*), in a quest to consolidate the ‘unity’ of the Bulgarian nation. To this day, the underlying factors of this sudden revival remain disputed. Pressure was put upon populations and 310,000 people had their names changed from December 1984 to January 1985. While Turkey protested these measures in the international arena, Bulgaria immediately looked for side issues that could deflect attention from the policy. On 18 January 1985, Todor Zhivkov mentioned the fact that Turkey could not adopt an overly aggressive attitude and that he thus expected a quick decrease in the anti-Bulgarian media campaign: ‘They can make noise, but it’s not in their interest, because their entire army is waging a war against the Kurds. We don’t wage any war, we just change names’ (*Istinata ...*, 2003: 27).

Contrary to Zhivkov’s expectations, Turkey launched a multifaceted offensive against Bulgarian policies in international organizations (Şimşir, 1990). Ankara emphasized Bulgarian human rights violations in the UN, the Council of Europe, and UNESCO. It also played a religious note by mobilizing the Islamic Conference. At a moment when – a few years after the beginning of the Afghanistan war – the Soviet Union was specifically trying to defuse tensions with the Muslim world, this was not welcome in Moscow. Moreover, Turkey harnessed the impact of the crisis in its effort to mend relations with NATO after a few years of cold due to the Turkish intervention in Cyprus in 1974 (Campany, 1986). The Soviet leadership had already been wary of Sofia’s chauvinistic disputes with the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in the 1960s–1970s, and the

Revival Process was perceived as an additional hurdle on the path of peaceful relations in the region (Schönfeld, 1988: 257–258). Gorbachev expressed his misgivings as early as his first encounter with Zhivkov in October 1985, and the campaign was one of the reasons Bulgaria became a burdensome ally (Gruev & Kal'onski, 2008: 149–151; Chakirov, 2001: 160).

Under the long-standing Minister of Foreign Affairs, Petăr Mladenov, Bulgarian diplomats were immediately mobilized to counter Turkish activities, but could not prevent the passing of many resolutions condemning Bulgarian policies. Among Sofia's few assets, however, were the Kurdish and Armenian questions. While Ankara's stubborn denial of the Armenian genocide had weakened its position internationally, the Kurdish question was seen by Bulgarian diplomats as the 'Achilles' heel' of Turkey, in particular considering the bloody military operations going on in Eastern Anatolia in the mid-1980s (TsDA, 1B/81v/459/73). The embassy in Ankara produced numerous reports that helped fill an international counter-propaganda strategy on human and minority rights in Turkey. In this perspective, Turgut Özal's openings for more recognition of the Kurds in Turkish society in the mid-1980s (Ataman, 2002) were generally seen as a tactical ploy of the military to minimize Turkey's domestic and international vulnerability (TsDA, 1B/81v/459/97-101).

For the Kurds settled in Bulgaria, counter-propaganda measures provided exactly the kind of political and cultural patronage that had cyclically existed in the Soviet Union itself. While the ВКР remained one of the most conservative parties in the Eastern Bloc until its very end, the geopolitical factor of confrontation with Turkey led Bulgaria to become a vocal supporter of the Kurdish cause. As Turkish ambassador Ömer Lütem recalls in his memoirs, this instrumental dimension was quite explicitly acknowledged by Bulgarian statesmen in their efforts to force Ankara's hand (Lütem, 2000: 319–324).

Bulgarian authorities looked for support among the newly established Kurdistan Socialist Party (ТСК), a leftist organization established by Zeki Adsız, a proponent of armed struggle against the Turkish state (Jongerden, Akkaya, 2019: 274). They also considered a series of measures such as a common Bloc policy toward the Kurdish issue, official relations with the Kurdish Institute in Paris (and other similar institutes in Western Europe), scholarships for Kurdish activists, and a cultural-political mobilization of Kurdish students in Bulgaria through the Friendship (Druzhiba) organization (TsDA, 174B/2/4067/1-8). Their activism was spurred by a willingness to catch up with mobilization in Western Europe that threatened to annihilate the a priori Marxist orientation of many Kurdish political movements in the 1980s. This brief moment also led to a renewal of publications on the Kurdish issue: after years of unsuccessful attempts, the former diplomat and expert on the Kurds, Radoj Krıstev,

was finally able to publish his book, *The Kurds in Turkey. Injustice and Terror* (Krîstev, 1987).

Conclusion

The fall of Bulgarian communism in late 1989 sealed the fate of the Revival Process and Sofia's tactical support for the Kurds in Turkey. Even before that, however, concerns had been raised about possible disturbances in the relations with Iraq, Iran, and Syria in the event that a strong pro-Kurdish course would be adopted by the BKP. Once again, as the head of the Bulgarian State Television and Radio noted in August, this course would fall prey to the impossibility of segmenting broadcasts and targeting Turkey's Kurds exclusively for this propaganda (TsDA/206/18/31/1-2). This final stage of Bulgarian-Kurdish relations during the Cold War period confirms the overall trend of approaching the Kurdish issue only as part of the three state contexts of Iranian, Iraqi, and Turkish politics. The fact that Kurdish militants settled in Bulgaria were overwhelmingly active in non-Kurdish organizations only accentuated this inclination.

Their activities tended to be strongly influenced by their country of origin and their Kurdish identity was maintained and vivified in the eyes of the Bulgarian authorities by two main factors: on the one hand, the influence of and interaction with Kurdish movements in the West and the Soviet Union, where Kurdish diasporas were more numerous and better structured; on the other hand, antagonistic policies led by state authorities in the Middle East, especially in Iraq. Iraqi complaints about 'Kurdish activities' in Bulgaria played a significant role in increasing the awareness of state and security organs concerning the actual scope of such activities.

Central European countries were therefore quite different from the Soviet Union in the sense that, lacking an autochthonous or strong émigré Kurdish community, they did not develop an independent framing of the Kurdish issue and continued to view it as a sub-piece of national chessboards. Successively seen as mainly an 'Iranian', 'Iraqi', or 'Turkish' problem, the Kurdish cause remained subservient to the imperatives of diplomatic and economic relations with these three Middle Eastern countries. For 'Moscow's loyal flag-bearer', the Kurdish issue became one of the bargaining chips that allowed Sofia to increase its independence in the last decades of the Cold War and balance an autonomous political course in Southeastern Europe.

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Rethinking State-Non-state Alliances: a Theoretical Analysis of the U.S.-Kurdish Relationship

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Abstract

This study investigates the growing influence of Middle Eastern non-state actors as agents of foreign policy and their interactions with states through an analysis of the U.S.-Kurdish relationship. Incorporating archival data and interviews with Kurdish and American policy makers, the paper analyses the factors that have affected the U.S.-Kurdish relationship from World War II to the recent Syrian crisis in the context of the mainstream theoretical approaches within the discipline of International Relations. The article concludes that the failure to formulate a coherent Kurdish policy complicates the U.S.' Middle East strategy and contributes to outcomes unfavourable to U.S. interests in the region.

Keywords

Rojava – Kurdistan Regional Government – Kurdistan Workers' Party – People's Protection Units

Hêza ji kenaran: Pêşniyara bo siyaseteke derveyî ya hevgirtî ya Dewletên Yekbûyî yên Amerîkayê li hemberî Kurdan

Ev lêkolîn tesîra her ku diçe mezin dibe ya aktorên ne-dewletî li Rojhilata Navîn wek failên siyaseta derve, digel danûstandinên wan bi dewletan re, li ser hîma tehlîla têkiliya

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DYA û Kurdan vedikole. Bi vehewandina daneyên arşîvî û hevdiîtinên li gel siyasetmedarên kurd û amerîkî, ev nivîsar nêrînên bîrdozî yê herî berbelav di babeta Têkiliyên Navneteweyî de bi kar tîne, ji bo ku faktorên bandor li têkiliyên DYA-Kurd ji Şerê Cîhanê yê Duyem heta qeyrana surî ya dawîn kirine, tehlîl bike. Nivîsar bi vê encamê digihîje ku têkçûna sazîkirina siyaseteke kurd a hevîgirtî ji bo stratejiya DYA ya li Rojhilata Navîn zehmetiyan derdixe û netîceyên neyînî bo berjewendiyên DYA jî bi xwe re tîne.

Hêzê Sînoran: Kurdan Reyde Mesela Sîyasetê Teberî yê DYA yê ‘Pêgirewteyî’

Pê analîzê têkiliya DYA û kurdan, no cigêrayîş Rojhelato Mîyanên de tesîrê averşîyayoxî yê aktorên bêdewletanê sey ajananê sîyasetê teberî û dewletan reyde înteraksiyonanê nê aktorên tehqîq keno. Bi dayeyanê arşîvan û roportajanê qerararanê sîyasetî reyde, no nuşte faktorên ke Cengê Cîhanî yê II. ra heta krîzê Sûrîye yê nikayînî têkiliya DYA û kurdan ser o tesîr kerdo, ê faktorên çarçewaya teorîyanê bîngewênan yê beşê Têkiliya Mîyanneteweyî de analîz keno. Na meqale netîce de vana ke DYA besenêkerd polîtîkayêka kurdan a pêgirewtîye virazê, na kêmanîye kî Rojhelato Mîyanên de stratejiya DYA kena tîmîyan û peynîye de faydeyê xo nêreseno menfeatanê DYA yê a herême.

Destlat le kenarewe: keysêk derbarey hawrrayî le siyasetî derewey Emerîka da beramber be Kurdekan

Em nûsîne le karîgerî geşesendî hêzwektere bê-netewekan le ser siyasetî Rojhellatî Nawerrast da dekolletewe, legell peywendîyan legell dewletkan da le rêgayî şîrovekirdîni peywendî nêwan wîlayete yekgirtwekanî Emerîka û Kurdekan da. Be tîkellkirdîni datay erşîf û çawpêketin legell siyasetmedare emerîkî û Kurdekan da, em nûsîne şîrovey ew fakterane dekat ke karîgerîyan le ser peywendî nêwan wîlayete yekgirtwekanî emerîka û Kurdekan da hebuh le cengî cîhanî duwemewe heta qeyranî tazey Suriya, le çwarçêwey tîore berbillawekan le zanistî peywendîye nîwdewletîyekan da. Encamî wutareke eweye ke be hoy şîkesthênan le dirustkirdîni siyasetêkî yekgirtû beramber Kurdekan, astengî bo planî Wîlayete Yekgirtwekanî Emerîka le Rojhellatî Nawerrast da dirust dekat û debête hoy dirustbûnî derencamî nerênî le qazancî Wîlayete Yekgirtwekanî Emerîka le nawçeke da.

Introduction

There is a wide recognition in the International Relations (IR) literature of the impact of non-state actors on world politics. The literature, however, is focused more on international institutions, regional organizations, and transnational corporations, while there is a relatively less comprehensive understanding of armed non-state actors and their interactions with states. It is particularly true in the Middle East, where non-state groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) thrive in the context of political vacuums created by state weakness, and increasingly act as autonomous agents in their exercise of foreign policy. This is a phenomenon for which there is a lack of sufficient theoretical and empirical engagement with regards to the Middle East.

The specific case study examined in this paper is the relationship between the United States (U.S.) and the Kurds. The article analyses the factors that have affected the U.S.-Kurdish relationship from World War II to the Syrian crisis in the context of the mainstream theoretical approaches within the discipline of IR. More specifically, the study investigates the underlying causes of the deepening U.S.-Kurdish cooperation since the early 1990s, and addresses the extent to which existing approaches in IR are adequate in explaining the changing political landscape in the Middle East that has brought the U.S. and the Kurds together in unprecedented ways.

Hesitant to engage with subnational groups for concerns over upsetting its relations with central governments, the U.S. has traditionally approached the Kurds as a function of its bilateral relations with Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The war in Syria and the legacy of the U.S. invasion of Iraq disrupted this status-quo by not only providing the Kurds with opportunities in various degrees of autonomy and self-rule, but also by increasing cross-border Kurdish interaction and cooperation. The paper argues that, for Washington, refusal to grapple with the profound transformations in the Kurdish political scene for reasons of regional status-quo is no longer tenable, and that there is a need for formulating a coherent U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds.

The Existing Literature and Methodology

There has been little academic work undertaken on the specific relationship between the U.S. and the Kurds. One of the most important studies on this topic, Marianna Charountaki's *The Kurds and U.S. Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East since 1945* (2011), provides an empirically rich and

theoretically sound analysis of the crucial question whether there was such a thing as a U.S. Kurdish policy. Charountaki's work, however, due to its publication date, does not account for the dramatic changes that U.S.-Kurdish relations have undergone since the Syrian civil war and the emergence of ISIS. Other studies, such as Mohammed Shareef's book *The United States, Iraq and the Kurds: Shock, Awe and Aftermath* (2014), are focused only on the study of the U.S.' relationship with Iraq's Kurds, and approach U.S.-Kurdish interaction not as a reciprocal process, but rather from the perspective of the agency of the U.S. only.

Recent developments in Iraq and Syria produced an upsurge in academic work in the field of Kurdish Studies, such as *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflict* (2019) by Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, and David L. Phillips' *The Kurdish Spring: A New Map of the Middle East* (2015). While these publications deepen our understanding of the Kurds and Kurdistan, they do not provide a theoretical analysis of the Kurds as a foreign policy actor, nor are they specifically dedicated to the analysis of the relationship between the Kurds and the U.S.

The most recent publication on the topic of U.S. Foreign Policy and the Kurds is an edited volume by Vera Eccarius-Kelly and Michael Gunter, *Kurdish Autonomy and U.S. Foreign Policy: Continuity and Change* (2020), which is a timely work that fills in a significant gap in the literature. The primary contribution of this edited volume is the rich empirical analysis of diverse U.S. foreign policy approaches toward the Kurds provided by authors from different disciplinary backgrounds. The book, however, includes little theoretical engagement with the U.S.-Kurdish relationship within the broader concept of state-non-state relations and agency of non-state actors in foreign policy, except for the chapters by Charountaki and Rasit.

Problematizing the theoretical scope of foreign policy which limits itself to the study of state behaviour and interests, the present work analyses the interaction between the U.S. and the Kurds as a fluid and reciprocal process in which the Kurds not only react to U.S. policies in the Middle East, but also capitalize on these policies to create new opportunities to widen their repertoire of collective political action. Methodologically, the analysis of key regional and international events that marked the U.S.-Kurdish relationship is conducted based on sources gathered through archival research which took place at the National Archives in Washington D.C. For a thorough understanding of the motives and attitudes of relevant actors, archival data is supplemented by in-depth interviews conducted with U.S. State Department officials, think-tank analysts, and Kurdish representatives in the U.S.

Understanding Armed Non-state Actors in the Middle East: an Analytical Framework

Although there has been a growing literature on the rising influence of armed non-state actors in the Middle East (Sluglett & Kattan, 2019; Dhakal, 2019), much of this work approaches state-non-state interactions in the context of traditional paradigms of foreign policy which view non-state entities as 'tools' that either consolidate or threaten states' interests, rather than agents in their own right. In her account of state-non-state alliances in the Middle East, Kausch (2017: 36) analyses non-state actors as state 'proxies' which have become 'both a tool and a decisive factor in shaping inter-state competition between regional powers'. Likewise, Maoz and San-Akca (2012) examine state-non-state cooperation as a rivalry management strategy used by states which are dissatisfied with the existing status quo, presenting, again, an understanding of non-state entities from the vantage point of state interests.

The current literature does not satisfy the need for a novel theoretical approach to international relations in the Middle East, a region which presents a unique political landscape where demarcations between state and non-state actors have become increasingly blurred since the Arab Spring in 2011. Valensi (2015: 60) argues that recent developments in the Middle East have weakened the state framework and undermined formal territorial borders, which created conditions conducive for non-state actors to fill the void left by weak governance. According to Kausch (2017: 37), many states in the Arab world hold territory but lack popular legitimacy due to weak state institutions and limited capacity to provide security and services. In the context of eroding national cohesion, she argues, many local communities turn to sub-state or transnational identity groups looking for protection. Berge (2016: 18) draws attention to the ways in which these non-state groups mimic state behaviour through their sheer ability to use violence within a specific territory from which they raise taxes, provide social and economic services, celebrate elections, and pursue foreign policies. Examples include Hamas, which is in de facto control of the Gaza Strip; Hezbollah, which has its own educational, social, and economic institutions that run parallel to the Lebanese state; ISIS, which established a so-called caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014; and the Kurds, who control autonomous regions in Iraq and Syria.

Mainstream IR theories, such as realism and neorealism, do not sufficiently account for this arising phenomenon in the Middle East, as they consider the state to be the prime actor in the international system. States are assumed to be rational actors that are primed for power maximization within an anarchic

environment (Waltz, 1979). In this view, non-state entities are considered insignificant due to their inability to wield power in the international arena. Non-state actors in the Middle East challenge such theorization, however, as many do act according to cost-benefit calculations within the constraints of their environment, and as their interactions with states directly impact the foreign policy agenda of the region. ISIS's push to seize territory was based on a calculated assessment of the emerging power vacuums in Iraq and Syria. Hezbollah uses its military assets to protect its interests, such as the calculated decision – if the regime falls, Hezbollah loses power – to intervene in Syria's civil war. Kurdish administrations in Iraq and Syria establish economic and security ties with foreign actors, including Turkey, Russia, and the U.S., to consolidate the autonomous status of their respective regions.

Liberalism challenges the realist premise that foreign policy is characterized by the unilateral impact of the anarchic international system, and focuses instead on how the foreign policy preferences of governments are influenced by state-society relations in the domestic realm, which is composed of competing sub-organizations, bureaucracies, and individual interests (Moravcsik, 1997: 513). By conceptualizing the state as a disaggregated, rather than a unitary, entity, liberalism allows for sub-state entities to have an impact on the international order. This impact, however, is often articulated in relation to state security and interests as the point of reference. Violent non-state actors, such as terrorist organizations, militias, and secessionist movements, are emphasized for their role in undermining the primacy of the state. Other authors, such as Keohane and Nye (1977), focus on the role of international organizations and transnational corporations in consolidating states' interests and widening the scope for inter-state cooperation.

The Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq are cases in point which demonstrate how sub-state entities impact the international realm through their role as independent actors of foreign policy. Both actors' strategic relations with the U.S. and Russia, economic ties to regional actors, and the ways in which these state-non-state interactions affect crucial regional issues such as the ISIS crisis are indicative of the rising influence of non-state entities in shaping the regional policy agenda.

In contrast to realism and liberalism, constructivism explains inter-state relations not by the imperatives of an anarchic self-help system, but by shared norms and ideas (Wendt, 1999). With its emphasis on ideational factors in explaining the motivations of actors in the international arena, constructivism brings a renewed focus on the agent. Nonetheless, it shares the same limitation with other mainstream IR theories in confining the scope of the agent to the state. The main premises of constructivism can apply to a wide variety

of non-state actors in the Middle East, as foreign relations of these groups are driven substantially by their specific ideologies and ideas they hold about themselves. Hezbollah's identity as a Shia organization is a prominent factor that shapes its ties with actors that share the same ideology, such as Iran and Syria (Valensi, 2015: 68). Other Islamic non-state groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, and Jahbat al-Nusra are driven markedly by their Sunni Islamist identity in pursuing their transnational goals. Considering how much the Obama administration wrestled with finding a credible anti-Assad ally in Syria that has the 'right' ideology and no links to jihadist groups, it was not only the PYD's military effectiveness but also its secular-democratic ideology which determined the workings of the U.S.-Kurdish alliance in Syria.

Given the existing theories' primary focus on state security and survival in explaining the workings of the international realm, a single-theory approach cannot adequately explain the subject matter of this study. It is, however, plausible to treat these theories as a menu of tools to interpret the changing political landscape in the Middle East, and utilize the set of explanations that each theory provides in the larger effort to identify all the significant aspects of the specific phenomenon in hand which is the U.S.-Kurdish relationship.

U.S. Cooperation with Non-state Actors: the Case of the Kurds

While the relationships between the U.S. and its non-state allies were varied over time, they have been driven primarily by realist considerations of enlisting local proxy forces to reinforce U.S. military capabilities in conflict environments. In his study of U.S. cooperation with non-state actors from 1776 to 1945, Grynawski (2018: 5–6) defines a non-state ally as a 'sovereign group that coordinates military operations with a state for political purposes, often by providing military, logistical, or material support'. As proxies, they minimize American involvement in combat and offer superior knowledge of the local circumstances and population that facilitate counterinsurgency (Rittinger, 2017: 396). From this constellation arises a mutually beneficial partnership in which the U.S. pursues its security objectives at a low cost, while the non-state ally gets access to military and financial support to advance its political agenda.

Rittinger (2017), however, draws attention to the problem of 'goal incongruity', which can potentially cause state aims to be unfulfilled if proxies pursue goals that are incompatible with the goals of their state ally. He underlines the various manifestations of goal incongruity – strategic, ideological, and cultural – which complicate the cost-benefit calculations of teaming up with local non-state actors. Realist treatments of state-non-state alliances face

difficulty in accounting for this problem because of their unilateral focus on the strategic advantages of delegating security responsibilities to proxies with no consideration of non-state allies' interests, identities, and post-war visions. American support for illiberal proxies during the Cold War, for example, such as the Contras in Nicaragua and the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, as well as the proxy forces enlisted in contemporary wars such as the Syrian rebels, gave way to increasing unease in the context of the pro-democracy and counter-jihadist rhetoric in U.S. foreign policy. Therefore, it is imperative to incorporate the strategic, military as well as the ideational factors into analyses of state-non-state alliances to understand the ways in which the ideologies, modes of operations, and strategies of non-state allies impact cost-benefit calculations of states.

The Kurds constitute a special case in the history of U.S. cooperation with non-state actors because of a number of unique features they have as a transnational ethnic group in the Middle East. First, geographically, although the Kurds still largely operate within the existing state framework in the region, there has been burgeoning trans-state dynamics first following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and then after the rise of ISIS in 2014. Even though this process has not united the Kurds into a singular political or organizational consciousness, it has nonetheless bound them into a transnational force away from their host countries, in varying intensities (Ünver, 2016). The U.S.' relationship with the Kurds in one country directly affects not only the actions and aspirations of the Kurds across borders, but also the U.S.' bilateral relations with Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, leading to complex manifestations of the problem of 'goal incongruity' between the U.S. and its Kurdish allies.

Second, ideologically, while most non-state actors currently active in the Middle East are based on some form of religious ideology, the Kurds are, for the most part, politically secular and embrace democratic ideals. A decade after the Arab Spring, many people live under the rule of non-state actors in countries as diverse as Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. Various Islamist groups have emerged as credible alternatives in power vacuums created by these countries' weak central governments. Of these non-state actors, the Kurds are the only credible group with a secular ideology that can potentially serve as a useful U.S. ally to halt the rise of Islamist groups and contain the growing influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran, confirming both strategic and ideational justifications for a coherent U.S. Kurdish policy.

Third, politically, the Kurds have a degree of longevity and autonomy that makes them qualitatively different than most other non-state actors with whom the U.S. has cooperated. Throughout the twentieth century, the Kurds have consistently presented significant challenges to the authority of their respective central governments. Since the early 1990s, they have made

enormous strides in their quest for greater self-determination, currently controlling two autonomous regions in Iraq and Syria. In a time of transformation and partial disintegration in the Middle East, the Kurds are among the actors who have the ability to influence outcomes on the ground and impact the trajectory of crucial regional trends at large. Their interests and post-war visions are decisive to the stability in the region and cannot be ignored.

During the early years of the Cold War, the Soviet-assisted establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad in Iran set the stage for the U.S. to designate the Kurds as a 'communist danger' in the Middle East (Culcasi, 2006: 692–694). In the 1970s, realist considerations of containing the Soviet influence led the U.S. to take into account the diverse socio-political contexts where the Kurds operate, which resulted in the emergence of a multitude of U.S. policies towards the Kurds. In 1997, the U.S. joined its NATO ally Turkey in declaring the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – originally a Marxist/Leninist organization – a terrorist group. In Iraq, on the other hand, alarmed by the increased Soviet influence, the U.S. and its regional ally Iran supported the Kurdish revolt against Baghdad in the mid-1970s as a strategy to contain Saddam Hussein (Meho and Nehme, 2004: 21). Nonetheless, when Iran cut a deal with Saddam in 1975, all U.S. and Iranian support to the Kurds abruptly ceased. What initiated this first major U.S.-Kurdish encounter was not a U.S. recognition of the political significance or strategic value of the Kurds. Rather, the Cold War containment policies and the U.S. national security interests in the Middle East – supporting Iran in its quest for achieving concessions from a weakened Saddam and distracting Iraq from joining Arab attacks on Israel – took priority.

After the Cold War, the U.S. strategy in the Middle East transitioned from the policy of containment to promoting liberal democratic regimes and free trade through multilateral means. The post-Cold War strategy was strongly manifested in the international coalition built during the 1991 Gulf War to liberate Kuwait from Saddam, which resulted in the second major U.S.-Kurdish encounter. As the Iraqi military was being ousted from Kuwait, U.S. President George Bush called upon 'the Iraqi people to rise up against Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship' (Shareef, 2014: 147). Despite initial successes, when Saddam began to put down the Kurdish rebellion in the north, realist concerns over a possible partition of Iraq and destabilization in the Middle East once again dominated the U.S. decision making. Once the U.S. decided not to intervene in the Iraqi strife, the uneven struggle between the Kurds and Baghdad quickly turned into a humanitarian crisis with some 1.5 million Kurdish refugees fleeing to the Iranian and Turkish frontiers (Gunter, 2004: 5). The regional security implications of the refugee crisis eventually led the U.S. to change course and

declare a no-fly zone over northern Iraq, which allowed the Kurds to safely return home (Meho and Nehme, 2004: 24).

Similar to the U.S.-Kurdish encounter in the 1970s, what prompted U.S. support for the Kurds in 1991 was not any particular interest in supporting the Kurdish fight against Baghdad, but to contain a regional foe, Iraq, and to accommodate the interests of a regional ally, Turkey, whose administration wanted a quick removal of Kurdish refugees from Turkish soil but was strictly against their return to a separate Kurdish state. However, the unintended consequence of the U.S. decision to impose a no-fly zone was the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992 in northern Iraq, where the Kurds began to build a de facto state and government. Although the U.S. maintained the regional status quo by preventing the Kurds from breaking away from Iraq, the establishment of the KRG disrupted the status quo 'within' Iraq and laid the foundations of a steady U.S.-Kurdish partnership and its extension to an institutionalized relationship of strategic importance for U.S. foreign policy into the twenty-first century (Charountaki, 2011: 168).

Throughout the twentieth century, the ad hoc, opportunistic nature of the U.S.-Kurdish encounters derived mainly from the clash between the priorities of the U.S. – sustaining the Middle East balance of power and protecting the interests of regional allies – and the Kurds' desire for regime change and achieving some form of political autonomy in Iraq. As such, the problem of strategic goal incongruity, coupled with the extremely asymmetrical nature of the relationship, points to the dominance of realism in shaping the U.S. policy towards the Kurds during this period. The U.S.' contacts with the Kurdish movements in other parts of Kurdistan remained limited and covert. The cause of the Kurds in Turkey is often perceived by the U.S. as closely tied to the PKK, which the U.S. designated as a terrorist organization. Despite the U.S.' non-existent relations with Iran after the 1979 Revolution and limited relations with Syria, the Iranian and Syrian Kurds were largely off the radar due to the U.S.' prioritization of Middle East stability and the territorial integrity of regional states. Thus, the U.S. never formulated a grand foreign policy strategy towards the Kurds, and U.S.-Kurdish relations manifested mainly as an extension of the U.S.' Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian, and Syrian policies. At the turn of the century, however, the stage was set for the dynamics of U.S.-Kurdish relations to change.

Partners, Not Proxies: the Kurds and the U.S. in the 21st Century

The dramatic changes that U.S.-Kurdish relations underwent in the twenty-first century can be explained based on both structural and agent-based factors,

pointing to three key interrelated issues: the changing political landscape in the Middle East in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings; the ways in which Kurdish political actors, especially in Iraq and Syria, expanded their sphere of influence by capitalizing on the regional structural transformations; and the changing priorities of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East following 9/11.

Structurally, weak institutional governance and increasingly permeable borders in the Arab world following the 2011 uprisings played a significant role in empowering non-state actors in the Middle East. Such emerging elements underscore the expanded agency of foreign policy in the region to include state as well as state-non-state interactions as determinants of the regional foreign policy agenda. Charountaki (2020: 14) contends that non-state actors that have reached a proto-state stage in their evolution possess similar characteristics to those of states and are identified by their autonomous exercising of foreign policy. The conflict in Syria since 2011 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 have led to increased state fragility in these countries and consolidated the status of the Kurds in a proto-state by allowing for greater Kurdish autonomy in its various forms.

The 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq dramatically transformed the political status quo in favour of the Kurds in that country, after the U.S. had already tilted the balance of power in the Kurds' favour in 1991 with the declaration of the no-fly zone. The 2005 constitution, which established Iraq as a federal democracy, further consolidated Kurdish autonomy by granting constitutional recognition to the KRG as one of the federal units in Iraq. In the ensuing years, an institutionalized U.S.-Kurdish relationship emerged which was identified by the shift in the U.S.-Kurdish interaction from a proxy relationship to a strategic partnership. Alongside the structural changes in the Iraqi political landscape, a number of agent-based factors account for this shift.

In post-Saddam Iraq, the shifting character of the U.S.-Kurdish relationship reflected a combined influence of realist and constructivist accounts defined by the increasing level of goal congruity in both strategic and ideational terms. For the U.S., 9/11 marked the transition to the Grand Strategy of the Global War on Terror in which the U.S. switched from acting in multilateral coalitions to a commitment to promote democracy through unilateral use of force. The Kurds, on the other hand, emerged from the U.S. invasion as the most organized group in Iraq, with substantial forces on the ground and a decade-long political experience in building a stable democratic government in the north. The expanded agency of foreign policy was particularly manifested in the role of the Kurds as the primary force pushing for a more liberal, pro-minority rights, and decentralized federal system in Iraq (Romano, 2014: 191–193). In the context of the post-9/11 U.S. strategy to combat terrorism through enforced democratization, U.S. and Kurdish interests for the first time intersected in

the form of a shared strategic interest in regime change in Iraq and a common ideational goal in building a stable representative government in Baghdad, paving the way for a steady political partnership in contrast to the opportunistic, ad hoc contacts that dominated U.S.-Kurdish ties throughout the twentieth century.

Regionally, the gains made by Iraqi Kurds provided the transnational character of the Kurdish question with more saliency. Gürses (2015: 142) argues that ethnic ties across internationally recognized borders provide external sanctuaries for rebels as well as a larger pool of human and economic resources that rebels can draw on in mobilizing for violent conflict. Since the 1991 Gulf War, Turkey's PKK had already entrenched itself in northern Iraq. It might not have survived the capture of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999, had it not been for the safe haven in Iraq's north which helped the PKK to group and resurface in Turkey as a credible threat in the mid-2000s (Gürses, 2015: 144). In Syria, too, advancements in the status of Iraqi Kurds encouraged Syrian Kurds to take a more active stance in demanding their cultural and political rights. The 2004 Qamishli revolt gave rise to a previously unknown degree of solidarity not only among Syrian Kurds, but also between the Kurds of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey (Lowe, 2007: 287).

If the period from the Iraq war to the Syrian crisis demonstrated the Kurds' potential to become an important transnational actor, developments following the rise of ISIS in 2014 represented the transformation of this potential into a substantial political force. Once again, state fragility emerged as the main structural factor that not only provided the Kurds with the opportunity to achieve greater self-determination, but also expanded the U.S.-Kurdish strategic partnership beyond the U.S.' long-standing ties with Iraqi Kurds. Out of the Syrian uprising, the Kurds of Syria, who have long been referred to as the 'forgotten people' (Yildiz, 2005), emerged as the most politically organized and militarily effective force on the ground. It has been particularly the PYD – the PKK's Syrian affiliate – which presents a unique case of a non-state actor whose foreign ties have reached a global level over the course of the civil war.

The emergence of the PYD as an internationally known armed non-state actor derived primarily from the transformations in the regional political and military environment caused by the demise of state authority in Syria in 2011 and the subsequent rise of ISIS (Güneş and Lowe, 2015: 13). In July 2012, the rapidly weakening regime of Bashar Al-Assad withdrew the Syrian army from Kurdish areas to tighten its grip against the offensive of Arab rebels, as a result of which the PYD took control of the main Kurdish towns and cities in northern Syria (Allsop, 2015: 1). Thereupon, Syrian Kurds embarked upon their first attempt at self-government, which culminated in the establishment

of a Kurdish-controlled autonomous administration in the north in 2014, later declared as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria-Rojava in March 2016 (Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, 2019: 89).

Although the changing domestic and regional circumstances were in the PYD's favour, its rise as a powerful non-state actor and an attractive local ally in the eyes of outside players cannot be explained by structural factors alone. The rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria coincided with another shift in the U.S. Grand Strategy during the Obama administration from the open-ended stabilization operations of the Bush era to a more restrained approach to using U.S. military power (Brand, 2006: 105). The emphasis on military restraint underscored a policy imperative to externalize the strategic and operational burden of war to regional partners in the Middle East, and was strongly manifested in Obama's deep reluctance to be drawn into Syria's civil war and the fight against ISIS which the U.S. fought by surrogate (Krieg, 2016: 98–100). Initially, the U.S. invested in training and equipping various Syrian Arab rebel groups, yet the U.S. programs involving these oppositionists yielded little success. Only after witnessing the effective resistance of the Kurdish forces against ISIS did Obama begin to cooperate with the Kurds militarily.

Similar to the post-2003 shift in the U.S.' relationship with Iraqi Kurds, what brought the U.S. and Syrian Kurds closer together is explained by both realist and constructivist accounts. The military prowess of the People's Protection Units (YPG), the PYD's military wing, made it central to the U.S.' Syria policy. However, the U.S.-Kurdish cooperation against ISIS developed not only out of shared strategic and military interests, but also as a consequence of ideational considerations. The Obama administration faced heavy criticism at home once the American military confirmed the failure of the train-and-equip program and that some of the American weapons ended up in the hands of extremist groups (Shear, Cooper & Schmitt, 2015). Besides their military effectiveness, it was also the Kurds' embrace of secular-democratic values which distinguished them from other opposition groups and made them the ideologically 'right' partners for the U.S. in the fight against jihadists. 'The U.S. does not rely on the YPG for defeating ISIS alone', Sinam Mohamad, the Representative of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) in Washington, D.C., emphasizes. 'The U.S. pursues an alliance with the Kurds also for defeating radical ideas of Islamist groups.' (S. Mohamad, personal communication, 12 June 2018.) Bassam Ishak, the President of the Syriac National Council of Syria, a member of the SDC, seconds this vision:

Syrian opposition's vision of democracy is different than ours. They say democracy but what they mean is a religious state. When we say

democracy, we mean a pluralistic, citizenship-based country where Syrians are equal regardless of gender, ethnic, religious, or sectarian background. (B. Ishak, personal communication, 12 June 2018.)

The PYD-YPG's military effectiveness and its success at securing an autonomous region cannot be understood in isolation from the transborder dynamics. From the onset of its insurgency in the early 1980s to the capture of Öcalan in 1999, the PKK found both shelter and recruits in Syria. During its reorganization in the early 2000s, the PKK formed affiliate parties in Syria, Iraq, and Iran, which are all part of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), an umbrella group created by the PKK in 2005 for all political parties committed to implementing Öcalan's idea of democratic confederalism (Gunter, 2013: 77). The doctrine of democratic confederalism emerged out of the dramatic alterations in the PKK's goals in the 1990s, which transformed the movement's focus from state-seeking nationalism to one that is centred on 'radical democracy', the idea that the state should become decentralized such that all groups in society and all cultural identities can express themselves at the local level (Öcalan, 2017: 26). After his capture in 1999, Öcalan further defined the pillars of radical democracy, including the 'democratic republic', 'democratic confederalism', and 'democratic autonomy', which are aimed at establishing decentralized polities across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria without challenging state boundaries (Öcalan, 2017). The power vacuum that emerged out of the demise of state authority in Syria created an opportunity for the Kurds to put Öcalan's ideas into practice for the first time.

Ethnic and religious plurality constitutes a major pillar of the governance model in Rojava, where care is taken to ensure equal representation of all ethnic and religious communities – Christians, Yezidis, Arabs, Turkmens, Chechens, Armenians – in local councils and assemblies as well as in defence units (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa, 2016: 44). Sinam Mohamad explains the diversity within the political and military structure of Rojava as follows:

Northern Syria is diverse, Kurds, Arabs, Muslims, Christians, Sunni, Yezidi. In the beginning, we built Rojava as a Kurdish administration. It was in 2011. We started to organize the youth, women, the protection units. After that, we contacted other groups such as Syriacs, Arabs, and others who were living with us. We shared our vision with them and they agreed to that. We established the self-democratic administration in the three cantons, Afrin, Jazira and Kobane, and then it became a joint administration of the Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs and so on. (S. Mohamad, personal communication, 12 June 2018.)

The fight against ISIS provided opportunities for Kurdish parties to expand in all four parts of Kurdistan. The PKK-PYD cooperation in Syria made the availability of transnational recruitment, funding, and military opportunities crucial to the YPG's military victories against ISIS as well as the political survival of Rojava (Arslan, 2019: 414). The Kurdish *peshmerga* in Iraq became a key partner of the anti-ISIS coalition and played a significant role in easing the burden of the YPG in the Kobane battle in 2014 (Gourlay, 2018: 34). The PKK and its Iranian affiliate, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), which are unable to carve self-administering regions from their strong central governments, rebranded themselves through their close ties to the PYD. In the context of the rising threat of ISIS, such transnational Kurdish awakening benefitted immensely from the U.S.-Kurdish alliance. In the context of the post-ISIS Middle East, however, the expanded agency of the Kurds and the escalation of transnational Kurdish nationalism gave rise to new manifestations of goal incongruity and the return of old stumbling blocks, namely, the U.S.' prior interest in sustaining the regional status quo and protecting the interests of its regional allies.

Conclusion: New Challenges and Prospects for a Coherent U.S. Policy towards the Kurds

Throughout the twentieth century, the fact that the U.S.-Kurdish relationship was largely shaped by U.S. security objectives and the interests of U.S. allies in the Middle East, such as Iran and Turkey, supports the realist position. As the relationship evolved into the twenty-first century, the liberalist understanding of the state as a disaggregated, rather than a unitary, entity, has been particularly applicable in the cases of Iraq and Syria, which provided the Kurds with opportunities to forge relations with foreign actors such as the U.S. and have an impact on the regional order. In addition, shared norms and values between the two actors played a crucial role in deepening their partnership from 2003 onwards, confirming the constructivist emphasis on ideational factors as important determinants of foreign policy.

As the dust is settling regarding the ISIS situation, the U.S.-Kurdish relationship faces new challenges. The Kurds in Iraq and Syria, and by extension their transnational ethnic kin in Turkey and Iran, successfully capitalized on the regional structural changes to advance their political agendas. The alliance with the U.S. further expanded their opportunities to accomplish their political goals. The U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds, however, remained incoherent and still dominated by realist considerations of the regional balance of power, which fails to incorporate the combined effects of liberalist

and constructivist elements that are vital to capture the dramatic transformations in the Kurdish political scene over the past three decades. As emphasized by a senior official from the U.S. State Department, Syria Desk, some of the major strategic goals of the U.S. in Syria and the wider Middle East are 'not only to defeat ISIS militarily, but also creating conditions to prevent their return, containing Iranian expansionism in the region and to reach a political settlement in the Syrian conflict' (Anonymous, personal communication, 22 June 2019). Cooperation with the Kurds is vital to all three goals. However, the failure to analyse the long-term significance of the Kurds for U.S. interests in the Middle East creates several contradictions for U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Washington wants to preserve its assets in Syria but its alliance with the YPG creates tensions with Turkey. The U.S.-YPG alliance elicited frenzied objections from Ankara, which views the YPG as a terrorist organization due to its affiliation with the PKK. The new role Kurds play in Iraq, coupled with the prospect of another autonomous Kurdish entity in Syria, initially provided Ankara with incentives to make peace with the Kurds in Turkey (Gürses, 2015: 145). However, first, the refusal of the Turkish government to aid the Kurds during the Kobane battle, and then the U.S. decision to cooperate with the YPG resulted in the collapse of the nascent peace talks which had been going on since December 2012 (Arslan, 2019: 424–425). In 2015, Ankara began a policy of outright conflict with both the PKK and the Kurds of Syria, which left the U.S. grappling with how to defeat ISIS whilst navigating its relations with two allies that view each other as enemies, while Turkey gravitated increasingly closer toward the Russia-Iran axis in the Middle East.

Throughout the Syrian civil war, the U.S. opted for a delicate balancing act between Turkey and the PYD in order to contain the ISIS threat. However, Washington did not take any action to prevent the two Turkish military incursions into northern Syria intended to expel the YPG from border areas, first in January 2018, and then in October 2019 following President Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria. Nor did Washington pull its weight to include the Kurds in the Geneva peace talks due to Ankara's protests over inviting the PYD to the table. The October 2019 Turkish incursion dealt a severe blow to the U.S.-YPG joint counter-terrorism mission and disrupted the long-standing stability in northeast Syria, demonstrating how the Turkey-PKK conflict complicates U.S. Middle East policy and bilateral relations with Turkey. Giran Özcan, the pro-Kurdish, Turkey-based Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Representative to the U.S., points to the vitality of the U.S. role in the resolution of this dilemma:

Lack of a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question has always been an obstacle to Turkey's democratization. The HDP's mission in Washington, D.C. is to encourage the U.S. government to play a positive and constructive role in the solution of this problem. We expect the U.S. to uphold its own values in the region. (G. Özcan, personal communication, 14 June 2018)

For Washington, careful engagement with the PYD-YPG is essential to both creating a post-crisis Syria that is favourable to U.S. interests and ensuring the stability of U.S.-Turkey relations. Following the October 2019 decision, Russia now sits at the fulcrum between the Kurds, Bashar Al-Assad, Iran, and Turkey, replacing the U.S. as the main guarantor of security and diplomacy in the Middle East (Feaver and Inboden, 2019). Russia and the PYD do not share a common political or ideological agenda, but the YPG is a military asset for Russia for effectively fighting ISIS and other Islamist groups that challenge the Syrian regime. For the PYD, Russia provides the Kurds with an alternative to the U.S. that supports the Kurds militarily but provides no commitment regarding the political future of Rojava. Bassam Ishak emphasizes that the cooperation between the Kurds and Russia is mainly tactical and states: 'But Russia supports the Syrian regime, and they want to re-establish its authority. The U.S. has been supporting us only militarily to defeat ISIS, but we need more. We need them to support us implementing our political project.' (B. Ishak, personal communication, 12 June 2018). In the absence of any U.S. political support, the Kurds turned to Russia and the Syrian regime for help against Turkey's offensive, earning a major political win for Bashar Al-Assad while crippling the democratic project in Rojava, which is a crucial component of designing longer-term strategies to address the root ideological causes of the problem of terrorism in Syria and in the wider region.

In Iraq, too, the U.S. was ill-prepared to manage the political consequences of its military actions. The U.S. military support in Iraqi Kurdistan to contain ISIS contradicted the U.S.' 'one Iraq' policy by empowering Erbil vis-à-vis Baghdad. In summer 2014, upon Iraqi Security Forces' retreat from northern Iraq following the rise of ISIS, the Kurdish *peshmerga* took control of swathes of disputed territories, including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk (Holland-McCowan, 2018: 7). The territorial expansion and military empowerment of the KRG culminated in a Kurdish independence referendum in September 2017 despite strong opposition from Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and the U.S. The post-referendum developments caused serious setbacks for U.S. national security interests. The armed clashes in Kirkuk between two U.S. allies, the Kurds and Iraqi military

forces, presented a profound U.S. policy failure and created a potential security vacuum in the fight against ISIS. Iraqi forces were also aided by Iran in attacking the Kurdistan region, which added to the growing influence of pro-Iran elements in Iraq. Although Washington declared its opposition to the referendum before it was held, the fact that the U.S. permitted an armed Iraqi and Iranian offensive against the Kurds created another contradiction in the context of both the U.S. desire to contain Iranian influence in the region and the ongoing U.S.-Kurdish cooperation in Iraq since 2003. The lesson from the referendum is that the viable strategy for the U.S. is to better mediate disputes between Erbil and Baghdad before they reach military escalation, a lesson that is also emphasized by Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, the KRG Representative to the U.S.:

We are told by our friends in the region and in the West that the Kurds are a moderating voice and the democratizing force within Iraq. In that case, empower us, don't allow the Iraqi Constitution to be neglected, ignored and violated not for just Kurdistan's sake, for Iraq's sake. (B. Abdul Rahman, personal communication, 8 June 2018)

The primary source of the incoherence of the U.S. policy towards the Kurds is the fact that the U.S. cooperates with the Kurds militarily, yet refuses to recognize the political consequences of this military alliance. Therefore, the key to a coherent U.S. Kurdish policy lies with reconciling the contradictions between strategic and ideational components of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, in other words, reconciling realist considerations of sustaining the regional balance of power with constructivist factors such as containing jihadism and promoting democratic institutions in the region. As stated by numerous Kurdish officials interviewed for this study, there is a need for a productive U.S. mediating role between the Kurds and their central governments for effective settlement of the aforementioned contradictions. Such a mediating role needs to be based on the recognition that U.S.-Kurdish relations in one part of Kurdistan have direct consequences for not only the Kurds across borders, but also for U.S.' bilateral relations with the regional states.

A decade after the Arab uprisings, an unprecedented network of novel relations in the Middle East has now extended to involve armed non-state actors, which directly influence regional politics. Unlike its rivals, such as Iran and Russia, Washington has not yet sufficiently incorporated this dynamic into its Middle East policy. This is clearly symbolized by the State Department's division of responsibility for stateless people into separate Bureaus. Issues regarding Turkey's Kurds fall under the European Bureau, whereas Iraqi Kurds fall

under the bureaucracy of the Near East Bureau (Gunter, 2004: 12). A fundamental part of an effective U.S. Middle East policy that adequately captures the new regional dynamics is a clear U.S. position on the Kurds and Kurdistan, especially on the future of Kurdish-held territories in Iraq and Syria. As emphasized by the Director of the Washington Kurdish Institute, Yousif Ismael, 'the creation of a Kurdish Desk in the U.S. State Department where all the issues related to the Kurds will be handled from one place' (Y. Ismael, personal communication, 7 June 2018) constitutes a crucial preliminary step towards crafting a coherent U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds.

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Islamic Universalism or Ethno-nationalism? Exploring Identity Salience within a Kurdish Migrant Community in Britain

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Abstract

This article examines identity salience among members of a Kurdish Muslim migrant community in England. The study, in contrast to previous research on the Kurdish diaspora, focuses on religious identity in a small-city context, with recently arrived migrants, predominately from Iraqi Kurdistan. In-depth interviews highlight how ethnic repression within sending nations results in greater politicisation of ethnicity and in turn salience over all other identities, even within a non-Muslim setting. As such, findings did not demonstrate growing salience of religious identity over ethno-national identities, in order to close ranks with other Muslim minorities in a local context, as described in literature on 'Islamic diasporas'.

Keywords

Muslims in the West – Kurdish – refugees – social identity – political mobilisation

Gerdûnparêziya îslamî ya netewparêziya nijadî? Vekolîna girîngiya nasnameyî di civateke Kurdên koçber li Brîtanyayê de

Ev nivîsar girîngiya nasnameyî ya li nav endamên civateke Kurdên misilman ên koçber li Inglîstanê vedikole. Li berevajiyê lêkolînên bihorî yên li ser diyasporaya kurd, ev

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vekolîn li ser nasnameya dînî ya koçberên nûhatî, pîrraniya wan ji Kurdistana Êraqê ve, di çarçoveya bajarokeke piçûk de radiweste. Hevdîtînen hûrgilî bal dikişînin ser polîtîzebûna bêhtir a ku bi encama zordestiya nijadî li neteweyên birêkêr pêk hat û, li ser vê, girîngiya meztir a nasnameya nijadî li ber hemû nasnameyên din, heta di hawirdoreke ne-misilman de jî. Weha, van encam hane girîngiya zêde ya nasnameya olî li hember nasnameyên nijadî-neteweyî nîşan nedaye, li berevajiyê destbiratiya herêmî ya bi kêmteweyên misilman ên din re ku di edebiyata li ser ‘diyasporayên misilman’ de tê dîtîn.

Îslamî cîhanî yan nasêwnallîzmî êtnî? Lêkollîneweyek le ser giringî nasnamey êtnî le nêwan komellêk koçberî kurd le le Berîtanya

Em wutare şirovey giringî nasnamey êtnî le nêwan endamanî komellêk koçberî musulmanî kurd dekat le Berîtaniya. Twêjîneweke be pêçewaney twêjînewekanî pêştir le ser rewendî kurd le tarawge, tîşk dexate ser nasnamey ayinî le nêw koçberî tazegeyştû le Kurdistanî ‘Êraqewe, le çwarçêwey şarêkî biçûkda. Çawpêkewtinî dûrxayan derîxistwe ke çawsanewey êtnî le wlatî koçkirdinewe debête hoy besiyasîbûnî nasnamey êtnî û zallbûnî be ser nasnamekanîtir da, tenanet le nêwendî namusullmanekanîş da. Le ber ewe encamekan zallî nasnamey ayinî be ser nasnamey êtnî dernaxen bo nizîkbûnewe le gell kamayetiy musulmanekanîtir le nêwendî nawxoda, wek leserçawekanîtir le ser musulmananî tarawge baskrawn.

Îslamî cîhanî yan nasêwnallîzmî êtnî? Lêkollîneweyek le ser giringî nasnamey êtnî le nêwan komellêk koçberî kurd le le Berîtanya

Em wutare şirovey giringî nasnamey êtnî le nêwan endamanî komellêk koçberî musulmanî kurd dekat le Berîtaniya. Twêjîneweke be pêçewaney twêjînewekanî pêştir le ser rewendî kurd le tarawge, tîşk dexate ser nasnamey ayinî le nêw koçberî tazegeyştû le Kurdistanî ‘Êraqewe, le çwarçêwey şarêkî biçûkda. Çawpêkewtinî dûrxayan derîxistwe ke çawsanewey êtnî le wlatî koçkirdinewe debête hoy besiyasîbûnî nasnamey êtnî û zallbûnî be ser nasnamekanîtir da, tenanet le nêwendî namusullmanekanîş da. Le ber

ewe encamekan zallî nasnamey ayinî be ser nasnamey êtnî dernaxen bo nizîkbûnewe le gell kamayetiy musulmanekanîtir le nêwendî nawxoda, wek leserçawekanîtir le ser musulmananî tarawge baskrawn.

Introduction

In the last two decades, studies have continued to describe the salience of religious identities among Muslim minorities living in the West (Saeed, et al., 1999; Adamson, 2011; Abbas, 2020). In other words, several scholars have shown that when given the option to describe themselves by an ethnic or religious identity, Muslims are more likely to choose 'Muslim' rather than, for example, 'Somali' or 'Pakistani', as the identity which is the most important to them (Saint-Blancat, 2002; Werbner, 2003; Hussain and Sherif, 2015).

Adamson (2011: 900) explains that although Muslims have been part of European society for many years, 'Over the past two decades, both Muslim populations and state actors have increasingly deployed the category of "Muslim" as an identity marker'. It is against the backdrop of the literature on the salience of religious identity for Muslim groups in Britain that this paper explores how a recently arrived (less than ten years since initial migration) Kurdish Muslim migrant community constructed their religious and ethnic identities within their new setting.

Kurds are considered the largest ethnic group without a nation state of their own (Aziz, 2011; Hassan, 2013). After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France were responsible for the division of its former territories, including the landmass which was home to millions of Kurds, referred to as Kurdistan (Hassanpour, 1992). However, Kurds were denied self-governance and, instead, the population was partitioned across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and smaller segments of Syria, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (McDowall, 2004). According to estimates, Kurds constitute approximately 20% of Turkey's population, 27% of Iraq's, 15% of Iran's, and less than 10% of the total population of Syria (McDowall, 2004).

The first Kurdish refugees began to arrive in Britain in the 1950s (Romano, 2002). However, the most recent wave of Kurdish migration to Britain occurred as a result of the United States invading Iraq in the early 1990s. Iraqi Kurds, who had long been the target of ethnic hostility, became increasingly vulnerable and, as a result, many left the country to seek refuge elsewhere (Aziz, 2011; Wahlbeck, 2019). Britain was the destination for many Kurdish asylum seekers from Iraq, and growing pockets of Kurdish populations began to take form

within many English towns and cities, including the one in which this research was conducted.

This study, in contrast to previous research on the Kurdish diaspora (e.g. Walhbeck, 1999; Griffiths, 2000), focuses on religious identity in a small-town context with recently arrived migrants, predominately from Iraqi Kurdistan. In-depth interviews were conducted with Kurdish Muslim migrants who had established a community in the north of England. The town is also home to longer-settled Muslim communities who first arrived in the area in the early 1960s, mainly from Pakistan-administered Kashmir and the Middle East (Hussain and Choudhury, 2007). In adopting this focus, the research set out to explore the following research question: How are religious and ethnic identities constructed by the recently arrived Kurdish migrant community members in a small northern town, which has existent, established Muslim minority communities?

This article first examines the salience of religious identity, with a focus on debates regarding the increased prominence of Muslim identity in Western settings. It then goes on to discuss key themes that emerged from the interviews against the backdrop of previous scholarship on Kurdish diaspora identity.

The Salience of Religious Identity

It is now widely acknowledged within the social sciences that identities are neither fixed nor intrinsic but are constructed and multiple (Brubaker, 2002; Morawska, 2018). For example, commentators have pointed towards the shift in language on 'race' and identity to argue that the way in which we think about our identities is constantly under construction (Nagel, 1994; Cornell and Hartmann, 1998). Scholarship on ethnic, national, and religious identities has demonstrated the prevalence of hybrid and hyphenated identities (Saeed, et al., 1999; Fenton, 2011). Yet, among the multiple identities one self-assigns at any given time, theorists of identity hierarchies argue that individuals rank their identities in terms of salience (Serpe and Stryker, 2011) or prominence (Brenner, et al., 2014) depending on how committed an individual is to a given discrete 'role' identity. In this view, the prominence or salience of an identity is influenced by processes taking place through the interaction we have with others and within social structures. Stets and Burke (2005: 11) further explain:

The prominence of an identity depends upon the degree to which one:
1) gets support from others for an identity 2) is committed to an identity,

and 3) receives extrinsic and intrinsic reward from the role identity. The more prominent the role identity, the more likely it will be activated and performed in a situation ... What importantly influences the salience of an identity is the degree of commitment one has to the identity [in the form of] the number of persons to whom one is connected through having a particular identity [and] the stronger or deeper ties to others based on a particular identity.

Like Brenner et al. (2014), Serpe and Stryker (2011) argue that the more commitment an individual has to an identity, the higher up it will feature on the salience hierarchy. Therefore, both theories emphasise the importance placed on an identity in the process leading to it becoming the principal way in which one views and describes oneself.

Literature on Muslim communities in the West has increasingly pointed towards the salience of religion above other forms of collective identifiers such as ethnicity and nationality (Saint-Blancat, 2002; Peek, 2005; Abbas 2020). Hutnik's (1985) study of Muslims reported that religion was listed as an important identity item by 80% of his respondents. Saeed and colleagues (1999) conducted self-identification surveys in Glasgow among second and third-generation Pakistani Muslims. The findings demonstrated that 'Muslim' and then 'Pakistani' identities were the two most frequent categories mentioned. However, it is noteworthy that 'Muslim' (85 %) was chosen nearly three times as often as 'Pakistani' (30 %) by participants.

La Brooy's (2008) study of young Muslims in Britain not only found a propensity for salient religious identities, but also described them as 'essentialist', suggesting that religion was the only important identity for many of her participants. Studies in the United States have also evidenced a trend towards the prominence of religious identity over other role identities for Muslims. For example, Peek (2005) explored the process by which religion evolved from an 'ascribed' passive identity to a 'declared' active and visible identity for participants in her study. The commitment towards a religious identity was often prompted by a desire to portray Muslims in a more positive light in the post 9/11 era.

Several studies have attempted to understand the growing salience of religious over other identities, including ethnic, for many Muslims living in the West. Literature attempting to explain this trend falls within two broad overlapping categories: 1) socio-political factors, and 2) the 'Ummah affect'.

Socio-political Factors

The assertion of a more religious identity by Muslims in Britain was facilitated primarily by the Rushdie affair, which set the scene for the latest surge

in Islamophobia in Britain (Mohammad, 1999). The anti-Muslim backlash of 9/11 and the 7/7 London bombings led to a more pronounced prejudice against Muslims and intolerance towards Islam in Britain and the West (Kundnani, 2001; Hussain, et al., 2017). An opinion poll in *The Guardian* newspaper demonstrated the isolation that Muslims believe they face, with nearly 70% stating that they felt 'the rest of society does not regard them as an integral part of life in Britain' (Kelso and Vasagar, 2002).

Arweck (2017) describes the increasing self-identification of British Muslims as such, rather than using ethno-national labels, as a reaction to perceived external rejection by the mainstream majority. Discussions regarding the salience of religious identity vis-à-vis discrimination after 9/11 (Hafez, 2018) state, in particular, that the politicisation of Muslims as a threat to the West has impacted how Muslims view themselves as a construct within Western popular imaginations. Elahi and Khan (2017: 5) write:

The first change is that the context – domestically and, perhaps more importantly, globally – has transformed fundamentally. After 9/11 and 7/7, Muslims became a greater focus of policymakers in the UK and around the world, but framed largely in terms of terrorism or as a civilizational threat. This framing of Muslims is, of course, centuries old, but has re-emerged in new and toxic ways since we published our report two decades ago.

The increasing normalisation of Islamophobia was commented on by the British lawyer and politician Baroness Warsi in 2011, when she remarked that anti-Muslim discourse had now passed the 'dinner table test' and had become a form of bigotry which was acceptable within society (Elahi and Khan, 2017). Extensive literature on the subject demonstrates how Muslims are believed to be deviant and problematic (Hafez, 2018; Law, et al., 2019; Abbas, 2020), yet, for Muslims themselves, this image does not ring true (Elahi and Khan, 2017). Through commitment to being Muslim in the face of dominance, Muslims seek to reclaim ownership of their identity and reconstruct the way it is presented within the prevailing political discourse (Arweck, 2017; Mckenna and Francis, 2018). Therefore, the commitment towards religious identity is a direct result of socio-political factors which have an impact on the way the identity is constructed within the mainstream (Modood, 2003; Anwar, 2005; Law, et al., 2019).

The Ummah as Islamic Universalism

Modood (2003: 101) described how 'Muslims [now] have the most extensive and developed discourses of unity, common circumstance and common

victimhood among non-EU origin peoples in the EU'. This sense of 'common victimhood' has provided an important bridge for ethnic and national differentiators among Muslim groups. It has led to the Muslim identity becoming a crucial unifier and a successful vehicle for political mobilisation. As Ballard (1996: 124) writes:

Given that Islam is manifestly a sophisticated world religion, which is at the very least a match for Christianity, and better still its long historical role as Christianity's "bête noir" [sic], it provides a wonderfully effective alter with which to identify, in response to White, European post-Christian denigration.

Placing emphasis on a Muslim identity is not new. Berggren (2007: 72) argues that many scholars claim religion is an essential identifier for Muslims as a result of the concept of what they describe as the 'Ummah Islamiyah (Islamic community of believers)', hailed as the 'most important collective to which one can and ought to belong'. The concept of a united Muslim community in the West, as the Ummah, is discussed as a contributing factor in the mind-set of many Muslims who identify themselves as being part of a Muslim diaspora (Werbner, 2003; Hussain, 2008; Abbas, 2020).

In this view, emphasis is placed on religious identity in order to close ranks with other Muslim minority groups. Strength in numbers is, of course, an important motivation for minority groups in attempting to unify with other minority groups, as demonstrated by minorities in Britain attempting to mobilise under the common feature of 'non-Whiteness' in the 1980s (Modood, 2003). The attraction for Muslims to unite by asserting a religious identity is the empowerment gained by the transformation of their minority group status to form part of a global counterforce (Khan, 2000; Abbas, 2020).

Based on extensive literature regarding the salience of Muslim identity among those in the West and the revival of collective Muslim identities as the Ummah, this study set out to explore the salience of religious identity among a recently arrived community of Kurdish Muslims in a small northern English town, who commenced migration to the area less than ten years before the interviews were conducted. In doing so, this study adds important additional features for exploring collective identity among the Kurdish diaspora – namely the impact of geographical distance from other longer-established Kurdish urban hubs in the UK, as well as a focus on religious identity.

Methodology

This study was conducted in a northern town in England, which became home to an increasing number of Kurdish inhabitants from the early 2000s. At the time of the study, the Kurdish population within the town was estimated to be between 1,500 and 2,000. The vast majority of Kurds in the area were from Iraq, with smaller numbers from Iran and Turkey. As Baser (2018) discusses, the majority of Kurds from Iraq who arrived around this period were a combination of civilians escaping war and political activists, both seeking asylum in Britain. This was reflected within the sample of interviewees in this study. Furthermore, all participants identified as Sunni, in keeping with the majority of Kurds in Iraq (Pew Survey, 2011), despite the fact that there are also Shia and Alevi Kurds, as well as non-Muslims such as Yazidi (van Bruinessen, 1992; Jenkins, et al., 2018).

As a result, the composition of participants in this study differed from many previous studies of Kurdish communities in the UK, such as Wahlbeck's (1999) and Griffiths' (2000), which are based in London, with the majority of Kurdish participants originating from Turkey. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-one Kurdish residents of the town during three months in 2009. All participants in this study entered the UK as asylum seekers, and the majority had been granted permanent residency, known as indefinite leave to remain. Several participants were interviewed more than once, and a professional interpreter assisted with interviews when requested. The majority of participants were adult males, reflecting the demographic nature of the population under study; however, five female respondents also took part in the study.

Participants were asked to describe themselves in their own vernacular, thinking about how they want others to understand their identity. For example, they were asked "How would you describe yourself?", and "If other people want to categorise you, what label or category would you choose for yourself?" Many participants discussed familiarity with being categorised in official terms, as a result of undergoing the asylum process and coming into contact with bureaucratic procedures. Interviewees were also asked about their group or collective identity – in other words, which group or community they belong to, if any. During the discussion, participants were asked questions regarding the asylum and migration experience, interaction with other local ethnic minority communities, accessing information and support, and the kinds of community activities and organisation they engage with, including mosques.

The author also conducted participant observation while spending time with interviewees in their homes and within two local Kurdish business hubs, a café, and a shop specialising in supplying the Kurdish community with clothes, music, and memorabilia imported from Iraqi Kurdistan.

Findings

During interviews, all respondents placed greater emphasis on their Kurdish identity when asked both how they describe themselves and how they want others to view them. Discussions were commonplace around the difficulty of explaining what being a Kurd was, as exemplified by the following quote:

People don't understand about the Kurds, or the ethnicity of the Kurds. If someone asks me where I'm from I say I'm Kurdish but they don't understand where I'm from, what they [Kurds] are, so I say I am Kurdish from the Iraqi part. And it's the same situation for the Kurds from the other parts.

The salience of Kurdish identity among the participants in this study can be understood in relation to the perceived subjugation experienced as an ethnic group. Interviewees described how, as a result of marginalisation felt by Kurds within the nation-states they left behind, there remained a desire to assert a Kurdish identity over identities ascribed to them, such as 'Iraqi'.

When you meet a single Kurdish person wherever you go, he doesn't want to call himself Turkish or Iraqi, he wants to say he is Kurdish, but due to the political situation, he has to say he belongs to one of the states in order to be recognised.

Similar to arguments presented on the growing salience of religious identity for Muslims in the West is the impact external threat has on individual and collective ethnic identities. Nagel (1994) and Fenton (2011) describe how identities are negotiated, defined and produced through social interaction inside and outside communities. When such interaction, whether individual or institutional, results in negative outcomes, one response is to strengthen affiliation with the identity which is most negatively perceived. This can lead to one identity becoming more salient than others as a response to social context and structures. Bobrow (1996), Gündüz-Hoşgör and Smits (2002), and Baser and Ashok (2010) explore Kurdish identity as a constructed identity used by groups

to strengthen their social position. They argue that the Kurdish example demonstrates how suppressed ethnic identities become particularly prominent in situations of uncertainty or threat. The perceived threat towards the Kurdish identity presented by the aforementioned authors relates to their position as an ethnic minority in a nation-state, where the power is held by the ethnic majority.

The redrawing of state boundaries as a result of French and British imperialism in the Middle East, together with the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, resulted in the physical separation of the Kurds into newly formed nation-states. Because of this division of their lands, Kurds began living under differing government policies which almost entirely catered to the ethnic majorities (van Bruinessen, 1992; Gurses, 2015). Turkish, Persian or Arabic were declared state languages in the countries in which Kurds had now become citizens (Hassan, 2013). Consequently, Kurdish cultural and linguistic traditions became marginal and, in the case of Turkey, outlawed. Despite such rampant assimilation efforts on the part of policy makers who, faced with a sizable minority population, attempted to mitigate any potential threat to their nation-states (Eccarius-Kelly, 2001), Kurdish identity remained resilient (Romano, 2002).

The development of resistance movements in response to government policies resulted in a cycle of ethnic conflict. Intense periods of upheaval left many with a strong sense of injustice. Discussions describing feelings of oppression based on ethno-national identity were a common feature within all interviews. The quotes below demonstrate frustrations regarding the loss of self-determination as a result of the state boundaries within which Kurdish homelands are confined.

Because Kurds in the past history have always been persecuted and under the hands of the ruling regimes we were always treated harshly. Therefore, we always see and always hope that those four parts, we don't say pieces, we say parts that should be linked together again as they were.

For all our lives we've had a very hard time, for a hundred, two hundred years we've only seen sadness. It's like they cut our country with scissors, and we will never be happy.

Another important feature, in regard to settlement within Europe, is how Kurds politically engage with the host country, through applying a decolonial lens for approaching the Kurdish question. Demir (2017) discusses how diaspora Kurds have been able to challenge both oppression within the nation-states they left but also the ongoing legacy of European colonialism which led to the very carving up of territories they challenge. She highlights political activism

aimed towards the governments of host countries, which led to the departure, in these countries, from rhetoric commonly used by sending countries. For example, she argues that Kurds were successful in challenging the labelling of Kurdish organisations as terrorist (as in Turkey), which led to Kurdish fighters being presented as allies within the British media in its reporting of the Syrian war. Lobbying the British government and reminding them of their role in the predicament Kurds face was also discussed by some participants in this study. In particular, interviewees shared how they would insist on being recorded as Kurds rather than Iraqis on forms, despite a Kurdish category not being officially recognised within British data collection exercises.

Religious Identity

Expressing a salient Kurdish identity did not undermine participants' religiosity. Islam, as a religion, was discussed to be of great significance for many respondents, who described themselves as practising Sunni Muslims. Observations suggested this was the case. During interviews conducted in homes, it was common to see monthly prayer timetables on walls and prayer mats visible in several of the houses, similarly described by Rouen's study (2015). Participants spoke about religion as an important personal aspect of their lives, rather than the primary source for collective identity. Here, religion was viewed as a spiritual matter, not a matter of political or ethnic identity. It was clear that there was no contradiction with being a Muslim by faith and the salience of a Kurdish ethnic identity for the respondents, and discussions with participants on the subject provided an important reminder that religiosity does not equate with religious identity.

A study conducted in Europe using the Centrality of Religiosity Scale by Huber (2011) reported a key differentiation between the 'centrality' or significance of religiosity and the concept of religious identity. The scale measured the centrality of religiosity not only by public participation in religious services and attending places of worship, but also by private practice, through questions such as 'how often do you pray?' and experience, as in, 'how often do you experience situations where you have the feeling that God or something divine intervenes in your life?' Survey respondents who strongly self-identified as being Muslim in terms of their identity did not necessarily correlate with those who scored highly using the scale of religious centrality. As a result of his findings, Huber emphasised the importance of differentiating between the centrality of religiosity and the concept of religious identity, stressing how 'neither concept should be confused'.

This distinction is worth highlighting in order to demonstrate the position described by many of the respondents in this study. Religiosity featured

among participants both in terms of belief and in relation to religious practice. However, the concept of religious identity was not salient in terms of providing a source for mobilisation, as the following interviewee states:

I think with the Kurds, we don't have an issue with religion, and it's always for the Kurds an issue with ethnicity rather than religion. Religion, never with religion, despite we are Muslims. We gather on one point – the issue of nationality.

Religious organisations such as the local mosques were not described as an important source of support in terms of accessing information about social services or jobs by the interviewees. Several participants stated that they did not regularly attend a mosque and preferred to pray at home. As one male participant explained, 'we are Muslim, we pray, there is the Qur'an (points to the Qur'an on the mantel piece); we pray but we don't go to the mosque.' Another participant described how he and his friends preferred to stay away from the mosque because he believed they were often judged for not being practising enough by other Muslims:

They think we disrespect religion, they think we say we're Muslim but we don't act like Muslims, so they don't like that. They see a lot of them [Kurds] as too free and disrespectful, because they think we are drinking or something like that.

In part, this was explained by the Kurdish community under study being dominated by young single men who, away from their families in Kurdistan, are no longer faced with constraints and expectations to comply with a religio-cultural behaviour framework, and have the freedom to explore behaviours frowned upon at home, such as drinking alcohol. This may lead to the more established Muslim communities viewing them with a level of disapproval, which may then act as a deterrent from regularly attending local mosques. However, there were some clear exceptions to this, as one participant stated: 'No, they [Kurds] do go to the mosque, some do go for Juma [Friday prayers] and during Ramadan and they pray five times a day.'

There were three Kurdish-led organisations within the community that provided important sources of information and advice on social services and advocacy. They also established a weekly language school for children to learn Kurdish and organised numerous social events, particularly around significant Kurdish celebrations such as *Newroz*, the Kurdish New Year. The organisations also played a key part in encouraging collective mobilisation. During the Iraqi

elections, Kurdish community organisations arranged for all Kurdish residents to be transported to the closest city in which they were able to vote remotely in the elections.

In addition to community organisations, the Kurds in the area had successfully begun to develop what can be referred to as an ethnic enclave (Peach, 2002), with numerous businesses, including restaurants, takeaways, clothing shops, grocers, and a car wash. Ethnic enclaves can provide important hubs for communities to source employment, information, and services (Clark and Drinkwater, 2000).

The majority of the Kurds interviewed had social networks outside the town. All participants reported having friends, family members, and even former neighbours living elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Respondents remained in regular contact with these networks and visits were commonplace. During discussions, it became apparent that the concept of community extended beyond the physical locality. For most of the respondents, community was not seen to be limited by geographical proximity to members of their networks.

Numerous statements were made about Kurdish solidarity and brotherhood. When Kurds from Turkey, Syria or Iran passed through the area (or settled temporarily), the Kurds from Iraq offered them advice and friendship. One participant described how he met and befriended a Kurd from Turkey, despite difficulty in communicating across dialect barriers. The handful of Kurds from Turkey who were in the area regularly attended the community centre activities. Living in Britain provided the first opportunity for the majority of Kurds from Iraq to interact with Kurds from other nation-states. This was discussed by Griffiths (2000: 282) of Kurdish community organisations in London. Although he does not do so in reference to religious identity, what is described certainly fits with the premise presented in this article, as he writes: 'The Kurds continue in the quest for national recognition, divided as they are between the competing powers of Turkish, Arab and Persian nationalisms.'

To summarise, the interviews demonstrated how Kurdish ethno-national identity was more salient at both an individual level and for collective organisation among the participants in this study. In the remainder of this section, I shall discuss how processes described by participants, in relation to interaction with other communities and societal structures, have influenced the prominence of Kurdish identity expressed throughout the interviews.

Sharing an Identity with the "Other"

Pattison and Tavsanoglu (2002) and Romano (2002) argue that when Kurds leave their nation-states behind, they often seek to establish themselves as a group in their own right by distinguishing themselves from the majority populations of their sending countries. There is evidence of such differentiation

expressed by several participants and the ethnic majority groups in the countries they left behind. One interviewee states:

It's always the Kurds in the revolutions; it's always fighting for recognition and identity. When you don't belong to a country, you don't feel like you have anything. Kurds are different from all the other nationals who live in the areas [countries] in terms of traditions, the way we clothe, the way we speak, what we eat, the way we dance.

Distinguishing oneself in this way not only assists with ethnic boundary maintenance but also provides an identity around which groups can mobilise. As Romano (2002: 127) writes, 'persecution based on ethnic identity justified mobilisation and politicisation of ethnicity, in order to defend oneself and one's group'. What Romano describes here is the process of 'othering' in response to being 'othered'.

Othering is described as a way of asserting a positive identity about one's own group by stigmatising the out-group. To identify a group as other emphasises differences often viewed as incompatible with the values of the in-group. To be othered often facilitates inequality, particularly where there is an imbalance of power between groups (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998). A Kurdish woman from Iran describes how she believes Kurds were othered by ethnic Persians in Iran:

With the Farsi people I spoke Farsi, with the Kurds I speak Kurdish. I lived in the capital, Tehran, but the Farsi don't like the Kurdish people. They have an idea from the government that Kurdish people like to fight, they cause problems; the media and government give this opinion to the local people, that we are dangerous people, so how can we have a good relationship?

In a British setting, it has been argued that one explanation for the salience of religious identity among Muslims is a response to being othered within the discourse of Muslims in the West. However, the other for Kurds in their countries of departure are fellow Muslims and, therefore, for the purposes of group mobilisation, religious identity – an identity shared with the other – becomes less effective.

Historically, however, Islam featured as a means of social and political organisation as a response to Kurdish oppression. Atacan (2001) describes Kurdish Islamic-orientated movements such as the Med-Zehra, who positioned themselves in response to subjection by what they believed was secular Turkish imperialism. Med-Zehra called for an Islamic federation, which allowed ethnic

and linguistic differences to flourish, in keeping with the teachings from the Qur'an, which states that God created different tribes so that they may know each other, not so that one should dominate the other. In this view, those who were on the side of religion stood for the equality of all nations. In contrast, those who promoted oppression based on ethnic chauvinism were removed from the teachings of Islam. However, there has been a clear shift away from the use of religion as a form of political mobilisation since the inception of the modern states, and particularly since socialist Kurdish groups became the core source of activism.

Sarigil (2010) discusses how the promotion of what he calls a 'pro-Islamic approach' that emphasises Muslim solidarity, described here as the Ummah affect, has been suggested by conservatives as a means for dampening Kurdish ethno-nationalism. This approach is criticised for attempting to manipulate Kurds to subscribe to a 'higher' (religious) identity and in turn stifle Kurdish ethno-nationalism (Houston, 1999, in Sarigil, 2010). Gurses (2015) discusses how, within Turkey, the promotion of 'Islamic brotherhood' was used as a vehicle for increasing peace between Turkish and Kurdish populations. However, during his interviews with Kurdish respondents, they revealed a distrust of what was viewed as a deliberate use of Islam to promote Turkish culture and Kemalist-inspired political agendas.

As described above, employing religion as a vehicle for mobilisation is a complex matter for Kurds who share a Muslim identity with those they seek to distinguish themselves from in order to gain self-determination. If a salient religious identity results in deemphasising the ethnic identity, as described by the Ummah affect, it may have implications for Kurdish social mobilisation and political organisation.

Period of Settlement in Non-Muslim Lands

There is a substantial body of literature that explores the impact of identity construction and a greater sense of ethnic belonging among communities who leave their homelands (Ballard, 1996; Modood, 2003). Identity theorists have described how, as a result of migrating to a new land, membership in an ethnic group can provide support in the way of social solidarity (Nagel, 1994; Cornell and Hartmann, 1998; Morawska, 2018). Gündüz-Hoşgör and Smits' (2002) study of migrants from Kurdish rural areas to urban centres demonstrated an increase in Kurdish migrants' need for an ethnic identity. This resulted in a greater awareness of their Kurdishness than in their home villages, where the previously-taken-for-granted 'normal' identity is transformed into a means

for self-definition among a myriad of different ethnic groups. In addition, it provides a vehicle to connect with others in a hostile and unfamiliar setting. In this view, becoming a minority within a new society can heighten specific identities by increasing their relevance for self-definition and support through group belonging.

Continued interest in political developments among the Kurdish diaspora was described as a significant feature of Kurdishness by participants in this study, echoing earlier studies:

I think politics influences every single Kurdish person's life, because when you put on the news whenever there is something about the Kurdish situation it is uncertainty or some difficulty, so whether you would want to or not you will hear about the Kurdish situation and it will affect you.

Whoever is Kurdish, who calls themselves Kurds would have links or are influenced by politics. Myself I am interested in it and follow the politics because I want to see an independent Kurdish state one day and I think that is everyone's position. It's only the Kurds who don't have a state of their own. It is very important for every single Kurd to know what is going on in this respect.

Several studies on Kurdish migrants demonstrate a continued commitment towards a Kurdish identity motivated by interest in the politics of the homeland (Eccarius-Kelly, 2001; Fawcett, 2001). In this view, migration does not necessarily decrease interest, involvement, and investment in the country left behind. In relation to political activity, even the earliest Kurdish migrants to Europe promoted the issue of the self-determination of Kurds in their sending countries using their new European platform (Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray, 2006; Wahlbeck, 2019). Studies on Kurdish diaspora organisations such as those by Wahlbeck (1999), Griffiths (2000), and Baser (2013) describe strong community networks which provide services and support that are not always present among other refugee communities. For example, Griffiths' study of Somalis and Kurds in London found that Kurdish refugees from Turkey have been able to create viable formal organisations, while in comparison the Somali refugee community remains largely fragmented without strong organisation. He explains this as being a result of Kurdish desire for self-determination, which acts as a collective bond between members of the group.

Focusing on developments in the homeland can impact the way the diaspora view themselves in relation to their now host country. Wahlbeck (1999: 5) writes: 'Because of the continuing relationship which most [Kurdish] refugees have to their countries of origin, they wanted to think of themselves within this framework and not within the framework of British ethnic relations.' In

this view, the perceived relevance of ethnic relations within the new host setting becomes less important when attention is fixed upon the sending country and global diaspora. The statement below demonstrates how, for some Kurds, tensions regarding the other remained even after several years on British soil:

The difficulties we faced in those states still has an impact here. So, for example, I am Kurdish, if I see a GP's practice and the doctor is Iraqi Arab and the other doctor is from Pakistan for example, I would prefer to go to the Pakistani than the Iraqi Arab because the way we look at people, we aren't racist, but because we've been persecuted by these countries we don't have very good relations with them.

Not all participants described such views. Several interviewees worked with Arabs from Iraq and felt such hostility was counter-productive in a British context, where the power relations no longer remained. However, other studies, namely Baser's (2013) work, describe how the Kurdish community in Sweden established their own mosques as well as community organisations, which illustrates a desire to maintain a level of separation from other Muslim communities. She describes how participants discussed a need to remain autonomous as a means for ensuring protection against persecution and perceived prejudice within the new setting.

Ethnic identities are not static but are developed and influenced by their environment, and this is particularly the case for migrant diaspora communities, who redefine meaning and boundaries from generation to generation (Nagel, 1994). As discussed, migrating to a new land can result in ethnic identities becoming more prominent and ethnic groups more bonded.

However, a very different consequence of migration for ethnic identities is acculturation. Residing in the UK will inevitably provide opportunity for contact with other groups and the potential for inter-group relationships to form. Marriage is a particularly useful indicator of the strength of group boundaries and identity maintenance (Merton, 1941; Alba and Golden, 1986). Given that many Kurds from Iraq arrived in the town as single young men, there is evidence to suggest a high propensity for marriage with non-Kurdish women could occur.

Three respondents in the study described being married to non-Kurds. A fourth participant discussed how it was particularly difficult for many of the Kurdish migrants he knew – arriving as single asylum seekers – to find a compatible spouse. One interviewee stated:

There are people who get married with other communities as well. I have a friend in Bradford and he got married with a Pakistani girl; he was Sunni, she was Sunni, and they are successful and have a happy life.

We give priority to Kurds; if not we will go to the next available, like the religious or culturally close and then it would go step by step like this.

One of the Kurdish women interviewed was married to an Iraqi Arab. She discussed how her marriage had not influenced her relationship with other Kurds in the local area. Her husband also reported an amicable relationship with the town's Kurds, although he did not attend many Kurdish organised events. His wife, however, was actively involved in the community and taught at the Kurdish language school. Another participant married to a white British woman described how he was very clear before the marriage that his spouse would have to learn the ways of his culture if they were to wed. He described how she had adopted many Kurdish traditions during their marriage and had learnt to speak Kurdish, the main language spoken in their home.

Although only three participants in the study had married outside of their Kurdish communities, they did not believe that doing so had resulted in a less salient Kurdish identity when compared with other Kurds. Despite this, boundary maintenance theory would suggest that individuals from bonded ethnic groups with prominent ethnic identities would be less inclined to marry out-groupers. Nagel (1999: 154) discusses this seemingly 'simultaneous decrease and increase' in ethnic relevance as being part of the process of redefining ethnic boundaries based on environmental challenges, which is a reflection of ethnicity as a social construct, rather than a feature cemented by a common variable. In this view, marrying out-groupers was not a reflection of a less relevant Kurdish identity, but a response to circumstances at the time. The quotes and discussions above demonstrate how actors negotiate the continuing prominence of their ethnic identity, whether seeking someone who is 'culturally close' or asserting the use of their mother tongue.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore religious and ethnic identities among a recent Kurdish migrant community in a small northern town in England with existent, established Muslim minority communities of different ethnic origins. Findings from this study highlight how the salience of ethnic identity was influenced by ethnic repression faced by Kurds in the states they had left behind, leading to a greater politicisation of ethnicity, rather than religious identity, as noted to be the case among Muslim communities in the West.

However, there were also other key considerations that had contributed to the establishment of a confident and politically active Kurdish community within this small town. The vibrancy of Kurdish nationalist movements

(Aziz, 2011; Demir, 2017), and their long-established presence within the diaspora (Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray, 2006; Baser 2018), meant that relatively newer migrants were able to make use of existent political and social organisations. The respondents in this study discussed tapping into networks that spanned the country and, as such, were able to draw upon resources outside of the town itself. This contributed to creating a significant space for ethno-national identity construction. For example, the bussing of Kurdish migrants to another city so that they were able to vote in the elections of their sending states was part of wider political activities taking place across the diaspora.

Although the majority of the Kurdish participants felt that religion was important, they did not subscribe to an umbrella religious identity for group mobilisation, as discussed by Adamson (2011). Instead, the research supports the findings of other studies on the Kurds (Bobrow, 1996; Romano, 2002; Rouen, 2015; Wahlbeck, 2019), which also discuss how the impact of ethnic repression results in greater politicisation of ethnicity, although they do not explore this in relation to religious identity. A key consideration discussed by participants regarding the adoption of a unified Muslim identity is that, in the Kurdish case, their perceived oppressors were also Muslims, even if no contradiction was seen between being Muslim by faith and the salience of a Kurdish ethnic identity among the respondents. Arabs in Iraq, for example, were viewed as the other by many participants when discussing how experience prior to migration impacted on group mobilisation.

As stated, Kurds are heterogeneous in terms of the religious sects they belong to (Pew Research Centre, 2012; Jenkins, et al., 2018), the nation-states they migrate from (Baser, 2018), and their political affiliations (Griffiths, 2000). Thus, while findings on identity salience generated within the interviews do not allow us to draw conclusions for all Kurdish migrants, they do remind us that the dominant discourse on religious identity is more complex than is often presented, particularly within academic discourse on Muslims in Europe. The findings also clearly support earlier studies, which acknowledge a myriad of political organisation among the Kurdish diaspora, yet still conclude that the pursuit of national recognition remains paramount across the Kurdish political spectrum in European settings (Griffiths, 2000; Baser, 2013).

Although the locale for this study differed in many respects from previous research on Kurds in Britain, such as that by Wahlbeck (1999) and Griffiths (2000), whose fieldwork was done in London with the majority of Kurdish participants originating from Turkey, within the local context discussed in this article, the salience of an ethnic identity among respondents remained, despite overseas migration. Furthermore, there was no apparent evidence of the importance attached to a Kurdish ethnic identity being downplayed or replaced in order to close ranks with other Muslim minorities in the town. On the contrary,

the Kurds had a strong sense of community and were part of social structures which spanned the length and breadth of the country. As such, being settled as refugees in this small-city context did not appear to affect the availability of Kurdish political spaces, which supported the maintenance of ethnic identity.

It should be noted that the period of settlement of migrant communities has an important bearing on identity formation and salience. In the case of the community under study, it is worth remaining mindful that within a British setting, first-generation Muslim migrants have been reported to identify more strongly with ethnic and national identities (Adamson 2011). However, Baser (2011) found that second- and subsequent-generation Kurds, or, as she refers to them, 'Euro-Kurds', were more likely to report a salient Kurdish identity if their parents were politically active. Stories of persecution in the homeland were discussed as important reminders for the need to maintain a sense of Kurdishness, even when young people had never visited their parents' countries of origin. Therefore, as this study explored identity salience among recent migrants (less than ten years), it is important to acknowledge that the meaning placed on both levels of religiosity and religious identity may shift among subsequent generations as a result of prioritising other forms of group recognition within a British setting.

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Obituary



In Memory of Kadri Yıldırım (Qedrî Yıldırım) (1959–2021)

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Abstract

This obituary outlines the life and work of Kadri Yıldırım, a prominent Kurdish scholar and the first professor of Kurdish studies in Turkey. It focuses on his early life and medrese education and highlights his contribution to the field of Kurdish studies and his scholarly and political efforts for the Kurdish language to become a language of education in Turkey.

Keywords

Kadri Yıldırım (Qedrî Yıldırım) – obituary – Turkey – Kurdistan – Kurdish language – Kurdish medrese

Bi bîranîna Qedrî Yildirim (1959–2021)

Ev bîrname xulaseyeke jiyân û xebatên Qedrî Yildirim e, ku zanyarê kurd ê mezin û profesorê ewil ê kurdnasiyê li Tirkîyê bû. Nivîsar bi taybetî li ser xortaniya wî û perwerdeya wî ya li medreseyan radiweste, digel xebatên wî yê kurdnasiyê û karên wî yê siyasî û zanistî ji bo ku zimanê kurdî bibe zimanekî perwerde li Tirkîyê.

Le yadî Qadrî Yelldirîm (1959–2021)

Em bîrnameye bas le jiyân û karekanî Qadrî Yelldirîm, zanayekî gewreyê kurd û yekem profîsorî lêkollîneweyê kurdî le Turkyâ dekat. Em nûsîne giringî dedat be seretay jiyânî û xwêndinî le medrese û tîşk dexate ser destkewtekanî le bwarî lêkollîneweyê kurdî û, herweha hewlle syasyekanî bo be fermîkirdnî zmanî kurdî lenawenî perwerde û fêrbûn le Turkyâ da.

Seba yadkerdişê Qedrî Yildirimî (1959–2021)

No nuşteyê yadkerdişî xulasaya cu û keda Qedrî Yildirimî ya ke zanyaro kurdo namdar û Tirkîya de profesorê kurdolojî yo verên bî. Nuşteyî de bale dîyena cuya ey a rewê û perwerdeyê ey ê medresan ser. Ser o kî giraniye dîyena beşdarîya kurdolojî û lebatanê ey ê zanistî û siyasîyan ser seba ke kurdkî Tirkîya de bibo ziwânê perwerdeyî.

Introduction

On 26 March 2021, Prof. Kadri Yıldırım passed away at the age of sixty-two in a hospital in Amed (Diyarbakır) after suffering from a brain haemorrhage. He had been struggling with several health issues in the last decade and was hospitalized in late November 2020 after falling gravely ill with COVID-19. He was an industrious and prolific scholar who authored and translated numerous books, book chapters and articles in the field of Kurdish studies and Arabic language and literature. He became the first-ever professor of Kurdish studies in Turkey and took up important administrative roles in the establishment of the first department of Kurdish at the Institute of Living Languages (Yaşayan Diller

Enstitüsü) at Mardin Artuklu University. He is remembered as a hardworking, humble, and kind person by his family, friends, students, and colleagues.

Early Life and Medrese Education

Kadri Yıldırım was born on February 5, 1959, in the village of Şeqlet (Şaklat), once within the administrative district of Lice in Diyarbakır province, but currently tied to the district of Karaz (Kocaköy), also within Diyarbakır. Şeqlet was a big village known for its widespread stockbreeding up until the village was forcibly evacuated during the ‘dirty war’ of the 1990s. Kadri Yıldırım worked as a shepherd looking after the family’s livestock during his childhood years like many other children in his village. His grandfather was a local *mele* (imam) and his father was a farmer raising livestock. Kadri Yıldırım lost his father at the age of twelve, which became an important factor for his educational trajectory. As is common practice in Kurdistan, orphans were sent to medreses by their families to study *ilm* (Islamic sciences) and become a *mele* (imam), and so did little Kadri’s mother.

In 1974, Kadri Yıldırım first attended the medrese in the village of Sergelya (Başalan) in the Çınar district of Diyarbakır, where he received the majority of his medrese education with Seydayê Mele ‘Elî. He then attended several other medreses in the area and studied with locally well-known seydas (medrese teachers). Some of the village medreses he attended and seydas he studied with are as follows: In the village of Sofya (Erler) in the Bismil district of Amed with Seydayê Mele Hesen; in the village of Yuwacix (Yuwacık)¹ in the Çınar district of Amed with Seydayê Mele Mihemedê Fetlê; in the village of Hecî Îsê (Karpuzlu) near Amed with Seyfûlmulûk Sheikh Muhammad Mehdi, who was one of the khalifs of the Sufi Sheikh Seyda of Cizîr (Cizre); in the village of Girê Sîra (Balpınar) in the province of Êlih (Batman) with Seydayê Mele Hawî; and in the village of Girbareşk (Îkiztepe) in the province of Êlih with Seydayê Mele Evdilbarî. In addition, Kadri Yıldırım briefly studied in the well-known medrese of Tillo in Sêrt (Siirt) and in a medrese located in the Seyrantepe neighbourhood of Amed, where he also concurrently attended the Ziya Gökalp High School and received his high school diploma.

1 This is a prominent medrese in the area where many Kurdish scholars studied, including the Kurdish poet and intellectual Seydayê Cigerxwin, the Kurdish Sufi and mudarris Sheikh Mele Mihemedê Arabkendê, and Seydayê Mele Mehmûdê Yuwacixî (Mahmut Çakmak).

The medreses Kadri Yıldırım attended were all what Martin van Bruinessen refers to as vernacular medrese² in reference to these institutions being mostly located in the Kurdish periphery and rooted in local Kurdish culture and society. Despite the Turkish state's repressive policies after the unification of the education system by the newly established Republic of Turkey in 1924, Kurdish vernacular medreses survived and continued their educational practice, following a curriculum and pedagogy that has been dominant across the Islamic world over the past centuries. At the time when Kadri Yıldırım attended the medrese, from 1974 to the early 1980s, these educational institutions were scattered around the Kurdish region and mostly consisted of small extensions to the village mosque, where a Seyda worked as the imam. These small multi-functioning rooms (called *hucra*, from Arabic *hujra*, 'cell') hosted approximately ten to fifteen *feqîs* (students), whose basic needs were provided by the residents of the village or through the network of the seydas of the medrese. Despite their precarious situation, these medreses functioned as important centres for the transmission of scholastic Islamic knowledge and the preservation of Kurdish literary language and culture. Although many of the medrese texts were in Arabic, the language of instruction was Kurdish and some graduates had a good grasp of Persian as well. The Kurdish poet Cigerxwîn and the authors Mehmet Emin Bozarslan, Zeynelabidin Zinar, and Kadri Yıldırım were among the well-known scholars who graduated from Kurdish medreses in the twentieth century.

Kadri Yıldırım is remembered as a brilliant *feqî* (student), who had a great memorizing aptitude – essential to the medrese training as the main texts of the medrese books are memorized by the *feqîs* – and analytical skills. Seydayê Mele Mustafa Yargi, one of his childhood friends and fellow medrese students, recalls an occasion when Yıldırım corrected his seyda on an issue related to *Tafsîr al-Jalâlayn* authored by Jalal ad-Din al-Mahalli and Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti between 1459 and 1505. Yıldırım's seyda insisted on his interpretation but eventually had to acknowledge his student's take once they referred to the book. Mele Mustafa adds that Kadri Yıldırım was always a hardworking person, who would start working before the first prayer until late evening and had a great self-confidence and high expectations of himself. When Yıldırım learned that Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazanî, the author of one of the essential texts of the medrese curriculum, *Şerh-ul Izzî fi't-Tasrîf* (widely known as Sa'dî'nî in the Kurdish medreses) wrote this work at the age of sixteen, he immediately

2 Martin van Bruinessen, *The Kurdish Medrese in Republican Turkey: An Institution of Civil Society Caught Between Turkish State and Kurdish Political Movement*, Zahra Institute Annual Lecture [Public Webinar], March 11, 2021.

set his goal: he aspired to be a Taftazani of his time as he considered himself no less than this fourteen-century polymath Muslim scholar. Indeed, he was no less than Taftazani in the sense that Yıldırım, too, became a polymath who published widely on Kurdish language, culture, history, and geography, wrote about Arabic poetry and literature, and translated many books from Arabic to Turkish and Kurdish. In addition to his Arabic, I was personally impressed by his Persian when I observed him on one occasion when he translated several Afghan asylum seekers' testimonies before a court in Mardin. His medrese training equipped him with a set of knowledge and skills that enlightened his scholarship and that will yet have to be matched in the following decades.

Academic Career

After graduating from the Kurdish medreses, Kadri Yıldırım worked as a construction worker and in several other temporary jobs in İzmir, where his family resided after his father's death. In 1984, he attended the Siirt Education Institute of Dicle University and graduated in 1986, when he began working as an elementary school teacher in the Patnos district of Agirî (Ağrı) for two years. He got married to Canan Yıldırım in 1987 and continued his primary school teacher position in the next twelve years in Agirî, Êlih (Batman), and Riha (Urfa). In 1994, he started his MA degree in the department of Arabic Language and Literature at Harran University in Riha and obtained his master's degree in 1996. His master's thesis focused on the influence of non-Arab Muslims (Mawali) on Arabic literature and poetry during the first century of the Abbasid Dynasty (750–865). He obtained his PhD degree from the same university in 1998 with his dissertation on the comparison of the context of Islamic and pre-Islamic poetry in the seventh century. In 1999, he was appointed as an assistant professor of Arabic Language and Literature at the Faculty of Theology at Dicle University, where he worked until 2010, first as an assistant professor and later as an associate professor. In 2010, he was appointed as the first-ever professor of Kurdish Studies in the Institute of Living Languages at Mardin Artuklu University.

I met Prof. Kadri Yıldırım as a young theology student in 2000 and along with credited courses in Arabic, I had a chance to study with him privately to finish my medrese training. He taught me the last two books of the classic medrese curriculum, *al-Bahja al-Mardiyya 'alâ Alfıyyat Ibn Mâlik* (an annotated version of a famous text on Arabic syntax, Ibn Malik's *Alfıyya*, composed by al-Suyuti, d. 1505) and *al-Fawa'id al-Diya'iyya* (another work on Arabic syntax, also simply known by the name of its author, Mulla Jami, d. 1492). Besides,

he also taught me one of the main reference books of the Hanafi fiqh studied in Turkish institutions, *Al-Ikhtiyar li Ta'lim al-Mukhtar* by Abdullah bin Mahmud al-Mawsili (d. 1284). I would visit him in his office, where we would sit across from each other, as in the medrese, and he would instruct me on the particularities of the text and its grammatical features. He would often give examples from Arabic poetry and tell many anecdotes from Kurdish culture and history to make his point. I was often surprised to see, and always deeply admired, the level of meticulousness in his instruction. He would recite Ibn Malik's *Alfiya* by heart without demur for a second. He was always kind, humble, and ready to help his students.

In 2010, we would meet once again, this time as I was one of the fifty students who were admitted to the newly opened Institute of Living Languages at Mardin Artuklu University for the summer school in Kurdish language, literature, and culture. This summer program was an opportunity to benefit from Yıldırım's vast knowledge in Kurdish linguistics and literature. In a group consisting mainly of expert linguists, novelists, and intellectuals, we took courses on Kurdish language, its dialects, and linguistic particularities as well as on classical and modern Kurdish literature. The latter module was especially interesting as we had to read and engage with the books written by our classmates, the majority of whom did not really need training but wanted to be a part of this historical moment and receive an official recognition to pursue their career in the field of Kurdish studies in Turkey. The political climate was relatively positive as peace negotiations between the Turkish state and the mainstream Kurdish political movement in Turkey were going on. It was, indeed, this climate that enabled the opening of such an institution for the first time in the modern history of Turkey.

Kadri Yıldırım, Selim Temo, Abdurrahman Adak, and Hayrullah Acar were among the first people who started teaching at the institute. Yıldırım's first five years between 2010 and 2015 were dedicated to establishing the department, opening the undergraduate and postgraduate programs in Kurdish language and culture, and preparing the first school textbooks in Kurdish (both for Kurmançî and Zazakî dialects) for fifth, sixth, and seventh-grade students, published by the Turkish Ministry of Education. In 2014, Kadri Yıldırım led the transfer of the Kurdish collection of Alexandre Jaba (also known as Auguste Jaba) from St. Petersburg, Russia to the Kurdology Library of Mardin Artuklu University. Several of our classmates from the summer program would also join the team in the following years as instructors and lecturers, but many would be purged when the political climate changed in the mid-2010s. The peace process stalled and finally collapsed; the liberal rector of the university was replaced in

2014 by an ultra-conservative Islamist and Arab supremacist, Ahmet Ağırakça, who oversaw the decline of academic freedom in the university.³

Political Career

In 2015, while the Department of Kurdish Language and Literature saw its first undergraduate students graduate, Kadri Yıldırım accepted an offer to run as a candidate representing the province of Sêrt (Siirt) for the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in the June 7, 2015 general elections. His motivation was to work towards policies that would eventually result in the recognition of Kurdish as an official language of education. During the period of election campaigning, then Prime Minister Erdoğan visited the Kurdish cities with a Kurdish translation of the Quran in hand, claiming his party's so-called Kurdish opening would end a century of assimilation and discrimination of the Kurds in Turkey. It turned out that Kadri Yıldırım was asked to edit this Kurdish translation, yet the government rushed publishing the translation without his edits to use it for their election campaigning. The HDP's strategy to include a group of well-known Muslim scholars and activists, most prominently the former state-appointed Mufti of Amed, Nimetullah Aydoğmuş, journalist Hüda Kaya, long-time Islamist politician Altan Tan, and Kadri Yıldırım, challenged the AKP's strategy to utilize religion for electoral success.

The June 2015 elections were an important turning point for the Kurdish electoral politics as the pro-Kurdish HDP for the first time passed the ten per cent threshold and managed to gain 80 out of 550 seats in Turkey's Grand National Assembly (TBMM). This also meant an end to the one-party rule of the Islamist AKP government as they, according to the Constitution, had to form a coalition government. However, the AKP refused to do so and instead ran for a re-election on November 1, 2015. The period in between June and November 2015 turned out to be the beginning of a dark period when the AKP's propaganda machine and its apparatuses started targeting the Kurds to consolidate Turkish nationalist votes. A series of suicide bombings targeted HDP rallies and other meetings of Kurds and sympathizers of the Kurdish movement in Amed, Pirsûs (Suruç), and Ankara. Violent conflict between security forces and the PKK-affiliated Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement

3 Ağırakça, who claimed he was appointed to his position by President Erdoğan himself and that this allowed him to rule the university as a personal fiefdom, was himself summarily dismissed by the President in 2019 and replaced by a more moderate person.

(YDG-H) led the Turkish military to engage in large-scale destruction of major Kurdish cities. Up to half a million Kurds were forcibly displaced and thousands of Kurdish civilians lost their lives. The renewed violence contributed to a nationalist reaction among Turkish voters and an election victory for the AKP and its right-wing ally the MHP.

During this period, and especially following the failed military coup attempt in July 2016, most of the advances with regards to recognizing Kurdish language and identity were rolled back and most of the critical Kurdish academic staff at the Institute of Living Languages and other departments at Mardin Artuklu University were purged through emergency decrees. In a speech in the Turkish National Assembly in January 2017, Kadri Yıldırım described this purge as a coup against Kurdology and questioned the contradictions between governmental policies during the peace negotiations and after the conflict reignited. He asserted that the institute and other initiatives had been just a utilitarian move by the government, through which they had hoped to receive electoral support from the Kurds. He referred to a speech made by then Prime Minister Erdoğan, who stated that 'What Kadri Yıldırım and his team are doing here [at the Kurdish department of Mardin Artuklu University] is revolutionary.' Yıldırım then asked what happened since this talk that all these academic staff who wrote the school textbooks in Kurdish, which are published by the Ministry of Education, were purged. Yıldırım concluded that on the day of judgement, alongside with the forefathers of the Kurdish language and literature, Ehmedê Xanî, Feqiyê Teyran, and Melayê Cizûrî, he will grab the government authorities by their collars and ask them 'Did you have no shame that your Ministry of Culture published [Xanî's] *Mem û Zîn*, but you expelled his grandchildren who taught this book at the Kurdology department?'

It is obvious that Kadri Yıldırım found himself in a violent environment that he did not anticipate when he ran for the elections. In such a conflictual environment, he could not achieve what he initially hoped for and became increasingly critical towards the government's policies as well as his party's stance towards the declaration of self-autonomy (*öz yönetim*) across Kurdish districts and towns, which was used as a pretext by the government to increase their repressive and violent practices against Kurdish civilians. In the following general elections in 2018, he did not run for the MP position and returned to Mardin Artuklu University, where he found himself completely alienated. The new infamous rector, Ahmet Ağırakça, had spearheaded the purges against progressive, leftist, and Kurdish academics at the university and replaced them with unqualified Islamists. He also dismissed Yıldırım but was forced to reappoint him when this decision was challenged as there were no legal grounds for dismissal. This time, however, Ağırakça appointed Yıldırım not to the Kurdish Department but to the Department of Arabic Language. Like

many other former and current HDP parliamentarians and Kurdish intellectuals, Yıldırım also faced several investigations and indictments that were still ongoing at the time of his death.

Works and Legacy

Kadri Yıldırım's contributions to the field can be divided into three categories. First, his contribution to the field of Kurdish studies with a particular focus on Kurdish linguistics and literature, Kurdish medrese tradition, and scholars, Kurdish society, geography, and Kurdish women. Second, his translation work from Arabic to Turkish and Kurdish and his compilations on issues related to Kurdish history, geography, and people. Lastly, his earlier work on Arabic language, poetry, and literature.

Yıldırım's three-volume book titled *Kürt Medreseleri ve Alimleri (Kurdish Medreses and Scholars, 2018)* is one of the most valuable contributions that he made to the field. In these three volumes on 1368 pages, Yıldırım delves into the history of the Kurdish medreses and scholars in the last millennium using original Arabic, Persian, and Kurdish resources, which makes the book the most comprehensive study on the subject to date. The first volume is divided into two different books. The first book deals with the theory and curriculum of the Kurdish medreses (*Teori ve Müfredat*) and explains the pedagogy of the medrese education, including the books that are studied in the medreses and their authors. In the first book he also focuses on Kurdish women who established medreses or were medrese scholars. The second book of the first volume is dedicated to the medreses of the Kurdish principalities (*Beylik Medreseleri*), whose scholarly influence extended far beyond the boundaries of Kurdistan. The Kurdish principalities did not only establish these great medreses that became a part of a global and cosmopolitan network of learning across the Islamic world, but they also established great libraries and endowments (*vakıf*) that aimed to provide and maintain the needs of the medrese students and teachers. In the second volume (*Tekkelere Bağlı Medreseler*), Yıldırım focuses on the intertwined dynamics of the Sufi medreses after the collapse of the great Kurdish principalities of the Marwanids, Ayyubids, etc. He examines how Sufi medreses, especially those of the Khalidi Naqshbandi branch of Sufism, established a network of great medreses next to their Sufi lodges (*tekke/dergah*) and mobilized meles/seydas across Kurdistan. The most prominent among those Sufi medreses/lodges were those in Norşîn, Oxîn, Nehrî, Arvas, Gayda, Biyare, Basret, Zoqayd, Çoxreş, Aktepe, Menzil, Xinûk, Tillo, and Xazna. The last volume (*Cami ve Hücreler*) focuses on the vernacular medreses rooted in the local culture and social organisation of Kurdish villages. In the first chapter

of the last volume, Yıldırım delves into the history of the mosque from the early period of Islam and situates mosques as early educational institutions. Then, he continues to examine the little extensions (*hucre*) of these mosques that did not partake in the capital and networks of the great medreses but were so widespread that they created their own vernacular network of scholars and students. In this last volume, Yıldırım greatly benefits from his own experience studying in several of these medreses and introduces a great number of vernacular medreses and their *seydas*, adding that it is almost impossible to encapsulate all these small educational institutions across Kurdistan. Overall, *The Kurdish Medreses and Scholars* provides a comprehensive analysis of the Kurdish medreses across the four parts of Kurdistan in the last centuries and is an invaluable source for the scholars of Kurds and Kurdistan.

In a similar vein, Kadri Yıldırım wrote several books on the poets Baba Tahirê Uryan, Ehmedê Xanî, and Hecî Qadirê Koyî, through which he seemed to have intended to tell the long history of Kurds and prominent Kurdish scholars, Sufis, poets, and intellectuals in the face of denial and assimilation of the Kurds at the hand of the oppressive nation-states. In his book titled *Ehmedê Xanî'nin Fikir Dûnyası (The Intellectual World of Ehmedê Xanî, 2011)*, he examines Xanî's life and work across ten chapters. In these ten chapters, he explores Xanî's biography and work, his understanding of Sufism, love, and cosmology. He then investigates the common themes, objects, and subjects that we come across in Xanî's work, such as music (instruments, maqams, and dances), flora and fauna that Xanî mentions in his work. Yıldırım then proceeds to Xanî's ontology, where he discusses Xanî's engagement with common themes in Islamic theology (*kalâm*). In the ninth chapter, Yıldırım investigates Xanî's unique position and his relation to the Kurdish language and collective identity, whereas he analyses Kurdish folklore (marriage rituals, hunting, Newroz, etc.) in Xanî's work in the last chapter.

In 2019, Yıldırım published a book on Islamic feminism, in which he analysed the work and opinions of around forty different Muslim feminists across a spectrum from moderate to radical and their critiques of patriarchy in Muslim societies. In this book Yıldırım provided many examples of misogyny from *tafsir*, fabricated *hadiths*, and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and took a critical feminist stance to correct wrong interpretations of disputed issues on polygamy, gender equality, divorce rights, and inheritance law in Islam. When he fell ill, Kadri Yıldırım had just completed a two-volume book on Kurdish women, which was published posthumously: *Kürt Kadını (The Kurdish Woman, 2021)*. In this book, his concern was to provide a comprehensive and holistic analysis of Kurdish women (of Sunni, Alevi, Yaresanî/Ehl-î Heqî, Êzîdî, Jewish, and Feylî backgrounds) and to tell the stories of both historical and contemporary Kurdish women who, against all odds, stood up against injustices, took active

roles in resistance and rebellions, and became successful scholars, poets, thinkers, writers, musicians, artists, and politicians.

In his scholarly work and his corpus of translations, Kadri Yıldırım introduced Kurdish history, geography, and its great scholars to the Kurdish people, whose agency has been denied by their oppressors. His two books on the history and geography of Rojava and Efrîn, published during the Syrian Civil War in 2015 and 2018, are especially relevant to this concern that drove his scholarly pursuit in the field of Kurdish studies. In these two books, Yıldırım set out to tell the rich and long history of the Kurds in Rojava and Efrîn as a response to those who seek to de-historicize the Kurdish presence in the region. His translation of Muhammed Ali es-Siwerekî el-Kurdî's book *The Kurds of Jordan* (2007), Kemal Mazhar Ahmed's book on Kirkuk and its history, politics, and ethnic structure (2005) and İzeddin Mustafa Resul's book on Xanî and his Mem û Zîn (2007) speak to the same concern. Yıldırım has consistently sought to dedicate his scholarship to the emancipation of the Kurdish people and their struggle for liberation, recognition, and collective rights.

Through his untiring efforts, Kadri Yıldırım has succeeded in becoming the Taftazanî of the Kurds. He wrote and translated a great number of books that each contains an important potential for Kurdish enlightenment and emancipation. He was a scholar of and for his people, one of the last great scholars of the Kurdish medrese. A kind, humble, and industrious man who worked from before sunrise to sunset every day for almost all his life. May he rest in light and may he hold hands with his people and the great Kurdish scholars before him in heaven and dance a *govend* till eternity. *Oxir be Seydayê mezin!*

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In Memoriam Kamal Mazhar Ahmad (1937–2021), Doyen of Kurdish Historians

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Abstract

The Iraqi Kurdish historian Kamal Mazhar Ahmad (1937–2021) was probably one of the best known and most productive historians. He belonged to the first generation of Iraqis to pursue postgraduate studies in the Soviet Union, and when he was allowed to return to Iraq in 1970, he played a crucial role in the institutionalization of academic institutions and disciplines there and acted as an intermediary between Iraqi Kurdish and Soviet academic circles. As a lecturer and later professor at Baghdad University, he trained thousands of (Arab and Kurdish) students.

Keywords

Iraqi Kurdistan – historiography – 20th century history – Kurdish Academy – Kamal Mazhar Ahmad

Bi bîranîna Kemal Mezher Ehmed (1937–2021), duayenê dîroknasên kurd

Dîroknasê Kurd ê Iraqê Kemal Mezher Ehmed (1937–2021), bê guman dîroknasê Kurdan ê herî berhemdar û bi bandor bû. Ew ji neslê ewil ê Iraqîyan bû ku li Yekîtiya Sovyetê di asta lîsansa bilind de xwendîye û, dema ku li sala 1970î destûra vegeza li Iraqê wergirt, wî li wir roleke mezin di sazûmanîya babet û sazîyên akademîk de ley-ist, û her weha navbênkariya derdorên akademîk ên Kurdî-Iraqî û Sovyetî kiriye. Wek

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dersdar û, bi pey re, profesor li Zanîngeha Bexdayê, wî bi hezaran xwendekar (hem Erebe hem Kurd) jî perwerde kirine.

Yadkirdnewey Kemal Mezher Ehmed (1937–2021), diyartirîn mêjûnûse Kurdekan

Mêjûnûsî benawbengî kurd Kemal Mezher Ehmed (1937–2021) yekêk bû le diyartirîn û karîgertirîn mêjûnûsekanî kurd. Yekêk bû le yekemîn newey ‘Îraqî ke xwêndinî bal-lay le Yekêtî Sovyet be dest hênawe. Û katêk rêgay pêdra bgerrêtewe bo ‘Îraq le sallî 1970 da, rollêkî karîgerî bîni le be damezrawekirdnî nawende ekadîmyekan û beşe zanisteyekan lew wllate da. Û herweha bû be nawendkarêk le nêwan ekadîmanî kurdî ‘Îraq û Yekêtî Sovyet da. Wekû mamostayekî zanko û paşan wek profîsorêk le Zankoy Bexdad, hezaran xwendekarî kurd û ‘erebî perwerde û fêrkirdwe.

Seba yadkerdişê Kemal Mezhar Ahmadî (1937–2021), duayenê tarîxnasanê kurdan

Beno ke tarîxnasê kurdanê Îraqî Kemal Mezhar Ahmad (1937–2021) tarîxnasê kurdan o tewr berhemdar û tesîrdar bî. O neslê îraqîjan ê verênî ra bî ke Yewîya Sovyetan de perwerdeyê lîsansê berzî wendbî. Wexto ke serra 1970î de destûr dîya ci ke agêro Îraq, uca dezgesazîya beş û enstîtuyanê akademîkan de rolêko elzem ard ca û mîyanê akademîsyananê kurdanê Îraqî û Sovyetan de mabênkarîye kerde. Sey dersdayox û dima zî sey profesorê Unîversîteya Bexdadî, ey bi hezaran wendekarî (erebe û kurdî) perwerde kerdî.

On 16 March of this year the Kurdish historian Kamal Mazhar Ahmad passed away in a hospital in Bonn, Germany. Overruling Covid regulations, the Kurdistan Regional Government had his body flown back to Erbil, where a ceremony was held in the presence of the president of the KRG, Nechirvan Barzani, minister of culture Hama Hama Saeed, and Erbil governor Omid Khoshnaw, before the body was taken to Sulaymani for burial. Dr. Kamal, as he was commonly known, was a much beloved public intellectual, the author

of numerous authoritative studies on modern Kurdish history and the teacher and supervisor of several generations of history students. He wrote in Russian, Sorani Kurdish and Arabic, and several of his works were translated into English, Persian, Turkish and Kurmanji Kurdish, making him one of the most widely read historians among Kurds from Turkey, Syria and Iran as well as Iraq.¹

Kamal Mazhar was born in the village of Aghjalar near Kirkuk in 1937 as the son of a civil servant. He grew up in a period when the traditional class system was breaking down and social mobility through education was possible. Like many others of similar background, he attended secondary school in Sulaymani, the major centre of Kurdish intellectual culture. Upon graduation, he was one of a smaller number who continued their studies in Baghdad at the Teachers Training College (later renamed College of Education). There he was at the right place at the right time when the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown in a military coup in July 1958.

The left-leaning new regime, led by Colonel Abdulkarim Qassem, established friendly relations with the Soviet Union, partnered with the Communist Party and made a number of reconciling gestures towards Iraq's Kurds, promising equal rights and cultural recognition. Mulla Mustafa Barzani and his loyal companions, who had been living in exile in the USSR since 1947, were welcomed back to Iraq and were treated as representatives of the Kurdish people. The first years of the Qassem regime raised expectations of a land reform that would break the power of the large tribal lords and empower the landless and poor peasantry, as well as Kurdish expectations of a degree of self-rule. It took three years for the relations between Qassem and Barzani and other politically active Kurds to deteriorate to the point where armed conflict broke out.

Of more direct importance for Kamal Mazhar was that the Soviet Union offered a number of scholarships for Iraqi students to pursue a doctoral degree there. Upon graduating from the College of Education in 1959 Kamal, who had become a member of the Iraqi Communist Party, was chosen to be one of the Kurdish recipients, together with Ma'ruf Khaznadar, Nasrin Fakhri and Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul. The story of this generation of Soviet-trained Kurdish scholars, their wrestling with Marxist orthodoxy, and the impact of their presence on Soviet Kurdology were highlighted in Nodar Mossaki's obituary of Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul, who had passed away a few months earlier (Mossaki 2021). Like Izzaddin, Kamal ended up in Baku, where he was trained as a historian and prepared a dissertation on the Kurdish movement during the years of the British occupation and mandate (1918–1932). The decision to

1 Essential information for this brief obituary was provided by Joyce Blau, Jamile Jamil (Cemilê Cemil), Hassan Ghazi, Jabar Kadir (Cebâr Qadir) and Nodar Mossaki.

concentrate on this period suggests co-ordination with the Moscow-based Russian historian M. S. Lazarev, who had earlier started work on a dissertation focusing on Kurdistan during the preceding quarter century (published as Lazarev 1964, reviewed in Evans 1965). Another Russian historian, N. A. Khalfin, was preparing a study of imperial rivalries in Kurdistan during the 19th century (Khalfin 1963), and the Kurdish scholar from the Armenian SSR, Jalile Jalil (Celilê Celîl) was completing his study of Shaykh ‘Ubaydullah’s uprising in 1880 (Dzhasimovich 1966, reviewed in Evans 1966). In Baku, the Kurdish historian and novelist Rahim Ghazi acted as Kamal’s mentor. Rahim, a paternal cousin of Ghazi Mohammad, had been among a group of some fifty students that were sent to Baku by the Kurdistan Republic in April 1946 for military training. After the defeat of the Republic and the public execution of Ghazi Mohammad and other family members, Rahim had decided not to return to Iran and made a career in Baku, writing a dissertation on the history of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Mahabad Republic and becoming one of the founders of the Centre of Kurdish studies at the university.

Kamal completed his dissertation in 1963 and submitted it to the Orientalist section of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (the Institute of Asian and African Peoples) in Moscow. Meanwhile changes had taken place in Iraq that prevented his return. In early 1963 Qassem’s government was overthrown in another coup by the Baath party, which banned the Communist Party and fiercely persecuted communists (Tripp 2000: 167–75). Kamal decided to remain in the Soviet Union, upon which Iraq invalidated his passport so that he would be unable to return until much later friendly relations with the Soviet Union were restored.

Kamal’s examiners had been favourably impressed by his dissertation, and he was given the opportunity to continue his research to the habilitation (Dr. Nauk) level, a privilege that was granted to only a small proportion of the foreign students. Moreover, the dissertation was published as a book in Baku, which remained Kamal’s base (1967). This was by no means his only Russian publication, for he had begun contributing articles on national and class struggles in Kurdistan to various Soviet journals. Most of these publications were offshoots from his ongoing research for the habilitation thesis, which continued the narrative of the original dissertation up to the end of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958. This work came to consist of three volumes of altogether 750 pages (of which the original dissertation was the first volume), which were again submitted to the Soviet Academy of Sciences and examined by three prominent Russian historians, including the Kurdish specialist Naftula Khalfin, “a Soviet historian of unusual ability” according to an observer of the scene (Evans 1966: 68).

Kamal’s work was well received by his Soviet colleagues, and especially warm relations of mutual appreciation and support developed between him

and Khalfin and Lazarev, as well as his fellow Kurd, Jalile Jalil in Yerevan. Among the first generation of Iraqi Kurdish students in the USSR he was the only historian who gained prominence, and throughout his life he remained the Soviet scholars' preferred Iraqi counterpart.² Being a foreigner, however, Kamal was not given access to Soviet archives – in those years these were only accessible to Soviet citizens who were party members. The historical narrative and analysis in the habilitation thesis and much of his later work were based on large amounts of published material in English, Arabic and Russian and his personal knowledge of persons and events in Kurdistan. Only much later, during a visit to Great Britain, was he able to carry out actual archival research.

Meanwhile significant changes had taken place in Iraq. The first Baath government was toppled after less than a year by a group of pan-Arab nationalist officers who were equally anti-communist. They were in turn overthrown in 1968 in a coup by another faction of the Baath party. Each new regime, from Qassem onwards, started out with promises to the Kurds but soon ended up fighting them. In the course of the decade, the Kurdish movement succeeded in mobilizing increasing numbers of Kurds behind its demands of cultural rights and political autonomy (Vanly 1970, Jawad 1981). The second Baath regime, led by Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein, went further than its predecessors in seeking accommodation with the Kurds and, renouncing on the earlier anti-communism, sought closer alignment with the Soviet Union. On 11 March 1970 a peace agreement was signed between Baghdad and the Kurdish movement, entailing autonomy and Kurdish representation in the central government, recognition of the Kurds as a nationality within Iraq and of their language as one of the two official languages, and official sponsorship of Kurdish education and culture (Vanly 1993: 153–7). In 1972, the regime nationalized the Iraqi Petroleum Company and signed a treaty of friendship and trade agreement with the USSR, completing its realignment in Cold War geopolitics (Tripp 2000: 205–8). Close relations with the USSR were to continue until the Iraq-Iran war.

These developments made it possible for Kamal to return to Iraq. He arrived late in 1970 and found a position as a lecturer in the history department of Baghdad University. It was the beginning of a 37-year teaching career during which he taught thousands of students, most of them Iraqi Arabs. Kurds initially constituted only a small minority among the students at Baghdad University.

2 There was another historian among his contemporaries, Kawus Qaftan, who studied in Leningrad and wrote a thesis on the early Barzani revolts under the supervision of Qanatê Kurdo, but he remained relatively unknown (Jabar Kadir, personal communication).

Kamal also became involved in the establishment of the Kurdish Academy (Korrî Zanyarî Kurd), one of the tangible products of the March agreement. Established by law in August 1970 and placed under the Ministry of Education, the Academy had as its task to “revive the Kurdish and Islamic heritage in the sciences, literature and the arts,” to safeguard and develop the Kurdish language, and to publish a scholarly journal and books. The history of Iraq and specifically its Kurdish region was explicitly mentioned as one of the areas of research to be stimulated.³ The Academy was run by a committee of some ten people that included Kamal as the only historian, and from whom he was elected as the secretary general. In this function, he was also in charge of relations with the Soviet Academy of Sciences and could distribute a number of scholarships for a new generation to be trained in the USSR.⁴

The Academy’s first publication was a Kurdish translation of the *Sharafnama* by the poet Hejar, for which Kamal wrote a preface on the place of this important text in Russian and Soviet scholarship (1972). The journal of the Academy, *Govarî Korrî Zanyarî Kurd*, began publication in 1973 and rapidly established itself as an authoritative medium, with lengthy articles in Kurdish and Arabic on various aspects of Kurdish linguistics, literature and – less often – history and society. Appearing annually (initially even twice per year), with an average size of 600 pages, it established a significant corpus of academic literature in Kurdish (mostly but not exclusively Sorani; there were also contributions in Badinani). In spite of the political conflicts of the following decades, the journal kept appearing regularly until 1990.⁵

Kamal contributed a series of articles on Kurdistan during the First World War, which were later published together as the book that is probably his best known work (1975). This work was not derivative of his dissertations, which

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- 3 The text of the law (in Arabic, with an English summary) can be found in the final pages of the first volume of the Academy’s journal, *Govarî Korrî Zanyarî Kurd* (1973). Periodical reports on the activities of the Academy were published in the journal – the first one by Kamal in his role as secretary general (Mezher 1973). In spite of its considerable output in books and journal articles and its contribution to the standardization of Sorani Kurdish, the Academy and its journal have received little scholarly attention. Amir Hassanpour is, to my knowledge, the only scholar writing in English who briefly discusses its establishment and work on Kurdish linguistics, noting that Kurdish writers had called for a different type of institution, which would uniquely focus on language standardization (Hassanpour 1992: 448–51). The only substantial study of the role of the Academy of which I am aware consists of two recent articles in Kurdish (Salih 2017, 2018), which Jabar Kadir kindly shared with me.
- 4 A group of four Kurdish students, including Kamal’s student at Baghdad University Jabar Kadir, left for Moscow in 1973.
- 5 Scans of the first twenty volumes (1973–1989) of the *Govarî Korrî Zanyarî Kurd* are available online at: <http://www.hewalname.com/ku/?p=1378>.

had dealt with later periods, but obviously was much indebted to his research while in the USSR. Besides memoirs by Iraqi personalities and numerous British sources, he also quotes his Soviet colleagues, who had been able to carry out the archival research that had not been possible for himself. The fifth instalment (in vol. 3 no. 1, 1975) focused on the role of the Kurds in the Armenian massacres.⁶

Kamal was the first Kurdish intellectual to explicitly address the question of Kurdish participation in the genocide. Citing numerous Russian and Armenian sources, he emphasized the active role of many Kurds in the killings and made no attempt to downplay their responsibility and question possible bias of the sources. He also demonstrated, however, that many other Kurds had helped Armenians to save their lives during these years. He placed the massacres in the context of a much longer history of feudal oppression. Although he was personally a nationalist and sympathetic to the struggle of the Kurdish movement, from Shaykh Mahmud to Mulla Mustafa Barzani, he remained true to his Marxist views and fiercely critical of the oppression and inequalities in traditional Kurdish society. It is probably no coincidence that his first publication after his return to Iraq was the Arabic translation of a booklet by the Armenian Kurdish writer Ereb Şemo on feudalism among the Kurds (1971).

Meanwhile the relations between the Baath regime and the Kurdish movement rapidly deteriorated and in March 1974, when the government proclaimed a severely limited form of autonomy, Barzani broke off relations with Baghdad and took up arms to defend the region that the Kurds de facto controlled (Vanly 1993: 153–77). The Kurdish ministers and other representatives in Baghdad were pulled back to the Kurdish region. The Academy remained in Baghdad and continued functioning, but Kamal left the capital for Kurdistan, staying in the “liberated areas” until the end of the uprising in March 1975. Following the defeat, he declined going into exile and decided to return to Baghdad. The government offered an amnesty to the Kurds who had sided with Barzani, and Kamal could resume teaching at the University but no longer was allowed to play a part in the Academy.⁷ Two books that he had prepared before were nonetheless published under the imprint of the Academy, both in Kurdish: the study of the First World War that was already mentioned (1975) was followed by a study of the first Sorani journal, which had been published

6 A French translation of this essay, incorporated as chapter 5 in the book, was later published by an Armenian history journal (1998).

7 Vanly, who visited Baghdad not long after the uprising, presents a vivid image of the precarious position in which Kurds in Baghdad found themselves and the heavy-handed government interference in all Kurdish institutions (1993: 177–87).

under British auspices in Baghdad in 1918, *Têgeyiştîni Rastî* (1978). Meanwhile he published a series of popularizing articles in the Arabic-language journal of the KDP, *al-Ta'akhi*, many of them focusing on the Shaykh Sa'îd rebellion in Turkey. A quarter century later, these were republished as a book by a Kurdish association in Beirut (1991).

Strengthening his credentials as a historian of Iraq (and not just the Kurds), and probably related to his actual teaching, Kamal's next two publications (1977, 1978), both written in Arabic, concerned an important episode in Iraqi history, generally known in English as "the Iraqi revolt" (Tripp 2000: 40–5), an uprising of the Arab tribes on the middle Euphrates against the British occupation in 1920. These books were at the same time part of his broader project of making Soviet scholarship concerning Iraq accessible to the Iraqi public. He followed this up with a history of the working class and workers' movements in Iraq, focusing especially on oil workers in Kirkuk (1981a), and two general books on the modern history of Iran and Iraq (1985b, 1987). In Kurdish, he wrote a number of popular scientific studies: an essay on the Kurds and history (1983a), a women's history (1981b), a book on the great Russian Orientalist Gordlevski and his observations on the Kurds (1983b), and a collection of previously published articles on Kurdish history (1985a).

By the early 1980s, he had been promoted to full professor, which provided a degree of social and financial security but offered little protection from the hardships to which all Iraqis were subjected: the eight-year war with Iran (1980–88), Saddam's occupation of Kuwait and the US-led war to expel him (1990–91), the international economic boycott through the 1990s and early 2000s, and finally the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the chaos that followed. Baghdad was heavily bombed in 1991 and 2003 and most of its infrastructure destroyed. The 1990s were the most difficult period; although Kamal continued teaching, his salary lost its value so rapidly due to the depreciation of the Iraqi dinar that it was insufficient for survival and had to be supplemented from the sale of the family's modest valuables.

Kamal produced no major new studies during the 1990s but wrote numerous short articles for the Kurdish magazine *Rengîn* and devoted much time to two major long-term projects. One concerned the annotated edition of the memoirs of two prominent Kurdish personalities who had played important parts in crucial periods of Iraq's history, the former ministers Ahmad Mokhtar Baban and Fouad Arif (1999–2009; 2013).⁸ The other project, which was to remain uncompleted, was an ambitious multi-volume documentary history of

⁸ Ahmad Mokhtar Baban served brief terms as a minister and finally as Iraq's last Prime Minister under the monarchy; Fouad Arif was Kurdish member of the Free Officers who

the Kurds in the modern period. One volume was published, in response to the political needs of the moment, as a history of Kirkuk (2004a–b), a rough draft of the second volume exists in handwritten manuscript (Jabar Kadir, personal communication).

The American invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 brought more destruction and suffering but also many new opportunities for the Kurds. The Kurdistan Regional Government was empowered by the new Constitution; Jalal Talabani became Iraq's President. Though Kamal had always remained politically independent, his work as a historian was highly appreciated by both of the Kurdish parties. He probably also perceived his potential usefulness as the Kurds were pressing their claims for control of Kirkuk, and he rapidly completed the first part of his long-projected history of the Kurds, with a special focus on Kirkuk. It was published by the Regional Government in Arabic as well as English in 2004, and translated into Turkish the following year.⁹

Kamal had been struggling with poor health for several years. The changed political circumstances enabled him to go abroad for treatment, with some support from the Kurdish authorities. From mid-2006 to early 2008 he and his wife, Shehla Haidary, lived in Great Britain. Besides medical treatment, he used the opportunity to do research in the British archives and find material for his documentary history of the Kurds. He prepared a collection of these documents, translated into Kurdish, as a two-volume book (2008, 2014).

The return to Iraq was also the moment of his resettlement from Baghdad, where he had lived and taught since 1970, to the Kurdish capital of Erbil. Here he had been elected a member of the Academy of Kurdistan (Korrî Zanyarî Kurdistan) the previous year.¹⁰

carried out the 1958 coup and served as a minister (and as a token Kurd) under Qassem as well as Abdurrahman Arif. He continued playing a role under the Baath regime. The second part of the memoirs includes developments since the fall of Saddam.

- 9 Kamal's book was perhaps too scholarly and too historical to be an effective political instrument. In the same year, the legal scholar Noury Talabany also published a book with the same objective of offering a historical and legal basis for the Kurdish claims on Kirkuk, which may have been more effective because of its focus on recent history (Talabani 2004).
- 10 The Academy of Kurdistan is not to be confused with the earlier Baghdad-based Kurdish Academy. The latter had in 1978 been downgraded in status to the Kurdish Branch of the Iraqi Academy (Korrî Zanyarî 'Îraq – Destey Kurd) and by the end of the 1980s gradually faded away. The Academy of Kurdistan was established in Erbil in 1997, and was later to change its name to Kurdish Academy (Ekađîmiya Kurd).

Serious health problems forced Kamal to seek treatment in Europe again, this time in Germany. In 2015 he and his wife moved to Bonn, where he was in and out of hospital for the following years. He was not to return to Iraq alive.

Colleagues and friends as well as the general public remember him as a gentle and always helpful scholar but an independent-minded person, a great teacher and a prolific scholar, whose reputation has only grown with the years. His numerous works will long survive him.

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BRILL

Book Reviews



V. V. Naumkin, I. F. Popova (academic advisors), *The Kurds. Legend of the East*.

Moscow: Arbor Publishing Group, 2019. ISBN 978-5-900048-94-9. 456 pp.

This handsomely produced coffee table book celebrates the Russian contribution to Kurdish studies and was produced as a public relations gesture by the Russian oil industry, apparently in the context of the signing of significant investment contracts with the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government. Gazprom Neft, one of the two companies involved (the other is Rosneft) asserts copyright. What makes the book of more than incidental interest is the involvement of Russia's academic establishment. Vitaly V. Naumkin and Irina F. Popova, who put their names on the book, are the directors of the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Oriental Studies (Moscow) and Institute of Oriental Manuscripts (St. Petersburg) respectively. The authors of the seventeen chapters in the book are members of the academic staff of these two institutes, specialists on Kurdish language and literature, history and culture. Many of the illustrations are from various Russian archives and have, to my knowledge, not been published before.

The history of Russian and Soviet Kurdology is discussed in two long chapters at the beginning and end of the book. Zare Yusupova, the senior Kurdish linguist at St. Petersburg, provides a detailed overview of Russian and Soviet studies of language, literature and oral tradition, from the first scientific studies of Kurdish grammar and Kurdish dialects by Peter Lerch (1856) to her colleagues' most recent publications. The emphasis is on the works by the Kurdish Research Group in Leningrad/St. Petersburg but she also discusses studies by Kurdish authors based in Iraq and the West European diaspora and, less systematically, major works by Western scholars.

The closing chapter 'Russian explorers – pioneers of Kurdish studies' begins with an overview in which Irina Popova places the emergence of Russian Kurdology as a branch of Orientalism against the background of Russia's imperial expansion, voyages of exploration, establishment of intelligence-gathering

consulates and religious missions. Consuls like Auguste Jaba systematically collected the Kurdish manuscripts that were later to constitute a major asset for the work of the Kurdish Research Group, which was established in Leningrad in 1959 under the leadership of the linguist Joseph Orbeli. With Qanat Kurdoev, Isaak Tsukerman, Margarita Rudenko, Jacqueline Musaelyan and Evgeniya Vasilyeva as full members of the group and Iraida Smirnova, Zare Yusupova and Karim Eyyubi as postgraduate students, this was the golden age of Soviet Kurdology. Historiography meanwhile flourished in Moscow, where Naftula Khalfin, Mikhail Lazarev and Manvel Gasretyan wrote major monographs.

Another major resource for Russian Kurdology consists of the copious diplomatic correspondence and travel notes of nineteenth and early twentieth-century consuls, military officers and missionaries, discussed by Kirill Vertyayev. The information is richest on the highland zone between Lake Van, the Black Sea and the southern Caucasus, sometimes called 'Lesser Kurdistan' in these sources. As examples of the kind of information to be found there he narrates several episodes on which these sources throw new light. The Russian consuls and travellers apparently perceived a more developed spirit of nationalism among their Kurdish interlocutors than recent academic studies generally give credence to. An interesting case, discussed at some length, is that of the cleric Mela Selim in Hizan who in 1914 led an uprising with Kurdish nationalist and anti-Armenian overtones. His followers briefly occupied the town of Bitlis; when they were defeated by Ottoman troops, Mela Selim took refuge in the Russian consulate and stayed there until Russia was drawn into the World War and the consulate was taken over by the Turks, who captured and then hanged Mela Selim.

The Russian vice-consul at Van, Sergei Olferyev, left extensive notes on his travels in 1912 and meetings with the Kurdish leaders Abdurrazzaq Bedirkhan, Sayyid Taha and Simko, who gave him the impression they favoured a semi-independent Kurdish emirate as a Russian protectorate. The book reproduces a selection of Olferyev's photographs and his notes on Kurdish tribes, which nicely complement those of the British traveller Mark Sykes. The chapter ends with brief biographies of prominent Russian Kurdologists.

Between these two long chapters that focus on Russian and Soviet diplomacy and scholarship, we find chapters on a wide range of subjects, from religion and folklore to politics and cinema. The historian Kirill Vertyayev takes care of most of the chapters on post-1920 history and his colleague Lana Ravandi-Fadai writes on Kurdish cultural traditions, clothing, housing and traditional weapons, as well as the 'mystery of the Kurdish woman'. The last-named chapter owes much to Western literature on the social and political role of women in Kurdish society but contains some additional information

from Russian/Soviet publications, including a recent author, Xalida Fenar, on the PKK's women warriors.

Stanislav M. Ivanov writes on the Kurds of the Russian Empire, USSR and Russian Federation, mentioning several Kurdish personalities who made successful careers, especially in the army, and showing that in the Russian-Turkish wars of the nineteenth century there were Kurds fighting on the Russian as well as the Ottoman side. The various voluntary and involuntary migrations of the Soviet and post-Soviet period (Stalinist deportations to Central Asia, expulsion of Sunni Kurds from Armenia) and policies varying from cultural autonomy to forced assimilation (in post-Soviet Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan) are briefly surveyed. A brief chapter on two early Kurdish republics supported by the Soviet Union – Red Kurdistan, which for a brief period (1923–29) was a buffer between Armenian and Azerbaijani Soviet Republics, and the Republic of Mahabad – complements what is generally known about these episodes with some material from Russian sources.

There are no separate chapters on the Turkish, Iranian and Syrian parts of Kurdistan but two on Iraqi Kurdistan. The chapter on recent history of the region cautiously steers clear of all sensitive issues and lavishes much praise on Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the Barzani family. The author (S. M. Ivanov) emphasizes the strong bilateral relations between the Iraqi Kurds and Russia but gives no concrete information. One would have wished to read something here on the period of 1961–1975, especially the years after 1968, when the Baghdad government tilted towards the Soviet Union and Barzani, leading a guerrilla war for autonomy, was increasingly seeking (and ultimately receiving) support from the United States and its regional allies. Soviet diplomats were known to have repeatedly travelled from Baghdad to the north to meet with Barzani during those years. They allegedly handed him money but it remains a mystery what the trade-off was. Russian archives no doubt contain interesting information about those negotiations as well as the role of the Iraqi Communist Party and its many Kurdish members.

The other Iraqi chapter, titled 'On the Front Line' (by Nikolai Plotnikov and Aleksei Marinin), contains some interesting information on the KDP and PUK *peshmerga*, although it passes over in silence all that could be contentious and does not even mention the PKK in the section about the fight against ISIS. The authors single out the female *peshmerga* for special praise, attributing the founding of the first women's regiment to Talabani in 1996, and again refraining from mentioning the PKK's famous women fighters. (These are mentioned in other chapters, however.)

In a brief postscript Vitaly Naumkin succinctly describes the geopolitical context of the Russian-Kurdish oil deals, and affirms that Russia continues

to stand for the territorial integrity of the Middle Eastern states (i.e., against Kurdish independence), while being in solidarity with the Kurdish people and ‘welcoming the attempts of the Kurds to unite with other forces opposing terrorism, including the Syrian government forces’.

This book would be of interest to many colleagues but unfortunately it is not commercially available. Its target audience appears to be the Iraqi Kurdish political and economic elite and their relations, as well as selected libraries and scholars. E-book and online versions appear to be in preparation, however. The original Russian version can already be downloaded free of cost (from <https://aegitas.ru/books/643750>), and the English version is due to follow in 2022. Besides these English and Russian versions, Kurmanci and Sorani editions have also been printed in smaller numbers (see also Gazprom Neft’s announcement of the book at https://ir.gazprom-neft.com/news-and-events/news/2021/gazprom_neft_launches_an_electronic_encyclopaedia_on_the_history_and_culture_of_the_kurds_5539482).

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Abbas Vali, *The Forgotten Years of Kurdish Nationalism in Iran* [*Minorities in West Asia and North Africa*]. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. XVI + 238 pp. ISBN 978-3-030-16071-5 (paperback); <https://doi.org/10.1007/987-3-030-16069-2> (eBook).

The forgotten years of the title are those between the fall of the Republic of Kurdistan in late 1946 and the struggle for Kurdish autonomy at the time of Iran's Islamic Revolution, and the book is a sequel to Abbas Vali's previous one, which dealt with the emergence of Kurdish nationalism and the Republic as its political expression (Vali, 2011). Long awaited, it was expected to fill a major gap in the historiography of the Kurdish movement in Iran. The existing literature in English, considerably less extensive than that concerning the other parts of Kurdistan, has focused mainly on the Mahabad Republic and the years of struggle during and immediately after the Revolution, with little or no attention to the developments in between. Yet it may be argued that the particular shape Kurdish nationalism took in Iran cannot be explained without a better understanding of crucial developments of the 1950s and 1960s that continued to define the political and ideological debates in the later period.

This includes the way the communist Tudeh party and its Soviet sponsors gained and continued to hold almost full control of Kurdish activism, until Mullah Mustafa Barzani's movement in Iraq began to constitute a rival form of patronage in the 1960s. Memories of a large peasant uprising in 1952–53, violently suppressed by an alliance of landlords and the Iranian military, haunted later debates on class and ethnicity in the Kurdish struggle as well as those between Soviet-type and Maoist leftists. More than three decades of political quietism on the part of the major Kurdish party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), were briefly interrupted by an ill-prepared armed uprising in 1967–69, whose leaders were in retrospect remembered as national heroes even by those who considered their action unwise. The existing literature is either completely silent on these developments or makes a tantalizingly brief reference to them, before jumping from the Mahabad Republic to the Iranian Revolution. It is only the political economy of Iranian Kurdistan during this period, notably the changes in landholding, that has received more than superficial treatment (Ghassemlou, 1965; Koochi-Kamali, 2003).

In all these respects, Vali's new book represents a considerable advance. The 1952 peasant uprising and the 1967 armed movement receive lengthy discussion, which is followed by a chapter on the later emergence and background of the KDPI's main rival Kurdish party, Komala. Vali devotes much attention to the heavy-handed intervention of the Tudeh party and its foreign

bosses in the KDPI. Throughout the period under consideration, he argues, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) demanded subservience to anti-imperialism, i.e., alignment with the Soviet Union in global geopolitics and de facto renunciation of the right to self-determination, on behalf of Soviet interests in Iran. Basing himself on the memoirs of and on interviews with leading KDPI politicians of the period (Karim Hussami, Ghani Bilurian, Hemin, Mohammad Amin Sarraji, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou – all of whom would probably disagree with Vali's interpretations), he sketches the history of the party as one of failure to realize the national interests of the Kurds. The KDPI's slogan of 'autonomy for Kurdistan and democracy for Iran', which for some Western friends signaled the non-radical and reasonable aspirations of Iran's Kurds (and which mirrored the similar slogan of the Iraqi KDP), represented in Vali's analysis a surrender to Soviet demands. (True nationalists would not demand anything less than independence, if I understand Vali correctly.)

Vali contests many established and widely shared views of Iran's Kurdish movement, offering information that was previously unavailable (at least in English) or radically different interpretations. He scathingly dismisses the apologetic views of those who perceived a difference between the Tudeh (unsympathetic to Kurdish ethnicity) and the CPSU (supportive of national liberation movements). His account makes Tudeh control of the KDPI more pervasive than any previous author's. Ghassemlou, the KDPI's most prominent leader from at least 1973 onwards, who was widely considered as a sort of social democrat by his Western friends, appears here as a staunch and prominent member of the Tudeh rather than the KDPI through the 1950s and most of the 1960s. In 1979, however, Ghassemlou's unwillingness to accommodate with Iran's Islamic revolutionary and anti-imperialist regime irritated the Tudeh leadership, which made efforts to have him replaced. This resulted in a split in the party, in which Hussami, Bilurian, Hemin and Sarraji broke away to lead a pro-Soviet alternative KDPI. This breakaway formation soon lost its significance, however, because Ghassemlou controlled most of the fighters, enjoyed greater personal popularity, and had the support of neighbouring Iraq.

Mulla Mustafa Barzani's remarkable influence on the KDPI, in the early years as well as during the 1960s, also receives elaborate discussion. Soon after his arrival in Baku in 1947, Barzani set about organizing a pan-Kurdish nationalist party of a pro-Soviet stance, involving Iraqi and Iranian Kurdish exiles present in the city, including men who were to be among the next generation of leaders of the KDPI. Vali's discussion of this period, which provides much previously unknown information on Soviet policies concerning the Kurds, is

based on the memoirs by Hussami *et al.* and on informed guesses on the motivation and perceptions of the actors. (Important new insights may yet emerge from the systematic study of the relevant Soviet archives, such as is currently being undertaken by Nodar Mossaki.) After his return to Iraq in 1958, Barzani soon emerged as the patron of KDPI activists in Iraqi exile. (Most party cadres lived in exile for much of their lives: in Soviet Azerbaijan, Eastern Europe, or Iraq.) He succeeded in sidelining the pro-Tudeh faction and making his protégé Ahmad Towfiq the single most powerful man in the KDPI.

As with most other issues covered in the book, the reader only learns implicitly about these developments from Vali's comments and his strident criticism of others' views and interpretations. Vali appears not much interested in narrative history but primarily in theoretical analysis. The book builds on decades of discussion and debate with other Iranian Kurds and appears to be addressed primarily to those long-time interlocutors. The events and personalities of the period are assumed to be known, although adequate accounts in English are as yet non-existent. Vali forcefully presents arguments to support his analysis and interpretation of the events, invariably against established opinion, but only rarely does he provide a full and systematic account of the developments.

The 1952–53 peasant uprising in the district of Bukan, some 50 kms to the southeast of Mahabad, is a case in point. It had long been neglected by historians, even those interested in agrarian affairs and class struggle. In Ghassemlou's book, which pays much attention to landholding patterns and feudal relations in Kurdistan, the uprising merits a mere two sentences (1965: 177) – an indication perhaps that neither the KDPI nor the Tudeh had been involved. The only other mention in a Western language that I am aware of is by the Swiss traveler Nicolas Bouvier, who spent time in and around Mahabad in the spring of 1954 and heard lively stories of the recent 'jacquerie' and its violent suppression, in which fifty peasants were killed (1963: 173). The late Marxist scholar Amir Hassanpour was the first to systematically interview survivors of the event. Vali acknowledges his debt to Hassanpour, whose material he perused but whose analysis he does not share. (Hassanpour's account and analysis of the uprising was published posthumously, in Persian, in 2021.) Vali gives his analysis of the uprising – which was sparked by government promises of alleviating the degree of rural exploitation and which soon assumed the character of a genuine class conflict, in which both peasants and landlords were aware of their class interest – but for details of the events he refers to articles in Kurdish or Persian by Hassanpour and a few others that are not easily accessible. His analysis focuses on the failure of the Tudeh and KDPI to respond to the situation,

which he blames on the 'superficiality of the Tudeh's class discourse' and the 'anomalies of the KDPI's painfully adopted class politics' (59).

The chapter on Komala, the 'Revolutionary Association of the Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan', places the emergence of this group against a background in which the 'political field' in Kurdistan was dominated by the 'Marxified' nationalism and reformism of the KDPI on the one hand and the non-Kurdish, all-Iranian Marxist left (Tudeh and the Feda'iyān-e Khalq) on the other. Vali is scornful of the party's 'chronic theoretical poverty' and 'naïve populist empiricism' and its inability to resolve the tension between class and ethnic-national identities. Komala gave theoretical priority to the class struggle of the Iranian proletariat but, as Vali notes, its actual political practice pushed it towards nationalism, especially where it had to compete with the KDPI and its program of autonomy and civic and democratic rights. In 1982 (after the pro-Soviet party Tudeh had been suppressed by the Islamic Republic's regime), Komala restyled itself as the Communist Party of Iran, 'erasing its ethnic identity [in favour of a] proletarian identity derived not from political practice but from an imaginary representation of the Iranian proletariat' (160).

In Vali's conceptual framework, sketched in the first chapter, resistance to sovereign domination is the defining element of popular democratic politics. (He appears to consider nationalist movements more genuinely popular-democratic than vanguard parties preaching class struggle.) Modern Kurdish identity is produced through resistance to domination by the Iranian nation-state. Modernization of the regime (under the Pahlavi shahs) required the suppression of Kurdish identity. Class relations in Kurdistan were impacted by heavy-handed intervention by the institutions of the state. A proper analysis, Vali insists in his criticism of the various leftist movements, needs to take account of the historical specificity of the Kurdish community rather than apply an abstract model of class struggle. Although he pays little explicit attention to the political economy, he acknowledges its significance (notably the impact of the land reform) in defining the modality of sovereign domination and thereby of class and ethnic identities. The framework, informed by eclectic borrowing from the political thinkers Schmitt, Agamben, Negri, Foucault, and Derrida as stray references indicate, remains rather abstract. The historical specificity of the Kurdish community, which Vali frequently invokes in his criticism of the major political movements as well as other analysts, remains almost devoid of empirical content, nor is there an attempt to show what makes it different from the specificity of Iran's Azeri, Baluch or Arab communities.

The reader who expects to find here a handy summary of the developments in Iranian Kurdistan in the second half of the twentieth century will

be disappointed. Considerable background knowledge is needed to be able to follow and appreciate Vali's arguments. More knowledgeable readers may find much to disagree with, but most will find food for thought in his arguments. In spite of the author's predilection for abstract theoretical arguments, however, the book contains much information on the period that cannot be found in any other work in English.

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Gülay Türkmen, *Under the Banner of Islam: Turks, Kurds, and the Limits of Religious Unity*, Oxford University Press, 2021, 204 pp., (ISBN: 9780197511817).

Under the Banner of Islam: Turks, Kurds, and the Limits of Religious Unity analyses the role of religion in ethnic conflicts by focusing on Kurds in Turkey and the story of historical polarization between Kurds and Turks. Gülay Türkmen scrutinizes the constitution of religious and ethnic identities, and discusses how a supranational identity, Sunni Islam, fails in an ethnically motivated conflict. She bases her study on an account of Kurdish history in Turkey, and on in-depth interviews with the religious establishment of Turkey, mostly *imams* and *meles*, both Turkish and Kurdish. While *imams* are appointed by Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs/*Dîyanet* and are generally Turkish, the *meles* are not state appointed and '[prepare] their own sermons' in Kurdish, 'rather than reading the text prepared by the Presidency of Religious Affairs' (p. 1). This dichotomy in Turkey's religious establishment forms the basis for a discussion of the role of Sunni Islam in consolidating ethnic identities, in this case Turkish and Kurdish. In addition, Türkmen focuses on Civil Friday Prayers, that is, Friday prayers that are conducted in Kurdish and held on the streets rather than in state mosques, to trace political and religious challenges against the Turkish government by religious Kurds. The book concentrates on the current political atmosphere in Turkey but undergirds its argument through a historical account. It seeks to show why steps taken by the current ruling party, Justice and Development Party (AKP), to peacefully solve the Kurdish-Turkish conflict on the basis of 'Muslim Fraternity' have failed.

Türkmen's book divides identity constructions among Turkish and Kurdish religious figures in Turkey into four categories: (1) ethno-religious; (2) religio-ethnic; (3) religious; (4) secular. The difference between the ethno-religious and religio-ethnic categories depends on the identity-maker role of either ethnicity or religion. In the former, ethnicity constitutes the main determinant of the identity, while in the latter religion takes over this function. Türkmen uses this typology to show how religion and ethnicity are differently interpreted among Kurds and Turks. Many of Türkmen's interviewees distinguish between ethnicity and religion, and Muslim Turkish religious and political elites have a tendency to prioritize 'Turkish ethnic identity'. This assumed superiority of Turkishness harms the peacemaker and unifier role of Islam, and explains why Islam has failed as a unifying banner in peace-making attempts. Thus, Türkmen shows that while 'Turks and Kurds might seem to be united in religion and divided by ethnicity, the data at hand demonstrate that identity dynamics in Turkey's Kurdish conflict are more complex than meets the eye' (p. 23). She also

connects it to Turkey's political history since the beginning of the Republican period (1923) in order to demonstrate to what extent the Turkish-Kurdish conflict is embedded in the modern history of Turkey and how governments have intervened in the conflict throughout history.

After the introduction, the first chapter, 'Green Kemalism', demonstrates how Islam has functioned as a tool of assimilating Kurdish populations since the establishment of the Republic in 1923. Türkmen summarizes the extent of the role played by religion among Kurdish revolts, arguing that religion and ethnicity went hand in hand in the revolts of the nineteenth century against the Ottoman state. However, revolts and uprisings during the Republican period are different because of their nationalist and separatist character. For example, Türkmen argues that the Sheikh Said rebellion of February 1925 foregrounded nationalist and separatist claims instead of religious ones, which is why the revolt did not influence religiously reactionary parts of Turkey which are geographically close to their Kurdish neighbours (p. 40). In this way, Türkmen underlines how religious and ethnic identity have been changing over the last century.

The second chapter, 'Islam as Cement: The Way Out?' discusses how ethnic boundary blurring is traceable through the narrations of Türkmen's interviewees and their references to the Qur'an. Kurdish interviewees (*meles*) who believe in the unifier role of Islam and its superiority over ethno-nationalism refer to the blurring of boundaries between Turks and Kurds. While ethno-nationalism is conceptualized as 'forbidden' amongst distinct Kurdish religious elites and figures, most Turkish religious elites do not think in a similar manner.

The third chapter, 'Muslim Kurds', discusses in detail religio-ethnic identification and its visibility among Kurdish imams and *meles* (as well as some Turks). Here, Türkmen focuses on how religio-ethnic identity constructions dampen ethno-nationalistic discourse by foregrounding Islamic theology. In other words, for these elites, 'Muslimness' is the main identity maker instead of ethnicity. On the other hand, the fourth chapter, 'Only Turks Can Lead a Muslim Union', analyses ethno-religious identity amongst Turkish religious elites who position Turks as the central element in the *ummah* and Islam. Amongst these elites, 'Turkishness' becomes a primary trope that leads to ethnicity triumphing over religion in the formulation of identity. These two chapters contrast how different actors prioritize either ethnicity or religion in their identity construction.

In addition, Türkmen provides an analysis of why the peace process, which was initiated by the AKP in the early 2000s, came to an end in 2015. She argues that the 'Muslim fraternity' project failed because the AKP changed its discourse

and policy after 2015, when they could not obtain an electoral majority in the June election and started targeting the Kurdish party, the Peoples Democratic Party (HDP), as a national threat. The AKP also embraces a Turko-nationalist discourse and defends the superiority of Turks over Islam. Analysing why the peace process failed in 2015, Türkmen lists 'the non-transparent nature of the peace talks', 'the importance of Alevi Kurds in certain Kurdish-majority regions', 'HDP's decision to not support Erdoğan's bid for presidency', and 'the spillover effects of the civil war in Syria' (p. 139) the main reasons. These points are analysed in relation to the religious elites and their narrations of identity, showing that the conflictual situation consolidated ethno-nationalism, especially on the Turkish side.

Under the Banner of Islam contributes to the literature on ethnicity and religion by responding to the question of how references to shared Islam fail to bring peace in a conflict situation where populations are ethnically divided but religiously unified. Türkmen's interviews with Turkish and Kurdish religious elites demonstrate that there is a multi-dimensional identity structure in the conflict. The book synthesizes the existing historical literature, especially at the nexus of Kurdish rights, revolts, and positions in Turkey, and it contributes to the literature by foregrounding narrations of religious figures in the context of the Kurdish conflict. Its methodological design opens a window of opportunity to integrate existing literature and first-hand narrative accounts in an innovative research approach. It also provides both historical analysis and sheds light on the current constitution of ethnic and religious identities in Turkey.

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