Introduction

The Kurds and the Kurdish Question in the Middle East

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

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

The Kurds and Kurdistan in the Age of Empires

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Remarkably, however, this fragmentation has also radicalized Kurdish consciousness and motivated them to form one single entity, distinct from the Arabs, Persians and Turks. The trans-border affiliations have maintained themselves despite the heavy repression of states and many of the Kurdish uprisings gained a regional dimension. From the 1920s onwards, a common cartographic imaginary, which has been studied by the late Maria O’Shea (2004), symbolically unified the divided nation. A commonly accepted national flag was adopted by different Kurdish organizations and intellectuals, before the common national anthem, *Ey Reqib* (‘You! Adversary!’), which became the official anthem of the Mahabad Republic (1946, Iran).

Similarly, a largely shared historical narrative tracing the origins of the Kurds to the Median Empire, presenting the nineteenth-century Kurdish revolts as genuine expressions of Kurdish nationalist ambitions and describing the second division of Kurdistan as the darkest period of the nation to be overcome, has emerged and spread itself among the Kurdish intelligentsia. This self-awareness did of course not mean that the Kurdish elites held back from integrating into the Iranian, Turkish, Iraqi or Syrian political and administrative bodies or refused to take any opportunity of co-optation that could appear. But a cross-border national ‘reservoir’ of myths, symbols and plea was there, ready-made for the future mobilization process.

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

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

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

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

The liberalization of Turkey’s political system during the late 1940s and 1950s, the rise of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq and the emergence
of a new generation of politically active Kurdish activists influenced the politicization of the Kurds in Turkey during the 1960s. The second half of the 1960s is characterized by the evolution of Kurdish activism towards a more organized form. The reinvigoration of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq had a direct bearing on this development. This is evidenced by the establishment of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey (TKDP), which advocated a similar program as the PDK in Iraq and marked ‘a new stage in the autonomisation of the Kurdish movement in terms of the worker and student movements’ (Bozarslan, 1992: 98–9). In 1967 and 1968, during the ‘meetings of the East’ (Doğu Mitingleri), Kurdish political demands were publicly expressed, and these meetings culminated in the emergence of the Revolutionary Cultural Hearths of the East (DDKO) in 1969 (Gunes, 2012: 66–71). During the mid-1970s numerous Kurdish left-wing groups or political parties were established.

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

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

The Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) offered Iraqi Kurdish parties more room for manoeuvre and provided the impetus in their attempts to re-establish
their presence in Iraqi Kurdistan. The PDK leadership was based in Iran and began to receive military aid and logistical support from the Iranian state. During the 1980s, the PUK managed to establish a strong support base in the Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk governorates. The PDK continued to receive military support and money from Iran during 1979 and the early 1980s. The PUK was initially allied with Syria, then signed a ceasefire agreement with the Iraqi government in October 1983. In October 1986, the PUK began to form an alliance with Iran and develop closer ties with the PDK.

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

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

The Revival of the Kurdish National Movements

The process of almost uninterrupted radicalization that began with the Barzani uprising in 1961 took a new dimension with the launching of a second rebellion in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1975, the formation of the Kurdish national movement in Turkey during the mid-1970s and the mass-mobilizations and guerrilla warfare in the Iranian Kurdistan in 1978–9. With these developments, Kurdistan entered a highly militarized process and integrated into a broader Middle Eastern environment marked by inter-
state or civil wars. The Syrian Kurds have also been engaged in this process since the mid-1970s through their mobilization for different Kurdish movements. This overall militarization allowed the Kurdish movements to access the resources of violence such as arms and shelter in one of the regional countries but also provoked internal conflicts which remained particularly traumatic throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

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

The 1980s and 1990s were a highly intense period of Kurdish political activities in Turkey. On 15 August 1984, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) embarked on its guerrilla war and during the late 1980s and early 1990s, it managed to gather popular support from the Kurds and increased its influence in Kurdish communities significantly. At the height of its power in the early 1990s, it had supporters and sympathizers numbering several million drawn from all parts of Kurdish-majority regions and among the Kurdish diaspora communities in Europe (Gunes, 2012: 101). Popular support for the PKK began to be demonstrated in the spring of 1991 and 1992 when large numbers of Kurds took part in popular uprisings, known as serhildan, across
Kurdish towns and cities in the south-east of Turkey. The PKK-led Kurdish rebellion is the longest in the history of the Kurds in Turkey. In addition to the PKK, Kurdish political demands have also been articulated through legal channels in Turkey by political parties that have a predominant Kurdish base and advocate a pro-Kurdish political line. This movement came into existence with the establishment of the People’s Labour Party (HEP) in 1990 and while many of these parties were closed down by Turkey’s constitutional court, the movement managed to grow throughout the 2000s and 2010s.

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

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

Rising National Consciousness amidst Persistent Social and Political Fragmentation

The conflicts between the Kurdish political parties have not been extinguished in the 2000s and 2010s, but gradually gave birth to a non-institutionalized and yet trans-border Kurdish political space with its ad hoc mechanisms of communication and arbitration. This political space has two major reference actors: the PKK and the PDK. However, this bipolarity does not mean that the PDK-Iran or the Kurdish National Council (KNC) of Syria, which have close relations with the PDK, or the PJAK in Iran and the PYD in Syria, which follow the orientations of PKK, lack agency. The PYD and the PJAK are autonomous if not totally separate from the PKK: they are deeply rooted in local Kurdish contexts with their sociological peculiarities and cannot be reduced to the PKK; and yet, they are actors of a broader Kurdish sphere determined by the PKK and cannot be separated from it. The fact that the regional subsystem built in the 1920s collapsed in its weakest links, that is, Iraq in the 1990s and Syria in 2010s, which host smallest parts of the Kurdish population, has transformed these countries into terrains where competitive models of Kurdish autonomy could be experienced.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century and during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Kurdish national mobilizations and activism have fostered the development of national identity amongst the Kurds in all parts of Kurdistan. Social and political transformations engendered a high level of complexity in Kurdish society and the Kurdish intellectual microcosm. Rapid urbanization provoked important class differentiations but also changes in the manners of being, experiencing urbanity and mastering time and space under political constraints and violence. The cross-border mobility between the Kurdish communities has been tremendously augmented after the 1991 Gulf War and the emergence of an autonomous Kurdistan. It has created new economic dynamics easing, at least to some extent, the ‘underdevelopment’ (Jafar, 1976) of Greater Kurdistan, but also accelerated the process of intra-Kurdish integration. In the course of this process, new generations of Kurdish poets, novelists and for the first time filmmakers emerged and obtained quite high visibility both in Kurdistan and, as one can observe through frequent Kurdish film festivals, in Western countries. The setting up of thousands of websites and tens of TV
channels made possible thanks to new technologies of communication allowed a much broader, non-censored intra-Kurdish communication.

The rise of Kurdish national awareness has also reduced the influence and appeal of subnational identities, such as tribal ones. Although they are not the sole constitutive element of the Kurdish social fabric, the tribes have played a decisive role in Kurdish history, particularly after the brutal suppression of the Kurdish emirates in the nineteenth century. From the Hamidiye Cavalries (1891) or the militias formed under the Kemalist regime to the ill-famed Mustashars in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, many tribal leaders collaborated with the state. On the other hand, the tribes have also constituted one of the main human forces of armed resistance against the Iranian, Iraqi and Turkish states.

In the highly urbanized context of the twenty-first century, Kurdish tribes do not have enough strength to impose themselves as main players of Kurdish politics, but they are still there and continue to play a double role: in Turkey, for instance, many of them are affiliated to Ankara’s paramilitary Village Guards, while the others vote massively for the pro-Kurdish political parties. In Iraqi Kurdistan where tribes were involved in the 1994–1996 Civil War, they lost their weight in the wake of reinforcement of the Erbil government.

The religious sphere is yet another domain where one can observe a fragmenting dynamic. The religious environment of Kurdistan has radically changed after the nineteenth century, and particularly after the Armenian genocide of 1915, which also affected many Aramaic-speaking Christian communities of Kurdistan. Although no specific chapter in this volume is devoted to this genocide, which has been extensively analysed by authors such as Üngör (2009), Kieser (2000) and Kaiser (2014) in the Kurdish context, it has played a decisive role in the massive process of Islamization of Turkey, but also some parts of Iran and Syria. There is no doubt that many Kurdish actors, both tribal and urban, have participated in this genocide (Bozarslan, 1995). The subsequent expulsion of Jews and forced or voluntary departure of many Christians from Iraq have also impacted Kurdish society (one should, however, remember that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christians took shelter in Kurdistan after 2003). The Kurdish-speaking Yezidi community has been also persecuted both in the late Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey, as well as in Iraq during the 1930s. The emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 went together with the quasi-genocidal violence deployed against this community.

The intra-Islamic divisions that one can observe in Turkey, Iran and Iraq are also present in Kurdistan and allow affiliations of some Kurdish actors with the non-Kurdish identities and solidarities. In Turkey, for instance,
Sunni belonging has played an important role in the formation of an alliance between many urban, tribal or religious dignitaries and Mustafa Kemal at the beginning of the 1920s. From the National Order Party (MNP) to the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkish Islamist political parties could find a constant (but fluctuant) electorate in Kurdish society. In the same country, many Kurdish Alevi have been affiliated with the radical-left movements or, later on, the Alevi associations’ networks. It is also well known that the Islamic regime in Iran could get the support of at least some segments of the Kurdish Shia community. The Kurdish religious brotherhoods have also found themselves in close association not only with non-Kurdish tariqat networks but also with the states. Traditionally, in Assads’ Syria, for instance, the position of the mufti of Damascus is held by a Kurd.

It is, however, remarkable to observe that in such a dynamic religious environment, Islamic politics have done rather poorly. The 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion is, in fact, the only rebellion that, while aiming at the establishment of a Kurdish state, also claimed to raise up the ‘flag of Islam’ abandoned ‘by the Turks’ who, according to the Sheikh, had ‘betrayed’ their promise of protecting the caliphate. To be sure, religious actors have also participated in the 1946 proclamation of the Mahabad Republic whose president, Qadi (‘Judge’) Muhammad, was a religious dignitary, as well as to the 1961–1975 Barzani rebellion, without, however, willing to transform them into religious contests. On the contrary, both contests had some left-wing orientations and adopted progressive policies. Today, in Iraqi Kurdistan the two main religious parties obtain hardly 15 per cent in elections. In Turkey, the Free Cause Party (Hüda-Par) – the legal political party representing the Islamist movement that has been built around the base of the extremely brutal Hezbollah, which occasionally also served as Ankara’s local death squadron in the 1990s – is yet to mobilize a fraction of the Kurdish electorate that the pro-Kurdish parties do. One should also add that, notwithstanding the hierarchical positions that they occupy, the number of Kurds affiliated to al-Qaeda and ISIS has remained limited to a couple of hundreds.

Kurdish Cultural and Political Activities beyond Kurdistan

To a large extent, ‘Kurdistan’ is a space open or exposed to different cultures, languages, religious, social, political and economic tensions or dynamisms. Much like the Caucasian and Near Eastern Armenian, Greek, Jewish and Palestinian communities, the Kurdish community has also grown into
a multicultural, if not cosmopolitan, one, by the very condition of its historical formation. Little wonder, then, that many Kurdish figures such as Yılmaz Güney, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Bahman Gobadi, Yaşar Kemal, Kamal Mazhar Ahmad or Khalid Bakdash have played the first-rank role in the cultural, scientific or political life of the four-concerned countries, or that a Kurdish politician such as Jalal Talabani has imposed himself in the 1960s and 1970s as a leading figure of Middle Eastern left-wing contests. What one could call the ‘Kurdish space’ is, in fact, undetermined and constantly changing, with multiple extensions well beyond the cartographic imaginations of Kurdistan. One observes, for instance, that the small Kurdish community of the former Soviet Union (around 300,000 people) had played a decisive role in the shaping of Kurdish literature and modern Kurdology after the Bolshevik victory in the Caucasus in 1920. The deportation of some segments of this community to Kazakhstan after 1943 could not break down its cultural dynamism. One should also mention the very small Kurdish community in Jordan; it certainly did not play a major political role but has been nevertheless active and gave birth to some original works, including one of the first Arabic–Kurdish dictionaries (Gewrani, 1985; Al-Khatib and Al-Ali, 2010). Estimated to number some 150,000, the Kurdish community in Lebanon hosted many political refugees from Turkey. At the beginning of the 1980s, PKK has been literally refounded in Lebanon before starting to wage its guerrilla warfare in Turkey itself. However, the most important Kurdish diaspora has to be found in Europe. The term diaspora was first used, in this context, at the beginning of the 1980s, when tens of thousands of Kurds fled from dictatorships in Iraq, Iran and Turkey, as well as the Iran–Iraq War, and sought asylum in different European countries. Thus, Kurdish political and diplomatic life has been literally transplanted in Europe, where the Kurdish Institute of Paris, founded thanks to Dr Kendal Nezan’s personal relations with the French President François Mitterrand, has organized three important international conferences, respectively in Paris, Washington and Moscow. Europe has also hosted Iraqi Kurdish political parties, as well as PKK, which established its publishing house in Germany. Iranian Kurdish leaders Ghassemlou and Sharafkandi have been assassinated by the Iranian secret agents, respectively in Vienna and Berlin in 1989 and 1992. When an autonomous Kurdish government was founded in Iraqi Kurdistan after the 1991 Gulf War, many of its leading figures spoke, besides Kurdish, Arabic and English, fluent Swedish, French or Russian.
But the real formation of the Kurdish diaspora took place rather in the years 2000–10 when the Kurdish political class could act more freely in Iraq and Turkey, and when a second, and then a third, generation of Kurds born in Europe came to the age of adulthood with strong pro-Kurdish sentiments, but a European education, and in some cases new professional profiles or political socialization in their host countries. During the 2000s, it was not uncommon to see Kurdish figures among the ranks of German, Swedish or European members of parliament. As the massive mobilization for Rojava, rather a neologism to describe Syrian Kurdistan, shows, this diaspora is quite active, but it does not constitute the very heart of Kurdish politics as was the case in the 1980s.

A New Era for the Kurds?

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the US and British forces and the chain of developments it triggered had a major impact on the fortunes of the Kurds of Iraq. In 2005, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) was recognized as part of Iraq’s new governmental structure and Kurds managed to secure some of the key political positions in the Iraqi state, including the presidency and foreign ministry. The KRI has complete control over and responsibility for its own internal security and the organization of its police and security forces, and its own military forces, the peshmerga, are outside the command of the Iraqi military forces. However, some of the Kurdish-majority populated areas, including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, remained outside of the Kurdistan region and the final status of these ‘disputed’ territories was to be decided after a referendum, which for various reasons was not held.

During the 2000s, significant developments also took place in the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. This began with the departure of the PKK’s leader Abdullah Öcalan from Syria in October 1998 and his capture by Turkey in Nairobi, Kenya, on 14 February 1999. He was subsequently sentenced to capital punishment, which, as a result of diplomatic pressure and fear that the conflict might descend into civil war, was reduced to life imprisonment. In August 1999, the PKK withdrew its guerrillas from Turkey to Iraqi Kurdistan and declared a permanent ceasefire, which lasted until June 2004 (Gunes and Zeydanlıoğlu, 2014). Subsequently, the PKK began to advocate the accommodation of Kurdish rights within the existing state boundaries through self-government for Kurdish communities. The transformation of the conflict brought about a normalization in Kurdish politics in Turkey and created
more room for the pro-Kurdish political parties to increase its presence in Turkey.

In the local elections of 2004, the pro-Kurdish political party won fifty-four councils, including the municipal councils of Batman, Diyarbakır, Mardin, Hakkari and Şırnak provinces. After the 22 July 2007 general election, the pro-Kurdish parliamentary opposition returned with the election of twenty-one MPs who stood as independent candidates in order to avoid the 10 per cent national election threshold. In the municipal elections held on 29 March 2009, the then pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) consolidated its position as a leading political force in the Kurdish majority regions. In total, the DTP won eight provincial councils and fifty district councils, including the council of Diyarbakır and Van. Being represented in the national assembly and having the experience of running many of the local authorities in the majority Kurdish regions had enabled the pro-Kurdish movement to establish a strong regional and national presence.

In the 2010s, the region entered a period of instability as a result of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The Kurds established themselves as important actors in the domestic politics of Iraq, Syria and Turkey and the Kurdish question became one of the main issues in the international relations of the region. In Iraq, the emergence of ISIS and its attempted genocide of the Yezidi Kurds in August 2014 led to a huge exodus that threatened the security of the entire Kurdistan region. The mechanism to determine the final status of the ‘disputed’ territories has not functioned and following ISIS offensive in northern Iraq in August 2014, the disputed territories fell under the control of the Kurdish peshmerga forces. The inability to reach an agreement on the final status of the disputed territories led to the Kurdistan region holding a referendum on its independence on 25 September 2017, in which 93.73 per cent of the voters cast a vote in favour of independence. However, due to the opposition of the Iraqi federal government and regional and international powers, the KRG reversed its decision of pursuing independence. On 16 October 2017, the Iraqi army and the Shia militia attacked and took back control of the disputed territories that were held by the Kurds, including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk.

At the onset of the conflict in Syria in 2011, there were around twenty Kurdish political parties in Syria and many of these were brought together under the umbrella of the KNC in 2011. Since 2011, the PYD has been the dominant political force in the Kurdish-majority regions of Syria and it has been spearheading the political developments there. The PYD was established by former Syrian Kurdish members of the PKK in 2003. Intra-Kurdish
relations since 2011 in Syria have not always been cordial but the tensions have not resulted in an armed conflict. The PYD has been accused of suppressing the activities of the political parties linked to the KNC and generally being intolerant to dissent. Such political disagreements have continued despite the attempts at securing an agreement among the Syrian Kurdish political parties.

In Turkey, the dialogue between the PKK and the republic created hope that the decades-long conflict will finally end via a political process. Between 2008 and 2011 Turkish state representatives held direct meetings with the PKK, mediated by Norway. In August 2009, the government announced that it was preparing a ‘democratic initiative’ to accelerate the process of political reform and offer greater recognition to Kurdish cultural rights. The process was aborted in October 2010 and renewed violence broke out between the PKK guerrillas and the Turkish state security forces, which continued until the end of 2012 when a new round of dialogue was initiated. The ongoing dialogue resulted in the PKK declaring a ceasefire on 23 March 2013 and this was followed on 25 April 2013 with an announcement that it was pulling its guerrilla forces from Turkey to its bases in Iraqi Kurdistan. This announcement created a new sense of optimism and was widely seen as a new chance for a peace process to end the conflict.

In this period, the pro-Kurdish political parties began to establish themselves as an effective electoral bloc, with the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) winning 35 seats in the general election held on 12 June 2011. At the local elections held on 30 March 2014, the BDP won 100 municipal, district and town councils. From 2012 onwards, the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) established itself as the main representative of the pro-Kurdish movement and in the June 2015 general elections, it managed to win the backing of 6 million voters to secure 80 seats in the parliament. Despite the subsequent repression, the HDP maintained its electoral base in the subsequent elections in November 2015 and June 2018, where it obtained 10.8 and 11.7 per cent of the national vote and 59 and 67 seats in the parliament, respectively.

One could thus conclude that real Kurdish empowerment took place in the region during the 2000s and 2010s, but the price paid for this rise was heavy. While in 2012–13 many observers thought that Iraqi Kurdish de facto independence could be viable, the Syrian conflict would not affect the Kurds, that a long-standing deal would smooth relations between Iran and the Western countries and that Erdogan’s Turkey would ultimately find a way out to envision a political solution for the country’s century-long Kurdish conflict, the regional environment evolved in a totally dramatic way: the rise of ISIS.
the burden of militia order imposed on Iraq and Syria by the Islamic regime
and last but not least, repressive and irredentist policies of Erdogan’s regime
created the conditions of a remilitarization of the Kurdish conflict. Kurdistan
of 2012–13 imagined itself as the Athens of the Near East; soon, it realized that
it was about to become its Sparta. After having successfully fought ISIS, the
Kurdish movement had to face important setbacks such as losing the oil-rich
city Kirkuk to Iraq’s Shia militias called Hashd-i Shaabi, affiliated to the
Iranian Pasdaran forces, and Afrin, a Kurdish city in Syria, which has been
heavily targeted by the Turkish air force and handed over to Ankara’s Syrian
Islamist militia clients. Meanwhile, repression increased both in Iran, where
a few Kurdish guerrilla groups fight frequently with the Pasdaran, and in
Turkey, where the ‘peace process’ launched by Erdogan at the end of 2013 has
left room for a new stage of massive terror leading to the destruction of a few
mid-sized Kurdish cities and arrest of many Kurdish politicians.

Despite these setbacks, one can observe that at the end of the 2010s the
intra-Kurdish dynamics remain quite strong and could contribute positively
to the reshaping of Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria in the 2020s. That being said,
one should also bear in mind that the Kurdish actors remain minor compared
to the Iranian and Turkish states, as well as to what remains from central
states in Baghdad and Damascus. As importantly, the Kurdish empowerment
in Iraq and Syria had been strongly dependent on American military and
political support. What will be the ultimate outcomes of the disintegration of
the Iraqi and Syrian societies? How will the Iranian and Turkish regimes
manage the crisis in which they have cast their own societies? What role will
the United States and Russia be able or willing to play in Syria and in Iraq in
the future? The fate of Kurdish society will depend on these yet unanswered
questions.

Organization of the Book

The chapters are organized within seven parts. Part I discusses the develop-
ments in Kurdish politics and society from the medieval period to the early
twentieth century. In Chapter 1, Boris James discusses the rise and fall of the
Kurdish emirates between the fifteen and nineteenth centuries. In Chapter 2,
Metin Atmaca delineates Kurdish emirates’ struggle to exist under the suzer-
ainty of the Ottoman and Persian empires. In Chapter 3, Sabri Ates sets out
the Ottoman Empire’s policy of repression of the Kurdish nobility and
discusses the sociopolitical ramifications of the dissolution of the Kurdish
emirates on its society. In Chapter 4, Djene Rhys Bajalan traces the
emergences of the Kurdish national movement in the late nineteenth century and its evolution until the early 1920s. In Chapter 5, Kamal Soleimani discusses the role Islam played in the early articulations of Kurdish nationalism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Chapter 6, Veli Yadirgi presents a historical account of the economic changes in Kurdistan.

In Part II, the impacts of the regional, political developments on Kurdish society and politics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are evaluated. In Chapter 7, Metin Yüksel provides an account of the main developments in Kurdish regions of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and the USSR in the interwar period. In Chapter 8, Béatrice Garapon and Adnan Çelik discuss the revival of Kurdish political activism in the pan-Kurdish space during the 1950s and 1960s. In Chapter 9, Cengiz Gunes highlights the main political developments taking place in Kurdish regions during the 1970s and sets out the organizational transformations and the fragmentation of Kurdish movements in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. In Chapter 10, Hamit Bozarslan situates the political developments taking place in Kurdish-majority regions during the 1980s and 1990s within the regional and international political fluxes and discusses the main events taking place in Kurdish regions of Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. In Chapter 11, Mehmet Gurses and David Romano examine the main developments in Kurdish regions of the Middle East before assessing the Kurdish prospects in light of the major transformation experienced in the regional order.

Part III of the book presents analyses of the state-level developments during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and highlights the main changes that have taken in Kurdish politics in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. In Chapter 12, Mesut Yeğen unpacks the ideological and organizational evolution of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey during the twentieth century. In Chapter 13, Derya Bayır deconstructs the strong hostility the dominant political forces in Turkey feel towards the idea of Kurdish autonomy and self-government, emphasizing its entrenchment in the country’s legal and political order. In Chapter 14, Gareth Stansfield provides an account of the consolidation of Kurdish self-rule in Iraq, highlighting the key political developments taking place and the main trends in the past five years. In Chapter 15, Nicole F. Watts provides an account of forms of Kurdish political activism through legitimate democratic channels in Iraqi Kurdistan and highlights the challenges and difficulties that such a form of Kurdish political participation faces. In Chapter 16, Massoud Sharifi Dryaz discusses the evolution of the Kurdish question in Iran after the 1979 revolution, examining
the domestic and regional factors that have influenced the evolution of Iran’s Kurdish movement in political and military terms. In Chapter 17, Jordi Tejel provides an account of Kurdish politics in Syria. In Chapter 18, Estelle Amy de la Bretèque discusses the Yezidi presence and experience in the Soviet Union.

Part IV focuses on religion and society. In Chapter 19, Michiel Leezenberg provides an account of the role of religion in Kurdish society, the Kurdish religious networks and organizations and how these religious actors interact with the other political organizations, statutory bodies and the public. In Chapter 20, Mehmet Kurt discusses the rise of political Islam within Kurdish society in Turkey and outlines the movements, political parties and/or organization that constitute political Islam in the Kurdish-majority provinces. In Chapter 21, Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Khanna Omekhali discuss the position of the religious minorities such as Yezidis, Yarasan and Alevins in Kurdistan whose religion is traced back to the pre-Islamic period in Kurdish history. In Chapter 22, Erdal Gezik discusses the Kurdish Alevins in Turkey and the evolution they have experienced in the twentieth century. In Chapter 23, Hamit Bozarslan and Cengiz Gunes discuss the changing role of tribes and tribal affiliations in Kurdish society during the twentieth century.

Part V turns the focus on the history and evolution of the main varieties of the Kurdish languages. In Chapter 24, Ergin Öpengin presents an account of the historical origins and evolution of Kurmanji Kurdish. In Chapter 25, Jaffer Sheyholislami discusses the emergence and evolution of Sorani Kurdish, also known as Central Kurdish. In Chapter 26, Mehemed Malmisani discusses Kirmanjki Kurdish, also known as Zazaki.

In Part VI, the developments in the fields of Kurdish art, culture and literature are examined. In Chapter 27, Hashem Ahmadzadeh outlines the evolution of Kurdish literature and critically evaluates the various literary movements and periods in Kurdistan. In Chapter 28, Farangis Ghaderi discusses the emergence and evolution of Kurdish poetry. In Chapter 29, Mari R. Rostami discusses the history of Kurdish theatre. In Chapter 30, Bahar Şimşek discusses the emergence and evolution of Kurdish cinema in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey, and in Chapter 31, Engin Sustam discusses the main artistic developments and cultural productions in the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria in the past three decades.

Finally, Part VII discusses the transversal dynamics associated with Kurdish politics and society. In Chapter 32, Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya discuss the ideological evolution of Kurdish movements in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, unpack the new political project the Kurdish movements seek to construct and analyse the inter-Kurdish ideological
debate and contestation. In Chapter 33, Ipek Demir discusses the emergence of the indigeneity discourse and claims within the transnational Kurdish movement. In Chapter 34, Barzoo Eliassi provides an account of the formation of Kurdish diaspora in Europe and assesses the impact diaspora has on Kurdish politics. In Chapter 35, Choman Hardi presents an account of women’s participation and influence in the KRI and discusses the progress they made and the challenges that remain. Finally, in Chapter 36, Isabel Käser presents an account of Kurdish women’s mobilization in Turkey, the impact it has on politics and society and the main trends and developments women’s increasing participation has engendered.

Bibliography


