

SHAKIR MUHAMMAD USMAN

THE KURDS

**A MISUNDERSTOOD
AND FORGOTTEN MIGHT
OF MESOPOTAMIA**

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BY:

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Photo on the front cover:
Les Costumes Populaires De La Turquie, en 1873. A collection of photographs
by Pascal Sebah on the occasion of the universal exposition in Vienna in 1873.
The album represents the costumes of the different regions, and ethnic and religious groups
of the Ottoman Empire.

On the right is a Kurd from Aljazeera (Mesopotamia). Center, a Kurd of Mardin (a city on
the Syrian border). On the left is a shepherd from the province of Diyarbekir. Shepherd from
the environs of Diarbèkir (Diyarbakir); (2): Kurde of Djizrè (Cizre); and (3): Kurd from the
environs of Mardin.

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Table of Contents

Foreword	9
Maps	12
Chapter One	
The Origin of the Kurds: Myth, Speculation and History	15
1.1. Kurdish Origins: Myths	15
1.2. Kurdish Origins: Prehistoric and Historic Speculation	17
Chapter Two	
Kurdish Nationalism, Identity and Political Struggle	31
2.1. Kurdish Identity	33
2.2. Kurdish Nationalism in Relation to the “Other”	39
2.3. The Kurdish Struggle in Iraq.....	40
2.4. The Kurdish Struggle in Turkey and Syria	41
2.5. Kurdish Political Struggle from the Ottoman Empire to Present Day.....	42
Chapter Three	
International and Regional Diplomacy and the Kurds.....	45
3.1. Kurds and Diplomacy until the End of WWI.....	45
3.2. Kurdish Diplomacy after WWI until 1947.....	50
3.3. Kurdish Diplomacy After 1947.....	58
Chapter Four	
Kurdish Struggle and Diaspora Politics.....	71
4.1. Kurdish Diaspora: A Unity Crisis	76
4.2. Kurdish Diaspora and Political Process	79
4.3. Kurdish Diaspora and Internal Politics	80
Chapter Five	
The Kurdish Conflict and the Outsiders.....	83
5.1. Iraq and Kurdish Conflict.....	84
5.2. Iran and Kurdish Conflict.....	88
5.3. Turkey and Kurdish Conflict.....	89
5.4. The West and Kurdish Conflict	91
5.5. Problems of the Conflict.....	95
Chapter Six	
Independence: A Farfetched Kurdish Dream.....	99
6.1. Tearing the Kurds Apart and the History of Invasion	99
6.2. Background: Western Colonialism post-WWI.....	102

6.3. US Policy with Kurds, Pre-Iraq War.....	104
6.4. Operation Viking Hammer and Kurdish Involvement in the Iraq War...	107
6.5. Recognition of the Kurdistan Regional Government.....	108
6.6. The Rise of ISIS.....	109
6.7. Kurdistan Region Independence Referendum of 2017 and the Battle Over Kirkuk.....	110
6.8. Ambiguous Future of Kurdistan.....	111
6.9. A Farfetched Kurdish Dream.....	112
Chapter Seven	
Historical Background of the Belief System of the Kurds.....	117
7.1. Zoroastrianism and Mithraism.....	118
7.2. Yazidism.....	121
7.3. Yarsanism.....	124
7.4. Judaism.....	126
7.5. Christianity.....	127
7.6. Islam.....	128
Chapter Eight	
The Concept of Masculinity and Femininity among the Kurds.....	133
8.1. Definition and Historical Background.....	135
8.2. Masculinity.....	136
8.3. Femininity.....	137
8.4. Kurdish Literature.....	138
8.6. The Role of Women in the Kurdish Cause.....	140
8.7. Public Reception.....	142
Chapter Nine	
Kurds and The Way Forward.....	145
9.1. Recommendations.....	149
Chapter Ten	
History and Evolution of Kurdish Flag.....	153
Bibliography.....	167

Acknowledgements

Before starting this project, I knew that any academic research is always challenging and tiring, but I was not aware that it would turn my world upside down. The aim of this book was to document and understand the untold as well as unknown history of the Kurds and their notion of Kurdish identity, nationalism, diplomacy, culture, political struggle, belief systems and a roadmap for a better future. Therefore, I thank everyone who supported me through this journey. I would also like to thank Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University in helping me to tell the world that the Kurdish culture, traditions, political struggle and literature are deeply embedded in the broader Kurdish history throughout Greater Kurdistan, ancient Mesopotamia. This has obvious implications for how rich, vast, and vibrant its culture can be. When we talk about the origin of the Kurds, we must acknowledge the work of the Austrian historian, philologist, anthropologist and Kurdologist, Ferdinand Hennerbichler as well as a Kurdish historian and linguist Soran Hamarash.

I owe special thanks, gratitude and acknowledgement to ancient historian and disability studies professor, Dr. Lynn Rose, Director of Disability Studies, Center for Gender and Development Studies (CGDS), American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, for her editorial support and critical lens, without whom I would not have been able to complete this project.

Dr. Shakir Muhammad Usman

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Foreword

As an indigenous community of the Mesopotamian region, Kurds have experienced dramatic highs and lows. Repetitive invasions, persecutions and victimization forced the Kurds to migrate to other parts of the world. Along with modern day Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Armenia and Azerbaijan, their main population lives in Europe and North America. There are about 45 to 46 million Kurds in the world, which means that if the Kurds were all in one place, Kurdistan would be among the 30 largest countries of the world. Kurdistan, also referred to as Greater Kurdistan, consists of around 200,000 square kilometers. In terms of land area, Kurdistan is among the 50 countries of the world with the largest amount of land. When I use the term “Kurdistan” I do not mean to support any political movement, but to refer to an ancient region scattered throughout the Mesopotamian region also known as the Fertile Crescent.

The waters of Tigris and Euphrates have given birth to many ancient civilizations. Human beings have lived in this region for up to 100,000 years. This piece of land, stretching from the Persian Gulf to Armenia and from the Hakkari Mountains to the Syrian Desert, was once one of the most fertile regions of the world. The residents of this region moved from hunter-gatherer communities to establish the earliest civilization. The availability of sweet waters in abundance and one of the few early organized agricultural practices and consequent civilization made the area extremely attractive to many other kingdoms. It encouraged Sumerians, Semites, Egyptians, Hyksos, Kassites, Assyrians, Greeks, Sasanians and others to inhabit the area, sometimes by force and sometimes peaceably, and to establish their rule.

The ancient Mesopotamian region is home to a wide variety of religio-spiritual practices including ancient Kurdish religions such as Yazidism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Yazdanism, also known as the Cult of Angels, Mithraism and Manichaeism. Followers of these religions dominated parts of this region for centuries. While the history of the Kurds is speculative until the Islamic era, and while Kurdish history is always part of the dominant groups’ history, there is a story of Kurdish origins and forerunners. Many people, however, do not know much about Kurdish history, especially about its earlier periods. To bridge this gap, this book is an effort to collect available information on topics related to Kurdish history and publish it under one collection, so that everyone can have easy access to the information that is now scattered.

One of the disadvantages of not having one’s own nation state is the lack of resources to maintain archives and the capacity to develop narratives through research. The way the global south deals with the idea of nation state, nationalism and patriotic notions is very different from the north. In the global north,

one's identity is connected to geography, but in the global south, nationality shapes the idea of a country and identity. The Kurds are mainly residents of the six nations among which they live, yet they have a public way of life as Kurds. A Kurd living in Turkey is a Turkish resident, not a Kurd. This issue of identity puts individuals who are not from the prevailing nationality at risk of feeling as though they are lesser than the others, and of being perceived as such, and this can generate conflict.

Historical evidence suggests that the roots of the Kurds could go back as far as the Akkadians in the third millennium, or to the Indo-European and mixed groups of the second millennium, such as the Kassites and Hurrians, or to the Medes of the later second millennium. Their cultural identity is one of the oldest in the region. With the passage of time, their DNA might have been mixed with the other ethnic groups, but there is no doubt that the Kurds are an ethnic group with early roots. The book starts by explaining the origins of the Kurds, tracing some linguistic theories. It also explains how Kurds could be among the oldest ethnic groups of the region and how many dynasties, kingdoms and civilizations they have witnessed. Throughout this book, hundreds of archives, pieces of literature, numerous historians were consulted, and many Kurds were interviewed, but in order not to obstruct the flow. I avoided referencing every bit of information, and cited only when necessary.

The Kurds have a long history of resistance and political struggle. This book not only discusses the existence of the Kurds during ancient eras, but also highlights the Kurdish resistance against early Islamic rulers, the Ottomans, Safavids, the British Mandate and the modern nation states. It explores the history of the nationalistic ideology and political struggle among the Kurds before and after World War I and World War II. The Kurds bore many losses, be it at the hands of the Republic of Mahabad, the Kingdom of Kurdistan, Saddam Hussein's genocides, numerous failed revolutions or the recent failed independence referendum. I also set out to explain the importance of diplomacy and the reasons behind the failure of Kurdish diplomacy because international relations, diplomacy, unification and utilization of Kurdish diaspora have been the weakest links throughout modern Kurdish history.

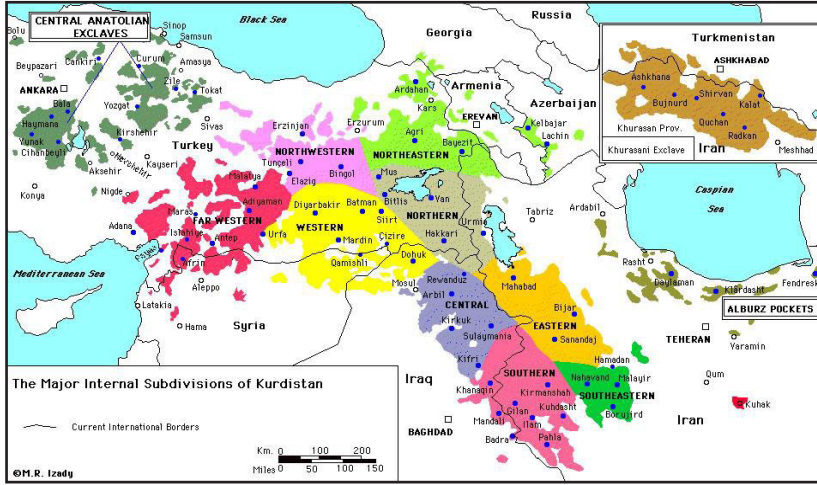
As Kurds have survived thousands of years and witnessed evolutionary processes, they have also adopted different religions at different times. Therefore, to provide an overview of their religious affiliations, I discuss the major religions and the belief systems of the Kurds. Throughout history, Kurdish people have suffered various genocides, mass atrocities and persecutions, thus, it is of utmost importance to talk about the human rights violations against the Kurds and as a result, how the human rights situation has deteriorated from time to time. Their socio-economic struggle, customs and traditions, and the idea of masculinity and femininity are discussed in this book. The Kurds form the

largest nation of the world without their own nation state, and the blame goes to a combination of internal and external factors. I also focused on analyzing the outside influences on the Kurds and the Kurdish quest.

Although Kurds have played important leadership roles in the history of this region such as Muhammad ibn Shaddad, Hasanwayh ibn Husayn, Badh ibn Dustak, Saladin Ayyubi and others, it is hard to see that they are identified as Kurds. I not only highlight these eras, but also have gathered the most prominent Kurdish flags, which is a unique effort, and I finalize this journey by providing a detailed roadmap about the future steps for the Kurds. It is unfortunate that such a rich history and culture has gone largely unexplored for centuries, but with the help of scholars, historians and anthropologists from the global north and south, a lot has begun to be researched and documented, and I hope this journey will contribute to preserving the rich Kurdish history.

Maps

Figure 1: The Major Subdivision of Kurdistan and its Current International Borders



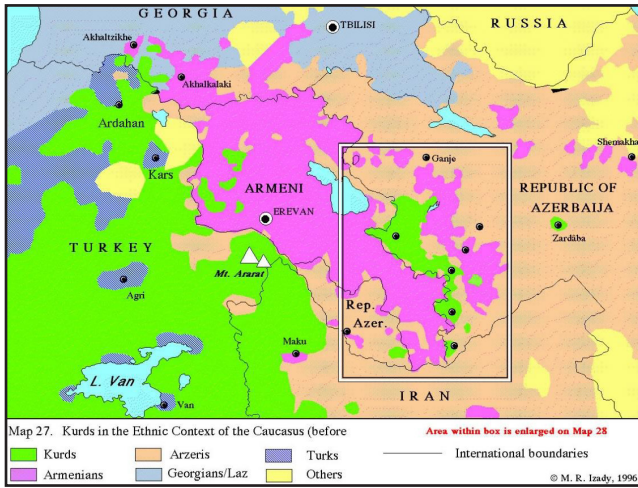
(Izady, 2022)

Figure 2: Kurdistan and its Neighboring Region



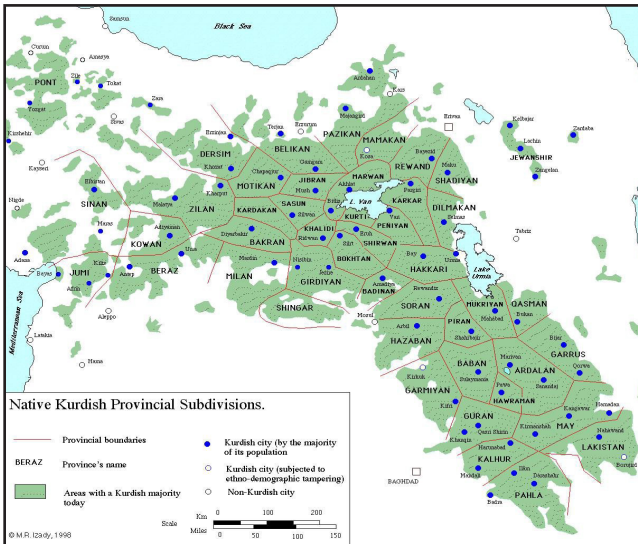
(Institut Kurde De Paris, 2022)

Figure 3: Kurds in the Ethnic Context of the Caucasus before International Boundaries



(Izady, 1996)

Figure 4: Native Kurdish Provincial Subdivisions and Provincial Boundaries



(Izady, 1998)

Figure 5: Areas of Majority Kurdish Settlement



(Encyclopedia Britannica, 1998)

Chapter One

The Origin of the Kurds: Myth, Speculation and History

This world has seen many civilizations. Every civilization has contributed in one way or another to the way we see this world today, and some civilizations left extremely powerful contributions. The residents of the ancient Mesopotamian region, in which the Tigris-Euphrates river system played a critical role, are the custodians of several such civilizations.

Some of the oldest civilizations Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Chaldean, Sassanian and Persian flourished on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates. In this chapter, I do not aim to focus on explaining how these civilizations developed or to discuss the reasons for their rise and downfall; rather, the focus here is to explore and explain the origins of the modern-day residents of this region known as the Kurds within the context of the better-known history. In this chapter, I lay the foundation for our readers to understand the historical background of the biggest ethnic group of the world that does not have its own nation-state. I also explain how historians connect the Kurds with various ancient groups, and consider them as their possible descendants.

The evidence found in various parts of Kurdistan shows that this region was inhabited by hunter-gatherer communities for dozens of millennia of prehistory. I will return to the word Kurd and Kurdistan, but before diving into this discussion, it is worth pointing out that whenever the word Kurdistan appears, it does not necessarily refer to the land situated in the northern part of Iraq. It refers to the larger historical collage, with its boundaries from the Persian Gulf (northeast of modern-day Iran) to Armenia and Azerbaijan, the region that was once part of 'Red Kurdistan'; and from the Hakkari Mountains to the northern Syria, and from the southeastern Turkey to the Zagros Mountains in Iran, including northern Iraq.

1.1. Kurdish Origins: Myths

The Kurdish people are currently the largest population without a country. Many myths have been long recited by the Kurds about their own origins. Like all societies, their myths have come to define them and to influence their traditions. Kurdish myths, not dissimilar to their history, are tinged with darkness

and tainted with violence. Rooted in all myths is the taste of truth. The myth of King Solomon is one of the many stories told to children as a spooky bedtime story. The legend tells of the Israeli king and his demand of 400-600 virgins for his harem. He sends his supernatural servants (demons or of angelic origin, depending on different retellings of the legend) to bring back these women. When they come back, the king is dead and the women are already pregnant, as they were all raped on the way there. These children are, in legend, the ancestors of the Kurds, who inherited the genetics of bravery and resilience.

In another story, King Zahak (or Dahek) comes to reign over Kurdistan and its surrounding regions after Jemshid, who is cut in half by a demon known as Ahriman. After the slaying, the demon disguises himself as the king's chef and feeds him enchanted food. When the king emerges from the enchantment, he discovers that two serpents have grown onto either of his shoulders. His health declines as the serpents can never be fed to fullness. In his desperation, he summons the best physician and asks for a solution, but what he doesn't know is that the physician is, once again, Ahriman in disguise. The demon tells him that the serpents can only be satisfied with brains, and the servants quickly realize that only human brains will satiate these parasitic snakes.

The king announces that he will require two heads a day, and anyone who attempts to flee will be among the first contributors. He tasks two of his best soldiers to randomly kill two people from the kingdom every day and retrieve their brains. The soldiers obey for a while, but they are maddened with guilt, so they decide to deceive their king by giving him the brains of cattle as a substitute. In order to avoid suspicion, they send the young people who were to be murdered to the mountains. When the king feels unwell again, he blames the people for being unwilling to serve their king, and demands more brains. One of the people, named Kawa (or Kaveh), a blacksmith who has sacrificed a dozen children to the serpents, steps forward and challenges the King to a duel in the name of the people.

Others fear to defy the king as their families are on the verge of becoming serpent food, but Kawa has nothing to lose. The king accepts the challenge and fights bravely, almost beating Kawa, who uses his hammer to kill the serpents and inevitably the king along with them. That's how the story of Kawa, the liberator ironsmith, has inspired the Nawroz (also pronounced Nowruz) celebrations at the dawn of spring. An almost identical story is told in the Farsi Shah-Nama (The Stories of Kings) and in Firdusi's tale, the Kurdish people are the children of those who sought refuge and hid in the mountains, saved by the cattle whose brains were sacrificed in their stead.

Kurdish origins are subject to additional religious myths as well as urban legends. In Hebrew literature, for example, Mount Ararat of Kurdistan was supposedly a resting place for Noah's Ark after the flood (Genesis 8:4). It is

told, mainly in Northern Kurdistan,¹ that Melik Kurdim, one of Noah's companions, took a liking to Kurdistan's nature, and settled there. He is credited for the Kurdish language as well as being the forefather of the people. The Kurds have no reason to reject any of these stories, but they are, after all, stories (van Bruinessen, 2005).

1.2. Kurdish Origins: Prehistoric and Historic Speculation

The region of modern-day Kurdistan was inhabited for at least 50,000 years, and recent discoveries extend this timeline by 20,000 years (Starr, 2020), several of which have been found in Shanidar Cave. The most recently excavated remains, called 'Shanidar Z,' date back to 70,000 years ago. This same cave also held the remains of more developed human species and their skeletal remains. Remains of 11 Neanderthal humans were discovered in Shanidar Cave, numbered chronologically to their discovery. 'Shanidar 1,' suggests the medicinal technology, or at least the resilience, of the Neanderthals, as the bones of this male showed clear signs of healing. He was estimated to have been 35-45 years of age, which is older than the normal life expectancy for this particular species. 'Shanidar 4,' was possibly a healer within the group, as he was buried with flowers that were discovered to have anti-inflammatory properties (Bonner, 2020). Human groups of the Paleolithic period were isolated one from another, and there cannot be any relation with the nation of Kurdistan other than the location overlay.

Kurdistan was also inhabited during the Mesolithic period; in fact, Charmo is one of the earliest sites, along with Catal Huyuk and Jericho, to have settled agricultural villages. The artifacts found in this central Zagros region date back to 6300 BCE or earlier. The site of the village of Charmo dates to the opening of the eighth millennium (Gaur et al, 1998) and is a sign of the transition from hunter-gatherer to agricultural societies. While Charmo is significant to pre-history, there is no evidence – or lack thereof – of the connection between the inhabitants of Charmo and the modern-day Kurds.

The first use of the word 'Kurdistan' is attributed to the Seljuqs; however, the first written instance of something that both sounds like 'Kurd' and possibly refers to ancestors of the Kurds, as noted by French archeologist and Assyriologist, Jean Genevieve Francois Thoreau-Dangin, dates back to the middle of the third millennium, in cuneiform script as 'Karda.' Godfrey Rolles Driver, an

¹ Northern Kurdistan was referred to as 'Corduene' or 'Gordia' in some European, Azerbaijani and Iranian sources. That are all similar, if not derived from the origins that are discussed later, such as 'Karda' and 'Gurd'.

English Orientalist of the early twentieth century, concurs that this inscription may refer to an early trace of the Kurds. This inscription is from the Akkadian Empire, which combined the southern city-states of Sumer with the northern city-states of Akkad, and used this Sumerian-rooted word to refer to the multi-ethnic, mountainous populations of the far north. Door sockets inscribed ‘Karda’ near the Zagros Mountain and its surrounding areas mentioned Ur-billu, which could reference modern-day Erbil (Hennerbichler, 2014). If you visit Kurdistan, you will observe that most of the signboards, taxis and vans will have Hawler, instead of Erbil, written on them, because the Kurdish people from South Kurdistan always refer to Hawler, not Erbil because they link Erbil to Arabic. Its etymology and historical journey show that the word Erbil is neither Arabic nor Semitic. Its origin goes back to the 3rd millennium B.C.E. (Hennerbichler, 2014, Ibrahim, 2015). Before coming to its current form, the name Erbil went through various transformations such as *Arbela* in the Aramaic language, *Arbaira* or *Arbira* in the Persian language, *Arba ilo* or *Arba-ilu* (four gods) in Assyrian, and Urbilum, Urbelum or Urbillum from Sumerian, which means a city located in a highland as well as *Erbilla*, *Erbilas*, *Irbil* and *Arbil* (green land) before coming to its current form Erbil.

The Kurds prefer to use Erbil’s Kurdish version *Hawler* or *Hewler*. Some Kurds believe that the word *Hawler* comes from the word ‘*Hawder*’ meaning the water source, which later became *Hawler*. Some Kurds also believe that the word Erbil and its spellings connect it to the Arabic language, therefore, they started using the Kurdish word *Hawder* because this region had abundance of water; and with the passage of time *Hawder* became *Hawler*. The Kurds in general and the Kurdish community in diaspora in particular prefer using *Hawler* because it is considered a symbol of patriotism, but this name has never been constitutionalized.

Remains of the Akkadian Empire highlight the importance and antiquity of words ‘Karda’ and ‘Erbil.’ The Akkadian Empire lasted for almost 200 years and the Guti were one of the forces to bring down the Akkadian Empire a century before the start of the second millennium, and they too have been associated with the Kurds. If there is an association, it is more likely that it is with the contemporaneous Lullubi, known as mountain people (Bois, 1966). The Guti and the Lullubi, who probably have the same origins, are seen in victory stele erected by the Akkadian imperialist Naram Sin. Additionally, the earliest rock carving in Iran, from the first half of the third millennium, mentions a Lullubi king. The area of Lullubum was likely in the area of modern day Halabjah.

Whether or not the Lullubi are Kurdish ancestors, they defeated the Guti and survived the collapse of the Akkadian Empire. There are records of the Lullubi into Ur III, also called the Sumerian Renaissance period, in an inscription near Lake Darbandikan. A Sumerian poem, “Lugulbanda and

the Anzud Bird,” refers to the land of Lullubum. The Simurru Kingdom, sometimes allied with the Lullubi in opposition to the Ur III rulers, was also the land of the Hurrians and Mannaeans, who are part of a new era, the wave of the Indo-Europeans after the Sumerian in about 2000 BCE. Sumerian people were one of the first ones to invent written script around 5300 BCE. Some contemporary historians (including the author) assume on the basis of historical evidence that Sumerian language shares many similarities with Kurdish. Sumerian, Hurrian and Mannaeian languages, for sure, are the older versions of Kurdish language and a lot of modern Kurdish diction is derived from these languages. It is also important to mention that the worldview of the majority of the historian, that Sumerian language died out, is incorrect. This is a colonial worldview to belittle and undermine the historical importance of conquered regions and people. This is a known fact that Sumerian, Hurrian and Mannaeian languages are strongly connected with many Indo-European languages, especially Kurdish (Hamarash, 2022).

During the second millennium, various small kingdoms cooperated and competed with each other in the Mesopotamian area and with the nearby Egyptian and Hittite Empires. The Kassites whose kingdom was called Karduniaš (pronounced as Kurduniash) took over the Old Babylonian Kingdom around 1600 while the Kingdom of the Mitanni ruled in the upper reaches of the river system. The Hyskos, pushed around by other forces, ended up migrating south and ruling in the Delta during the Egyptian Second Intermediate Period. The Hurrians also migrated rather than establishing one stable kingdom. The Hittites would rise to rival new Kingdom Egypt, but in the earlier second millennium were confined to the Anatolian peninsula. From this compilation of dynamic forces, the Kurds have been associated with the Hurrians on the basis of tenuous linguistic similarities, such as the original Hurrian sounding more like Khurrite. The Mitanni Kingdom had diplomatic relations with New Kingdom of Egypt, exchanging royalty, there is speculation that Nefertiti herself was a Mitanni, and that the Mitanni were Kurds, thus Nefertiti was Kurdish. According to a historian and linguist Soran Hamarash, there are enough similarities and evidences to confirm these speculations (Hamarash, 2022).

Another group associated with the Kurds is the Medes, one of the small kingdoms of the Four Kingdoms era, from the fall of Nineveh in 612 to the establishment of the Persian/Achaemenid Empire in ca. 550. The kingdom of the Medes existed in the mountains of modern-day Iran and Pakistan (Baluchistan) to the highlands of modern-day Turkey, setting their capital near the Zagros mountains at Ecbatana (modern-day Hamadan, in western Kurdistan). Because of their geographical area, their association with the mountains, and their Indo-European language, the Medes have been postulated as the ancestors of Kurdish people. The literary historical record is Greek and mostly Herodote-

an, thus not very reliable. In 550 BCE, Cyrus the Great led the Achaemenid armies to take down the Medes. He also took the Cyrtii, indigenous tribes who were part of the Medes, and incorporated them into his army as expert slingers. The Cyrtii are considered to be the ancestors of the Kurds and the linguistic evidences confirm that the language of the Mede is Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish language (Hamarash, 2022).

Darius the Great, son of a Satrap,² expanded, consolidated and standardized the area, the borders ranging from Macedonia and Libya in the West to the Indus Valley in the East, from the shores of the Caspian Sea in the North all the way South to the Arabian Peninsula. In 401, the Greeks tried and failed to overthrow Artaxerxes II, the Persian king at the time (Rodriguez et al, 1998). Whilst making their way back home, near Botan River, they encountered the Kardokhis, who Xenophon – a historian almost as unreliable as Herodotus – describes as brave and unbeatable. They are said to have destroyed 120,000 soldiers (or 10,000 soldiers – both numbers are exaggerations) who were once sent to colonize them, thus gaining their freedom from the rule of surrounding kingdoms (Gunter, 2004). This term, Kardukhi or Kardokhi, might be derived from the Akkadian. The original ‘Karda’ made plural with the Armenian suffix ‘kh’ could explain the expression (Augustyn et al, 1999). Based on available linguistic material and similarities with Kurdish language, one can clearly say that the Kardokhis were related to the ‘Karda’ and that the Medes were in some ways ancestors of the Kurds (Hamarash, 2022).

The Persian Empire fell to Alexander the Great, and the Hellenistic era began, where four equally balanced powers were unable to conquer each other. The Seleucid Kingdom, which supplanted the Persian Empire though with much less territory, included a small group called the Corduene, or Gordyne, identifiable by the first century CE, who lived in the upper reaches of the Tigris River. Never independent from the Seleucids, they worshiped the Hurrian sky god Teshub, and because of their location and the possible connection with the Hurrians over a millennium previously, they have been thought to be the ancestors of the Kurds as well.

The Seleucids, and the other Hellenistic powers, ultimately gave way to the Roman Empire, where Christianity and its exportation began. Shortly after the birth of Christ, around the year 64, missionaries found their way to Kurdistan. Thomas, one of the 12 original apostles, and Thaddeus, of the first 70 disciples, advocated for Christianity in the region (Rassam, 2005). The teachings of Christ became widespread. Three centuries later, the Kurds joined the Council of Nicaea, founded in 325 (Frenkel, 2020), a council of the Christian church, thus the spreading of the Nicene creed faith. Prior to

² In the Persian Empire, a provincial governor was called Satrap.

the spread of Christianity, most of modern-day Kurdistan and Iran practiced Zoroastrianism and worshiped the deity known as Ahura Mazda. This diverse array of cultures and religions in Kurdistan suggests a variety of indigenous identities (Nebez, 1997).

The Sassanian Empire of Iran was the last great power in the Middle East before Islam. The Sassanid Empire, founded by Ardashir I, came to power after almost 500 years of the Parthian Empire's rule, from 224, and prevailed until 650 (Arfa, 1966). The Roman Empire, then the Byzantine Empire, were the main rivals of the Sassanids, and they fought many wars against one another's armies and signed numerous short-lived peace treaties until a settlement, during the Battle of Callinicum in 531, which lasted until after the arrival of Islam. Prior to the treaty, the Romans had moved their capital to Constantinople and gained proximity to the Sassanians, making it easier to carry out the series of conflicts that took place.

In 430, the third council took place at Ephesus where Nestorius' teachings were condemned (Meyendorff, 1989). Although Nestorius made controversial interpretations of the Christian scriptures, he had a significant following, especially in the Kurdish regions. The Nestorian churches were isolated from the Catholic and Orthodox churches of Rome and the East respectively. This isolation did not become as much of a conflict as it might have, because the Islam started to take root in the region around the 6th century. In order to have a better understanding, in the rest of the chapter, we will discuss the history of the Kurdish uprisings, revolts and quest to have an independent state.

As an indigenous community of the Mesopotamian region, Kurds have gone through dramatic highs and lows. Repetitive invasions, persecutions and victimization forced the Kurds to migrate to other parts of the world. Along with modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Armenia and Azerbaijan, their main population lives in Europe and North America. There are about 45 to 46 million Kurds in the world, which means if the Kurds were together, Kurdistan would be among the 30 largest countries of the world. Kurdistan, also referred to as Greater Kurdistan, consists of around 200,000 square kilometers. In terms of land area, Kurdistan is among the 50 countries of the world with the largest amount of land.

Stateless Kurds are the fourth largest ethnicity of the Middle East. The Kurds are a tribal society and live in tribes and clans, but they can be divided into seven major groups; i) Kurmanj, ii) Kalhor (Kalhur), iii) Soran, iv) Hawraman (Hewraman), v) Zazas, vi) Goran (Guran), and vii) Shingalis. Some historians include the eighth group Lur³ and believe that Lurs are also Kurds

³ Lurs are Iranian people and are believed to be the descendants of the Elamites and the Kassites. Their population is around two million. They live in southwest and south of Iran and speak Luri and Laki dialects. Luri is a Persian dialect and Laki is a Kurdish dialect. Along with historians such as Hemdullah Mustewfi, Abdul-

(you can see below a briefly explanation about where the Lurs stand in the discussion of Kurdish ethnicity). In general, Kurds speak the Kurdish language, which comes from the Indo-European and Indo-Iranian language families. Kurmanji and Sorani are the two main dialects of the Kurdish language. In terms of speakers, Kurmanji is the largest dialect and it is also considered the original language of the Kurds. Along with Kurmanji and Sorani, Kurdish people, living in different regions, speak other dialects as well such as Badi-ni, Hawrami, Gorani (connected to the Zaza-Gorani languages), Pahlewani, Kermanshahi, Zazaki, Kalhuri, Kolyai, Bajelani, Shabak, Fayli, Harsini, Sanjabi, Surchi, Botani, Dersimi, Dumbili, Modki, Lihoni, Shamdini or Hakkari, Shingali, Mukri and Laki. The Shingali dialect is spoken by the Yazidis living in Shingal, also known as Sinjar, and the Mukri dialect is spoken by the Mukri tribe, who reside south of Lake Urmia in modern-day Iran. “The Mukri claim that their dialect is the most ancient of all, and while its antiquity is probably not greater than that of its neighbors, its excellent preservation of ancient forms gives it a claim to be considered the standard by which to compare other dialects” (Soane, 2013, p. 450). Laki is also a local language of the Lak tribe, who are residents of southwestern Iran including Hamadan, Ilam, Lorestan and Kermanshah. Over the years, in these regions, Kurds and Lurs got so mixed that it is extremely difficult to differentiate between and trace their ethnic differences.

Due to political and socio-religious influence or oppression, together with forced education and depending on the influence, some Kurds also speak Turkish, Arabic, Farsi, Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian. Before Muslim leader Omar ibn Al-Khattab’s invasion of this region in the 7th century, the Kurds were a multi-religious society. Zoroastrianism, Yazdanism (also known as the Cult of Angels), Mithraism, Manichaeism, Gnosticism, Sabianism, Yazidism, Christianity and Judaism were the most common religions of the Kurds. Many Kurdish Jews made *Aliyah*⁴ to Israel. Ex Minister of Defense Yitzhak “Itzik” Mordechai, speaker of Israeli Parliament Mickey Levy and many others are Kurdish in origin.

After the Muslim invasion of the Hakkari Mountains in the 7th century, Arabs came to know and use the terms Kurd and Yazidi. Since then, the Kurds have suffered at the hands of Arabs, Ottomans and Safavids. Once a multi-religious ethnicity, the Kurds became the victims of forced conversion; therefore, Islam gradually became the most common religion of the Kurds. After the death of Omar ibn Al-Khattab, Muslim caliphates were caught up in their internal

lah Kashani and Muhammad b. Huseyn Şebankara, a very famous 16th century historian and traveler Sharafkhan Bidlisi identified Lurs as Kurds. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish the difference between the Kurds and the Lurs.

⁴ *Aliyah* is a Jewish immigration from abroad to the state of Israel.

conflicts and were unable to capitalize on what previous caliphs have achieved. The Umayyad Dynasty leadership was living a lavish lifestyle and was not in favor of forced conversion, but was extremely Arab centric (Shakir, 2021).

As Kurds had shown that they would resist any political, cultural, religious or socio-linguistic influence, the Umayyads used matrimonial influence to get their support. In the process, many Arabs married Kurds; consequently, Kurds did not face the atrocities from the Umayyads that they suffered later on. The arrival of the Abbasids was not good news for the Kurds. The Abbasids were absolute authoritarians and wanted to govern the entire region with utmost power and authority, and the Kurds were known for their military might and fighting abilities. Therefore, when the Abbasids started to pressure the Kurds and started to force conversion, they faced severe retaliation from the Kurds.

Until the 9th century, although some of the Kurds accepted Islam, their ethnic bond appeared to be stronger than their religious affiliation. In 838, when the eighth Abbasid Caliph Al-Mu'tasim Bi'llah started a persecution campaign against the Yazidis in the north of Mosul, many Muslim Kurds joined the Yazidi leader Mir Jafar bin Mir Hasan Dasni, also known as Jafar bin Faharjis, and revolted against Al-Mu'tasim Bi'llah. This was among the first documented uprisings of the Kurds. Although the uprising was not successful, Al-Mu'tasim Bi'llah perceived extreme disrespect, and sent his huge Arab army under the leadership of Abdullah bin Ans al-Azdi to attack the Kurds. Initially, the Arab army was defeated and lost many leaders, but a reinforced military force under the leadership of Aytakh al-Khazari, a Turkish nomadic slave, defeated the Kurds. To avoid becoming prisoner of war Mir Jafar bin Mir Hasan Dasni committed suicide by drinking poison (Shakir, 2021, Brook, 2009, Bois, 1966).

As mentioned, the Abbasids were an extremely authoritarian dynasty and they used religion as a tool to expand their dynastic powers. They gave birth to a new tradition by hiring religious scholars to validate and support their lawful and unlawful decisions. This move helped them to control the society at the grassroots level. A combination of matrimonial and religious influence started showing its results, and many Azerbaijani and Arab leaders became Kurdicized and started considering themselves as Kurds. When their children took over the power, many Sunni Kurdish dynasties were born, including the Shaddadids (951-1199) in some parts of Armenia and Iran, previously known as Arran, the Rawadid Dynasty (955-1071) in Tabriz, the Hasanwayhids (959-1014) in the western parts of Zagros Mountains, the Marwanid Dynasty (983- 1085) in Diyarbakir and the Ayyubid Dynasty, founded by the Sunni Kurd Al-Nasir Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, known as Saladin or Saladin Ayyubi. This dynasty enjoyed one of the longest reigns among the other Kurdish dynasties. It was founded in 1171 in Cairo and ended in 1341 in Hama, Syria. During its dominance, it also ruled Damascus and Aleppo (Peacock, 2017, Matthew, 1993).

These dynasties continued the tradition of forced conversions and persecutions of non-Muslims, especially Yazidis. Some of these dynasties saw uprisings from the Yazidi Kurds, but were victorious against them. This was the time when the Kurdish community was divided into Muslim and non-Muslim Kurds. It marked the downfall of Kurdish military might that saw its nadir during the Ottoman and Safavid rivalry. Although the arrival of Islam, forced conversions, persecution of non-Muslims and Muslim dominance with the help of Sunni dynasties divided the Kurds during the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries, the first major split of Kurdish lands dates back to 1514, when the Battle of Chaldiran was fought between the Ottomans and the Safavids. The rise of the Ottomans and the Safavids began the downfall of the Kurds. The Kurds, once known as independent and fierce, became mercenary fighters of these two dynasties at the time when both, the Ottomans and the Safavids, were trying to use religion as a tool to obtain, sustain and expand their power.

Over the years, the Kurds had developed working relationships with the Ottomans and Safavids, and the majority of the Kurds were enjoying their semi-autonomous power under the Safavids. When the Ottomans won the Battle of Chaldiran, the majority of the Kurds had no choice but to side with the Ottomans, as the Ottomans were more powerful, but it damaged the Kurdish cause greatly, dividing the Kurdish lands and bringing religious extremism to the region. Kurdish lands were captured and controlled by the Ottomans. Once again, forced conversions and persecutions were at their peak, which divided the Kurds further. Yazidis, Yarsanis (Kakai or Ahl-e-Haq) and Alavis or Alevi were the main target of these atrocities, and the Ottomans used the Sunni Kurds for their benefits.

A half a century later, the Kurdish community started realizing that they had lost their way and were being taken to the point of no return. A Kurdish historian, poet and writer Sharafkhan Bidlisi (1543-1603), also known as Şerefhan Bitlisi, wrote a book “Sharafnama”, also written as Şerefname and meaning the Book of Honor, to emphasize the need to awaken Kurdish nationalism. He mentions the glories of the Kurds before Islam and laments the lack of hegemony among the Kurds. Later on, another Kurdish intellectual, poet and writer Ahmad Khani (1650-1707) wrote about the same issue. In his famous Kurdish love story “Mem and Zin” he points out the Kurdish dilemma, saying that if the Kurdish nation had a leader, they would not have gone through what they had.

The Kurds, once among the strongest forces of the region, could not keep quiet for long, and they began their resistance against the oppressors. They staged revolts and fought various battles against the Safavids in the 16th and 17th centuries. They also fought against the Zand and Qajar Dynasties. Their love/hate relationship with the Ottomans continued; the Ottomans invaded and captured their regions. The Kurds rebelled and fought numerous battles

and wars against the Ottomans and other powers. The Kurdish revolts include the Baban uprising against the Ottomans (1806–1808), Sheikh Ubeydullah's revolt against the Qajar Dynasty of Iran (1880–1881), and the Shekifti rebellion against the Ottomans (1890s). In 1914, Kurdish leader Mullah Selim started a revolt at Bitlis against the Ottomans. Also known as the Bitlisi revolt, and was supported by the Russian Empire. This rebellion continued during World War I, but it ended the same as the previous revolts: The Ottomans overcame the Kurds (Jwaideh, 2006, Ozoglu, 2004, Olson, 1989).

In any discussion of Kurdish history, religious victimization, persecution, religious extremism and use of religion as a tool to strengthen power corridors, it is extremely important to talk about the Armenian and Yazidi genocide before WWI by the Ottomans and the role of the Kurds in this genocide. The Kurds were used by the Ottomans against the Armenian community as well as against the Yazidi Kurds who were living there after their migration to escape Ottoman persecution. After the genocide, the Kurds regretted their actions and said that they were manipulated, and were unaware of what was happening. It is a crime for which the Kurds will never forgive themselves.

In the beginning of the 20th century, the idea of the nation state began to flourish. In the pursuit of the idea presented by Ahmad Khani and Sharafkhan in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Kurds also started planning to have an independent nation state. A Kurdish nationalist organization Khoyboun (also written as Xoybûn) and its leadership presented the first Kurdish flag at the Paris Peace Conference in 1920. From then on, whether the Kurdish leadership was in exile or fighting against the oppressors, it has always used this flag. The initial flag had a large sun in the middle with numerous thin rays, as compared to the current design.

At the time of the creation of the short-lived first independent Republic of Kurdistan at Mahabad, the flag was adopted and the shining sun was replaced, but later, in 1992, when the current flag was designed by Dr. Mehrdad Izady and Dr. Bijhan Eliasi, the sun was restored, with 21 rays. The sun represents the old Yazidi, Yazdani, Yarsani and Zoroastrian religions. In these religions, the number 21 represents rebirth and reincarnation. There are three stripes, red, white and green (top to bottom) in the flag. Red represents the blood of the martyrs who gave their life for the Kurdish cause; white represents peace and equality; and green means the natural beauty of the landscapes.

The Paris Peace Conference in 1920, where this flag was presented, is also significant for another reason, the Treaty of Sèvres,⁵ where the Kurds were promised independence in a speech by the U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. This speech led the Kurds to think that sooner rather than later they would

⁵ The Treaty of Sèvres 1920 was a treaty between the Ottomans and the Allies of WWI. France, the United Kingdom, Greece and Italy were given parts of the Ottoman Empire.

have their own homeland, which never happened. Once again, religion played an important role. As the Armenians were Christians, they were given much more attention than the Kurds. The Christian West did everything that it could to make sure that the Christian Armenians would be free of the Ottomans, and the U.S. President Woodrow Wilson even ordered an outline of the boundaries of Armenia, but the Kurds were ignored and received only shallow promises. This was a huge setback to the Kurds and the Kurdish quest.

It is impossible to determine the exact number of revolts, rebellions and uprisings fought by the Kurds. Immediately after WWI, in 1919, Mahmud Barzanji, a sheik of Qadiriya Sufi traditions from Sulaymaniyah, launched a series of revolts against the British Forces and Iraqi authorities. The Kurds continued their attacks and in 1921, Mahmud Barzanji declared the formation of the unrecognized Kingdom of Kurdistan in Sulaymaniyah; he was the self-proclaimed king of this kingdom. In July 1924, Mahmud Barzanji was defeated by the British Forces.

Turkish soil witnessed the first revolts of their modern history, first the Koçgiri rebellion in 1921 by the Alevi and Sunni Kurds and then in 1924, the Beytussebab rebellion led by Halid Beg Cibran. These revolts protested the prohibition on using the Kurdish language and on Kurdish landowners. Many military garrisons joined the revolt, but it was suppressed. This practice continued, and just as before, 1926 was another year of unrest in the history of the Kurds. First from 1918-22 and then in 1926, Simko Shikak led two uprisings against the Pahlavi Dynasty of Iran, but suffered severe defeats. On the Turkish side, Sheikh Said, an important member of the secret Kurdish organization Azadi, initiated a rebellion against the Turkish government. He claimed that he wanted to revive the Islamic caliphate.

Zazas and Qizilbash tribes as well as many soldiers supported the revolt, but it was unsuccessful. In October 1927, Ihsan Nuri, an ex-Ottoman soldier and Kurdish leader, started yet another rebellion, also called the Agri rebellion, against the Turkish government. Khoyboun, a Kurdish nationalist organization, was able to receive support from most of the Kurds, Turkmens and even Armenians, who had suffered at the hands of the Kurds a decade earlier. They fought for three years, but could not succeed. In September 1930, the Kurds and their allies could not withstand the offensive of a highly equipped Turkish Air Force (Jwaideh, 2006, Ozoglu, 2004, Olson, 1989).

In 1930-31, Ahmed Barzani, Mustafa Barzani and Mahmud Barzanji attempted yet another revolt against the Iraqi authorities, but were not successful. Initially, they were able to gather the support of the majority of the Kurds, but when the Iraqi Army could not deal with the Kurds by themselves, they requested the British Forces to support them. These severe attacks forced some Kurdish leaders to surrender at the hands of the Turkish forces in 1932, but

Mustafa Barzani and his forces continued fighting until 1933. Finally, they also had to surrender, and the allied attempts of Iraqi Forces, British Forces and Turkish Army were able to suppress this revolt. In 1935, Yazidi Kurds of Mount Sinjar revolted against the Kingdom of Iraq, but they were suppressed by the Iraqi Army. These two decades were the deadliest in Kurdish history, and ended with yet another massacre of the Kurds.

Between 1937 and 1938, once again Alevi Kurds initiated an uprising against the Turkish government in the Dersim region under the leadership of Seyid Riza. In order to suppress the rebellion, the Turkish Army used brutal force and killed thousands of civilians. This incident is also considered a genocide against the Alevis. With the passage of time, when the political movements around the world were accelerating, the Kurds started to realize that they had to shift from tribal and endemic warfare to a political struggle. The Soviet Union and its communist mindset played an important role in politicizing the Kurds. Another eventful year was 1939, when Mustafa Barzani tried to establish the first Kurdish political party under the name of *Hiwa* – Hope, but was unsuccessful.

On the Iranian side, another revolt, Hama Rashid, took place under the leadership of Muhammed Rashid from 1941 to 1944. When, after three years of continuous unrest, it was finally suppressed, the Kurdish area came under complete control of Iran, and Muhammed Rashid was forced to take refuge in Iraq. After the World Wars and seeing the increasing US influence in the Middle East, the Soviet Union wanted to have allies in the region. This period was one of the most significant and critical times in the Cold War. Two puppet governments, the Republic of Mahabad and Azerbaijan People's Government, were established, but neither could survive.

Since 1939, Ahmed Barzani, Mustafa Barzani, also known as Mulla Mustafa and Mahmud Barzanji had the idea of founding a political party, but they were not successful because they were under extreme restrictions and observation. Finally, when in 1943 Ahmed Barzani, Mustafa Barzani and thousands of their men were able to escape, they had to seek refuge on the Iranian side of Kurdistan. Kurdish internal rivalries were far from finished. Mustafa Barzani, the traditionalist and conservative, did not like Qazi Muhammad, a very powerful leftist Kurdish leader who later became the Head of the Republic of Mahabad – the first Kurdish nation state – backed by the Communists, but Mustafa Barzani had to accept him because he did not have any other choice.

Similar to the unrecognized Kingdom of Kurdistan, some leaders of the Kurds, who had very close ties with the Soviet Union, were influenced by the Russians and decided to establish the Republic of Mahabad in 1946. When this Kurdish Republic came into being, it also gave birth to another Kurdish political party, the Kurdish Democratic Party – KDP, KDPI or PDK – and Qazi

Muhammad became the first head of the party, against the wishes of Mustafa Barzani. Subsequently, on August 16, 1946, the Kurdish Democratic Party was founded in Iraq and Mustafa Barzani was nominated as its president.

The decision of the Kurds of establishing a Kurdish nation state made the Iraqi-Kurdish relations bitter, and these resentments created a huge gulf between the two sides. This was a major turning point into what the world saw later on; a series of conflicts, wars, revolts and uprisings by the Kurds against the Republic of Iraq. The majority of the Kurdish leadership spent decades in exile. In 1958, the decades-long monarchy was ended by Army Brigadier Abdal Karim Qasim, who initiated the negotiations with Mustafa Barzani and asked him to return to Iraq. He returned with great hopes, which were soon shattered when a series of conflicts began. The first instance of the conflicts was the Aylul Revolts, from 1961 to 1970. Once again, the Barzani tribe was leading from the front under the command of Mustafa Barzani. Their main aim was the now familiar idea of building a Kurdish nation state that would be the home of the Kurds.

A decade-long revolt and war was devastating for both sides, but the Kurds suffered more as they were less equipped and poorly organized. The majority of the Iraqi Army took part in the combat operations and an estimated 80% of the Iraqi Army fought against the Kurds. After a decade-long war, when the Kurds were gaining momentum and the Iraqi Army was getting tired and losing its ground, the Iraqi leadership decided to bring the Kurds to the table, which resulted in an agreement between both sides known as the Iraqi–Kurdish Autonomy Agreement of 1970. The agreement acknowledged the Kurdish right of self-determination and autonomy, but this was never fulfilled.

Kurdish resistance in Iraq encouraged the Kurds on the Iranian side and once again, after the fall of the Republic of Mahabad, the Kurds started an uprising against the Iranian Empire in 1966 and it continued until 1968. The Kurds were unable to succeed once again, and this time their internal conflict got even worse when Mulla Mustafa was accused by the Iranian Kurds of betraying them and not supporting their cause against Iran. It is another example of lack of trust, and of fighting for hegemony, among the Kurdish leaders.

As mentioned, when the Iraqi Army started losing ground and the Kurds were gaining momentum, the Iraqi leadership played a trump card and to gain some time, they offered the Kurds an agreement, which guaranteed that the Kurds could have an autonomous Kurdistan. Against the wishes of many, Mulla Mustafa accepted the peace agreement, but as expected the agreement did not last for long because of the disagreement between the two parties over the oil fields of Kirkuk. In 1974, deception forced Mulla Mustafa to rebel against Iraq, but after fighting for a year the Kurds lost their strength and took heavy losses. Lack of advanced technology and empty-handed troops contributed to the cause of defeat for the Kurds.

Throughout these years of struggle the Kurds on the Iraqi side of the border were supported by Iran against Iraq, but the 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq was one of the biggest setbacks in their history. Iran and Iraq agreed to cooperate with each other in securing the border region and one of the points was withdrawing any secret support to any insurgent group in each other's territory. After the agreement the central government of Iraq decided to abrogate the agreement with the Kurds and they were once again denied their right to self-determination.

This brought unimaginable atrocities to the Kurds. The majority of the Kurdish leadership was expelled from the Iraqi side of Kurdistan. Due to the disagreement between Mustafa Barzani and Jalal Talabani as well as the deteriorating relationship between the central government of Iraq and the Kurds, on 1 June 1975, Jalal Talabani, Nawshirwan Mustafa, Dr. Fouad Masoum, Dr. Kamal Fouad, Adil Murad, Omer Sheik Mus and Abdul-Razaq Faili decided to lay the foundation of another political party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan – PUK.

Immediately after its formation, the PUK declared a war against the Iraqi government. Mustafa Barzani was not in favor of such attacks, but Jalal Talabani and his group continued these attacks until 1979. This disagreement between the two leaders created another internal crisis which in 1977 turned into a full-fledged war. It weakened the Kurds and benefitted Saddam Hussein's government, which attacked most of the villages of Kurdistan and killed thousands of people. Many Kurdish tribes were bribed to spy on their fellow Kurds.

Although it was very recent that Iran abandoned the Kurds in 1975 after the Algiers Agreement, the short memory of the Kurds dragged them again between Iraq and Iran when, in September 1980, they entered into yet another war. The Kurds supported Iran against Iraq and in return Iran supported the Kurds in another Kurdish revolt against the central government of Iraq in 1983, but a huge miscalculation and underestimation of the situation cost the Kurds dearly. Saddam Hussein's forces gained a free hand to attack the Kurds. This onslaught continued until 1986. The most devastating instances of these attacks were the Anfal Campaign, including the Halabja chemical attacks, which killed thousands of Kurds. There was hardly a family left who had not lost relatives.

A few years later, during the Gulf War, once again the West and Iran needed the Kurds to fight against Saddam Hussein, and once again the Kurds jumped into a third-party conflict hoping that the West would support them. During the speeches, the western leaders showed great support for the Kurds and encouraged them to initiate an uprising, but when the Kurdish uprising started and Saddam Hussein's army attacked the Kurds, the West was nowhere to be seen. The Kurds suffered major losses. According to the Middle Eastern Watch, during all these campaigns and attacks by Saddam Hussein's army, up to 182,000 Kurds died.

The struggle of the Kurds continued after the US invasion of Iraq and ousting of Saddam Hussein gave them semi-autonomy over Kurdistan, but the poorly planned referendum of 2017 and believing the false promises of the West damaged them once again. The Kurds have also been fighting against Iranian, Turkish and Syrian governments. The revolts against Iran after the revolution in 1979, from 1986 to 1996 and from 2004 onwards, has caused Kurds to leave Iran because of persecution. Their ongoing conflicts in the northern and eastern parts of Turkey against its government since 1978 and the Rojava conflict in Syria are also worth noting.

In conclusion, a remarkable history led from Land Karda to the current semi-autonomous and oppressed state of the Kurds; many nationalities and religions found a home in this region, as did many myths and legends. The murky origins of the Kurds are reflected in religious texts, societal values, celebrations, campfire stories and cultural events. The Kurds are a nation built from the fires of Nawroz and risen from its ashes. The Kurds, whatever their origins, have inhabited these lands for centuries and have fought against any force that tried to deprive them of their rights. The Kurdish mountains sheltered our human ancestors, and early agricultural societies arose in the green fields of Kurdistan. Numerous powers rose and fell while the Kurdish community, in its diversity, endured.

Chapter Two

Kurdish Nationalism, Identity and Political Struggle

A brief definition of a nation according to today's politics is that a nation is an ethnic group that has and belongs to a place that they have occupied for a long period of time. They also share a common language, culture and history. Nationalism is a strong feeling of belonging to a nation. Nationalism is a lens to see the world from a certain perspective and it is made up of a unity among a nation and its allocated geography. Nationalism respects the history of a nation, but it is more interested in establishing a nation with its own criteria. Nationalism is crafted from the definition of a nation's identity. A nation's identity includes the shared characteristics and values of an independent nation to which the individuals of this nation have a nationalist feeling, information and awareness which unites them together. Nationalistic identity creates differences from one nation to another. Shared land, religion, language, political history, norms, literature, and arts are parts of nationalistic identity (Nadr, 2018).⁶

To understand Kurdish nationalism, it is important to understand the word in Kurdish and how it came into being. *Nishtimaan* – نیشتیمان means nation in Kurdish, and it comes from the words *nishtaje* (نیشتهجی) and *maan* (مان). *Nishtaje* means setting or settling in an area and *maan* refers to ours. Therefore, the literal translation of the word *nishtimaan* would be 'our settling/settled area.' A complete definition of the term is "a community of people who share a common language, culture, ethnicity, descent, or history" (Glosbe, 2021). A better word to describe a nation would be solidarity. But what is it that provides this solidarity?

Many scholars argue that the idea of nationalism came into being from the European ideas about nationalism that spread during the age of imperialism and colonization around the 17th century. However, for an ethnic group to survive thousands of years of oppression under the rule of many invaders such as the Ottomans, Safavids and others, they must have had a binding factor with

⁶ Translated from Kurdish.

which to identify. The word for nationalism in the Sorani dialect of Kurdish is *nishtimaan parwari* نیشتمان (پەروری), which consists of the words *nishtimaan* meaning 'nation' and *parwari* meaning 'worshiping', in which literally translates to nation worshiping.

At the linguistic level, it could be argued that the word for nationalism in Kurdish is more closely related to the people as it becomes a sort of religion to them that to which they all feel they must stay loyal to. After World War II and after the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, although Greater Kurdistan was divided into four parts, but the Kurdish identity managed to stay intact. Nationalism in general was spread with globalization and colonization when European invaders brought this idea with them, but its roots are older than European colonization. Before colonization, nationalism and the idea of nation state was more rooted in religion than in ethnicity.

A simple example of this is Saladin Ayubi. Although he was a Kurd, his allegiance was to Islam and in all his conquests, he was working for Islam rather than for his ethnicity. However, this example may not be a correct representation of how strongly Kurds felt about their ethnicity and how much dignity and pride they put into their identity. Although the idea of nation state originated in the 17th century, it really flourished in the 18th century, and Kurdish poet Ahmed Khani used it in the folklore epic poems Mem and Zin in the 17th century (1650-1707). This folklore suggests that Kurds did in fact have loyalty in their identity as Kurds before the age of imperialism and colonization (Gunter, 2004).

In Mem and Zin, there is a significant amount of mention of Kurds as a nation and Kurdish national identity and the poet Ahmed Khani sheds light on the importance of the characteristics of Kurdish heritage and culture. He also mentions that if the Kurdish nation had a leader, they would not live like orphans and they would have their own land. He continues saying that if Kurds had a leader, the Turks, Tajiks and Persians would not be able to dictate them. In this epic poem, there is a part about Nawroz which has become a sort of identity to Kurds of every region and religion (Khani, 2008). It is true that with colonialism, the national and ethnic identity shifted and changed, but there is no truth in saying that there was no nationalism before the arrival of European colonizers and all loyalty and identity was based on religions rather than ethnicity and culture.

Kurdish identity and nationalism were suppressed and challenged during the Ottoman and Safavid dominance, but often, through literature this identity was kept alive. In a research about Kurdish identity, Dilshad H. Khidr argues that the idea of the Kurds as a nation also spread through stories, whether they are nonfiction or fiction (Khidr, 2015). And this is noticeable in the poetry of Tawfeq Mahmoud Hamza also known as Piremerd. Piremerd lived from 1867 to 1950, and throughout that time the identity and language of many groups

were in danger because as after the Ottomans and the Safavids, the Europeans were colonizing many places. Piremerd had a great impact in bringing Kurds together and creating a unified identity within the Kurds. He claims the celebration of the New Year, Nawroz, as specifically a Kurdish celebration. In his poems about Nawroz, he mentions how it is a Kurdish celebration and how all the flowers are red because of the blood of the Kurds, who sacrificed themselves for an independent Kurdistan (Piremerd, 1936).

The problems of Kurdish identity and nationalism lies in lack of leadership and the presence of powerful enemies. Gunter argues that Kurdish nationalism is stuck in a place where because of the different Kurdish languages, strong family systems, tribal loyalties and regional pressure, the Kurds have a slim chance of achieving an independent nation state. It is true that the chances are bleak, but it is not because of the lack of Kurdish nationalism; rather, it is because of the aforementioned reasons. Kurdistan is surrounded by powerful enemies: Turkey from the north, Iraq from the south, and Iran from the east and none of them want an independent Kurdish state.

2.1. Kurdish Identity

The Kurdish people are by far the largest nation without a state in today's world (Shakir, 2021). The land of the Kurds has been divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and the former countries of the Soviet Union. Many Kurds are also forced into exile because of the oppression of these countries. Due to this division "the Kurds are a stateless nation and therefore fragmented" (Galip, 2015, p. 3). Smith argues that there are four main ingredients for creating a national identity. The first one is "the whole process of forming and maintaining nations or nation-states" (Smith, 1991, p. 72).

This signifies how the image of belonging to a territory is crucial in making a nation. The second one is "a consciousness of belonging to the nation, together with sentiments and aspirations for its security and prosperity" (Smith, 199, p. 72). This implies that it is important for the people to remember the past events that they went through together as a nation which will make them look forward to a time of more stability in their nation. Then, Smith highlights the importance of "a language and symbolism of the 'nation' and its role" (Smith, 1991, p.72).

Having a common language and symbol solidifies the national identity for the people living in those lands which would later on be used in making the nation. He concludes by saying that "an ideology, including a cultural doctrine of nations and the national will and prescriptions for the realization of national aspirations and the national will" (Smith, 1991, p.72) is also a signifier of national identity. This means that also culture plays a big part in building the

national identity but the most important point is that the people believe their homeland has the potential to be a nation and they will do anything for it to be a nation.

While looking at the arguments presented by Smith, one can say that the Kurds had all the ingredients, but Kurdish identity was always in flux due to local and global factors. This caused Kurds to constantly try to adjust to their changing surroundings. Kedourie supports the previous argument by saying that “the politics of Islam, the autonomous political structures of tradition, and the resistance of the ‘periphery’ to an integrated national economy were all the components of the Construction of Kurdishness” (Kedourie, 1996, p. 226).

The word ‘Kurd’ is an ancient term which was used in the third millennium BCE (Hennerbichler, 2014). When Omar bin Khattab invaded the Ancient Mesopotamian region in the 7th century CE, this term was also used to identify the nomadic people living in this region (Shakir, 2021). Another historical mention of the term Kurd was in Sharafname (1956) in the 16th century by the Kurdish ruler Sharafhan Bitlisi, who also describes the geography of Kurdistan: “the boundaries of the Kurdish land begin from the sea of Hirmuz and stretch on an even line to the end of Malatya and Maras. The north of this line includes Fars, Irak-I Acem, Azerbeycan, Little and Great Armenia. To the South, there is Irak-I Arab, Musul and Diyarbakir” (Galip, 2015, p. 16).

Some researchers link Kurdish identity to the Sumerians, Akkadians or Medes. Although some historical truth might be found in this claim, it is important to highlight that establishing a strong Kurdish identity is a strategy of nation-building against the Turkish refusal of Kurdish nationalism, ethnic identity and existence. Through governmental, political and social narratives, Turkey tries to establish that Kurdish nationalism is a very recent phenomenon that did not exist in the past (Glastonbury, 2015). If Kurds are proven to be descended from Medes or Akkadians, then the Turks cannot claim that the Kurds are of Turkish origin. This tactic is used by The Kurdistan Workers’ Party, Partiya Karkarên Kurdistan (PKK). PKK utilized “national Kurdish myths of common ancestry and past differentiated from that of other groups in the area to enhance its nationalist claims” (Romano, 2006, p. 131).

The Kurdish national anthem that is used in Iraqi Kurdistan is “we are the descendants of the Medes.” This suggests that the myth has worked itself into our modern-day era too. Nawroz, the Iranian New Year, is celebrated by the Kurdish community not just as a festival, but as a celebration of Kurdish identity or *Kurdayati*. According to Kurdish mythology, Nawroz is linked to Kawa from Medes, who was a blacksmith who defeated King Zuhak. King Zuhak was the Assyrian ruler, who demanded two Kurds to be sacrificed every day so that the king’s serpents could devour their brains. The myth goes on to explain that due to Zuhak’s evil rule spring would not come to Kurdistan.

Kawa defeated King Zuhak, freed the Medes and as a symbol of celebration Kawa, along with the other Medes, lit the fire and ran to hilltop or mountains to inform the others that he has defeated the King. Finally, spring came back the next day to Kurdistan. This myth continued as the utmost symbol of freedom in Kurdish uprisings.

In 1992, in Turkey during the Nawroz celebrations, the state killed more than 50 people and another two were killed in 2008. As it became inevitable and difficult to curtail Nawroz celebration, the Turkish government decided to Turkify this Kurdish festival. They started a campaign and announced that it was actually a Turkish celebration called Nevruz. In 2000, they legalized the celebrations only with the name “Nevruz.” This is another piece of evidence that shows how the strategy of establishing and curtailing Kurdish identity worked.

Kurdish identity becomes more politicized and popular when other nation-states oppress or deny it. The question of where Kurds come from has been one of the main factors that has helped Kurds to form their identity and sense of nationalism. The connection with the Medes and Nawroz mythology was helpful to form Kurdish Identity. As the Sumerians, Akkadians and Medes established their empires in the same region where modern-day Kurds are settled, some historians believe that there is a connection between these ancient civilizations and the Kurds. According to Houston, “the Kurdish region was located in eastern and southeastern Anatolia but also sometimes Mesopotamia” (Houston, 2007, p. 401).

Mesopotamia as the home of Kurds has been a crucial part of the identification of the Kurds from a geopolitical point of view. However,

The concept of Mesopotamia as the imaged land of the Kurds can be debated as a reactionary tactic to the oppressive rule of Turkey. This can be seen in PKK’s politics today as well. Casier argues that “Mesopotamia is employed as a myth by the PKK and Öcalan (PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan) to help raise collective awareness and to mobilize the masses. It nevertheless contributes to the depiction of the Kurds as being amongst the world’s most ancient people, and presents their history as legitimizing their contemporary identity. So, it explains and thereby justifies Kurdish existence (identity) and the political demands of the Kurdish movement (Casier, 2011, p. 231-32).

Using an ethnic group from early history to serve the politics of Kurdish identity today is a brilliant nationalist strategy. It signifies the Kurdish identity and a Kurdish cause. Despite all the various arguments over the origins of the Kurds, most theories point to the same geography where most Kurds live today.

Despite Kurds not having a nation state, it is clear in the mind of every Kurd in general and politicized Kurds in particular that the ancient Mesopotamian region and modern Kurdistan is their homeland. Having a common ancestry, folklores, and myths is essential in uniting Kurds. Traditional Kurdish myths and symbols are an integral part of Kurdish Identity and nationalism today. Whether we look at the Kurdish national flag, governmental and non-governmental organizations or the general public, ancient symbols are part and parcel of everyday life of the Kurds.

The creation of a Kurdish identity and nationalism was not only built upon the myth of the origin of the Kurds, ancestral lands and geographical landscape; Kurdish culture is something that no one can deny. Kurdish identity from the point of view of the west is such that it “focuses on the fact that they [the Kurds] are fighting to preserve their identity, but ignores what is perhaps the most vital component of that identity, namely Kurdish culture” (Allison, 1996, p. 1). This one-sided view is debilitating for Kurds because Kurds need to be seen as more than just ‘warriors’. The west needs to fix its distorted image of the Kurdish ancient civilization which has centuries of culture. This view is also bad for the Kurds because this way they need to somehow convince the world that their identity as Kurds is valid and recognizable despite what Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria say.

Likewise, Kurdish identity was centered on a territory that nowadays is called Kurdistan. When the formation of the territories changed, so did Kurdish identity. Kurdistan means the land of Kurds and some historians believe that the origin of this word goes back to Akkadian civilization (Hennerbichler, 2014), but the term Kurdistan “was first used in the 12th century as a geographical term by the Saljuqs” (McDowall, 2004, p. 6). Nezan concurs that in “1150 CE, the Seljuk Sultan Sanjar was already so aware of the distinctive personality of the Kurdish people that he created a province of Kurdistan, or Land of the Kurds, with the town of Bahar as its capital, near the ancient Echatatana (now Hamadan), the capital of the Medes” (Nezan, 1996, p. 10).

In the twelfth century, the Kurdish leader Saladin Ayyubi relied on Islam, not his Kurdish identity, to unite people, since that was the trend in the world at that time. Nezan points out that Salahdin “was trying to use the holy war to unite the Muslim world under his leadership and to build an immense empire that would be ruled by his family” but “at the very same time, in Europe, other dynasties were using Catholicism to build a world-wide empire, and the Russians would do the same much later in the name of communism” (Nezan, 1996, p. 10).

This shows that the Kurds were perhaps mistaken to put their religion before their identity as Kurds. Moving forward to the 16th century, the Kurds were stuck in feudal divisions all around and within themselves. At the end

of the 17th century, prominent Kurdish poet Ahmed Khani published his poem “Mem u Zin” in which he expresses deep nationalistic ideals and questions about the Kurdish identity. He says that:

I leave it to God’s wisdom
The Kurds in this world’s state
Why are they deprived of their rights?
Why are they all doomed?
See, from the Arabs to the Georgians
Everything is Kurdish and, as with citadel
The Turks and the Persians besiege them
From four sides at once
And they both make the Kurdish people
Into a target for Fate’s arrow

(Bozarslan, 1990, p. 56)

This poem was written a century before the ideas of the French Revolution came into the world. However, the idea of nation-state did not light a fire in the hearts of privileged Kurdish princes. When the Ottoman Empire started their Tanzimat and took away the privileges of the emirates and the Kurdish princes at the end of the 19th century, only then did the Kurds start a few uprisings for an independent Kurdistan. The Kurds “lacked coordination as well as support from the outside world and, owing to the fragmentation of Kurdish society and the quarrels and contradictions inherent in Feudal divisions, their attempts were doomed to failure. Yet they were instrumental at least in making public opinion and the great powers of the time aware of the legitimacy of the Kurdish aspiration for a national state” (Nezan, 1996, p. 11).

After WWI, in 1918 Woodrow Wilson’s fourteen-point Declaration sparked up many people to demand their own nation-states. Kurdistan was also considered to be created when “Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States, contemplated the creation of an independent Kurdistan on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. The international treaty of Sevres, signed on 10 August 1920, recognized the legitimacy of the claims presented by the Kurdish general Sherif Pasha” (Nezan, 1996, p. 11). The Kurds would have gotten their independent land in the mid-20th century, but geographical separation after the WWI, hypocrisy and double standards of the west as well as tribal hegemonic greed of the Kurdish leadership played an important role in keeping the Kurds of Greater Kurdistan separate.

Then why didn’t this happen? There are two reasons for this according to Nezam, one of the reasons was that the interests of the colonial powers, Great Britain and France, lay in dividing Kurdistan. The other reason was “inherent

in the Kurdish social culture of the time, torn by internecine quarrels among elites unable to meet the challenge of history” (Nezan, 1996, p. 11). At the same time the Turkish General Mustafa Kemal promised the Kurds that he would integrate them into his state and so the Kurds gave him all their forces. When the state of Turkey got the recognition, it needed through the Treaty of Lausanne in July 1923, Mustafa Kemal did not stick to his promise. He “dissolved the national Assembly which had included the seventy-five Kurdish representatives. He even closed Kurdish schools and forbade all expressions of Kurdish culture” (Nezan, 1996, p. 11).

Kurds in Northern Kurdistan learned from this mistake and when asked by the League of Nations about wanting to have an independent Kurdistan in 1925, “...an overwhelming majority, seven eighths of them came out in favor of an independent Kurdish state and categorically refused the return of Turkish sovereignty or annexation by Iraq” (Nezan, 1996, p. 11). The Council of the League of Nations once again didn't listen to the Kurds due to their own interests. Britain decided to incorporate Northern Kurdistan into Iraq, which was Britain's mandate in 1925, due to the immense oil wealth in that part of Kurdistan.

To appease France and the United States they each “received 23.75 percent of the revenues of the Turkish Petroleum company, which later became the Iraq Petroleum Company and was in charge of exploiting all the oil deposits of Kurdistan” (Nezan, 1996, p. 11-12). The Syrian part of Kurdistan was under France's mandate. France decided to incorporate “... the Kurdish provinces of Jezire and Kurd Dagh, whereas Iran has overcome the independence movement led by the Kurdish chieftain Simko” (Nezan, 1996, p. 12).

Another part of Kurdish identity is Kurdish culture. Due to the historical, socioeconomic and geopolitical circumstances of the Kurds, there were also changes in the culture. Paying closer attention to Kurdish culture, we realize that although influence from neighboring cultures, and a tendency to distance themselves from the Arabs, Turks and Persians impacted Kurdish culture and although imposing western culture on themselves, we still find ancient components in Kurdish culture. Anthropologists believe that “an early stage where Kurdish costumes, unrestrained by centralizing forces, showed a huge and colorful variety, followed by an increasing tendency to abandon traditional clothes for western ones, while the events of recent decades have led to the emergence of a few particular types of costume only as typically Kurdish” (Allison, 1996, p. 5). This shows the effect of Kurdish costume devaluation due to the colonization of the neighboring countries such as Turkey and Iran and also the west.

The Kurdish language adds another factor to Kurdish identity. The situation in Kurdistan was not ideal for the emergence of one official Kurdish language for a very long time, however there was “a period of improvement followed owing to the increasing encroachment of other languages; faced by the need

to demonstrate a clear Kurdish identity, Kurdish scholars have made several attempts in modern times to create a unified, but more or less artificial written language where a rich profusion of dialects in fact exists” (Allison, 1996, p. 5).

2.2. Kurdish Nationalism in Relation to the “Other”

Identity is a combination of multiple intersectional layers and the modern ideas of nationalism, the nation state and being different from one’s opponents is an important component of someone’s identity. This brings us to our next point, in which countries define themselves through their enemy, especially in times of instability and war, when there is an evident enemy to a country or group. The Kurdish struggle is a consequence of the oppression of the numerous invaders, colonizers, dictators and oppressors to the Kurdish nation. The oppression, massacres, and genocides against Kurds “brought about the kindling spirit of resistance, to forge a Kurdish national conscience and reinforce the ties which bind the Kurds to their identity” (Nezam, 1996, p. 14).

The Kurdish struggle and national identity that Ahmed Khani talked about in the 17th century quickly became a political identity for Kurds. With the passage of time, it got strengthened when it had encounters with the other national identities of the states they lived in. Turkish, Arabic, Syrian or Iranian nationalists actually helped the Kurds strengthen their own nationalistic identity. Van Bruinessen contends that “the Kurdish movement of Iraq developed its political ideas and forms of action in debates and polemics with Arab socialist and nationalist movements and adopted much of their discourse. In Turkey, the Kurdish movement developed in close relation with the Turkish left as well as in communication with the Iraqi Kurdish movement, and the same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of the development of Kurdish political identity in Iran and Syria” (van Bruinessen, 2014, p. 3).

Subsequently, each part of Kurdistan had a different Kurdish movement matching the socio-political circumstances of their geography and state authorities. There are groups of people in Kurdistan whose identities as a Kurd have been denied or challenged either by other Kurds, their neighbors or sometimes themselves. Yazidis and Alevis are a perfect example of Kurds oppressing other Kurds. The Yazidis and Alevis much like the Christian and Jewish Kurds, are minorities, so they remember their traumatic experiences at the hands of Sunni Kurds. This is one the reasons why they, especially the Yazidis, choose to identify more with their religion than their nationalistic identity. A small group of the Yazidis, especially the ones who migrated to the former Soviet Union states deny being Kurds and consider Yazidism their religion as well as their ethnicity.

Kurdish political parties need the support of these minority groups, therefore, the Sunni Muslim Kurdish leaders have been working on this issue. “Yazidis and especially Alevi have been strongly represented, and these leaders have made great efforts to awaken an awareness of Kurdish identity in their communities” (Van Bruinessen, 2014, p. 4). This shows that religion is a significant factor in the Kurdish identity struggle. Kurdish identity and nationalism have been imagined in different ways that could adapt to their different circumstances and respond to changes as well.

There are two main events in the early 21st century that merit our attention: the formation of “the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq and the declaration of self-governing cantons in the Kurdish zones of Syria, have clearly brought out the existence of competing visions of Kurdish political self-expression” (van Bruinessen, 2014, p. 5). Although these two movements show completely different types of Kurdish nationalism, they emphasize that the Kurdish struggle for establishing their own nation state as well as the Kurds being a separate ethnic group still needs international attention.

2.3. The Kurdish Struggle in Iraq

The Kurds have long been a presence in the Mesopotamian region (Shakir, 2021). They were active before and after the formation of Iraq as an independent state and they have always had the dream to establish a nation state under the name of Kurdistan in their homeland in the Mesopotamian region. They started their resistance immediately after the independence of Iraq, but starting from 1961 this political struggle in Iraq became an armed struggle. Their demands were to have autonomous, independent, self-governed and democratic representation in the Iraqi Parliament.

The Kurds established their own political party and continued their struggle. This newly established political party and their leadership has a tribal background which means less political and more tribal or feudal mindset. Therefore, they were more concerned about self- government than anything else because this would mean controlling more lands and tribes. The activists who established the political party, the Kurdish Democratic Party (PDK), were led by two types of people. One group was an urban educated political group and the other had more ties with the military support of the tribes. Tensions soon broke out between the two leaders of PDK, Mustafa Barzani and Jalal Talabani; the latter was dismissed and fought with the PDK in 1966.

The PDK was defeated in 1975, which led Jalal Talabani to establish his own party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which mainly included people from Sulaimani. The division is more about hegemonic struggle than

ideological differences. The PDK controls the Turkish border which generates immense revenues and the PUK controls the Iran border with less revenue. This financial difference between these parties can be seen in the political and election campaigns. Both govern their own territory and their own shares in the Kurdish government and also in the Iraqi government.

They have their own faction of Peshmerga, which control the borders or their governed areas and while crossing from one region to the other, it seems that one enters an enemy country, but now situation is much better than before.

The mid-1990s, the KDP and PUK were engaged in a fratricidal civil war, among other reasons over the redistribution of the region's revenue. The KDP succeeded in expelling the PUK from Erbil (for which it invoked the help of Saddam Hussein's army!) and has since been the dominant party of the two (van Bruinessen, 2014, p. 6).

The US invaded Iraq in 2003, which led the two governments (PUK and PDK) to reunite and establish the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The Kurds, however, were less excited to be a part of Iraqi government because they have suffered genocide, persecution, political victimization and politically motivated prosecution and during the Iran- Iraq war, the Kurdish-Iraqi civil war, Halabjah genocide and the Anfal Campaign between 182,000 and 250,000 Kurds were killed. In 2014, when ISIS appeared in Mosul the Iraqi army fled and the Kurdish forces took back many territories which were Arabized and occupied by the Iraqi Army.

The Kurdish forces have controlled these areas since then; however, the Talabani faction of the PUK Peshmerga, through a deal with Iranian Badr Corps officials arranged for the retreat of their own Peshmerga forces, leading to an easy capture of Kirkuk by Iraqi Army and PMF forces. The collapse of the Peshmerga defense and loss of Kirkuk to Iraq was a fatal blow to KRG government's revenues. The KDP, PUK and KRG are in many ways simply the family businesses of the Barzani and Talabani families. It is hard to imagine that these two tribes would ever let go of their territorial control of northern Kurdistan, but with these parties in power it would be an uphill task to gather the Kurds from different parts of the Greater Kurdistan.

2.4. The Kurdish Struggle in Turkey and Syria

Similar to Iraq, the political parties in Syria and Turkey emerged in the 1960s onwards from the bourgeois class. Most of the political parties had so-

cialism or Marxism as their basic ideology, but political tribal leaders remained among their ranks, except the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK), "which from the start sought to represent the exploited classes and considered the tribal elite as collaborators in the colonisation of Kurdistan" (van Bruinessen, 1988, p. 40-46).

However, the PKK recruits came from all over Greater Kurdistan and they are not ethno-religious centered. The PKK pursues post-nationalistic ideology because it uses Kurdish independence as a symbol more than an attainable reality. In the Syrian part of Kurdistan (Rojava), which is controlled by PYD, a different situation is unfolding. The PYD established its own local and regional governments. They function based on the ideas of radical democracy and gender and ethnic equality.

The offenses of ISIS towards Kobani caused turmoil and the immigration of Kurds, but it also made the PYD and its armed struggle gain popularity internationally. The contrast between the PDK and PKK represent the different forms of Kurdish nationalism. These parties are very powerful forces, but they are also rivals in all parts of Kurdistan. There are many other factors in the political struggle of the Kurds, but these seem to be the most prominent ones at the moment.

2.5. Kurdish Political Struggle from the Ottoman Empire to Present Day

To understand the current situation of the Kurds a quick overview of the past is essential to understand the current socio-political circumstance of the Kurds. The geography of Kurdistan maybe one of the reasons why they have struggled so much. Kurdistan is surrounded by high mountains and has many valleys, but it also connects Asia, Europe and the Middle East. This strategic location has been the place of trade for centuries, however, it has also been the place of many invasions, which never allowed the Kurds the peace to build their own unified political identity. In the mid-10th century, Kurdistan was ruled by three principalities, which were "the Shaddadids, with their capital at Ganja (951-1174), the Hassanwahids in the south (959-1015) and the Merwanids in the west, with their capital at the Diyarbakir (990-1096)" (Nezam, 1996, p. 12).

These principalities managed to unite the Kurds over the years, but the invasions of Turkish tribes did not allow this to last for long. In the 12th century, the Kurdish prince Saladin tried to build his own empire based on Islamic reunification, but again this was ruined by the Mongol invasions in the 13th century. Later on, in 1515, the Kurdish emirates signed a treaty with the Ottoman Sultan Selim-I. The deal recognized the autonomy of the Kurds and in exchange the Ottomans got full military support against Persian Shiites, the Safavid Empire.

This deal brought peace in the region that lasted for three centuries. Even though Kurdistan was divided into seventeen principalities and fed the tribal rivalries, it enjoyed somewhat peaceful era. At the start of the 16th century, the Ottomans took northern Kurdistan and Iraq under their rule and this region remained under their control until the end of WWI. The first division of the Kurdistan region and division between the Kurds happened on 23 August, 1514 in the Battle of Chaldiran in northern Kurdistan. Although the battle was between the Safavid and Ottoman Empires, the Kurds on both sides were divided and an atmosphere of resentment began because the Ottomans defeated the Safavid Persians with the help of the Kurds on the frontline.

Another reason was a religious one; the Ottomans needed the Kurds as Sunni allies against the Safavids, a Shi'a majority (Eppel, 2008, p. 239). According to Özoglu (1996) the Kurds were an interest to the Ottomans to defend the empire's eastern borders against the expansion of the Safavid Empire. The ideas of the French Revolution in the 19th century took everybody by storm. The ideas of nation-state and nationalism came full force into the Ottoman Empire. The Kurds also wanted their own nation. There were two notable movements at this time. They were led by "Prince Muhammad of Rewanduz (1839) and Bedir Khan Pasha of Botan (1847)" but were "crushed by the Ottomans with the support of the British and the Germans" (Nezam, 1996, p. 13).

Along with the lack of leadership, unity and political understanding of the Kurds, the great powers of the 'democratic' countries have also had their own colonial and imperialist interests in mind which is why their constant intervention in the division, oppression, and subjugation of the Kurdish struggle is a big part of Kurdish history. In 1925, the USSR openly provided help to Turkey and so did France, discreetly, to crush several Kurdish uprisings most notably "the Sheykh Sa'id revolt, the mount Arrarat in 1927-30 and of Dersim in 1936-39" (Nezam, 1996, p. 13).

Galip concurs that "there was no place for "Kurdishness" in the new Republic of Turkey" (Galip, 2015, p. 35). There was a period of Turkification of the Kurdish villages in the 1930s and 1940s, where they changed the names of these places to Turkish names. Kurds were called "mountain Turks" (Houston, 2005, p. 406). The Turkification of Kurdistan was carried out; van Bruinessen asserts that "by the late 1930s, the eastern provinces were pacified. Every Kurdish village of some size was closely controlled by a Turkish police post [...] The government policy of forced assimilation seemed to bear fruit. In the towns, everyone spoke Turkish, and Kurdish nationalist sentiment seemed to disappear altogether" (Bruinessen, 1984, p. 121).

In conclusion, since the partition of Kurdistan by western powers, who also support the oppressors, Kurdish people survived, and have tried to do the impossible: demand their rights within the jurisdiction of other states. The

Mesopotamian region, the cradle of civilization, was invaded by the rulers time and again and established their empires, caliphates and dynasties. Each of these empires, caliphates and dynasties tried to oppress Kurdish identity.

Later on, with the establishment of the idea of nation state, many countries, especially Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, have been trying to unify its people under the name of their nation states, which in turn denies the Kurdish identity and struggle completely. The majority of the Kurds refuse to be molded into the identities of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria or Armenia. This is an endless struggle for the Kurds due to their geopolitical situation.

Chapter Three

International and Regional Diplomacy and the Kurds

In this chapter, I present the historical background of the Kurds with special focus on their diplomatic relations with the local, regional, and international actors. However, the entrance point to the history of Kurdish diplomacy is at the period of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires because before this era, the Kurds were mainly nomadic or semi nomadic tribes, migrating between the valleys, mountains, and fields of Kurdistan (Ozoglu, 2004). After the conquest of Mesopotamia by Muslim forces, the Kurdish nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes were incorporated into the new Islamic realm. Hence, Kurdish diplomacy did not develop into a particular Kurdish form until the 1800s and 1900s. Moreover, Kurdish history before the emergence of both Empires, Safavid and Ottoman, was related to the Kurdish Emirates (dynasties) in which the diplomatic relationship between the Emirates was usually limited to discussion of war over the controlled lands or borders of the Emirates, exchange of commodities and animals between the dynasties, or tribal rivalries. Therefore, I focus on the later periods of the Kurdish diplomacy.

This chapter consists of three sections, in which I present the history of Kurdish diplomacy and analyze the diplomatic approaches in each period. In the coming sections, I will explore; i) Kurdish diplomacy until the end of WWI, ii) Kurdish diplomacy after WWI until 1947, and iii) Kurdish diplomacy since 1947. The nature of Kurdish diplomacy for most of its history has been tribal-oriented, concerning personal relations and individual interests, and did not evolve to national scale diplomacy until the establishment of the KRI, of which there is more discussion in the coming sections. In the section of Kurdish diplomacy after 1947, I mostly focused on the diplomacy of southern Kurdistan.

3.1. Kurds and Diplomacy until the End of WWI

The majority of Kurds before WWI lived in the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, and later in the Qajar dynasty. Hence, when we attempt to understand the diplomatic relationship of the Kurds with their oppressors, we mostly focus on the local Kurdish tribes along with religious leaders, called *Sheikhs* or *Sayyeds*,

and their relationship with the sultans, administrators, or kings. Before discussing the diplomacy during this period, we should bear in mind that a dominant factor in Kurdish society has been tribalism and clannism. Donald Bruce Disney states that “tribal loyalty and aspirations appeared to predominate over other issues of loyalty to religion or empire” (1980, p. 16). The nature of diplomacy during this period was a tribal-based relationship with the central government.

The relationship among the Kurds, the Ottomans, and the Safavids can be traced back to the early years of the sixteenth century, but the relationship reached another level after the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, a battle between the Safavids and the Ottomans (McDowall, 2007). As a result of the battle, the Kurds had to decide whether to join Shah Ismail’s side or the Ottomans. The ruling families desired a more independent environment, which they could get through the Ottomans because Shah Ismail administered the territories through the Turkmen or Persians, while the Ottomans relied on the local chiefs. The Kurdish ruling families within the Safavid Empire did not enjoy being ruled by an outsider because the Kurds preferred to devote themselves to the head of their ruling family, or sheikh, and not the outsiders.

While the Kurds were trying to pick a side, a Kurdish Sufi whose name was Idris Bitlisi strengthened his position in the Sultan’s house. Bitlisi was respected by the Kurdish chiefs and at the same time by Sultan Selim, negotiating with Kurdish notable families to persuade them to join the Ottomans’ suzerainty. Consequently, the majority of the Kurdish ruling families accepted the Bitlisi terms, especially due to semi or full independence that the local chiefs had under the Ottomans, and many emirates were added to Shah Salim’s territories over the year. David McDowall notes that these emirates were subject to a quasi-feudal system by the Ottomans (2007).

In addition, the diplomatic approach of Bitlisi cannot be ignored because he played a crucial role to persuade the local chiefs by promising them autonomous ruling, along with prestige in the empire. The Kurds were divided between the two empires, but the Kurds impacted both empires greatly during wars, tax collection, and expansion. For instance, the Kurds during the reign of Sultan Sulaiman Qanun helped the sultan, while the *Morki* Kurds helped the Safavids to recapture Baghdad. The Kurds between 1500-1800 worked as mercenaries and manifested effective power in both empires especially militarily; the diplomatic relationship between the Kurds and the Ottomans was more harmonious than between the Kurds and the Safavids, and the Kurds under the Ottomans were more independent than under the Safavid power.

In the early years of the 19th century, when the Kurdish tribal chiefs gained local dominance in the Ottoman Empire, the sultan had to accept these changes (McDowall, 2007). The growing power within the Kurdish territories in the Ottoman Empire was partially due to the support promised by the Russians.

From 1853 to 1855, the Russians contacted the local Kurdish chiefs to help them in a war against the Ottomans and in return, the Russian provided an autonomous Kurdish principality (Disney, 1980). We will see more promises by oppressors and different states in the coming discussion – promises that they would create an autonomous region for the Kurds. Undoubtedly, an autonomous Kurdish region did not come into existence until very late: the Kurds, during the negotiations, could not fulfill their goals.

As explained in the first chapter, revolts and rebellions were common responses in Kurdish history, but the Kurds never created a unified front that could form and defend the nation or be a base from which to fight for Kurdish nationalism. For example, Mir Muhamad's power seizing in the early 1800s (McDowall, 2007) and the Badirkhan family revolt (Disney, 1980) were not nationalism-driven attempts; on the contrary, both attempted to establish their superiority over other tribes. Mir Mahmud was negotiating with the Qajar Dynasty so that in the case of the Ottomans attacking his principality, he could flee to Iran, although he was then persuaded by a British general to yield to Istanbul, and later was killed (McDowall, 2007). Regarding the Badirkhan revolt, in the Ottoman archives, there are letters indicating that Badirkhan was anxious about losing his power over the emirate (Ozoglu, 2004); he was not worried about the Kurdish nation.

Clearly, Badirkhan Pasha was not a nationalistic figure, but his descendants in the Badirkhan family impacted Kurdish nationalistic history significantly. Kurdish nationalism emerged in the 19th century. Sheikh Ubeydullah of Nahri was a prominent religious notable of the Shamdinan family, arguably fighting for Kurdish causes; in 1880, he launched his revolt against the Qajar Dynasty and the Ottomans (Ozoglu, 2004). British generals were aware of the revolt and were monitoring the situation. On one hand, Sheikh Ubeydullah asked the Ottoman authorities to support his revolt to overthrow the Qajars' power in the Kurdish territories in Iran. On the other hand, he had planned to attack the Ottomans' districts after his sons succeeded in controlling the Qajar Dynasty territories. Sheikh Ubeydullah's intentions regarding the Ottomans and the Qajar Dynasty were unclear. In addition, he was also aware of the Armenians' relationship with Britain. Sheikh Ubeydullah was afraid of the promise given to the Armenians to have an independent state, and, feeling left out, he realized it was a crucial move to unite the Kurds (Ozoglu, 2004). Sheikh promised to agitate the power growth of the Shikak family in Qajar Dynasty and the Harki family in the Ottoman realm.

This revolt was defeated by the Qajar Dynasty in 1881 and Sheikh fled to Istanbul, surrendering himself to the Ottomans (McDowall, 2007). It is still one of the most significant revolts in Kurdish history; as consul-general Abbot described, "his project is to place himself at the head of a Kurdish principality

and to annex the whole of Kurdistan” (McDowall, 2007, p. 55). This is an indication that the idea of Kurdish nationalism partially existed in Sheikh Ubeydullah’s revolt. The British were aware of his intention; hence, it implies that Sheikh had undertaken diplomatic negotiation with the British officials, although the criteria of his negotiation are still vague. Sheikh Ubeydullah had a good relationship with the sultans, but not with the pashas or the local administrators. For instance, in 1877-1878, during the Russo-Turkish war, Sheikh was the head of Kurdish Tribal Forces (McDowall, 2005).

Before closing this summary of the nationalism movement of Sheikh Ubeydullah, I would like to emphasize how great a role tribalism and religious prestige played in almost every relationship during this period. When Sultan Abdul-Salim II, a traditionalist, gained power, Sheikh became a dominant ally of the sultan because both shared a conservative ideology and a determination to preserve Sunni Islam, which contradicted the *Tanzimat*⁷ reformation. Sheikh was a devotee of *Naqshbandi Tariqat*,⁸ following Sunni-Sufism ideology, and a notable figure in the area, so the Sultan had to establish a stronger relationship with him in order to secure the regions and loyalty of Sheikh along with Sheikh’s followers. Clearly, the diplomacy between Sheikh and Sultan was based on religious prestige and tribal honor.

The relationship between the Kurds and Qajar Dynasty was less troublesome in terms of the connection between the local chiefs and the Qajar Shahs. Gradually, the Qajar authorities placed their trusted men and Persian chiefs into the Kurdish areas to secure their position in the region in the case of any internal rebellions or invasions. The Kurds provided infantry and tribal fighters in the matter of days or weeks to the shahs, and in return, the Qajar Dynasty gave more authority and credibility to the local chiefs. The British Consul General in Tabriz, Walter Smart, saw this as a feudal relationship (McDowall, 2007).

The Hamidiya Cavalry is another example of the military relationship between the sultan and the Kurdish tribesmen. In 1891, Sultan Abdul-Hamid created mounted forces that were mostly one Kurdish tribe, and their tribal leader became the commander of the force. The Hamidiya tribe was important for the Ottomans especially because they were used as an obstacle and resistance force against the Russian penetration and infusion from the east of Anatolia. During the late years of the 19th century and early years of the 20th century, the Kurds became caught up in the conflicts between the Ottomans, Safavids, and Russians in the region. The Kurds were focused on the particular

⁷ *Tanzimat* was an era during the Ottoman rule where they conducted reforms (1839-1876).

⁸ It is an order, lineage or school of Sufism. Their followers practice religion through mystic and spiritual practices. *Naqshbandi Tariqat* is the only Sufi *Tariqa* that establishes its lineage to Prophet Muhammad.

family or clan superiority and power, but gradually, the idea of nationalism was growing within the Kurdish societies, after the revolt of Sheikh Ubeydullah and the publication of the first Kurdish newspaper, *Kürdistan*, in 1892 by the Badirkhan family (Disney, 1980).

The year 1908 is revolutionary in the Ottomans' era as well as for the Kurds. Young Turk movements, nationalism awareness, and other conflicts kept rising within the empire. Some of the Kurds felt that they belonged to the Turkish identity and others did not. Several notables from Badirkhan and Shamdinan families showed their intention to spread the idea of Kurdishness. Political clubs were established by Amin Ali Badirkhan and General Sharif Pasha (Disney, 1980) and the Kurdish reformists saw themselves compatible with the ideology and principles of the Young Turk movement. As a result, the Kurds overestimated the benefits and relationships with this movement. After gaining power, the Young Turk members mistreated the Kurds, and after 1909, started attacking the minorities in the Ottoman Empire. With the declaration of the constitution in the Ottoman Empire, the ruling families feared losing power. Soon, they started causing trouble and initiated a brief revolt against the administrators.

Until the breakout of WWI, the Kurds were divided, yet most of the notables, ruling families, and chiefs supported the Ottomans in the war against the Russians. Although the Russians attempted to gain Kurdish support, the Kurds knew about the Russian-Armenians alliance and their bitter history with the Armenians. This bitter history dated back to the Kurdish brutality against the Armenian people, especially of the Hamidiyan troops, when they seized the Armenians, destroyed their homes and committed one of the most horrendous genocides (McDowall, 2007). As a result, before WWI officially began, most of the Kurds decided their side based on one objective. It would not be the first time to see the Kurds overestimate their ally or their opponents. The Kurds were fighting the Armenians and Russians, while Young Turk nationalists already had a plan for the Kurds (McDowall, 2007).

WWI ended, and gradually the power of the Sultanate decreased. The overestimation of Young Turk's promises was yet to be recognized by the Kurdish commanders in 1918. The Kurds were still tribally oriented, and factionalism caused massive destruction and setback in each approach or discussion they had with the power holders or oppressors. Donald Bruce Disney mentioned that Kurdish loyalty to the Ottomans during WWI was largely due to religious similarity with the Ottomans and anti-Christian notions among Kurdish tribal troops. Most of the Kurdish diplomatic dialogue had been based on tribal interest or sole-figure power dominance, so the notion of Kurdish nationalism never evolved to a greater level before 1918, and then the Kurds realized the necessity of autonomous principality or region.

In this period, the diplomatic gains were the creation of youth networks among different ethnicities in the Ottoman Empire, emphasizing reformation. The establishment of the Kurdish political clubs was another achievement. These clubs focused on education and intellectual growth of the nation. The fundamental gain in this period was the realization of the Kurds how critical nationalism is. Diplomatically, the Kurds failed on some fronts during this period. They could not form strong relations with the SuperPowers, and the Kurdish tribes could not unify the people in the case of confrontation against the oppressors. The Kurds even failed to create diplomatic relations among factions of the Kurds.

3.2. Kurdish Diplomacy after WWI until 1947

After the end of WWI, the Ottoman land was devastated, so the SuperPowers desired to penetrate their influence and existence into the weak Ottoman territories. The Bolshevik revolution took the Russians out of the equation until WWII, but the Communists revealed the details of the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1917, which decided the fate of the Middle East (McDowall, 2007). According to the agreement, France and Britain divided the Middle East and Ottoman territories between themselves. Consequently, the Kurds were among the societies that had an obscured future in the region. The US president, Woodrow Wilson, in his Fourteen Points, emphasized the sovereignty of every nation within the Ottoman Empire. It seemed to be a gateway for the Kurds, but the future revealed otherwise.

After 1918, the British forces had control over the Mesopotamian region, although they were uncertain about the northern part of ancient Mesopotamia, which was Mosul *Vilayet*⁹ (province). The Mosul province consisted of a majority of Kurds, and was precious terrain due to its petroleum reserves. Soon, the British officials acknowledged that, and they attempted to control the Mosul province. To achieve the goal, the British delegates were in touch with the Kurdish chiefs of Khanaqin, Tuz Khurmatu, Kifri, as well as chiefs of Sulaimani. The Kurds were constantly under the threat of the Ottomans notifying the Kurds that British rule would abandon them and put them under Arab control (McDowall, 2007). During this sensitive and determining point, the Kurdish chiefs along with the notables were trying to strengthen the idea of a united Kurdish nation. This included Sharif Pasha, Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji, Mustafa Barzani, Sayyed Abdulkadir of Shamdinan, Emin Ali Badirkhan, and other individuals.

⁹ Vilayet: first-order administrative division in the Ottoman Empire.

The Kurds established several political groups and from there on Kurdish nationalism was politicized. One of these groups was the Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan (SAK).¹⁰ The members of SAK advocated for Kurdish independence and autonomy (Ozoglu, 2004). Abdulkadir of Shamdinan was the son of Sheikh Ubeydullah, who was a crucial member of SAK, but Emin Ali Badirkhan¹¹ was not pleased about Abdulkadir's presence in the club. In addition, Abdulkadir asked Britain for assistance in establishing an autonomous Kurdistan during the Paris Peace Conference. Sayyed Abulkadir also attempted to ask the French as well as the US authorities to consider the Kurdish cause, but none of them showed any sign of support to Abdulkadir, except for the British authorities (McDowall, 2007).

A British High Commissioner of Istanbul, Richard Webb, pointed out that Sayyed Abulkadir asked to make himself the ruler of the autonomous Kurdistan. As mentioned earlier, several figures between 1918-1923 tried to be the leader of the Kurds and Kurdish nation, but there was little if any collective effort. Sayyed Abdulkadir of Shamdinan explicitly displayed his desire to lead; but these diplomatic attempts, or rather individual milestones, would never benefit the nation. This approach never established whether or not the Kurds deserved to be an independent nation; instead, it led to chaos and victimization for the Kurds. Although Abdulkadir did not ask for an independent Kurdistan, he told the British officials that if they permitted such an idea, he would separate his realm from that of the Ottomans, and declare an independent state. Sometimes, the British authorities would whisper speculation about a Kurdish state, but it was for the benefit of British rule, because in case of war against the Ottomans in Turkish Kurdistan or other locations in the area, they could use the information in their favor (Ozoglu, 2004).

In South Kurdistan and Mosul province, Sheikh Mahmud announced himself as the representative of the Kurdish people and notified the British officials in Baghdad. The British officials showed interest in creating an autonomous and tribally orientated Kurdistan. However, in the Paris Peace Conference, they were uncertain about whom to choose as the leader of the Kurds. General Mehmet Sharif Pasha¹² presented himself as another representative of the Kurds, and he contacted the British officials to accept him as the leader of an independent Kurdistan (McDowall, 2007). He also attempted to harmonize the long, brutal relationship between the Kurds and Armenians before the Peace Conference, thus, he was successful in forming a peaceful relationship with

¹⁰ SAK was a Kurdish organization established in 1917 in Constantinople.

¹¹ Emin Ali was one of the well-known notables and intellectuals of the Badirkhan family.

¹² Mehmet Sharif Pasha was a nationalist leader and the founder of several Kurdish clubs in Istanbul.

the Armenians and drawing a map on which some conquered areas were to be given back to the Armenians.

In 1919, Boghos Nubar, representative of the Armenians, along with Sharif Pasha, submitted their proposed maps of both nations and searched for support from the prominent figures in their nation before attending the Peace Conference. However, soon after Sharif Pasha's proposition, conflicts emerged within the Kurdish clubs and political groups. The rivalry between Abdulkadir and Emin Ali reached a climax that resulted in the dissolution of SAK. It is another example of the internal Kurdish struggle and preferring personal interests to the national interests from the Kurd leadership.

At the conference in Paris, no one was there to represent the Kurds, since Sharif Pasha withdrew his proclamation as the representative of the Kurds. The echoes of these rifts and conflicts can be heard even in the 21st century. The Kurds were deeply divided from the south, north, and east. Decisions were made by the west without the presence of the Kurds in the conference, so the Kurds lost hopes in Britain. The discussion about the Kurdish fate continued until the treaty of Sèvres on August 20, 1920. Articles 62 and 64 of the treaty provided a future independent state for southern Kurdistan and other Kurdish provinces in the north, though excluded the Kurds from Syria and Dersim Province (McDowall, 2007). The treaty also shrank the borders of the newly formed Turkish government, and the outcome of the treaty of Sèvres was another treaty.

During this period between the treaty of Sèvres and the next treaty, which was the treaty of Lausanne, 1920-1923, once again the region faced instability and uncertainty. The Kurds were shattered, the Armenians' future was opaque, the Turks were unhappy, and the British authorities kept trying to win Mosul Province. A potential relationship emerged between the Kurds and Greeks during this time when the Greeks launched major campaigns against the Turk regime from the west. The prime minister of Greece urged Europe to assist the Kurds (McDowall, 2007). To some extent, this relationship was diplomatically promising for the Kurds to share their cause with another nation, but negotiations were mainly by the Badirkhan family members. Yet again, a single family tried to do the job. The British officers in 1921 showed support for the Kurds, but it was not a strategic support because it was not from London (McDowall). The Kurdish leaders, who called themselves representatives of the nation, were representative only of their clan or family, and were protecting their stakes. There had been diplomatic discussions, but the discussions were around the recognition of one family, and the superiority of one clan and expansion of their land.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk took advantage of the situation in 1922, when he acknowledged the weak relationship between the Kurds and London. He tricked

the Kurds and propagated the idea that he wanted Muslims to support him to protect the Muslim land from the west. Consequently, some Kurdish tribes fell for this, and showed allegiance to Mustafa Kemal (Ozoglu, 2004). These events led to the Treaty of Lausanne, which was signed on July 24, 1923 (McDowall, 2007). The treaty brought a massive change to the course of Kurdish history. Since the day the treaty was signed, the Turkish government has continually violated the treaty and launched a series of Turkification campaigns against the Kurds. The Kurds have faced such campaigns as Arabization in Iraq, Farzization in Iran, and Turkification in Turkey. Nonetheless, the treaty could not settle the Mosul Province issue because the British government and the newly established Turkish government both desired to control it.

The diplomatic approaches or the relationship of the Kurdish leaders with the foreign officials or states started progressing. One of the Kurdish leaders in Sulaimani was Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji, who was from a *Qadiriyya*¹³ religious order and was well known among the Kurds as well as the British authorities working in the region. Initially, he allied with Britain, but he was unsatisfied with the increase of British interference in his realm. This continued for some time, but he got frustrated with extreme intervention, which ended up with Sheikh Mahmud's rebellion from 1919 to 1932 against the British mandate (Romano, 2006). The British officials already realized his important role in the northern Mesopotamian region, so even after his exile, the British authorities called upon him again to fight against the Turks. However, he returned, and allied with Kemal Ataturk.

Sheikh Mahmud's rage against the British authorities and religious attachment with Kemal Ataturk played an important role in this alliance, and he ditched the Kurdish cause. Kurdish history is full of such incidents of betrayal because the Kurds have been tribally influenced and governed for a long time, and the tribal leaders never emerged from the tribal mentality, and did not think about the Kurds as a nation. Another influential figure, Sayyed Abdulkadir, was a son of a revolutionist and nationalist Sheikh Ubeydullah. He had a strong socio-political position in the region. He was also in contact with the CUP¹⁴ leaders after the revolution of the Young Turks in 1908. He asked to persuade Kurdish fellow tribes to recognize the CUP revolution as well as back them up (Ozoglu, 2004).

Hakan Ozoglu emphasized the importance of Abudlakdir's role within the Ottoman bureaucracy as he was designated as in *Ayan Meclisi*¹⁵ (2004).

¹³ A Sunni Sufism order, usually called *Qadiriyya Tariqat*.

¹⁴ The Committee of Union and Progress, secretly established in 1889, was a revolutionary political organization.

¹⁵ 'Assembly of Notables' functioned as the General Assembly of the Ottoman Empire.

Although he served in CUP and the Ottoman house, he privately joined SAK and was loved by the public as Istanbul's population consisted of Kurdish laborers that came to replace the Armenians to work. Although in 1920 the Turks found out that he had been working with the Kurdish nationalist movements for a while, the Turks continued working with him and the revolutionary parties in the country also respected him. It shows he had a strong relationship and an intelligent diplomatic policy towards the Turks. Even though he worked with Emin Ali Badirkhan for SAK, he could not resolve the rift between his clan and the clan of Badirkhan. As discussed earlier, Sayyed Abdulkadir also approached the western states for help, though only the British delegates heard his request.

Sayyed Abdulkadir was unable to unite the Kurds in the north against Kemal Atatürk's movement, also called the Kemalist Movement. Perhaps tribally fractured provinces of Turkish Kurdistan would have never let him represent all Kurds, but the most devastating point was the divide between Emin Ali Badirkhan and Sayyed Abdulkadir; as a result, it led to the dissolution of SAK. Even though Sayyed Abdulkadir was a religious leader like Sheikh Mahmud and a charismatic figure, he could not solve the internal conflicts among the Kurdish tribes diplomatically. However, his constant support for Kurdish nationalism at the end of the Ottomans' reign cannot be ignored. Indeed, Sayyed Abdulkadir was a nationalist and anti-Kemalist, as he persistently showed his ambition to help the British government to overthrow the Kemalists and Turkish nationalists during 1920-1925.

Another Kurdish figure, Simko Shikak,¹⁶ is an important personality in Kurdish history. Ismail Agha Simko, known as Simko Shikak, led a significant revolt against the Iranian regime, and he declared an independent Kurdistan after the treaty of Sèvres (Disney, 1980). Simko Shikak was very like Sheikh Mahmud Barznji in that both were tribally affiliated. They met each other in 1923 (Romano, 2006), but there was no strong bond between the leaders. Probably cooperation did not exist due to lack of anticipation of future plans, as well as overestimation of solo ventures. Since both leaders were very proud of their tribal prestige, they also made the same mistake as the other Kurdish leaders, trying to lead the Kurds and their resistance single-handedly. Simko Shikak's revolt was suppressed by the Iranian authorities in 1924 with the help of Assyrians and Azeris in the area because both nations were suffering, but Agha Simko's revolt was all about the Kurds and did not bring in other oppressed nations. Instead, the Kurds further oppressed the oppressed ones.

This is another incident showing the weakness of Kurdish diplomacy. Instead of establishing a beneficial and mutual relationship with other oppressed

¹⁶ Ismail Agha Simko, a feudal chief from the Shikak tribe in Iranian Kurdistan.

nations, they annexed their territories and unjustly murdered the people. This occurred with Simko's revolt: he killed Azeris, Assyrians, Persians, and even Kurds from other tribes. No matter how many nationalist movements the Kurds had, they never could form a united Kurdish front that could speak for one cause and defend it.

In 1925, Mosul *Vilayet* was awarded to British Iraq by the League of Nations (Romano, 2006). Hence, most of the Kurdish population in the south became a part of the Kingdom of Iraq. It demonstrates that the Kurds could not persuade the British government to support or create an independent Kurdish entity in the region. It was definitely due to poor diplomatic and shoddy strategic negotiation with the British and other SuperPowers. Therefore, the Kurds found themselves ruled by a new government, an Arab government, in south Kurdistan or Mosul *Vilayet*. However, after WWI, the Kurds were able, to some extent, to politicize their movements, but there was no leader who could mobilize and unify the Kurds until the 1940s.

Next, a new resistance emerged in south Kurdistan while the Kurds in the north were facing Turkification and oppression. Tribal leaders rose up against the Iraqi government; as a response, the Iraqi government used other Kurdish tribes to confront their rebellious brothers. The Iraqi authorities created a gulf between the Kurdish tribes and took advantage of their rivalries and tribal mentality. For instance, the rivalry between the Zibari tribe and the Barzani tribe provided a great opportunity for the Iraqi government to ensure instability and internal conflicts in south Kurdistan by fueling the opposition between these tribes (McDowall, 2007). Gradually, in south Kurdistan, northern Iraq, Mulla Mustafa Barzani gained popularity as a religious tribal leader. Although Mustafa Barzani was a politician, partisan, revolutionary, and, more importantly, a nationalist, he desired to be the only leader of Kurdish nationalist movement.

During WWII, the focal point was in Mahabad, where a Kurdish party, *Komalay Jiyanevat Kurdistan*¹⁷ – Committee for the Rebirth of Kurdistan, had already been established. This party's manifesto was to politicize the Kurdish ethnicity and intellectualize the people (Romano, 2006). Slowly, Komala JK attempted to mobilize the Kurds in Mahabad although, militarily, the party was still weak. The Soviet authorities were closely monitoring the situation in Mahabad and in the early years of the 1940s, they showed interest in Iran to support the Kurds as well as the Azeris. As a result, the Kurds along with the fellow Azeri of Iran exchanged thoughts with the Soviet officials in the region. A Kurdish notable and cleric of Mahabad, Qazi Muhammad, with another reli-

¹⁷ Committee for the Rebirth of Kurdistan, known as JK society or Komalay JK, was a Kurdish political party established in the 1940s, later on, dissolved into Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI).

gious notable, Sheikh Abdullah Gillani,¹⁸ teamed up and attempted to persuade the chiefs of Urmiya and Mahabad to support their cause (McDowall, 2007).

In May 1942, the Soviet officials met Kurdish delegates and turned down their intention for independence, but they expressed Soviet support for self-determination (McDowall, 2007). At this stage, the Kurds developed different diplomatic approaches, which were not similar to the previous. Qazi expressed his support for the Azeri and showed his intention to protect other minorities in the government. Simultaneously, the JK society held secret meetings and exchanged ideas with other Kurdish political groups, especially *Hiwa*. Both groups, *Hiwa* and JK Society, emphasized education along with intellectualization; as a result, both had their own publications. To attract the Communists to support the Kurds, a booklet of the JK Society was printed with a red flag on the cover page (McDowall, 2007).

Finally, in April 1944, Qazi Muhammad joined the Komala JK and became the president of the party as well. Komala JK did not survive in this name because the Soviets put pressure on the leader and its members to form a party that could possibly have more military strength (Romano, 2006). Consequently, in 1945, Qazi Muhammad established the Kurdistan Democratic Party¹⁹ in Iran (KDPI) and announced their manifesto. David McDowall described the nature of the manifesto as reformist (2007). In the same year, Qazi Muhammad obtained huge military support when Mulla Mustafa Barzani and his Brother Sheikh Ahmed Barzani arrived at Mahabad. Although both Barzani brothers were fugitives after fleeing from Iraqi authority, it was crucial assistance for Qazi before declaring the republic, especially by providing military support of the Peshmerga to his force.

On January 22, 1946, Qazi Muhammad declared the Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad, announcing himself as its president. It must be mentioned that Qazi Muhammad heavily depended on Soviet Union support. Perhaps Qazi overestimated the Soviets' assistance. Initially, the Soviet government provided some help: one of the provisions was a printing press, from which the republic gained benefit in publishing Kurdish language books, especially educational books. Qazi Muhammad obviously did not have a pleasant, peaceful republic. As usual, cohesion and unity were absent among the Kurds in this newly established republic. Some of the local tribes were working with the Iranian government to sabotage it (Romano, 2006). During the early months of the republic, Qazi constantly was in touch with the Azerbaijan administration to create a united front against Tehran.

¹⁸ A Kurdish religious notable from the Gilani family.

¹⁹ The Kurdistan Democratic Party is a social-democratic as well as nationalistic political body in the Kurdistan region in Iraq, and was initially established in Mahabad.

Qazi Muhammad had several tribes along Mulla Mustafa's Peshmerga on his side, but in the beginning of summer 1946, other tribal leaders outside of Mahabad showed allegiance to Tehran. As a result, conflict and trouble rose within the republic. One of the main marshals of Qazi troops, Amir Khan, secretly asked Tehran for support, and he abandoned Qazi. All of these issues doubled when Tabriz and Tehran reached an agreement. Therefore, the ray of hope of Qazi's republic kept getting dimmer and dimmer as more and more Kurdish chiefs and tribal leaders abandoned the republic and sided with Tehran.

As Iranian troops controlled Tabriz again, Sadr Qazi, brother of Qazi Muhammad, who was in the Iranian parliament, asked for the handing of Mahabad peacefully to Tehran (McDowall, 2007). Tehran sent the allied tribes among them: there were Dihburki men, who held a serious grudge toward Qazi Mohammad. As a result, Qazi Mohammad asked Tehran to send regular Iranian troops to control the city, fearing the brutality and looting of the fellow Kurdish tribes. Diplomatically, the Iranian government was successful in pushing the Soviet withdrawal from Iran, and promised oil supplies. The lack of local, regional, and international diplomacy, as well as Soviet support, was one of the main reasons for both Azeri and the Kurds to collapse.

In December of 1946, the republic ended, and Mahabad was controlled again by Tehran. Consequently, on 31 March 1947, Qazi Mohammad and his brother, along with his cousin, were hanged in the town square (McDowall, 2007). Although the life of the republic was brief, Kurdish nationalism was reshaped and spread to a broader audience. Another achievement of the republic was to politicize the Kurdish ethnicity. However, Qazi Mohammad and his republic could not mobilize the Kurds on a large scale. Mulla Mustafa Barzani, who never accepted Qazi as a leader wholeheartedly, had to leave Iran to save himself.

To conclude, the Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad undoubtedly lacked international recognition and internal strong support. Lack of vision and unity among the Kurdish leaders from Sheikh Abdulkadir to Qazi Mohammad and even Mulla Mustafa, which was necessary in creating a nation and an independent country, caused the Kurdish failure. Repeatedly, a tribe would stab another tribe in the back without hesitation and because of this, we do not see a broad national or international support for the Kurdish cause. The most fundamental gain of this period was the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad and, to some extent, the cooperation between partitioned parts of Kurdistan. Yet, the Kurds again failed to create a unified front, to diminish tribalism, or to gain regional or international support on a large scale, except for the brief relations between the USSR and Qazi Muhammad. The considerable failures in this period occurred between 1920 and 1925, when the Kurds were too shattered to send a representative to the Paris Peace

Conference. As a result, not only did the Kurds lose international recognition and acknowledgment after the Treaty of Lausanne, but also the case of Mosul province was due to this internal divide.

3.3. Kurdish Diplomacy After 1947

The events of Mahabad echoed throughout the four parts of Kurdish communities. The leftist ideology penetrated Iraqi society and ICP,²⁰ the Iraqi Communist Party, was established. As a result, some young Kurds emancipated from traditional tribal orientation, seeking secularization and reformation through the leftist standards. For instance, *Shursh*,²¹ *Rizgari*,²² and *Hiwa* were based on Communist, intellectual, secularist ideologies. Although some of the members of these organizations and parties joined the newly established KDP²³ in Iraq at the first congress of the party in Baghdad in 1946 (McDowall, 2007), other members joined ICP. Officially, the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq was established on 16 August 1946, and the president of the party was Mulla Mustafa Barzani, though he was in exile.

In the early years of the 1950s, a well-known writer and politician joined KDP, Ibrahim Ahmad,²⁴ later becoming the Secretary- General of the party. First, as the Secretary-General, Ibrahim Ahmad attempted to sack the leftists, who were against nationalism. Gradually, the party itself adopted civic nationalism and leftist programs in 1953 (McDowall, 2007). After the third congress of the KDP, the relationship between ICP and KDP grew stronger, cooperating to establish a democratic front in Iraq. It was by early 1958 when the idea of overthrowing the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq was materialized. The Kurds were aware of the upcoming changes; hence, they hoped for a new era in which they would have more presence within the government and more recognition by the central government.

In 1958, Abdulkarim Qasim along with some officers overthrew the monarchy (McDowall, 2007). Qasim welcomed Mulla Mustafa Barzani from exile and established a trusted relationship. Barzani cooperated with Qasim in suppressing non-Kurdish opposition from, for example, Ba'athists and

²⁰ The Iraqi Communist Party was established 1934, supporting Communism and classical Marxism, as well as secularism.

²¹ The Kurdish-Iraqi Organization was founded in 1945.

²² A Kurdish political organization that was established in 1945 but dissolved into KDP in Iraq in 1946.

²³ The Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq was founded in 1946.

²⁴ Ibrahim Ahmad was an intellectual born in Sulaimani who studied law; he was an active politician and nationalist.

Communists. As a result of the cooperation, Qasim promised the recognition of the Kurds and fair treatment for all Iraqis. Though the relationship between Barzani and Qasim was going smoothly, Qasim developed a fear of growing power in the North, which might have led to separation. Abdulkarim Qasim provided ammunition and weaponry to the enemy tribes of the Barzani family (Romano, 2006) to reduce Barzani's power. Yet again, the authorities took advantage of the divide and rivalry among the tribes. The first revolt in the new Iraqi government broke out in 1961: Barzani along with rebels stood against tribes who allied with the central government along with Qasim.

Although Mulla Mustafa initially avoided confrontation with Abdulkarim Qasim in early 1961, he had to join the rebels' side when Qasim struck the Kurdish rebels from the air. Within the KDP, there was debate over how to respond and whether or not to join the revolt. Jalal Talabani believed they could use the rebels for the nationalistic cause, while Ibrahim Ahmad reckoned that economic and social progress was more valuable than siding with the rebels, who were mostly *Aghas* and tribal leaders (McDowall, 2007). Mulla Mustafa was in contact with the SuperPowers such as the USSR, Britain, and the US, but he was unable to gain their support and assistance. The 1961 Revolt was the first campaign of the 1960s, and the Barzanis and rebels were successful in protecting their basic rights. It led Abdulkarim Qasim to ask for amnesty, but Mulla Mustafa was not satisfied with Qasim's proposition, and he demanded more from the central government.

Mulla Mustafa established himself as a strong leader, but the revolt further divided the Kurds. David McDowall stated that the Kurds called the people who helped Qasim '*Jash*' literally meaning 'little donkey' and metaphorically meaning 'traitor' (2007). Another outcome of the revolt was the re-evaluation of with whom – the Kurds in general and KDP in particular – they needed to ally. The KDP started negotiating with the Ba'ath and Arab nationalists to overthrow Qasim. Therefore, the pattern of miscalculation and overestimating an outsider to fulfill the Kurdish cause continued. In 1963, Abdulkarim Qasim was overthrown by a coalition of the Ba'ath party and the Iraqi army. General Abdul Salam Arif became the president of Iraq, explicitly desiring to eliminate the Kurdish influence and existence in the government, for he prioritized Arabism (Disney, 1980).

The Kurdish diplomatic efforts suffered a lot during this time because they could not persuade the Arab nation to recognize the Kurds. Even, the question of autonomy was almost annihilated among the Arabs. The Arabs did not want a Kurdish body in the region due to the fear of their relationship with Iran, Israel, and the Western Oil Companies, although it was a false assumption. Mulla Mustafa demanded immediate recognition of the Kurds along with gaining oil revenue fairly or he would continue the war against Baghdad. Abul Salam Arif

did not accept such a demand, and began military confrontation against the Kurds, which led to casualties in Sulaimani. The main negotiator between the Kurds and Baghdad was Jalal Talabani, but Mulla Mustafa disliked Talabani and was cautious about his position. Barzani desired to be the only leader of Kurdish nationalism, and started undermining Jalal Talabani's negotiations.

The tension between Baghdad and the Kurds was addressed by signing an agreement in 1964 between Mulla Mustafa and Abdul Salam Arif. This agreement was an outcome of the Barzanis' fear of Talabani's growing power in the region. David McDowall described the signing of the agreement as Mulla Mustafa's personal desire rather than a responsibility of a KDP president (2007). From Barzani's action, we may conclude that he was not the sort of nationalist he was preaching for because he preferred his tribal and conservative as well as personal interests to the Kurds as a nation. On the contrary, Ibrahim Ahmad, Jalal Talabani, and other KDP intellectuals orbited around the sphere of politics and developments. Soon after the ambition of Mulla Mustafa was recognized, Ibrahim Ahmad and Jalal Talabani separated themselves from his tribal pact, and a bitter situation arose among the Kurds. Mulla Mustafa's over confidence and trust in Abdul Salam Arif was not well received by some of the KDP leaders. As a result, Mulla Mustafa Barzani dismissed Ibrahim Ahmad and Jalal Talabani from the party.

Abdul Salam Arif was murdered in his helicopter in 1966 and his brother, Abdul Rahman Arif, took over the power. He, immediately, revealed his desire not to support the Kurds and not to respond to the Kurds' demands (McDowall, 2007). Abd al-Rahman al Bazzaz, the prime minister of Iraq, was the mediator between the Kurds and the central government. He convinced Mulla Mustafa by announcing a 15- point Bazzaz agreement on 29 June 1966, in which almost every demand of the Kurds was mentioned. Three points: Kurdistan separation, the KDP publicly contesting the election, and oilfield revenue were secretly discussed (Disney, 1980).

After Bazzaz's Declaration, Arif and Barzani announced a ceasefire and discussed the future of the state. Barzani explicitly mentioned that this declaration was only a starting point for the Kurdish objectives. After the meeting, Mulla Mustafa attempted to resolve the internal conflicts such as ideological rivalries and tribalism. After 1966, Mulla Mustafa was seeking to secure help and assistance from Iran along with Israel, both of whom were enemies of the Iraqi government. Iran supplied modern weapons to Mulla Mustafa's Peshmerga because for the Shah, the conflict in Iraq was beneficial. The Peshmerga secured temporary shelters in the Iraqi-Iranian borders. In 1968, another coup occurred in Iraq, and as a result the Ba'ath regime gained control again.

A new era of conflicts started between the Kurds and Arabs in Iraq after 1970. Mulla Mustafa, supported by Iran, Israel, and the US, negotiated confi-

dently with the central government, and the negotiation led to the 1970 Peace Accord (McDowall, 2007). The central figure in the accord from Baghdad was Saddam Hussein displaying a friendly, socialist attitude to the Kurdish delegates, including Mulla Mustafa and Dr. Mahmud Usman,²⁵ along with other KDP members. Even Ibrahim Ahmad and Jalal Talabani agreed to expand negotiation and diplomatic approach with the Ba'ath regime due to their political point of view on socialism. In the accord, Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr guaranteed decentralized government for the Kurds, economic reconstruction, and many other promises to the Kurds, but later all these points were ignored and disregarded. The accord failed badly and once again, poor judgment, sentimental decision, and opaque vision led the Kurdish movement to fall on its face.

It was clear that Mulla Mustafa did not realize that the external powers were using him to achieve their goals, especially controlling the oilfields in Kirkuk.²⁶ The friendly attitude of Saddam Hussein was able to buy more time for Baghdad to prepare militarily and economically in order to launch offensive campaigns against the Kurds. It became more obvious when the USSR provided modern weapons to the Iraqi troops in 1974 (Disney, 1980). Mulla Mustafa constantly forced the central government to implement the accord, but he was also asking for help from the outside. According to The Washington Post, he requested the US to assist them and the Kurds would give the oilfields of Kirkuk to the American companies (McDowall, 2007). The announcement of 11 March 1974 spelled out the intention of the Iraqi government. Even though the Kurds were promised autonomy, in the announcement, the Iraqi government would still have superiority over the Kurds.

During 1974 and 1975, diplomatic relations between Baghdad and Barzani were discontinued, so war was inevitable. Surprisingly, Saddam Hussein and the Shah discussed the border-related issue, and the Algiers Agreement of 1975 was signed between Iraq and Iran. The devastating outcome of the agreement was immeasurable for the Kurds. The Iraqi army attacked the Kurds; thousands were killed and injured, and many fled their homes. Many Kurds were threatened, and the Iraqi government took this opportunity to start demographic changes in Khanaqin, Kifri, Mandali, Kirkuk, and many other locations (McDowall, 2007). Along with the Iraqi forces, many Kurdish tribes provided intelligence and support to the Iraqi government against the fellow Kurds (Shakir, 2021). Even Mulla Mustafa left Iraq and later on, he died of cancer in the US.

The agreement temporarily solved the border issue for Iraq, which the Iraqi government had wanted for a long time. The agreement also ceased the

²⁵ Dr. Mahmud Usman is a prominent member of the KDP.

²⁶ A famous city in Iraq whose population is mainly Kurds and partly Turks and Arabs, this is a crucial point due to the oilfields.

military support for the Kurdish rebels, which was good for the Iraqi government, but extremely disadvantageous for the Kurds. Thereby, the Kurds were not only defeated by the Iraqi regime, but also butchered in a literal sense. In the aftermath of all these developments, on the first of June, 1975, the old PDK member Jalal Talabani officially decided to part ways with the PDK, and declared the establishment of a new political party, the PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Most of the PUK members were close friends of Jalal Talabani, including two stalwarts, Nawshirwan Mustafa²⁷ and Ali Askari.²⁸ Masud and Idris Barzani, sons of Mulla Mustafa, started political and partisan activities again after 1976. Within Iraqi Kurdistan, new reformist parties formed the socialist party *PASOK*. Their aim was to fight for the independence of the Kurds along with autonomy for all nations around the world.

The Algiers Agreement had definite negative impacts, especially casualties, displacements, and destruction, yet the agreement created a new phase in the history of Kurdish resistance in Iraq. After the agreement, on 22 March 1975, Mulla Mustafa announced their withdrawal from the cities and villages, and the Peshmerga along with their families fled to Iran and Turkey (Disney, 1980). The struggle of the Kurds continued even after 1975, but somehow, the Kurds managed to surface their internal conflict. Political divergences and ideological rivalry could be seen everywhere in Kurdistan. While the Kurdish guerillas were fighting against the Ba'ath regime, the PUK and the PDK attacked and invaded each other as well, and at the same time, both parties regularly approached Baghdad to negotiate. As usual, the negotiating party was considered a traitor (Romano, 2006).

However, we should not forget that between 1960 and 1980, Kurdish nationalism reached a stage that it had never reached before. The demand for basic rights and self-determination, along with economic independence, was always in the discussion when Mulla Mustafa, Jalal Talabani, or other members of the parties met foreign governments or even Iraqi governments. Nevertheless, their diplomacy was limited to their interests, and each politician desired to be the sole hero of the nation. During all of the revolts before 1980, the external forces were involved in Kurdistan. The USSR assisted Mulla Mustafa Barzani, the US directly and indirectly exerted influence on the ground, Iran first supported the Kurds and then made an alliance with Iraq, and even Israel had an uncertain relationship with both the Kurds and Baghdad. External forces affected the history of Iraq; sometimes, the Kurds were in triumph due to mass support from outside, and at other times, they were severely defeated due to external abandonment.

²⁷ Nawshirwan was a secret Marxist-Leninist who led *Komala*.

²⁸ Ali Askari was a well-known fighter and later important politician.

In 1979, when Saddam Hussein became the president of Iraq again, the first thing he did was to regain the territories that he had given to the Shah in 1975. He launched a full-scale invasion of Iran in September 1980 (Romano, 2006), and the Eight Year War broke out between Iraq and Iran. Many people were victims, but the Kurds were especially victimized due to their presence on both sides of the borders. Hence, the Iraqi government helped the KDPI to fight against Iran. On the other hand, the Iranian government supplied both the PDK and the PUK to fight against the Saddam regime. The cooperation between Iraqi Kurds and Tehran alarmed Turkey, Saddam, and even the US. Saddam soon attempted to persuade the Barzanis to help him against the Iranian government, but it was too late, because the Barzanis were already allies with Tehran.

The more the Kurds supported Tehran, the more vengeance grew inside Saddam Hussein. As a result of this rage, Saddam Hussein massacred 8,000 Barzanis from *Qushtapa* (McDowall, 2007). A dreadful and awful series of mass massacres kept occurring against the Kurds. Saddam intensified the Arabization of the Kurdish areas, especially near Kirkuk. After these incidents, Qassimlou²⁹ persuaded Jalal Talabani to halt resistance to save more lives. Jalal Talabani started negotiating with the central government, thus, a ceasefire was announced. It was a breathing space for the Kurdish rebels to regain strength and secure their position (McDowall, 2007).

Jalal Talabani became the symbol of Kurdish nationalism since Mulla Mustafa left the country, and his sons lost supporters. The PUK's demands to Saddam's government included the annexation of Khanaqin, Mandali, Sinjar, and Kirkuk to the autonomous region, discharge of the political prisoners, releasing the *Jash* group, and recognition of the Peshmerga forces. The reason for Saddam to listen to the demands of the Kurds was that Saddam was alone in the fight against Iran, however, in 1984, Saddam was assured that the US would provide assistance because the US was not pleased with the increase of Iran's influence in the region (McDowall, 2007).

After Saddam secured support, the war started again in 1985. Turkish Kurdistan also joined the situation. While the Kurdish parties in the south were fighting against the Saddam regime, in the north, the PKK,³⁰ which was an active organization, launched a guerrilla-style campaign against the Turkish government. The leader of the party was Abdullah Ocalan, commonly known as Apo. The PKK introduced a unique phase in the Kurdish resistance against the oppressors. They held a firm Communist and nationalist ideology and no

²⁹ Abdul Rahman Qassimlou was a Kurdish leader in Iran and Secretary-General of the KDPI.

³⁰ Kurdistan Workers' Party founded in 1974 Turkey.

tribal affiliation. Hence, in the 1980s, the political realm of Kurdish history experienced heroic moments, hurtful memories, and the emergence of new political entities.

The relationship between the PUK and PDK was distant and polarized, but Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani met in Tehran in 1986 (McDowall, 2007). In 1987, both parties formed an opposition front along with the other anti-Ba'ath parties to express their demands and actions in coming years. It is important to note that whenever the Kurds were united, they gave a tough time to the oppressors. After the alliance, the Kurdish dominance grew in the north of Iraq, and Saddam did not want to be lenient. Ali Hassan al-Majid, an outrageous military commander, was ordered by Saddam Hussein to respond to the Kurdish insurgencies in the north of Iraq. In 1987, he launched his offensive and the world witnessed one of the most devastating and horrendous chemical weapons attack, execution, massacre, and genocide.

The Superpowers of the world and human rights champions were silent spectators, and did not take any conclusive step, so in 1988, al- Majid was assigned to launch a full-scale operation against the Kurds, the *Anfal* operation (Shakir, 2021). In February of 1988, Jalal Talabani asked the West for help, but once again, almost every state ignored him. Talabani pleaded that they intervene because the Iraqi government used chemical weapons, but the Turkish state blocked the UN investigation envoy from entering the borders. The Kurds became the real victim of the Iraq-Iran and PKK threat to Turkey. The Superpowers certainly acknowledged their failure in the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran; therefore, they also disliked the expansion of the Iranian influence in the region. Although the Kurds became the victim of various proxy wars in the region, it is also important to highlight the failure of the strategic and diplomatic plan of the Kurdish leadership and the civilians, who paid the price.

On 16 March 1988, after Halabjah³¹ was captured by the PUK Peshmerga and Iranian forces, the Iraqi air force bombarded the city with chemical bombs that killed 5,000 civilians and thousands of animals and contaminated their habitat. The next day, the Iranian government sent journalists to share this inhumane act, which was a bad move. The Kurds should have made sure that this news would reach the world as soon as possible; instead, they let Iran do the job, and it raised credibility issues. On the one hand, the Kurds failed to engage the international community and on the other hand, the international community failed humanity badly.

Halabjah was the starting point of the *Anfal* operation, which extended into the summer of 1988 in eight different campaigns (McDowall, 2007). David

³¹ Halabjah is a Kurdish town in the KRG which became the symbol of Kurdish resistance after the town was attacked by chemical bombs.

Romano described the nature of Anfal operations as parallel to the Holocaust (2006). Approximately 150,000- 200,000 lives were lost during the *Anfal* operations (McDowall, 2007). The international response came very late; when the Iranian government clearly expressed their inability to continue the war, then, the West reacted and started investigating the violations in Iraq. The British government raised the issue and encouraged the UN to start investigating. However, the British officials did not investigate the case by themselves; instead, they asked the Turkish government, which denied proof of chemical weapons used in the region. It was a predictable answer from Turkey because they were at war with the Kurds.

After 1988, the Kurdish movement faced worse collapse than in 1975. Before moving to the Gulf crisis, we would like to go back to northern Kurdistan, or Kurdistan under Turkish control. In the 1980s, the creation of the PKK was the response to the constant Turkification and oppression in Bakur. In 1984, they started resisting, and the PKK gained massive support from Syria although the support should have been secret since the Turkish government made it clear that they were against any aid to the PKK members. However, Kurdish nationalism survived in Turkish Kurdistan due to the PKK's tough response and guerrilla resistance. From 1980 until 1999, the PKK guerrillas were the symbol of Kurdish nationalism in Bakur with some secret aid from Syria, Iraq, and Greece. During this time, the US provided advanced military equipment to the Turkish government, mostly because of the PKK's Communist ideology. The PKK members kept fighting even outside of Turkey and eventually, Apo, the PKK head, was arrested by the joint efforts of the CIA, Mossad, and Turkish agents in 1999.

His arrest did not lead to the discontinuation of PKK activities. While the Turkish government was fighting against the PKK members on its land, the Turkish government kept cooperating with Saddam Hussein to suppress the Kurdish voices in Iraq. The Kurds were almost hopeless about launching new resistance against the Ba'ath regime, but Saddam Hussein made it possible again after expressing his intention to conquer Kuwait. The world, especially the US, reacted quickly to the annexation of Kuwait, and the US led a coalition to liberate Kuwait from Saddam. The coalition sought internal assistance from Shia Iraq and the Kurds. The Kurds' initial intention was to avoid war against the central government after what they already endured. Later, the Turkish government joined the coalition, attempting to persuade the Kurdish parties in north Iraq to support the coalition.

Although the Kurds were worried about the situation in the region and in doubt over the West, along with the Turkish government assistance, Talabani and other KDP members met Turgut Ozal, the president of Turkey in 1991. He promised the Kurds that they would help them in case the coalition failed to

control Saddam (McDowall, 2007). It was not easy for the Kurds to trust the Turkish government because the Turkish authorities launched several assaults against the Kurds in Bakur and attacked the PKK, but eventually, the Kurds committed yet another mistake and joined the coalition. On 4 March 1991, a revolution erupted in Raniya, a Kurdish town in northern Iraq. Initially, the uprising was started by the people. Even Masud Barzani stated that the general population managed the uprising and the Peshmerga did nothing (McDowall, 2007). An amazing feature of the 1991 uprising was the participation of the *Jash* group. They supported people against the Ba'ath troops and became collaborators with the revolution, instead of traitors.

Looking at the Kurdish revolution, the Shi'i from the south of Iraq initiated a rebellion against Saddam. Saddam knew from the past experience that international aid would not reach the ground rapidly, thus he launched his special Iraqi guards to repress the south and north rebels. Both rebel forces were too weak to defend the cities and towns against the Republican Guards, which were weaponized with advanced western assault rifles, tanks, helicopters, and military jets. Fear spread among the citizens, and people fled their homes and reached the Iranian and Turkish borders. Approximately two million people became refugees (McDowall, 2007).

Talabani and Barzani warned George H.W. Bush that if the US were to abandon the Kurds and the Shi'ite, there would be thousands of casualties and millions would become refugees. This was as disturbing as it sounds: the intention of the US was to leave the rebel organizations alone, and in this case, the Ba'ath militias could eliminate them easily. After the calamity and chaos reached its peak, the coalition started a military operation – Operation Provide Comfort – in April of 1991. Simultaneously, the United Nations Security Council voted in Resolution 688, and for the first time after the Treaty of Sevres the name of the Kurds in international affairs was mentioned (McDowall, 2007). The Coalition, especially France, demanded a no-fly zone in Kurdistan, northern Iraq and created 'safe havens' (McDowall, 2007), which helped to improve the situation.

The situation was critical and sensitive, but once again, the Kurdish politicians such as Jalal Talabani and Masud Barzani started negotiations with Saddam Hussein. The purpose of the negotiations was to merge Kirkuk, Khanaqin, Mandali, and other locations, which had been outside of the safe haven territory. While meeting Talabani and Barzani, Saddam focused on the weak point of the Kurdish front, which was to decide the leader of the Kurds. Saddam chose Barzani as the main negotiator of the Kurds. Barzani showed his intention to join the Iraqi government and obtain regional autonomy under the federal constitution of Iraq. Mahmud Usman argued that Barzani might have become less favored in rebellious acts and war after what he witnessed

occurred to his tribe during *Anfal* operations (McDowall, 2007). By June 1991, Saddam demanded the closure of the Kurdish front radio, refused Kurdish leaders joining his government, and ceased relationships with foreign states. Any reasonable leader would refuse these demands, but Masud Barzani agreed to the majority of the points (McDowall, 2007).

After 1991, the internal disagreements, Saddam's intention to recapture the northern part of Iraq, and external influences led to the first election in the northern part of Iraq. As a result, in 1992, the Kurdistan Region government was officially established and both parties, the PUK and the PDK, shared the cabinet. From 1980-1992, the PUK and the PDK had already established foreign affairs with neighboring countries such as Iran, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Israel. Along with these aforementioned countries, Egypt, Libya, the USSR, and the US were also in touch with the Kurdish leaders, but the relationship was asymmetrical since the Kurds were used to serving the foreign policies and benefits of other countries (Sadoon, 2017). Both parties were manipulated by external forces. After Anfal, it became clear that the Kurds' diplomatic affairs were not able to gain so-called allies or even basic aid to save the civilians from Saddam's cruelty. However, after the establishment of KRG, the foreign affairs were directed towards the nation-state building route (Sadoon, 2017).

Without doubt, the first election in the Kurdistan region was a phenomenal point in the entire history of the Kurds. After a long struggle against different oppressors, the Kurdish community in southern Kurdistan, or northern Iraq, could fulfill the dream of an autonomous Kurdish entity in the region. Surely, the recognition of this entity was a slow process, especially due to the presence of Saddam Hussein as the president of Iraq. Therefore, the Kurdish politicians soon started new diplomatic approaches; Talabani, especially, realized the importance of the relationship with the Turkish government.

Both Barzani and Talabani started diplomatic relations with the Turkish government that have lasted to the present. Turkey has been a key state working with the KRG, even though the relationship has been a complicated one. However, the internal conflicts between the PUK and the PDK kept growing because of the region's revenue, the controlled areas, the Peshmerga, and many other issues. A civil war broke out in 1994 between the parties because neither of the parties was willing to compromise or negotiate with the other on their differences. Gradually, tribalism recurred in both parties since the leaders depended on tribal fighters.

During the civil war, the KDP members asked Saddam Hussein to send troops to Erbil. Saddam took advantage of the opportunity and destroyed the CIA bases along with coalition spots in Erbil (Romano, 2006). Again, the pattern of overestimation, underestimation, misunderstanding, and individual interest was higher than the general interests and Kurdish nationalism. The PDK

could not understand how Saddam's help could damage the Kurdish cause, and time has shown that the Kurds suffer up to the present day. However, under pressure from the US in 1998, the PDK and the PUK signed the Washington agreement in which two district administrations were created in the KRG (Romano, 2006). Until 2003, the Kurds focused on the aftermath of the civil war and worked to expand their affairs with neighbors and the Superpowers.

If it had not been for international assistance, the Kurds would not have been able to secure Kurdistan due to the internal conflicts and tribal mentality.

The newly established region faced external and internal political obstacles and the Kurdish relationship with the others consisted of survival policies, because the region was fragile. During the civil war, the fragility of the region doubled, but it gave relief to neighbors who were afraid of Kurdistan's independence. After the civil war, the Kurds expressed their intention in the Iraqi opposition to overthrow Saddam's regime and keep Iraqi unity. After the PUK and the PDK were enlisted in the anti-Saddam bodies, the US provided aid as well as ammunition to KRI (Sadoon, 2017).

It was a crucial phase for Kurdistan, because after 1998, the Kurdish government focused on democratization and establishment of foreign relationships. The Kurdish politicians attempted to show that the KRI was the future model of a new Iraq after Saddam, but internal conflict once again hindered Kurdish progress. Kurdistan, the de facto state, was divided between the PUK and the PDK. In 2003, the Kurdistan government provided bases for the US troops in the war against Saddam (Sadoon, 2017), and the de facto state became a recognized state. After 2003, both parties reunited and created the Kurdish front again.

After 2003, in Iraq, the KDP and the PUK Peshmerga became the most organized local military units on the ground, hence the US troops depended on the Kurdish armies in the north of Iraq. Both parties could control Kirkuk and Mosul along with the oilfields. David Romano explained that the Kurdish movements, after 2003, instead of heading back to the mountains and fighting as guerillas, started diplomatically confronting the matters of Kurdish nationalism (2006). We can identify the 2003-2007 period as the most successful diplomatic era for the Kurds since their political flight. The Kurds took active part in the internal matters of Iraq and they were present in writing the new constitution, in which Kurdistan was designated as an autonomous region of the federal government of Iraq (Romano, 2006).

After the formal recognition, in 2005, the Kurdish government strengthened the Department of Foreign Relationship, trying to portray a softer image of the Kurds. It focused on highlighting the development in security and safety, emphasizing education, intellect, and improved infrastructure (Sadoon, 2017). However, the real question is about how effective this campaign was. Future

events show that it did not change much, as the US and most of its allies treat Kurdistan as an integral part of Iraq. One example of this was the lack of international support during the independence referendum in 2017.

The Kurds within Iraq have been fighting to guarantee the survival of the Kurdish government. As the economy is the backbone of any country, they tried to establish an independent economy, but its success is doubtful. The Kurdistan government signed many economic contracts with Turkey and Iran, as they depend heavily on the neighboring countries. Although they can try to survive in case of a conflict with Baghdad (Sadoon, 2017), it makes them extremely vulnerable and dependent on Turkey and Iran. In this case, the dream of an independent Kurdistan seems a far-fetched reality because Turkey and Iran would never let it happen. For this sake, they have been playing a double game; getting economic benefits from Kurdistan and keeping a strong relationship with Baghdad.

During the last few decades, Iraq has not been a stable state, as it constantly encountered new internal and external threats and is labeled as a conservative country, but the Kurds have been trying hard to embrace modernity and western values. Although these changes are more like optical illusions, they have helped the Kurds to establish direct relations with the west. The Department of Foreign Relations opened many diplomatic offices in different countries. From an unrecognized government in the early 1990s, Kurdistan by 2011 became a semi- autonomous entity in Iraq (Sadoon, 2017).

With the reemergence of ISIS in 2014, the Kurds proved their capability of resistance and protection of the region against terrorism. While the Global Coalition against ISIS provided both Erbil and Baghdad military advice, ammunition, weapons, and information, the Kurds received special treatment from the West. The Kurds fought for their lives and sacrificed in the so-called war against terrorism. From the western perspective, it was for their benefit that they did not have to fight on ground, but the Kurds thought they had earned global support for the Kurdish nation in case of separation. The Kurdish politicians misunderstood the international alliance and once again, the West ditched the Kurds when they decided to hold an independence referendum on 25 September 2017.

The idea of a referendum has always been an essential option for the Kurds, but it should have been at the right time, a time when the Kurds are fully united, economically stable, militarily developed, and strategically prepared. Going for an independence referendum without gaining international support was a complete diplomatic failure and strategic disaster by the Kurds. Therefore, the referendum brought total chaos for the Kurds; it created further economic crisis, loss of international support, and gave birth to the internal conflicts. The Kurdish politicians underestimated the Iraqi government and their dip-

lomatic ties. They overlooked that after Saddam Hussein's ousting, the Iraqi government had a very strong Iranian and international influence. Turkey has been suppressing the Kurdish movement in Dersim and surrounding area, and would never let southern Kurdistan to be independent.

On the referendum day, when the result was announced and almost 93% of the population voted in favor of an independent Kurdistan, the world witnessed as the Iraqi forces, including militia groups with heavy Iranian and US weapons, attacked Kurdistan and overtook airports as well as other strategic points. In addition to the ground crisis, the Turkish and Iranian governments were explicitly against the result of the referendum. Although the Kurds could not declare an independent state, this case can be studied as lessons learned.

In conclusion, throughout Kurdish history, the Kurds have not been excellent diplomats. None of their leaders could unite them and develop a plan to fulfill the dream that the Kurds have had for centuries.

The words of the famous 17th century Kurdish poet, Ahmad Khani, also written as Ehmedê Xanî, are true today: he says that if Kurds had a proud, generous, and intellectual leader, they could easily have a prosperous, independent state (2008). Contrary to this, the Kurdish leadership has been tribally oriented rather than nationally oriented, which has been a reason for the Kurds to be unsuccessful in diplomacy. The issue of internal rivalries, personal likes and dislikes, and tribal power-control played an important role in their failure to achieve their dream.

The Kurds have yet to find the right approach to establish an independent state. During the nation-state building period, Israel and Turkey focused on the unification of each fractured part of their nation in order to provide a powerful and united diplomatic plan to establish an independent state, but the Kurdish leadership failed to produce that. Although the Kurds failed in diplomacy to accomplish their dream, they have been able to gain an extraordinary position globally as well as regionally after 2003. The establishment of a semi-autonomous region is the highlight of their modern history. They could have achieved more if the parties and their leadership were not caught up in rivalries.

Chapter Four

Kurdish Struggle and Diaspora Politics

The numbers of the Kurdish diaspora in the west are touching almost 1.5 million and due to the current circumstances, it is constantly increasing (Bozarslan, Gunes and Yadirgi, 2021). Many crises have filled the Kurdish arena, such as the economic and political crisis and old external threats such as Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, in addition to the emergence of the ISIS factor, which worsened the situation. More than 85% of the Kurdish diaspora consists of the Kurds from Bakur (the Kurdish region under Turkish control) and the Yazidis (Bozarslan, Gunes and Yadirgi, 2021). The internal factors also have a major role in exacerbating the crisis within the Kurdish community, which pushes it from one decade to another into major migration campaigns and results in renewed struggle of finding identity, homeland, language, and culture. Even if the Kurds emigrate to countries that guarantee them the freedom and the life they aspire to, this longing for the motherland becomes part of their daily life. Although the term diaspora was used by the Greeks during their Hellenistic era, postmodernism gave it a new shape. The world has become a global village and due to technological developments, revolution in the aviation industry, economic crisis, a series of ethno- religious persecutions and socio-political conflicts, mass human migrations have happened and people have moved to different parts of the world. Therefore, over the last few decades diasporic communities have been playing an important role in building and sustaining economic, political and social identities of a nation. The Kurdish diaspora was not different from the other diasporic communities. The Anfal campaign, Halabjah genocide and persecution of the Kurds by Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria forced the Kurds to flee to the other countries. Since the denial of their right to self-determination after WWI, the Kurds have always dreamed of an independent nation state. While the Kurds in their homeland were fighting and struggling for their independence, the Kurdish diaspora kept this dream abroad.

The 25th of September 2017 was certainly one of the most significant days in Kurdish history. It was a day filled with positive energy and joy. Cars honked through the streets of the cities of the Kurdish autonomous region. Teenagers and children leaned out of the open windows and sunroofs or stood in the back of the Toyota pick-up vehicles and waved the red, white, and green Kurdish flag imbued with the light of the yellow sun in the center. The sidewalks were

crowded with men and women in their colorful traditional dresses, *Jilli Kurdi*. There was a sulphurous smell of powder in the air from the many salute shots and fireworks. The Kurdish music on the streets was so loud that one could hardly ignore it. You could see people laughing and dancing together. The Kurdish population in the densely populated city of Sulaymaniyah had not seemed so happy for years. There was a strong sense of unity and strength.

What was the reason for people to celebrate? It was the day that the controversial independence referendum was carried out. The leadership of the autonomous region of Kurdistan sought to secede from the central Iraqi state. It is a very controversial matter that had drawn attention and criticism from all around the world. In a controversial referendum, several million Kurds were to decide whether this autonomous region, *Bashur* – South Kurdistan, should be independent from the rest of the Iraq.

Opinions on this question were divided. While the majority of Kurds agreed that independence was long overdue, other countries, such as Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria refused to recognize the referendum. Other countries such as the US initially gave the green signal to the referendum, but later decided not to support it. There was a fear that the referendum could trigger a civil war because it could endanger the integrity of the Iraqi state and if the Kurds in the northern part of Iraq were to get independence then the Kurdish separatist movements in Bakur, Rojava and Rojhelat would also demand their right to self-determination.

Although this referendum did not bring the desired results, it gave millions of people hope for freedom and liberation from suffering and oppression. As mentioned in the previous chapters, the Kurds have dreamed of an independent state for a very long time. Now they had the opportunity to get one step closer to realizing it. Without knowing the fate of this referendum, hours before its results were announced, people had gathered and celebrated in all the major cities of Kurdistan. The international community was also keeping an eye on the developing scenario in the region.

However, many already knew that a result in favor of the Kurdish population would not lead to an immediate detachment from Iraq prior to voting. But even if the referendum did not immediately lead to a split of the country and a recognized declaration of independence, it had an enormous symbolic power. This important and historic event was experienced differently by Kurdish diasporic communities outside of Kurdistan, communities shaped by an essentially disparate sense of unity and belonging.

Almost every household of the Kurdish diasporic community was eagerly waiting for the results of the referendum glued to electronic or social media around the world. Many families travelled all the way to Kurdistan not only to cast their vote, but also be part of this historical moment. The Kurdish com-

munity and their sympathizers were not only filled with a feeling of hope, but also fear. They hoped that something would change for the Kurds not only in their homeland, but also for all the Kurds around the world and that their pain and suffering might finally be heard. They feared that yet another civil war might break out, which would bring more bloodshed to the Kurds.

Some of the Kurds from the diasporic community who were interviewed recall and remember all their hopes and fears vanishing and a heavy wave of disappointment filling them when they first read that only around 93% of the votes were cast in favor of independence. For them, it was an experience of a bewildering array of emotions as it was difficult for them to understand how any Kurd could vote against their own freedom. The results seemed utterly incomprehensible to them. Growing up far from their homeland and having been torn from their roots and relatives, the only thing that the majority of the diaspora community wanted to have was an independent Kurdistan, a dream shared by millions.

The word diaspora in itself is a socio-political term that refers to the dispersal of people from their homeland to other countries. Thus far millions of Kurds have been on the move, journeying from one part of Kurdistan to another, to other countries in the Middle East, Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, and other parts of the globe. This was a large-scale population movement, partially voluntary, but predominantly involuntary and forced. There is no recent or accurate census of all the Kurds living outside of the greater Kurdistan, in the fertile crescent of the Middle East, but the widely accepted figures estimate around 1.5 million Kurds live abroad, with the biggest majority living in Germany.

In the case of the Kurdish diaspora, the traumas that have led to the decacination of many Kurds have not been uniform. The motivation as to why many Kurds have left the region of Kurdistan falls under disparate causes and events, and the Kurdish diaspora community has been fashioned in a notably momentous way. The involuntary dispersion and the desire, yet impossibility to return to their homeland is what connects the Kurdish diaspora. The displacement of millions of Kurds has unremittingly reconstructed the Kurdish society and sweepingly modified the nature of the Kurdish question. Compared to other diasporas it is easily noticeable that factors influencing the consciousness of the ethnic identity are the native language, the history that the diaspora communities have in common, but also the efficacious attempt to keep the culture alive. Another common denominator of the Kurdish diaspora is centered on politics.

Interviewees pointed out that their parents' views on politics, their memories as well as experience with political persecution, and their story of escape, safety and freedom had had a substantial impact on their lives. They strongly suspect that this contoured the silhouette of a sense of belonging and idea

of Kurdish identity. Throughout the years, they remained acquainted with many other Kurds in Diaspora which has invited comparison. It conveys the impression that most of the Kurds are actively conversing about politics in their surroundings. One of the questions that we will try to explore in this chapter is whether Kurds in diaspora have room for any sort of involvement or rather participation in Kurdish politics and if yes, do they intentionally choose to use it, and whether Kurdish political parties involve Kurdish diaspora in active politics and benefit from their expertise, or not. This chapter deepens our understanding of the construct of identity, the idea of belonging and the perception of home in relation to Kurdish diaspora.

To grasp a comprehensive understanding of the matter in hand, a group of educators as well as some individual, who still live abroad or have returned to Kurdistan, were interviewed. The interviewees spent a fraction of their lives abroad and have now returned to their homeland to work. The interviewees were individually asked multiple open-ended questions about Kurdish identity, the Kurdish cause and how much Kurdish diaspora is involved in the decision-making process within Kurdish politics.

When being asked about the Kurdish identity, many parallels emerged in their answers. All five interviewees were undoubtedly proud to be Kurdish. The emotional tie that diasporic communities keep with their home countries and the urge for belonging is what has kept them connected to their roots despite having spent a large portion of their lives abroad. One of the respondents spoke about how they have struggled with their Kurdish identity because of feeling inadequate mainly due to the fact that their homeland is not independent. Growing up, they had longed not to be a Kurd because they thought it would have made their life easier if they were not.

The interviewees talked about how they continuously faced racism outside of their Kurdish communities and how they felt unwelcomed within other communities. Based on personal observation, we came to the realization that the feeling of belongingness is inaccessible to diasporic communities. We call that the *Koç*³² phenomenon. To be able to understand the meaning of this phenomenon, we first must define the conception of *Koç*. The term *Koç* stems from Kurdish and describes the movement from one region to another, in other words, migration. We make distinctions between three varying types of *Koç*. 1) The eternal *Koç*. This variant depicts the wandering from life to death with no possibility of return. 2) The volitional *Koç*. This kind describes the wilful migration from one place to another with the possibility of return. 3) The forced *Koç*. This type depicts the unwilling and involuntary migra-

³² *Koç* (Koch, Koj or کۆچ) is a Kurdish term, which means leaving to somewhere very far from your home.

tion for example due to war or the risk of persecution with (temporarily) no possibility of return.

In the course of the interviews, we have met a group of people who have experienced an overriding volitional migration knowing they will eventually return to their homeland. When a return that is in the back of one's mind, one cannot quite embrace and fully commit to an integration. Therefore, one has a disturbed perception of belonging. The forced *Koç* is followed by the shadow of inadequacy, blocking the access to belonging. The inadequacy results from having lost a home, and both the willingness and inability to replace what one has lost.

Symbolically expressed, one has lost their heart somewhere, while the empty body has been forcefully moved to another place. There is no way to recover from the forced *Koç* and consequently no way to find one's heart in the same condition in which one has lost it. One can witness the exile communities creating organizations and associations in the attempt to replace the home they have left or to try to assemble a connection to their homeland. This is also an example of a disrupted commitment to integration in the country of migration. Concurrently, there are no imparted paths of reintegration for the Kurds who get the chance to return to their homeland.

Considering that many of the intellectuals, the educators, the thinkers and talented artists are the ones who have migrated to other countries, the problem of lost potential can be crystallized. The problem of lost potential on the one hand means having little to no possibility of incorporating one's degree, knowledge, and talent in the place one has migrated to. On the other hand, blending back into the society one had left can be highly challenging, especially for those who have forcefully migrated someplace else for a long duration. From this it becomes clear that by virtue of a disturbed integration in the land they have fled to and the difficulty to integrate back into their homeland one loses the sense of belonging altogether. This results in the *KOÇ*-phenomenon.

When the interviewees were questioned about the Kurdish Cause, one of the respondents replied with: "In the past the Kurdish Cause had been sacred to me, but I will no longer fight for it." As a matter of fact, that was the broad reaction that I got during the interviews and in general this is the attitude they have held towards Kurdish politics. The interviewees are neither currently active in Kurdish politics nor interested in being involved. Some of them avoid politics to the extent of not even wanting to vote. Referring to the previously mentioned referendum, a few have either not voted at all or voted despite holding a deeply distrustful stance towards Kurdish politics and having an unfavorable outlook on the future of Kurdistan. Considering that in the past years the Kurds and the Kurdish issue have become a topic that is being discussed globally in international forums which indicates that

there is the interest in internationally recognizing Kurds as political entity, it is profoundly discouraging to know that some of the accomplished scholars in Kurdistan do not realize the necessity of political involvement.

In particular, the diaspora Kurds are capable of providing a fresh perspective through having previously had a direct thread connecting them to both Kurdish as well as western politics. This new perspective and the knowledge diaspora Kurds carry back into their homeland may provide new insights and tangible opportunities that may lead to awareness and the recognition of a Kurdish entity in a global setting. Against this background, it is interesting to see that in comparison to the Kurds we were allowed to meet and interview in Kurdistan, Kurds living in diaspora try to take an active part in the political and cultural life in the pursuit of preserving their Kurdish identity. This is one of their ways of overcoming their longing for their homeland.

As mentioned, Kurdish diaspora communities have among other things formed associations and assemblies, which are partially intensely politicized. Their work on account of the Kurds in their homeland has assumed a wide range of forms, spanning demonstrations, donations and in the main humanitarian work aid to political acts. Many Kurdish activists have made it their mission to spread awareness on political topics in the western countries and speak up for the Kurds. Though factors such as the lack of a Kurdish state, the division and factionalism among the Kurdish diaspora communities caused by the geographical, tribal, linguistic, and ideological separation, is undermining its potential impact. In order to harness political support and recognition of its national claims in the approach of representing the Kurdish cause, Kurdish diaspora tried to become involved in the institutionalized venues of their host countries and to be politically involved.

This interest, commitment, and loyalty of the Kurdish diasporic communities is not being properly encouraged or used in favor of Kurdish politics in Kurdistan to establish diplomatic ties abroad to lobby for the Kurdish cause. Apart from being able to vote on certain decisions, the Kurds have not been given much room to demonstrate any further actions. From this, one can conclude that diaspora Kurds are not necessarily being taken into account in the process of decision making in active politics.

4.1. Kurdish Diaspora: A Unity Crisis

The Kurds in diaspora are not homogeneous or united in terms of the political vision of the Kurdish reality in Kurdistan as a whole, because the Kurdish public opinion is often tainted by the mood of bitterness, ideology, or the lack of deep political awareness of the Kurds. This is due to two main

reasons. First, the Kurdish diasporic community is not being taken into consideration by the active political actors in Kurdistan and second, there is a lack of unity in the Kurdish diaspora discourse. This lack of unity exists because of historical crises such as the struggle for a unified language and conflicting political orientations. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the Kurdish position on Kurdish politics because of opinions that are often controlled by mood and emotion rather than political awareness.

Therefore, the Kurdish situation among the Kurds of the diaspora is not stable due to the absence of rational political discourse. In defining the rational political discourse, it is the discourse that seeks to gather as many common issues as possible, analyze and criticize them, and then turn them into public opinion and a tool of pressure on the government to transform the reality intended to change. However, the majority looks critically at the current political situation in Kurdistan in general and in the Kurdistan region of Iraq in particular because it has not taken decisive positions toward the Kurdish interest. In addition to the failure of the current political system to manage the economic crisis such as the fuel crisis and the rise in food prices, which leads to harming the Kurdish community on a daily basis and pushing it into the abyss. Also, the Kurds of the diaspora reject these egoistic and tribal differences between the ruling Kurdish parties, namely the PUK and the PDK, which divided the Kurdish region into two parts with help of their militias and external powers such as Iran and Turkey respectively.

The common belief among the Kurds in the diaspora is that this policy has divided the society and the Kurds have become a tool of manipulation in the hands of neighboring powers and it may lead to the loss of the dream of an independent Kurdish state. Therefore, a formula for a solution and unification of the Kurdish political discourse must be reached. The majority of the Kurdish diaspora criticize the policies of Turkey, Iran and KRG of restricting new and emerging political movements or parties in Kurdistan. It is obvious that new movements and young blood have a role to play in the process of building, reforming and strengthening the Kurdish political house, bridging the gap of old differences and creating a new Kurdish generation that is politically aware and has ambition in creating a real and unified political discourse. Most of the views in the Kurdish discourse of the Kurdish diaspora gather around the self-criticism directed at the Kurdish government to develop the political process and find solutions and contributions to reforming the political reality. It is difficult to summarize all the political orientations of the Kurds in the diaspora, but some people oppose this system because of disunity, political victimization, the policies of repression towards freedom of expression and the socio- economic crisis in southern Kurdistan. The majority says that this system is not ideal and many reforms are needed if southern Kurdistan wants to become an independent state of the Kurds as a whole.

The Kurdish political parties view the Kurdish diaspora with the lens of doubt and distrust because similar to the past, the Kurdish diaspora can create a wave of public opinion or public mood to put pressure on the host countries to force political parties to do things which their conservative supporters do not appreciate. Kurdish political and social activists living in the western countries used the same tactic to pressure the KRG government to introduce women's rights and honor killing laws (Voller, 2014). However, the political system, in general, does not look with satisfaction at the Kurdish diaspora because of the disparity in support and opposing opinions as well as different beliefs and political orientations.

For example, many of the diaspora's Kurds are supporters of the PKK, and this is what embarrasses the Kurdish position in Iraq towards its ally Turkey, as seen by the PDK. This embarrassment defines the position of the regional government on the diaspora Kurds. There is no doubt that the regional government, and in particular, the PDK party, enjoys excellent relations with Turkey – the old enemy and the so-called ally whose friendship is inevitable, as Turkish investments are boosting the economy of the city of Erbil. It is ironic that yesterday's enemy is today's backbone of the economy, and without their support and their imports, the KRG can face food shortages within weeks at any given time.

The Kurdish political dispersion also has its effects on the relationship or discourse directed toward the Kurdish diaspora due to internal differences. Therefore, the situation is sometimes characterized as sensitive and ambiguous. The relationship between the Kurdish community and the Kurdish regime is not stable due to the opposing movements and the multiplicity of discourses and political orientations. What unites the two parties is the idea of an independent motherland and the common customs, traditions and culture. All Kurds, whether they are in the diaspora or within their regions, are united by the dream of a nation-state.

All Kurds are also concerned about their existence and the survival of their diverse ancient Kurdish culture, but has this concern translated into practical steps and a deliberate policy? The outlook is not very optimistic. This concern is not always translated into politics, public opinion, and orientation because the predominance of emotional discourse over rationality, political dishonesty and safeguarding self-interest over common interest affected the formation of a unified opinion. It is also important to highlight that the official media of the Kurdish political system does not promote the issues of the Kurdish diaspora with a high focus, particularly during the periods of migration from Kurdistan to the west, which are almost ignored, which means that there is lack of political will to interact with the Kurdish diaspora, which is reflected in political decision making.

4.2. Kurdish Diaspora and Political Process

Certainly, any diaspora affects the political process of its homeland, but to what extent does the Kurdish diaspora affect the decision-making process and peace-building as well as the lobbying on the political process? During the first migrations of the Kurdish diaspora to Europe, they established large media and cultural centers, especially in Sweden, where the first newspapers were published and the names of important journalists and newspapers such as *Özgür Politika* (Free Politics) appeared. In addition to this, publishing houses focused on spreading Kurdish culture such as poetry and novels to promote and maintain Kurdish identity.

As compared to their high numbers, some Kurds have been involved in the political process in the host countries, but many of them struggled to integrate with the new society and its norms because they could not forget or detach from the culture of their motherland (Mojab and Hassanpour, 2002). Their presence in European politics helped to transform the Kurdish issue from a local issue and a conflict between countries such as Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey with the Kurds in the mountains, into a global issue. With the help of the most prestigious parliaments in Europe, Kurdish diaspora was able to raise questions on the treatment of the Kurds in the ancient Mesopotamian region. Although ignored by the political parties, the Kurds of the diaspora were able to internationalize the Kurdish cause and expose the injustice which the Kurds are subjected to as well as they proposed solutions to improve the Kurdish situation.

Despite the Kurdish diaspora's entry into parliaments and community organizations concerned with human rights, and their founding of the KHRP (Kurdish Human Rights Project), the Kurds were unable to translate this presence into a practical discourse. They could not become a part of the decision-making process, either in the host countries or in their homeland, and this is due to the reasons, mentioned before, about the dispersal of the unified political discourse and their internal differences. The decision-making process requires a lot of public, local and international support for the policy taken by the decision-maker, and this is what the Kurds lack. Despite their large number as a diaspora community, the Kurds could not establish mass movements and develop connections with the lobbyist groups in the host countries that would enable them to reach to the power corridors where high-level decisions are made.

If we compare the situation of Kurds in Europe and the greater Kurdistan region, the Kurdish diaspora community enjoys greater freedom in political engagement, establishing activist organizations and newspapers that critically analyze and evaluate the situation of the Kurds more than the region itself. Oppressive governments in Turkey, Iran and Syria, combined with the hegemonic struggle between the two parties in the southern Kurdistan region, disallow

the Kurds to express their point of view freely. For example, in Turkey, if they have strong political views or support a separatist Kurdish movement they cannot move around freely, and they are held at the airports and raided frequently. In the southern part of Kurdistan things are not so different, as major political actors have extreme difficulty in accepting different political views and criticism from the rest of the political parties. Therefore, although far from their motherland, the Kurds in diaspora prefer to remain as a means of activism, pressure and criticism of governments rather than engaging in political action as supportive and opposition parties.

One of the weaker points of the Kurdish diaspora is high scale lobbying for an independent Kurdistan. The diaspora Kurds can pressure the governments of the host countries, as we mentioned earlier, to spread the Kurdish voice and safeguard Kurdish interest. After decades of struggle, the Kurds can make their voices heard and get the local civil society on board to create a real public opinion which can push the governments of Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, France, the US and others to support the Kurdish cause efficiently. But they almost failed to establish any meaningful lobbying for the Kurdistan cause, except online activism and some public gatherings in scattered and politically divided groups, but this is not considered a lobby. The concept of the lobby is the hidden force that can turn public opinion in its favor through several means such as the media, diplomatic pressure, political pressure and huge economic support and investments, but Kurdistan has not witnessed this so far.

4.3. Kurdish Diaspora and Internal Politics

The relationship between Kurdish diaspora and local leaders has both a bitter and sweet history. Kurdish diaspora has always been critical towards domestic policies of the Kurdish political parties and in return, sometimes Kurdish diaspora was not taken into confidence on local matters. During the 2017 referendum, the Kurdish government tried to gain the confidence of the Kurdish diaspora because they wanted to bring in as many supporters as possible as well as they wanted to attract international audiences. Indeed, this case succeeded in bringing many Kurds from the diaspora to vote, despite the divergent opinions of those who support the referendum and those who oppose its timing.

The idea of postponement of the referendum due to its inappropriate timing was not broad in terms of acceptability, although it includes rationality, lack of international lobbying and political awareness, as some describe it. The Kurdistan Regional Government succeeded in publishing the content of this

referendum globally through mobilization and the numbers that participated in it exceeded 5 million subscribers with almost 93% in favor of secession. The emotional dimension of the independence referendum stirred the feelings of all Kurds, which made them participate in voting. The emotional atmosphere filled with dreams and hope about an independent and united Kurdistan, in addition to the participation of the Kurdish diaspora, contributed to the spread of the Kurdistan cause until it topped the headlines and buzzed in all communication sites.

It is believed that the Kurdish government somewhat succeeded in this process of highlighting the Kurdish cause and at least attracted sympathies towards the issue of the referendum and Kurdish oppression. It was obvious that the vast majority of the Kurds and the Kurdish diaspora supported the independence of Kurdistan, but some also believe that after making this huge noise, the Kurds have come back to square zero, while a well-coordinated effort with the help of lobbying and appropriate timing would have brought a much better result. After supporting the west in their fight against ISIS, putting Kurdistan in a dire situation, diminishing Kurdish resources and the high number of casualties at the hands of ISIS were more than sufficient to gain international recognition of the Kurds as an independent state. Although the referendum helped to revive the feeling of Kurdish nationalism, the timing of it is still debatable.

In conclusion, the experience of the diaspora Kurds deserves study and criticism because it is possible for the diaspora to influence and unite their opinions and create a public movement that can change the political situation. For example, regarding the current Kurdish parties, most of them were formed in the countries of exile or diaspora. Most of the Kurdish leaders have lived a period of their lives in the diaspora, and therefore, they know the situation well. It is possible that the leadership will end up ignoring the reality of what this experience can do in terms of creating new political trends and currents. This is why it is important to keep striving and reminding the hegemonic corridors that diasporic communities can help the Kurds to achieve the dream of an independent nation-state. But, similar to their extreme internal divide, the problem of the Kurdish diaspora is that they are not homogeneous. The lack of unity, extreme political differences and the multiplicity of languages prevent the Kurds from being homogeneous, which is one of the reasons for the dispersion they live in.

The Kurdish diaspora view their current political struggle in Bakur, Rojava and Rojhelat as fighting for its survival and the political system in Iraqi Kurdistan as incomplete and imperfect, and its course must be corrected. Others reject the gains of the Kurds or their struggle completely. Likewise, the political system sometimes does not view the diaspora pragmatically and also

does not focus much on their situation, as there is a media disregard for their situation. It is ironic that the Kurdish government has demanded that all the Kurds in diaspora join to vote in the independence referendum, yet after the vote was held, the policy of ignoring the Kurds in diaspora continued. Although the diasporic Kurdish community was able to build a society for themselves in their host countries and engage in economic, social and political activities, their success is not great in their countries of origin. Therefore, the Kurdish issue will keep stumbling and internal dispersion will continue if the Kurds do not unite around a clear and conscious political discourse that enables the Kurds to reach their historical dream of an independent nation-state.

Chapter Five

The Kurdish Conflict and the Outsiders

The waters of Tigris and Euphrates have given birth to many ancient civilizations. This piece of land stretching from the Persian Gulf to Armenia and from the Hakkari Mountains to the Syrian Desert was one of the most fertile regions of the world. The availability of sweet waters in abundance and one of the very few sites of early organized agricultural practices made it attractive to many other kingdoms. It encouraged Sumerians, Semites, Egyptians, Kassites, Assyrians, Sasanians, and others to invade and establish their dynasties (Krejčí, 1990).

This has now become one of the most polarized regions of the world (Sørli, Gleditsch & Strand, 2005). Since the death of Prophet Muhammad, a new wave of conflicts has taken over this region. The Shia-Sunni divide, the Kharijites, the Umayyads, the Abbasids, the Safavids, the Ottomans, and the British colonizers, one after another, have played a part in radicalizing this region (Alterman, 2015), so that each one could benefit from it. This has brought instability, divide, turmoil, and conflict to the area.

Before Islam and the invasion of the second caliph of Islam Umar bin Al-Khattab between 636 and 638 CE, the ancient Mesopotamian region was religiously a diverse region of Yazidis or Zoroastrians, Sabians, Jews, and Christians, and in general the Yazidis believe that they were among the natives of this region (Khalil “Personal Interview” 2020). After the arrival of Islam in the region, a new era of wars, persecutions, genocides, resistance, and revolts started. The eighth Abbasid Caliph al-Mu’tasim Bi’llah’s persecution plan and a revolt by Yazidi leader Mir Jafar bin Mir Hasan Dasni in 838 (Manucharyan, 2015) was one of the first attempts to target the Yazidi Kurds systematically.

Badr al-Din Lu’lu’s brutalities in the thirteenth century and the genocide against the Yazidis of Emir Muhammad Kor, also known as Mîrê Kor,³³ in the

³³ Mîr Mihemedê Soran or Emir Muhammad Kor, also known as Mîrê Kor, was a Kurdish tribal leader who revived the Soran Emirates (a medieval Kurdish empire that was later conquered by the Ottomans in 1514). As a result of the Russo-Turkish War (1828-29) and the Turco-Egyptian War (1831-33), there was a power vacuum in the region that provided Mîrê Kor with an opportunity to establish the lost Kurdish empire in Rawandiz. He gathered the local tribes and conquered

nineteenth century, changed the demographics of the region because, in the memory of the Yazidis, he pushed the Yazidis to the north and restricted them to the Hakkari Mountains and Mount Sinjar (Saeed “Personal Interview” 2021). This had a significant impact on how this region looks today. Later on, in the 20th century, the Arabization, anti-Shia, and anti-Kurd campaigns of Saddam further polarized the region (Alterman, 2015).

With the introduction of Arab Spring, intrastate conflicts, international involvement, and domestic manipulation made the situation graver than ever before. As a result, the chances of sustainable peace have been getting slimmer and slimmer every day. Although conflict has always been an integral part of the history of the Middle East, the 2003 Iraq invasion by the US-led forces marked a new phase in the existing tensions of the region. It not only sparked the conflicts between two countries, but it created conflict within nations and added fuel to already existing conflicts (Alterman, 2015).

In previous chapters, we discussed the history of the Kurds, their presence, and their development in the ancient Mesopotamian region, as well as their internal conflicts; in this chapter, the focus is on the national, regional, and international impact of the Kurds and their internal conflict and its implications on the peace process in the Middle East. The conflict among the Kurds has an impact on the peace process in the rest of the Middle East, and it is obvious that the changing political situation and deteriorating peace process in the other parts of the Middle East will affect the situation in Kurdistan and Iraq. Therefore, this chapter also analyzes the historical, socio-political, and socio-economic decisions of the past in the Middle East and how they contributed to the current scenario in Kurdistan.

5.1. Iraq and Kurdish Conflict

When I was planning my residence in Kurdistan, Iraq to conduct my research, I knew that Kurdistan was a semi-autonomous region of Iraq, but I was not aware of its confused political and administrative system. I contacted the Iraq Embassy for the visa requirements and upon learning that I was going to the city of Sulaimani in Kurdistan, they directed me to dial another number and contact a Kurdish representative within the Iraqi Embassy. After telling them my purpose and nationality, the representative informed me that I would

Zakho, Duhok, Amedi, Bohtan, and its capital, Cizre. In newly captured areas Mîrê Kor oppressed, persecuted, and committed genocide against the Yazidis, which Yazidis remember as the Mîrê Kor genocide. After a series of attempts, the Ottomans regained control in 1836.

not need a visa. Once I landed in Kurdistan and got permission to work and do research, I wanted to visit Sinjar, Karbala, Kufa, and Najaf as part of my research, but I was told that I could not cross the Kurdish border without an Iraqi visa. It was surprising to find that I would need an Iraqi visa to travel from one part of Iraq to the other, as it is one country, with one passport, but two constitutions.

My second week in Kurdistan gave me the opportunity to experience some protests, and I learned that the Kurdish government employees had not received their salaries for months because the federal government of Iraq in Baghdad and the Kurdistan government in Erbil were (and as of this writing still are) arguing over oil sales. The arguments over who should sell the oil and who will receive the money led people to start another movement of civil disobedience and revolt. "Revolt" not a new term in this region. As mentioned in detail in the first chapter, Kurdish history is full of revolts, and the Kurds, in general, take pride in this.

During the Ottoman era, especially, the Kurdistan region was not an easy place to rule. Once the First World War concluded and Iraq established its first monarchy with the help of the British mandate, they faced severe resistance from the Kurds. The first Kurdish flag was presented by the leaders of the Khoyboun, the "independence" movement, to the international delegation at the Paris Peace Conference in 1920 (Eliasi, 1998). Inspired by other political movements, the Kurds decided to pursue their dream of an independent Kurdistan and came up with the idea of forming their own political party. Although Ahmed Barzani, Mustafa Barzani, Mahmud Barzanji, and other Kurdish leaders laid the foundation of PDK in 1945, it was formally established first in the Republic of Mahabad in the first half of 1946, and a few months later, on August 16, 1946, it was formed in Baghdad.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party joined hands with other forces such as Baath Party, the Iraqi Communist Party, and the National Democratic Party to fight for an independent Iraq and an autonomous Kurdistan. The idea was to create a nation state where different ethnicities could live together and own the land. Their dream of an independent Iraq came true in July 1958, when the monarchy was overthrown. All the democratic forces gathered in the Republic of Iraq and formed the new government, but this alliance did not last for long (Sorby, 2005).

The Kurdish leaders parted ways with Prime Minister Abd al- Karim Qasim and started their armed resistance (Sorby, 2005). A series of fights and attacks started in 1963, when the Baath Party came into power for the first time. The relationship between the Arab and Kurdish parts of Iraq had never been strong, but 1963 was the beginning of a never-ending conflict. The Baath regime was very hard on the Kurds; they started attacking civilians with air-

strikes bombings, and deportation, and by stripping them of their citizenship (McDowall, 1996).

Surprisingly, the second reign of the Baath regime in 1968 started with a rather cautious attitude. Instead of a military solution, this time, they opted to try negotiation. On the 11th of March 1970, the Kurdish leadership and the government of Iraq signed a memorandum in which all parts of Kurdistan and Iraq with Kurdish majority would exist under an autonomous Kurdistan. Arabization and rich oil fields made Kirkuk a controversial area, so it was decided that the fate of Kirkuk would be decided by the referendum (McDowall, 1996).

Similar to the previous memorandums of understanding, this one did not last long, and in 1974, the government passed a law which struck down the previous memorandum. It marked the second wave of Iraqi- Kurdish war, but this time, it was an intensified attack on the Kurdish population. International actors such as the USSR, the US, Iran, and Israel played their parts in making this conflict worse. Thousands of civilians had to flee to the mountains or to neighboring countries to save their lives. Although the 1975 Algiers Agreement enforced a ceasefire, the conflict was not even close to its end. After the failed uprising, Jalal Talabani founded another Kurdish political party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Their aim was self-determination, human rights, democracy, and peace for the region. It was headquartered in Sulaimani (Hama, 2019).

As mentioned before, the *Anfal* Campaign, the chemical attacks, the various genocides, and the concentration camps resulted in over 182.000 Kurdish deaths (Middle East Watch Report, 1993). Immediately after the Gulf War, the Kurdish uprising started and was met with a strong military counterattack by Saddam Hussein's government. Once again, thousands of people lost their lives during the uprising and the result was not much different than before, but the Kurds were able to take Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaimani provinces, and with this area, they established their local administration.

Poverty, fear, chaos, and instability are weapons of war, and along with the conventional weapons, the government used these weapons to gain the support of many villages and towns. During the periods of unrest and war, there were many Kurdish villages that supported Saddam's regime in targeting their fellow Kurds. This was the beginning of an internal conflict within the Kurds, and it instilled distrust and hatred among the Kurds that would be reflected in the years to come. In 1994, a civil war began between two parties, the PDK and the PUK, and for years, it was hard for people of one province to travel to the next. At one point, the PDK asked the Iraqi government to help them expel the PUK from PDK headquarters in Erbil. Thousands of people were displaced and killed (Hama, 2019). After a long conflict, and after bearing huge losses, both parties signed a peace agreement in 1998, but without any roadmap for compensation and bringing back the displaced population.

This conflict between two parties created safe havens for terrorists and extremist groups. Along the borders of two provinces, there was a buffer zone that was a sort of no man's land, and places like this serve non-state actors well. Extremist groups such as the Kurdistan Islamic Group, Ansar al-Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan, and the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan established themselves and gathered in the mountains of Kurdistan along the borders of Iran and Syria (Bakawan, 2017). Militants from the Arab world, Africa, Afghanistan, and Central Asian countries reunited, and started attacking Kurdish officials, civilians, and towns.

The easiest way to spread chaos, instability, and hatred among people is to wage war on them, and this is what has been happening in Kurdistan. The governments of Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq opposed an independent, autonomous, and prosperous Kurdistan. Because it is not in their interests, they may try to play every card that they have to make sure that their interests are not threatened (Jaafar, 2019). The Kurdish political parties in general and the PUK in particular have accused Iran and Iraq of sponsoring these terrorist groups to bring instability to Kurdistan.

Militancy is not a new tactic to destabilize a country or a region. The same formula was used to destabilize and polarize the region to create rifts and conflicts within the civilians and various factions. A simple analysis of the evidence suggests that internal Kurdish conflict supported the Iraqi government. So, it is not impossible that the governments might have supported and incentivized these groups to create problems within Kurdistan.

Another episode of this internal conflict and its outcome is the ISIS onslaught on the Yazidi Kurds in 2014. Yazidis were used as scapegoats to appease and calm this multilayered conflict between Arabs, Kurds, Sunnis, and Shias. Religion was used as a driving force to identify and target the victims. According to René Girard's³⁴ concepts of rivalry, scapegoat or victim, and sacrifice, people believe sacrifice establishes a connection between human and divine, and it calms the rage of God and brings God's blessings, but Girard thinks followers misunderstand it, and religion plays an important part in establishing this misunderstanding. Religion provides direction and motive, sanctioning the belief that a divine figure requires blood, killing, and slaughtering of various

³⁴ A French philosopher and historian René Noël Théophile Girard (also known as René Girard) is the founder of the Mimetic Theory of Desire. According to this theory, humans imitate others and this mimetic desire evolves into a rivalry between two or more people, groups, or communities, and it ends in scapegoating. He believes that human desire is an independent process, not a collective decision. We want something because other people also want it. Girard explains that imitating other human beings is a universal phenomenon and mimetic desire develops natural rivalry that leads to scapegoating.

creatures in order to calm its anger (Girard, 1977). If we explore the reasons behind this conflict, unsurprisingly, religion will be one of the main one.

ISIS belongs to a radical Sunni sect of Islam that desires to dominate the region in place of Shias. On the other hand, Shias also want to dominate; this clash of wills is nothing new. It has been happening for centuries, and has always generated rivalries between Shias and Sunnis. According to Girard, when two or more groups or individuals desire the same thing, it can generate rivalry, and when the rivalry reaches its apex, it needs a scapegoat and a victim to defuse the tensions and restore peace (Girard, 1977).

A similar pattern can be seen in the Shia-Sunni, Iraq-Iran, Turkey-Iraq, and Iran-Turkey rivalry, both in terms of desire to dominate and in that whenever their rivalry gets close to collision, they find a scapegoat to release their tensions. Over the last 1400 years, most of the time the Kurds have been the scapegoats of this rivalry. They are an easy target for ethno-religious hatred and portrayal as people with intentions to dominate the region and bring all the Kurds together who need to be targeted in order to restore peace.

5.2. Iran and Kurdish Conflict

Iran is a key player in the region and an important stakeholder when the question comes to the Kurdish quest, as the idea of a Greater Kurdistan involves Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. A Kurdish separatist movement in Iran is led by the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) (ACCORD Report, 2013). This means that Iran will never support the Kurdish quest for independence because if one part of Kurdistan gets independence, it will definitely support the other part, and here the ugly side of politics shows its face.

On one hand, Iran has completely rejected the idea of an independent Kurdistan and any Kurdish referendum by saying that it is an Israeli-backed project (Majidyar 2017), but on the other hand, Iran supported and sponsored this movement for decades, against Saddam's regime. Politics can be a dirty game in which, often, no one is your permanent enemy or friend: it is all about vested interests. In 1973, the same Iran who accused Kurdish independence of being an Israeli project, got into an agreement with the Central Intelligence Agency of the US – CIA – and Mossad, the national intelligence agency of Israel, to sponsor Kurdish resistance in Iraq. Before the Iranian Revolution in 1978, the Shah supported Mustafa Barzani. The revolution changed the leadership, but what it did not change was Iranian policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan (Entessar, 1984), but this support and the US, Israel, and Iran nexus was fatal for the Kurds.

Although Iraqi Kurdish forces had conflict within the ranks, and the KDP, the PUK, and other Islamic extremists were fighting with each other as well

as with external forces, Iran had always supported all of them against Saddam Hussein's regime. This alliance and support must have hurt Kurdistan more than it helped the cause. It is also strange that, even after the 1975 Algiers Agreement, when Iran abandoned the Kurds and left them at the mercy of Saddam Hussein, the Kurds did not learn the lesson that Iran was using them as a tool and was not a true ally. The current generation of Kurds, even Shia Kurds, generally does not like Iran and its interference in Iraqi politics (Manzoor "Personal Interview" 2021).

After Saddam's departure and the Shia takeover of Iraqi politics, Iran established a close relationship with Baghdad, and this was one of the main reasons that it did not support the Kurdish referendum in 2017. Since Qasem Soleimani's active role in the Middle East in general and in Iraq in particular, many Kurdish and Iraqi leaders were following Tehran's agenda and ideology (Manzoor "Personal Interview" 2021). Iran is also accused of supporting, sponsoring, and providing arms to Shia militants.

Iran has been extremely vocal about the withdrawal of US military presence, as it has faced some difficulties in moving around and being involved in objectionable activities in the region. But, whenever the US lays a hand on an Iranian official, Iraqi and Kurdish leaders come to the rescue of Iran. This style of politics has further damaged the peace process in the region, and according to locals, the death of Qasem Soleimani sparked another wave of conflicts that will bring negative results for the region (Manzoor "Personal Interview" 2021).

This is an example of political dishonesty of the Kurdish politicians: they are aware of the fact that Iran is involved in suspicious activities and sponsoring militias as well as, from time to time, attacking the border regions of Kurdistan, but they still look to Iran for support. According to Leila Manzoor, however, Iran will never want betterment for the Kurdish people (Manzoor "Personal Interview" 2021). If Kurdistan and its leaders want to achieve a better solution and have long lasting peace in the region, they have to break away from Iranian influence and make decisions that are in their best interest.

5.3. Turkey and Kurdish Conflict

Since the time of the Ottoman Empire, the Mesopotamian region and Constantinople, modern day Istanbul, never had the best of relationships. Many wars, persecutions, and genocides have turned the people of this region against each other. In the beginning of the 20th century, many stood against the Ottomans and supported Christian minorities. The Ottoman Empire's participation and defeat in World War I, and the dissolution of the Ottoman

Empire, brought about huge change in the Middle East. When the atmosphere of war calmed down and the Kurds realized that they were used by the Ottomans during the Armenian genocide, it left a bitter taste in the Mesopotamian region (Çelik, 2020).

The Kurds believed that they were used against the Armenians and that they could face the same atrocities at the hands of Turks. As Girard explains, in the dance of violence, initially the protagonists believe that they can handle the conflict and that they can end the violence and change the system, but instead, they become a part of the vicious circle of violence (Girard, 1977). The Kurds, who were victims themselves, turned out to be antagonists and victimizers.

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1921, some Kurds believed that the new president of modern-day Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, would bring a ray of hope for the Kurds and that maybe sectarian and ethnic divides would end, but actually they increased with every new government (Wehrey, 2018). Atatürk's patriotic mindset and idea of a unified Turkey was also bad news for the Kurds. The Kurdish situation in Turkey and in the surrounding areas did not change much. The deportation and persecution policy which started in the early 20th century continued, and thousands of Kurds vanished (Gunter, 1988).

This made Iraqi Kurds very suspicious of Turkish intentions, and they became aware that Turkey would never support their cause. Subsequently, the relationship between Turkey and the Kurds in Iraq has always been sour. In 1991, during the Gulf War, Turkey's decision to allow the Allied Forces to protect the Kurdish mountains helped both sides to better their relationship. Later, Turkey allowed the leading Kurdish parties – the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan – to establish their political offices on its soil (Aykan, 1996). Although diplomatic ties were initiated, Turkey has never recognized the government of Kurdistan. Turkey was well aware of the fact that once Iraqi Kurds are settled, they would not stop until they had their own independent country, and this was totally unacceptable for Turkey, because they know that the Kurds' dream of Greater Kurdistan would always remain a threat for Turkish national integrity. Another reason for Turkish suspicion towards Iraqi Kurds is their sympathies and support for a Turkish militant group, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, also known as the PKK (Salih, 2019).

After gaining better relations with Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey launched several attacks on Iraqi soil and established checkpoints in the Sinjar and Duhok regions. The PKK mostly operates within Turkey and attacks the Turkish forces, but it has its hideouts and safe havens in the Kurdish mountains on the Iraqi side as well. During my visits to Duhok and Sheikhan, I met some people who served in the PKK and fought against the Turkish forces to protect the Kurdish mountains on both sides of the border. Since my arrival in Kurd-

istan, there have been several incidents of the PKK kidnapping and killing Turkish citizens, and in retaliation, Turkish forces attacked and damaged the PKK forces, and as collateral damage, many Iraqi Kurds lost their lives and properties. “Turkish jets are bombing Sinjar and I am so worried about my parents; they are old, but they do not want to leave their village” (Saeed “Personal Interview” 2021).

These attacks increased the resentment among the residents of the border areas, and many young people, as revenge, joined the PKK: they did not have any hope and they could not live in peace. “When we will have peace, we do not want anything, we just want to live. Let us live” (Saeed “Personal Interview” 2021). People with whom I talked from the region do not like Turkey because of its past and present actions. With every passing day, Turkish influence and trade is increasing in Iraqi Kurdistan, but at the same time, some people are boycotting Turkish products because the Turks are considered oppressors.

Even though the Iraq invasion by US-led forces in 2003 brought a sigh of relief for two marginalized groups of Iraq, the Kurds and the Shias, it also changed the demographics of the region, as well as the political and economic balance. The influence of neighboring Arab countries has increased. The image that Turkey had built by supporting Allied Forces in 1991 was damaged when Turkey decided not to allow US-led forces to enter and use their soil (Müftüler-Bac, 2005).

This move has definitely affected the Turkish influence in the region, especially in the matter pertaining to Iraqi Kurdistan, but the Kurdish government is more comfortable now than ever before in having stronger ties with Turkey. Even so, Turkey knows its limits and has never supported the annexation of Kirkuk by Kurdistan because Turkey is aware that once Kurds take Kirkuk, no one can stop them from being independent. In 2017, Turkey outrightly called the Kurdish referendum an illegitimate act (Pichon, 2017).

5.4. The West and Kurdish Conflict

The US has always put its interests before anyone else's, and the relationship between the US and the Kurds has developed accordingly. Because in the last two centuries the Kurds have not been an organized or formal force, their relationship with the US has seen many ups and downs. The US has successfully used the Kurds and their dependency as a tool to maneuver in the region. The Kurds have done the same, using the US for their benefits. The relation between these two forces has been fluctuating depending on the circumstances of the regions and the US policy towards the Middle East. An infamous tradition of “good cop, bad cop” and “good *Taliban*, bad *Taliban*”

was adopted by the US in the case of the Kurds as well. Whenever the US needed the Kurds, they became “good Kurds,” and whenever the US wanted to discard them, they became “bad Kurds” (Schwarz, 2019).

The period around World War I is one of the most significant periods in the modern history of the Kurds in general. This was the time of making and breaking promises. The dream of Greater Kurdistan was shattered and the Kurds realized that it was just a delusional tactic by the West. After World War I, President Woodrow Wilson, in his speech to the US Congress, announced that the US would support the Kurds in achieving the right of self-determination, but that the Kurds, along with all other minorities within the Ottoman territory, should be given the right to choose their future (Schwarz, 2019).

This speech gave the Kurds hope to achieve their dream, and two years later, in 1920, the Treaty of Sevres was signed between the Ottomans and other allies: The United Kingdom, France, Italy and Greece, in which the Kurds were promised independence. It was a huge moral victory for the Kurds. They could taste independence, and thought that the dream of a Greater Kurdistan was just one step away. They did not know that their dream would live only three years and that soon Kurdistan would be divided into four pieces (Schwarz, 2019).

After a seven-months-long conference to determine the boundaries of modern-day Turkey as the successors of the Ottomans, the Treaty of Lausanne was signed between Turkey, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Japan, Greece, Romania, and the Kingdom of the Serbs. The treaty contained a list of territorial divisions and administrative shifts, but the most important outcome, for this study, was the decision to cancel the idea of making Kurdistan an autonomous region. Instead, according to this treaty, the Kurdish nation would be divided among Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran (Schwarz, 2019).

The US and other western allies, especially the United Kingdom and France, could not keep their promises, and the Kurds received one of the biggest setbacks of their modern history. After World War II, seeing the German influence in Iran, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union attacked Iran, and Soviet forces positioned themselves in Iran. The Soviets were aware of the fact that neither the US nor the United Kingdom was happy with their presence in Iran, and they feared that they might play some trick to oust them from Iran (Schwarz, 2019).

In light of these possibilities, the Soviet Union started supporting and arming the Kurdish separatists in Iran. Iran could not hold onto the Soviet power for long, and in January 1946, Iranian and some Iraqi Kurds formed a self-governing state with the name of “Republic of Mahabad.” It was an unrecognized Communist state supported by the Soviet Union, but could not sustain the pressure, and came to an end after 11 months when Iranian forces overtook the attempt (Roosevelt, 1947).

During this Soviet support of the Kurds and establishment of the short-lived Kurdish state, the US, under the leadership of President Harry Truman, was constantly opposing the moves. The US, the UK, and France continuously pressured the Soviet Union through the United Nation's platform to stop supporting the Kurds until they achieved their objectives. This shows how western forces have used every available platform to guard their interests. Whenever the decision of supporting the Kurdish quest was in their own interests, they made it a human rights and minority issue, but whenever it was against their interest, they used all available means to stop it.

As mentioned, the West in general and the US in particular have looked at the Kurdish quest through the lens of their own interests. Similar policy was adopted during and after the Cold War era. During the time when Iraq was governed by monarchs, the US had a very close relationship with the leading elite, and never questioned Iraqi policies towards the Kurds. In order to keep the Iraqi-US friendship flourishing, the US maintained the stance that this was Iraq's internal matter and that the US would not interfere in any country's internal matters. The Kurds have always responded to the call of the West, but whenever they needed the support, they were let down by the West (Schwarz, 2019).

The US also thought that because Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani had spent over a decade in exile in the Soviet Union, he might be inclined toward the Communist mindset. The Baath Party, initially against the Soviets, became the closest ally and friend of the US and Barzani, who repeatedly requested the US administration to support the Kurdish cause, went unheard. A shift occurred when the Shah of Iran developed stronger ties with the US, and the Baath Party decided to incline towards the Soviets and adopted an aggressive policy against Israel (Hughes, 2006). Now, both the Shah of Iran and the US wanted to weaken the Iraqi government, and the easiest way was to support the Kurds. For quite some time, the US-Iran nexus had supported the Kurds, but after the Algiers Agreement in 1975, both parties distanced themselves from the Kurds and left them alone to deal with the brutalities of Saddam (Hughes, 2006). Once again, the Kurds were just a tool, used as political cards to play. The US-Iran support to the Kurds was not humanitarian based support, but was an interest-based ideology.

The Kurds did not learn lessons from the past, and continued to get involved in the mess created by the others. It had not been long ago that they were abandoned by the US and Iran when the Iran-Iraq war started in 1980, but once again the Kurds chose the side that would hurt them in the future. They decided to support Iran in this war, and in return Iran started supporting them to fight against Saddam's regime. A combination of poor assessment of the possible threat from Saddam by the Kurds, Iran involving the Kurds for their

benefits, and the US turning their backs resulted in one of the most horrific crimes in modern history.

Once again, the Kurds were on the receiving end of violence, and the perpetrators knew that no one would come to rescue them. This barbaric mindset encouraged the Saddam regime to go all out against the Kurds. They attacked the Kurds with every weapon that they had. The chemical attack on the city of Halabja, the Anfal Campaign, and bombardment of the civilians took place. The streets and the villages of Iraqi Kurdistan were attacked mercilessly, but no human rights defender came forward to protect the men, women, and children from being butchered by the Iraqi forces.

The story of Kurdish-US hide and seek is one of the most shocking stories in modern history. Once more the Kurds thought that the chaos that resulted from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and then the Gulf War brought another opportunity for independence. Their misapprehension was also due to President George W. Bush's speech, in which he encouraged the Kurds to revolt against Saddam's government (Schwarz, 2019). Once again, without thinking much, the Kurds decided to fight, and once again history repeated itself.

The US, instead of supporting the Kurds, turned its back and walked away. Their stance was the same old story: they did not want to interfere in the internal politics of Iraq. Yet again, Saddam crushed the Kurdish uprising brutally and created one of the biggest humanitarian crises of Middle Eastern history. Millions of Kurds had to flee the region and live in refugee camps in Iran, Turkey, Syria, and other neighboring countries, including Europe. At the request of Turkey, Iran, and France, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 688 and asked Iraqi forces to stop the atrocities in Iraqi Kurdistan (Chitalkar and Malone, 2013).

The Gulf War, in 1991, brought a sigh of relief for the Kurds, and the Allied forces of the US, France, and the UK managed to establish a *de facto* Kurdish state in the north of Iraq. This was by far the biggest achievement of the Kurds in their quest to establish their own independent country (Gunter, 1993). The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the ousting of Saddam Hussein and the establishment of Kurdistan as an autonomous region were big steps for the Kurds. For the first time in their history they were recognized and acknowledged internationally.

The Kurds also became an important part and partner of the US "war on terror" policy, when in 2014 ISIS attacked and captured many cities of Iraq. The Kurdish military, the Peshmerga, received international acknowledgement for their sacrifices (Connable, Lander and Jackson, 2017). The Kurdish leadership saw this international recognition and support as an opportunity, and wanted to cash in on it by introducing the independence referendum. The decision of going for a referendum without detailed homework and interna-

tional diplomacy cost the Kurds dearly. There was no significant support from the international community in favor of the referendum. Although more than 92% of the Kurds voted in favor of independence (Pichon, 2017), the lack of international support damaged their cause.

The lack of support from the US and the West made the Kurds realize that they were once again betrayed. It gave a strong signal to the federal government that they could take a strong stance against the Kurds. With the help of Iran and their Shia militia, the federal government attacked the Kurds, retrieved the disputed areas from their control, and closed the airports. It was a significant economic and reputational loss for the Kurds. Throughout this chaotic period, the US government remained silent and once again termed the issue an internal issue of Iraq.

Although the Kurds are far from achieving their desired goal, they have taken significant steps in the direction of their goal of an independent Kurdistan. Perhaps the Kurds have learned the hard way that in the international arena, things are not as easy as they might appear. International forces always look out for their own benefits, and overdependence on them can hurt the cause more than it benefits. Time and again, the Kurds have been unable to read their opponents or allies, and they have lost more than they have gained.

Whether or not the Kurds have gained a deeper understanding remains to be seen, but in the 21st century, in order to achieve one's objectives, one needs to be economically, strategically, politically, and diplomatically savvy. It is important to calculate benefits as well as risks before burning bridges. Maybe in the past, passion, desire, and force were enough to achieve greatness, but the world we live in now is different, and the sooner the Kurds realize this, the sooner they can benefit from it.

5.5. Problems of the Conflict

The modern history of the Kurds is full of tragedies, casualties, and atrocities, but the last four decades are the most catastrophic period. Along with the betrayal from the international community, their own lack of planning or anticipation, as well as internal divide, have cost them. One of the ways to rectify failure is to observe what has gone wrong.

Without identifying mistakes, it is hard to correct them. As Greig Beck quotes Albert Einstein, "doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results" (Beck, Ch. 24) is not wise, yet it seems that the Kurds have been doing exactly this.

In order to resolve this chaotic situation, Iraqi Kurds need to work on some basic issues within their camps. It is easiest to blame someone else and believe

that there is nothing wrong with one's approach, but self-reflection is a key factor in future planning, especially if one has been defeated numerous times and has lost morale. When the objective is fading, self-reflection is one of the most important tools.

First and foremost, the Kurds need to focus on their inner conflicts and come out of the state of denial and self-praise. As I have mentioned, I have noticed that if you ask anyone about the Shia, Sunni, and Yazidi conflict or about the internal conflict of the Kurds, the first reaction is total denial and the second line of defense is to fall back on a mighty past and rich history. Another important factor in the internal divide is how damaging it is for their future. It is obvious and quite evident that the Kurds are divided into Shias, Sunnis, Yazidis, Yarsanis, and others. Even within Sunnis there are divisions. Every group has its own agenda and objectives, and is striving to reach them, but during this tussle they have forgotten their main objectives and goals. They have to realize that it is extremely easy to defeat a group that is divided as compared to a group that is united. Instead, they are fighting with each other and carrying out ethnic cleansing so that some of the borders can be modified and one group can have a bigger territory than the other.

Some new borders are being drawn, such as those around the Kurdish regions of Iraq and perhaps Syria, but mostly, what we are seeing is the ethnic cleansing of much of the region to fit the borders (Wehrey, 2018, p. 24).

Internal divide and lack of unity gives birth to various issues within a nation or a team. One of these issues is future planning, which depends on a nation's education system. Whether it is about the national budget or other political priorities, education is nowhere to be seen and lack of education generates issues such as inequality, corruption, social imbalance, injustice, marginalization, crime, and intolerance, all of which weaken the socio-political system. The main reasons behind ethno-religious divides in a community are lack of education, inequality, and a corrupt education system.

Under authoritarianism, when people are forced to follow a certain ideology or when they are marginalized, it generates divide, hatred and intolerance. This is what has been happening to Kurdistan over the years. The marginalized ones and the victims have been victimizing and marginalizing others. Yazidis and Shias are examples of this pattern, which further divides the Kurds. Authoritarian regimes have benefited in the past and are benefiting at the moment. A uniform, unbiased, and tolerant political and education system for the unity of the nation and a strong diplomatic policy for better international communication are the issues that the Kurdish nation needs to address. Otherwise, it will

be hard to bring a visible change, because if we analyze the political, social, economic, and education systems of Kurdistan, they contain the deficiencies and discrepancies which lead to polarization and sectarian divide.

In authoritarian states, these deficiencies include strategies of institutionalized sectarianism through the uneven access to economic capital, political exclusion, gerrymandering, and discrimination in education, the media, and security sectors, to name a few. All of these factors, independently or together, can contribute to the politicization and radicalization of micro-level religious identities (Wehrey, 2018, p. 6).

After a thorough analysis of external involvement and internal deficiencies, one can say that Kurds need a deeper process of self- reflection and a sharper focus on the reasons for their failures. It is also important to mention that the international community has contributed significantly to the current crisis of Kurdistan and Iraq. Therefore, Kurds need to establish themselves at the regional as well as global level and make their own decisions.

Chapter Six

Independence: A Farfetched Kurdish Dream

This chapter focuses on the years-long Kurdish struggle for independence. The Kurds fell for the false promises of the west time and again; added to this is the aftermath of the 2017 ‘Kurdish Referendum’ for independence. To better understand the Kurds’ position in the foreign policy of the most powerful countries, especially the US, we try to understand the historical context of the Kurdish position in colonial Britain’s Middle East policy. To illustrate this subject, it is important to have a brief review of the Kurds, as well as of Kurdish nationalist movements and along with that we explore the influence of other foreign powers, such as Britain and the Soviet Union, on the Kurds. This chapter also deals with the immediate aftermath of the power gap left in the wake of Saddam’s collapse under the US-led international alliance.

While the US invasion helped in overthrowing a more than 30- year-old Saddam’s dictatorial regime, which had long haunted the Kurds’ existence and aspirations, it still ended up replacing the issue of Saddam with plenty of other issues including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The Kurds, being an old US ally against Saddam, suffering genocides, persecution and migration, felt that the US and its western allies owed them a favor of helping them in getting independence, but, on the one hand, Saddam being gone was a welcome change, on the other, the Kurds still found themselves back to square one with being constantly under threat from every side and with no real independence in sight. In this chapter, we discuss how overdependence of the Kurds on the western powers gave them nothing, but massive loss and disappointment.

6.1. Tearing the Kurds Apart and the History of Invasion

The Kurds are often referred to as the largest nation without a state, surrounded by the Turks, Persians and Arabs, who have seen the Kurds as their enemies and oppressed them for centuries (Shakir, 2021). Due to these hostile circumstances Kurdish existence and identity has constantly been under threat. Perhaps because of that the iconic phrase of “no friends but the mountains” came about. The reality of existing in-between and surrounded by overwhelmingly more powerful nations and ethnicities, in terms of both

population and resources, the Kurds are defined by their cultural and ethnic differences. Another factor to consider is the Kurds' relative vulnerability from a geopolitical standpoint with respect to the power balance in their region. That, among other factors, has dictated that the existence of an autonomous Kurdish nation and independent power brings an indigenous struggle into light and ensures as well as enforces Kurdish sovereignty by acting as a deterrent to keep the power balance in check in the Middle East.

Kurdish desire for an international sponsorship to gain their autonomy meant the support of the forces they ally with so that these allies can intervene and protect Kurdish interest on their behalf. This is because the Kurds functioned as a buffer zone in-between the more powerful nations, the Persian and the Ottoman Empires. Kurdish nationalist goals would see both the Turks and Persians finding common goals in suppressing them. Although both, Persians and Ottomans have always been enemies, when it comes to the Kurdish question, they would rather join hands and see the Kurdish identity as a threat in their territory.

In pre-air force times, the mountainous nature of the landscape meant that the Turks would find it difficult to thoroughly assert control over the Kurdish region. This also added another reason why the Kurds have no friends but the mountains. According to the Persian and Ottoman perspectives, asserting full control could result in unnecessary tension with each other, as opposed to leaving the Kurds sandwiched in-between, as a way of containing the Kurds strictly within their territories. The Persians and Ottomans thought that oppressing and squeezing the Kurdish nationalists in both Iran and Turkey will force them to slip to Iraq.

As mentioned in previous chapters, prior to the first recognized, significant, or otherwise recorded instances of Kurdish nationalist movements, uprisings and revolts, there were well established Kurdish emirates. The hegemonic struggle between the Ottomans and the Safavids not only damaged peace in the Middle East, but it also split the Kurds into two in the sixteenth century, forcing them to stand against each other and in the early nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire put an end to these Kurdish emirates (Eppel, 2008). Given the split, the history of Kurdish nationalism was divided into isolated instances within the respective empires and the larger nations they revolted against due to lack of communication and coordination. Even though they were divided, due to the lack of clear borders and to overlap across the two empires, the Kurdish struggle often was involved from the other bordering empire. For instance, one of the first recorded attempts in the modern history of Kurdish nationalism is the unsuccessful revolt by Sheikh Ubeyduallah in 1880, which involved a letter to British vice-consul Clayton in Başkale that included the following:

The Kurdish nation, consisting of more than 500,000 families, is a people apart. Their religion is different, and their laws and customs are distinct. It is known among all nations as mischievous and corrupt. This is how Kurdistan has been depicted. [...] The chiefs and rulers of Kurdistan, whether Turkish or Persian subjects, and the inhabitants of Kurdistan, one and all are united and agreed that matters cannot be carried on this way with the two governments, and that necessarily something must be done, so that European governments having understood the matter, shall inquire into our state. We also are a nation apart. We want our affairs to be in our hands, so that in the punishment of our own offenders we may be strong and independent, and have privileges like other nations; [...] (Joseph, 2000, p. 119).

This letter is peculiar in mentioning the difference in religion, given the fact that he was a Sunni Sheikh and had the same religious ideology as the Ottomans. This pattern of ‘wanting our affairs to be in our hands’ or ‘to be sponsored by western powers’ persists throughout the course of the Kurdish cause. Sheikh Ubeydullah is distinct from his predecessor, Bedir Khan Beg because his ambitions went beyond the autonomy of emirates under a larger empire. He gathered the Kurds and initiated a nationalistic Kurdish campaign while Sultan Mahmud II of the Ottoman Empire decided to suppress the semi-autonomous hereditary regimes in Kurdistan (Jwaideh, 2006).

The Sultan’s efforts were part of a large-scale effort in centralizing power to strengthen his rule, under the guise of reforms spanning the period following the Turko-Russian wars from 1812 until the Sultan’s death in 1839 (Eppel, 2008). In a sense, the history of Kurdish nationalism starts from those hereditary, tribal, semiautonomous emirates and Bedir Khan Beg’s struggle to retain autonomy against the Ottomans’ insistence on direct rule to Ubeydullah’s first direct opposition, and declaration of total autonomy and independence as a nation. Hence, Ubeydullah is believed to be the founder of the Kurdish nationalist movement in modern history.

Sheikh Ubeydullah’s focus was primarily directed against the Persian Empire because of his discontent and disagreement with the Persian Empire’s mistreatment of the tribal chiefs who recognized and acknowledged his religious authority. He had close connections with the Ottomans and the way his forces entered Persia through the Ottoman lands shows he was given tacit and unofficial consent by the Ottoman Sultan (Gunter, 2020). Other factors include the shared Sunni-Muslim identity with the Ottomans against the Shi’ite-Muslim of Persia. The Kurds were also biased towards the Ottomans because the Ottoman policies allowed them to have a semi-autonomous rule (Eppel, 2008).

On the one hand, one can give credit to the wealthy Sheikh for utilizing the Ottomans' interest in undermining and weakening the Persians. On the other hand, this clearly suggests that the rebellion still lacked the capabilities for the Kurds to independently exercise and assert their sovereignty without striking deals with other forces. Therefore, these deals have always undermined and weakened the Kurdish cause and the Kurds were used as a tool by others to fulfill their needs.

It is also worth noting that the Ottoman Sultan's rather unwise attempts to centralize the governance system at the expense of antagonizing the Kurds led to the rise of religious authority of Sufi Sheikhs alongside tribalism. This resulted in the rise of the Barzani and Barzinji clans under the Naqshabandi Sheikhs (Eppel, 2008). This move carried huge consequences on the Kurds' position and strength. Given the differences in sect, ethnicity, and religion with the Persians, Turks, and Arabs, as well as the western world, the Kurds were effectively alienated from any potential ally. This inability to have diplomatic compromise, and to establish an effective presence and form close ties played into how out of the three ethnicities of the Azeris, Armenians, and Kurds, only the latter remains without a fully independent and autonomous nation state to this day.

6.2. Background: Western Colonialism post-WWI

Understanding the nature and premise of the dream of independence of the Kurds and the US invasion requires a revisit of prior western involvement in the region. Following the defeat and collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the forces of the Allies were scrambling on how to best divide and split up the Ottoman empires amongst themselves, which included the region inhabited by the Kurds. The turning point was during the Paris Peace Conference meetings in 1919-1920 during which the victorious allies worked out agreements and treaties on drawing the borders on the map in the regions and territories formerly under the now- defeated Ottoman Empire. With regards to the Kurds, their cause was interrelated with that of the Armenians, Azeris, and of the Republic of Turkey – the latter being the mainland of the former Ottoman power. The discussions and negotiations leading up to the Treaty of Sèvres had representatives from the groups laying claims over these territories. The representative of the Kurdish delegation proposed the boundaries of Kurdistan. Mehmet Ibrahim Şerif Pasha specified following territories as Kurdish territories:

The frontiers of Turkish Kurdistan, from an ethnographical point of view, begin in the north at Ziven, on the Caucasian frontier,

and continue westwards to Erzurum, Erzincan, Kemah, Arapgir, Besni, and Divick; in the south, they follow the line from Harran, Sinjar Mountains, Tel Asfar, Erbil, Süleymaniye, Akk-el-man, Sinne; in the east, Ravandiz, Başkale, Vezirkale, that is to say the frontier of Persia as far as Mount Ararat. (Diener & Hagen, 2010, p. 110)

Notwithstanding, other Kurdish claims over areas were contested with the Armenians, such as the Van region. The Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 ultimately ended up giving the Kurds a small southwestern part of what is now part of the Turkish republic. In order to neutralize any future threats from Turkey the Kurdish territories bordering Turkey, Syria, Iran and Armenia were divided. The southern part of the Greater Kurdistan locally known as *Bashur*, located in the north of Iraq including Mosul region, came under the British-mandated which strengthened western presence and control in the region (Kubilya, 2015). However, this treaty was rendered meaningless after Turkey rose into a regional superpower as a nationalist republic under Mustafa Kemal ‘Atatürk’ Pasha.

Following his successful campaigns to retake control and assert Turkish control over the lands the former Ottoman empire had ceded to the Greeks, Armenians, French, Italians and Kurds under the 1920 treaty, which had limited the Turks to just the region of Anatolia, Atatürk’s success annulled and cancelled the treaty. The internal concerns amongst the Allied forces, fears of Russian alignment by the new Turkish republic, as well as annoyance with the results of the Greek elections also played an important role in this development (Durham, 2008; Karvounarkis, 2000; Kubilya, 2015). Among other factors, the new Treaty of Lausanne acknowledged the Turkish republic’s claim of the Asia minor region, while leaving the subject of Mosul, which was under British mandate as part of the Iraq area for later (Durham, 2008; Karvounarkis, 2000; Kubilya, 2015).

The subject of the Mosul area at the time, of which Kurdish areas were also a part, pivoted on one concern for the British: the oil. The British appeased the Turkish republic on territorial claims over cultural and ethnic grounds whilst maintaining a presence and diplomacy to protect against Russian influence in light of the increasing war costs. Atatürk’s prowess was a suitable compromise, giving up the oil reserves in the Mosul area. The British saw interest in supporting the Kurdish cause as a means of pressuring Turkey, as well as maintaining presence and access to the oil in the Mosul area under the British mandate. This pattern shows that: 1) either having a mandate over the state controlling oil territory, negotiating deals with the regional superpower where diplomacy is possible; or 2) supporting minority groups (in this case, the Kurds) in their cause to serve as pressure on the other players or making

deals to ensure economic benefits was later adopted by the US following its introduction into the regional politics.

The end result for the Kurds in the aftermath of WWI and the treaties signed by the dominant regional players resulted in the people ethnically identified as Kurds being split across five states, none of which identifies as Kurdish. The Kurdish population was divided in a way that a majority became a minority. For instance, 43% of the Kurds are in Turkey, 31% are in Iran, 18% in Iraq, 6% in Syria and 2% in the former Soviet Union states that later went on to become the states of Armenia and Azerbaijan (Gunter, 2004).

6.3. US Policy with Kurds, Pre-Iraq War

The previous section described the position of Kurds in the geopolitics of the region, which is as an afterthought with the occasional useful tool in grand strategy that takes any promise given to them as a convenient item to forget the agenda once the objective is achieved. The US was no different on that front. It is important to highlight that the Kurds' affiliation with Islam adds more misery and problems for the Kurds because they are considered less important and the children of lesser God by the predominantly Christian western powers. Meanwhile, their alignment with the Sunni sect means being at theological odds with post-revolution Iran. Lastly, their nationalist ambitions ultimately put them at odds with all their neighboring nations.

Every Kurdish neighbor has a stronger military, economic, and diplomatic presence. From a practical point of view, and to put it bluntly, there is no feasible way for the western powers to sponsor and protect a Kurdish nation state, rendering any promise given to them on that front wishful thinking at best, and a blatant manipulation at worst. Ultimately, for a western power or an international force to protect the Kurds, this would effectively undermine and contradict any sense of sovereignty, not to mention the resources and one-sided agreements that the Kurds would have to arrange with those powers in order for them to be legitimately involved and acting sincerely on the Kurds' behalf.

From the US side, their concern was first and foremost with oil. In a sense, ensuring the territory that controls the oil is weakly governed and ruled with no strong state is advantageous from a strategic point of view. Should a crisis erupt, they have a pretext with the international community to get involved in the affairs of the region. Should the Kurds start gaining power and prominence, their hostile neighbors would ensure that the Kurds are subdued and lacking any means to sustain their economy while simultaneously starting military operations under the pretext of protecting their sovereignty from the Kurdish nationalists threatening their national integrity as they retreat to the

mountains and across the Iraqi section who sympathize or otherwise support their Kurdish brethren.

Additionally, if the Kurdish region remains vulnerable it offers immense leverage through which the western powers can ensure that the Kurds would seek support from global superpowers. Ultimately, there is no effective or practical solution that ensures Kurdish independence let alone any incentive or interest from any capable or resourceful power in or out of the region. The Kurds are too weak to sustain themselves as a completely independent or sovereign nation against the influence and pressure of all their neighbors. In other words, the Kurds lack any power or capability to exercise and assert their right to self-determination over their territory, leaving their future entirely up to the whims and interests of the far more powerful and influential powers in and outside of the region.

Along those lines, the western powers used Saddam's persecution of the Kurds as a legitimate pretext to enforce a no-fly zone in 1992, to help provide a more stable environment for the Kurds to seek their own political harmony and cohesion (Rudd, 2004). Saddam's persecution of the Kurds came as a reaction to the natural attempt by the Kurds to seek more autonomy as they have always done throughout their history, ever since the idea of an independent Kurdish state was formed. The Kurds' continuous actions to seek independence and refusing to collaborate or make concessions despite their weak position always resulted in tragic massacres and genocides or at least crushing defeats.

With a series of risky and poorly calculated decisions, the Kurds became a mere tool that ultimately serves the grand interests of foreign powers. These powers used the Kurds and their moves as a pretext or bargaining chip in their dealings with the Turks and Iranians, as well as Saddam's regime. This ironically, and sadly, makes the Kurds a very trustworthy ally for anyone posing as a supporter for their ambition of independence. In reality, from the strategic point of view, it only makes the Kurds a useful tool that can be manipulated on the basis of false promises. This shows that it is obvious to the world that the Kurds have no means of posing any serious threat, let alone challenging anyone over their broken promises.

As such, one can think of the choice to protect the Kurds from Saddam's genocidal tendencies as serving the greater objective of ensuring Saddam's inability to fully secure his hold over the oil in the Kirkuk region. Earlier in the twentieth century, the decision by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to concede the Mosul region (which includes all the territory of the Iraqi Kurds) was perhaps an appeasement to guarantee the Treaty of Lausanne as well as under the hope that Turkey could press their claim at a later time when they would be stronger, given his predisposition with reforming the new republic and rebuilding his vision of the new Turkey. Alev Aydın describes the situation as follows:

Actually, the resolution of the Mosul Question with the inclusion of Mosul into Iraqi territory was the outcome of a multi-dimensional process that cannot be explained with regard to one single factor. Relations between Great Britain and Turkey and a number of other factors, including economic interests and particularly oil concerns were among the most important components of the resolution (Aydın, 2004, p. 2).

Atatürk's wish did not end up being carried out after his death, similar to some of his reforms that were reversed by his predecessors, but Turkey's interest has not necessarily subsided. After all, they also had grounds on the basis of protecting the Turkmen in the region, who comprise a significant portion of the demography in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, should they decide that the combination of their position and strength with the power balance in the region and other factors would make for a good time to press for their claim. Between the Kurdish-Turkish struggle, and western powers' interests, Saddam took the Kurds' defiance as a pretext to start manipulating the demography of Kirkuk in a process of Arabization. As Şafak Oğuz states:

Saddam Hussein's success in breaking the relationship between Iran and the Kurds, and the collapse of Kurdish rebellion, which resulted in Barzani's exile, started a new Arabization wave in Kirkuk. To ensure that the Kurds could never again claim they had a majority in the city, the Baath regime embarked upon a deeper Arabization of the region, with tens of thousands of families moved off their land to sites in the southern deserts. In 1975, the Iraqi Baath Party, under Ahmat Hassan al Bakr, began to Arabize the Kirkuk area by imposing restrictions on Kurds and Turkmen who lived there while trying to replace them with Arabs from central and southern Iraq (Oğuz, 2016, p. 173).

Saddam's actions saw the western powers – among which the US slowly gained more prominence – use genocide and ethnic persecution as justification to intervene and rationalize their presence in the area. Otherwise, they would no longer have a reason for imposing their decision on Iraq's internal affairs and sovereignty. Establishing a relationship with the Kurds as a powerful ally knowing that they had no ethnic or religious interests was nothing less than a perfect deal for the west because they were aware that no major player had access to the resources of the region.

These efforts also coincided with another no-fly zone in the southern Shi'ite region as well as with the US presence in the aftermath of the Gulf war and the

retreat of Saddam's forces in Kuwait. It meant that the US was only looking for a reason to topple Saddam's regime which had been on the decline with the UN sanctions and lack of any allies in the region besides the Ba'athist regime in Syria. A decade later on the basis of false claims of Iraq possessing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) as well as potential links with Islamist terrorists in the wake of 9/11, the US administration under George W. Bush decided to deliver the final blow.

6.4. Operation Viking Hammer and Kurdish Involvement in the Iraq War

In February 2002, in the prelude to the Iraq war, the US Intelligence community, which included the CIA among other intelligence and military operatives, entered the northern Iraq region (Edu, 2021). They contacted the Kurdish leaders of the KDP and PUK to arranged and prepare for operations against the Ansar al-Islam radical group as well as Iraqi government forces on the northern front (Edu, 2021). Having established a favorable recent history from humanitarian aid as well as helping to enforce the no-fly zone. The US could count on the Kurds as a reliable ally against their common enemy Saddam, with optimistic and unofficial promises over Kurdish sovereignty.

Perhaps this was an extra incentive as well as a legitimate prospect for the Kurds once the biggest threat of Saddam's persecutory regime was gone. During that period, Iranian Badr Corps commanders had been conducting meetings with Kurdish leaders, Jalal Talabani of the PUK and Masoud Barzani of the KDP. Those meetings culminated in Iranian investment in the city of Sulaimani. They agreed on a student exchange program of Badr Corps' members and Iran-affiliated Iraqis into the University of Sulaimani through a deal with the PUK. They also initiated the opening of a Badr Corps office in Erbil with the KDP's permission (Elkhamri, 2007). Although Iran had complicated relationships with the US, it also had interests in toppling Saddam's rule in the light of the Iran-Iraq war, as well as their interests and connections with the Shi'ite component and the Dawa party considering their potential role in post-Ba'athist Iraq.

The 10th Special Forces Group of the US alongside the NILE team, helped train and prepare the Kurdish Peshmerga forces of both the PUK and KDP against Ansar al-Islam and Saddam Hussein's forces in Salah el-Din, Shargat, and the city of Mosul; while the Kurds helped provide US intelligence and the US policy makers with valuable intelligence to guide their strategy (Edu, 2021). Despite the complications due to Turkey's refusal to allow land passage of the US forces and the precarious nature of the US-Iran relationship, thousands of PUK and KDP forces together with a few dozen US special forces officers

attacked (Edu, 2021). In spite of having minimal air and artillery support due to the bigger battles on the southern front, they ended up defeating the Islamist forces of Ansar al-Islam in Shargat and Saddam's forces around the city of Mosul (Edu, 2021).

The end result was that the PUK and KDP Peshmerga forces, together with the help of the US 10th Special Forces Group and NILE team, secured control over the historically Kurdish areas (Edu, 2021). This concluded the Kurdish involvement in the US invasion of Iraq, which boiled down to accepting US help in securing their own lands and securing victory on the northern front for the Allied forces against Saddam's regime. It is worth mentioning that throughout the process, the Peshmerga forces managed to regain control of the much-coveted city of Kirkuk.

6.5. Recognition of the Kurdistan Regional Government

Though there could be lots of possible explanations as to why the Kurds did not end up with a fully autonomous and sovereign nation state, one thing is clear: that they ultimately managed historic feats for themselves in the years following the ousting of Saddam. The Kurds secured full recognition of their ethnicity in the new Iraqi constitution alongside the rights to a regional self-governing body with its own security and an equitable share of the national revenue. The Kurdish language was also recognized alongside Arabic as the official languages of Iraq (Radpey, 2014). As part of the rights to self-governance provided to the Kurds under the new Iraqi constitution, they were allowed to draft and act on their own constitution through their own respective democratic process, provided it did not contradict the Iraqi federal constitution.

An oversimplified, optimistic and somehow naïve US policy expected that the state of Iraq and the region following the removal of Saddam would end the chapter of violence and unrest in the region and start a new chapter with a clean sheet of democracy and coexistence. But the reality reflects the history of KDP-PUK, Iran and Turkey's interests, and other tribal or ethno-religious interests and it explains that stability comes from power. With that in mind, and given the power gap left after Saddam with a weak Iraqi central government and complicated Kurdish internal politics, it was foreseeable that issues and tensions would find a way to come up once again. A draft of the Kurdistan constitution was approved on the 24th June and passed on the 26th in 2009 by the KRG lawmakers and its parliament respectively (Radpey, 2014). A referendum by which the constitution would be voted on before being enacted was supposed to occur as of 2021 (Faidhi Dri, 2021).

Furthermore, amongst political maneuvers both internally amongst the Kurdish parties as well as with the federal government, the Kurds had already begun violating the oil agreements by negotiating deals with foreign oil companies without involving or consulting the federal government's position on the matter, not to mention its legality within the Iraqi constitution (Oppel Jr., 2007). This led to starting a series of heated arguments over violations of the Iraqi constitution as well as disagreements over its interpretation by both the federal and regional governments regarding the autonomy of the region. The questions were raised about negotiating direct deals with respect to oil operations in light of the share of national revenue allotted to the KRG government. It is important to note that by that time, the KRG population was yet to vote on a Kurdistan constitution, adding more chaos to an already messy situation. The situation remained as such until the emergence of ISIS.

6.6. The Rise of ISIS

Amidst a weak and corrupt federal government, the US desire to create an Al-Qaida style extremist group to topple Bashar al-Asad in Syria and internal Kurdish political struggle provided an opportunity to the radical elements from different parts of the world to gather in Iraq and form a militia group ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) also known as *Daesh* or ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant). All of a sudden they became a strong force and rose to be a regional threat following the capture of large swathes of territory in northern Iraq and eastern Syria, including the area and city of Mosul, the third largest city of Iraq. Looking at the complicated and murky nature of the unofficial alliances the Kurds appeared as a very obvious and clear ally for the US and international alliance forces in fighting this rising threat for the stability of the region. On one hand, Erdoğan's Turkey was suspected of having provided support for Islamist radicals given the Caliphate-like aspirations of Erdoğan, animosities towards Kurds, and interests in the Mosul region, among other justifications (Philips, 2014). On the other hand, despite being from the Shi'ite school of thought which traditionally has always been the target of radical Sunni groups such as Al-Qaeda, Daesh or ISIS, Iran's agendas and operations as well as involvement in Iraqi politics and their contradictory relationship with the United States could give credence to claims of their facilitation of the ISIS situation (Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2015).

Once again, the US turned to the Kurds as the primary and most effective ally on the ground to complement their airstrikes and intelligence reports and military strategies. As usual, the desperate situation and shortsightedness of the Kurds did not allow them to question unfulfilled and false promises of the

west in the past and they jumped into yet another western war. In particular, the KDP Peshmerga, together with the PKK and YPG forces, worked with the US to help reclaim the Yazidi area Shingal (Sinjar) from ISIS forces, which had launched an onslaught on the Yazidis and were committing genocide against the Yazidi people (Martin and Kozak, 2016). Ultimately, the short-lived ISIS Caliphate was crushed and its territory regained by the Iraqis and the Kurds. In the aftermath of defeating ISIS, Kurdish Peshmerga forces managed to secure control over Kirkuk, which was among the cities that the Iraqi forces lost after the attack of ISIS forces (Hama and Abdulla, 2019).

6.7. Kurdistan Region Independence Referendum of 2017 and the Battle Over Kirkuk

While the presence of ISIS served as a temporary opportunity for all factions to work together on neutralizing a common enemy, they nevertheless only represented a pause in the political struggle between the KRG and the Federal Government of Iraq. As the war against ISIS was nearing its obvious end with the so-called Caliphate's defeat, the different factions were already making plans for the post-ISIS scenario. Masoud Barzani had announced that he would conduct a referendum for independent Kurdistan including the disputed areas once the situation with ISIS had been dealt with (Rasheed, 2019). During that time, the oil-rich city of Kirkuk was under the control of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, making the subject of a referendum for independence a seemingly powerful pressure card to negotiate more favorable terms with the federal government.

It was only in early 2017 when the Kurdish leaders finally made an official announcement of their plans to hold a referendum. This move sparked heavy condemnation from Iraqi officials amidst heavy welcome and support by the Kurdish population. A mixed response came from various segments of the population. Some applauded the move and some said the Kurds were taking advantage of the ISIS situation to assert control over the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. The issue of the oil contracts that predated the ISIS crisis, alongside other accusations leveled against the KRG, undermined the unity of Iraq.

The results of the referendum came out with an overwhelming 92% for independence across a 72.6% turnout rate (Shakir, 2021). Given the implications of the Kurds' inclusion of Kirkuk and constitution complexities that preceded the fall of the territory into ISIS hands, the Iraqi Army forces launched an attack to regain control. The Prime Minister of Iraq, Haider al-Abadi, asked Iran to support him and the PMF (Public Mobilization Forces) sent a sizable force to reclaim Kirkuk from

Kurdish control (O'Driscoll and Baser, 2020). Because of overwhelming forces and huge loss of lives on the Kurdish side, the Talabani faction of the PUK Peshmerga struck a deal with the Iranian Badr Corps officials to call a retreat of their forces. This move collapsed the Peshmerga defense and led to an easy capture of Kirkuk by Iraqi Army and PMF forces (Spyer, 2017).

With Kirkuk slipping out of Kurdish control and the freezing of the referendum's results the Kurds' political position further weakened. This failure saw the rise of intra-Kurdish division of the Talabani faction as well as an alleged internal family struggle within the Talabani family (Zaman, 2021). History repeated itself, and the Kurds were once again back to square one with internal political division. As mentioned in the previous chapter, due to lack of diplomatic efforts, internally and externally, there was no meaningful outcome for the Kurdish population.

6.8. Ambiguous Future of Kurdistan

As it stands, the current status of Kurdistan is still ambiguous and up in the air. No efforts are being made to vote on an officially recognized Kurdish constitution, and an unclear policy and relationship with the Iraqi federal government as well as hostile relations with Iran are damaging the Kurds heavily. When there is no internal unity, external forces always take advantage. Therefore, the Turks keep up escalating their military operations in the Sinjar (Shingal) region of Kurdistan. They claim to be securing their national interests against the PKK forces and their alleged supporters and sympathizers.

The atmosphere of dissatisfaction is dominant amongst the Kurds over the political leadership's performance and their inability to sustain the KRG government without brokering deals with Baghdad. Their lack of understanding of political process, tribally-dominated politics, no ability to assert meaningful sovereignty for the Kurds in general and declaring support to Kurdish nationalist movements in Turkey, Iran and Syria are a few reasons which cost the Kurds and Kurdish unity over the years, as well as acting as a hurdle to fulfilling their dream. If there is one thing that can win the Kurds an independent nation that is unity among their ranks, not following other nations' agendas. The Kurdish leadership always thought that their so-called friends would take them out of this turmoil.

The US stance towards the Kurds beyond logistical and aerial support amounted to vague promises and reassurances that were never intended to materialize. The US ditched the Kurds multiple times before (Shakir, 2021) and at the time of the independence referendum, history repeated itself. The Kurds made countless sacrifices fighting for their survival as well as the peace of the

region by taking on the brunt of the ISIS threat as well as in other battles, and then being left to defend themselves with nothing but broken promises and fractured relations with their hostile neighbors, with no means to fend for themselves. Besides sensational headlines and superficial acknowledgement of the Kurds' effectiveness and bravery as a reliable ally against ISIS, the US never took any meaningful or significant policy direction with Kurdish sovereignty as a priority.

This situation reflects that the US administration is no different than the British that preceded them and divided Greater Kurdistan into many pieces. They never had any policy with regards to Kurds besides being a useful tool or as a pressure card to play while they negotiated with Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey. The US lacked any serious policy that addressed the Kurdistan question simply because it stands to gain nothing but an independent state in the midst of all the powerful and influential players in the region. The Kurdish leadership's overdependence on US support, the absence of any objective or positive merit for supporting Kurdish claims against any other player in the region and the US support of Israel, Ukraine, Greece, Poland and other Christian majority countries forces one to think that the only demerit that Kurds have is being Muslims.

6.9. A Farfetched Kurdish Dream

The US invasion brought very few positive changes and an overly negative impact on the situation of the Kurds and their security and autonomy as a nation. The US realized that supporting the Kurds was a common interest for both and that in return the US could have access to the potential oil revenue and presence in the Middle East, so that they could keep an eye on Iran, Russia, China and Turkey. In a region full of political and military giants, a small fish, Kurdistan, is nothing more than a mere liability. A nation that is plagued with internal tribal struggles, no reliable allies and with a baggage of ambitions that contradict every powerful player's interests is a simple loss.

Therefore, the US did what one of the most violent ideas in human history, the idea of nation state, does. The US prioritized its national interests in negotiations with the Iraqis, Iranians, and Turkish states, while leaving the matter of Kurdish independence as a mere suggestion. They played a verbal game and used diplomatic and neutral statements emphasizing on sorting out this issue democratically with their neighbors. Once again, the US disregarded any promises given to the Kurds, leaving them to eventually being forced to take matters into their own hands.

The US stance often sided with the more dominant player in Iraq and at times rebuked the Kurds for having gone 'too far' in their demands over Kirkuk

(Rasheed, 2019). Paul Bremer argued in the early years following the ousting of Saddam Hussein that the Kurds were an instrumental ally that carried the heaviest burden of the fight (Rasheed, 2019), but once the fight was over, they were abandoned. The promises made to Kurds by anyone never materialized and over-reliance on reassurances often led to further weakening of their position through betrayal from outside if not also from within.

This lack of a clear ally meant that the Kurdish factions often had to make deals with those who were not real allies, and this also led to further divisions among the Kurds, who were already divided and separated, which makes the situation of the Kurds even more vulnerable because they have had to struggle separately when they wanted to gain independence. It is thus left up to each respective Kurdish party to secure and negotiate its own backdoor deals both to gain favors and resources to increase their control, as well as means to attain some power and recognition internally, regionally and internationally. But one thing is for sure: without any significant cooperation between all Kurdish parties, independence is nothing more than a far-fetched dream.

If there is any real result or lesson learned from the Kurds' perspective with regards to the whole saga of the US involvement, it would be that the US can never be a reliable ally, nor are they necessarily any different from the Turks, Persians, and Arabs. The US has been wrestling with these regional powers throughout modern history. As we have seen in the past, it is ultimately the victor, the leader or the most powerful that gets to set the rules and decide who is an aggravator or troublemaker and who has the right to self-defense and sovereignty.

Therefore, failure to establish an autonomous state for Kurds falls entirely on unwise decisions by the Kurdish figureheads throughout their history. From being unable to get past the differences because they were unjustly divided across different borders in the name of the nation state, to an inability of the leaders to be flexible enough to establish trust within their ranks, are some causes of the failure to achieve independence. These mistakes resulted in losing civilians, military strength, and economic power. They kept blaming and calling each other backstabbers which brought further division and none of the leaders stood up and acknowledged their vulnerability and inability to learn from history. It cannot be overstated enough how out of Armenians, Azeris and Jews, only the Kurds failed to establish a recognized modern nation state, but as explained earlier, association of the Kurds with Islam was treated differently than the Christian Armenians or other non-Muslim ethnicities.

Along with external factors, the Kurds were not sincere with each other, and they lacked self-reflection. They showed their stubbornness in refusing to acknowledge their inability to achieve and sustain their independence, refusing to merge with the Azerbaijan People's government during the Soviet era and

trying to impose on the Red Army against the Soviets' strategic interests cost them dearly. The Kurds did not realize that their short-lived Kurdish state 'Mahabad' was not capable of defending itself without the support of the Red Army. It resulted in recapturing of the territory by the Iranian government. It is also important to mention the collapse of Mustafa Barzani's rebellion against Saddam's regime. In short, without a doubt the Kurds were valiant and inspirational fighters, but they suffer from a lack of shrewd, well-calculated and long-term effective policy-makers and leaders.

There are many examples that the Kurds can learn from. The neighboring Turks were blessed with a gifted military leader who effectively asserted their new republic's borders through sheer military and strategic supremacy on the battlefield alongside minor support from the Soviets. In Israel's case, the Zionist movement was started by a few men who planned for decades before turning it into reality. They made connections with all the wealthy and influential Jewish businessmen and diplomats who could lobby and influence the western superpowers to act on their behalf while having clear bargaining power and leverage to make sure promises made to them materialized. The Azerbaijanis were able to find independence as a republic alongside Armenia and Georgia through improving their condition, diplomacy, and position until independence came naturally once the Russian Empire collapsed. Independence comes through unity, planning and being strong enough to slowly transition into self-governance, but if there is anarchy within it will reflect everywhere.

The Kurds future remains in their own hands as it has always been. A realization is necessary that independence can only occur through a natural process of growing economically, diplomatically, as well as militarily, rather than by brute force and prematurely imposed status under the implied threat of external intervention. Independence that largely hinges on external approval and permission is not real independence and it shows the Kurds' lack of readiness to handle the responsibility of running a full-fledged sovereign nation.

Emphasis should not be on finding reasons to critique and blame past allies who betrayed them for obvious reasons in the form of prioritizing their own interests. Instead, effort should be poured into economic development, infrastructure development, and to rise as an economic power amidst Turkey's declining economy, and Iran's position in international politics and ever-increasing influence in the Iraqi government. Instead of being shortsighted and always being ready to give countless Peshmerga lives away over doomed wars is not different than Saddam's frivolous wars with Iran and Kuwait that resulted in nothing but crippling diplomatic relations and economy. In essence, if Kurds ever hope to be recognized on their own merit without any patronage or sponsorship, which contradicts the notion of independence by default, they ought to remember that self-reliance, self-sustainability, self-belief and unity are the way forward.

To win in their quest for independence, they should aim to endure through focusing on internal development with whatever territory and resources they have under their disposal, with or without Kirkuk's oil. Their ultimate goal should be self-sufficiency, with no need for skimming off the top of Iraq's national budget or depending on the UN/US humanitarian aid. All while letting the surrounding and competing states wear themselves out until the time comes where they would inevitably get their independence and recognition that they deserve.

This brings us to a critically important realization about the new forms of independence movements, nationalism, cultural influence, and economic prowess as they have manifested in this modern world. The Kurds should disregard outdated notions of getting independence through brute force with insufficient strategic strength and gambling on shallow promises by the global powers. The Kurdish leaders should think and plan for the long term; they should invest heavily in focusing on a complete revamping and reformation of the KRG government with serious diplomatic, economic and strategic plans. They should utilize the nationalist ambitions of their citizens by using all the given resources and channeling them into giving rise to the KRG as an economic regional power, irrespective of what their neighboring political powers are doing. For that to happen, the Kurdish leadership, across all their different parties, borders and allegiances, should unite under an honest and realistic aim to assert their Kurdish identity not through empty bravado, but through a focused mindset rather than a war-driven one. The Kurds need a leader with the ultimate aim of becoming a major agricultural and industrial power with effective bargaining ability that could see their demands and claims being taken more seriously with any potential partner, within or outside the region, in the future. Otherwise, and as explained thus far, reclaiming Kirkuk alongside all the contested territories from Iraq and even from Turkey, Iran, and Syria, still would not result into a meaningful independence because financial dependency is the mother of all problems.

Chapter Seven

Historical Background of the Belief System of the Kurds

Ancient Mesopotamia is one of the richest and most diverse regions of the world. Being one of the main corridors between the East and the West, the territorial landscapes that the Kurds inhabited have been ground for religious beliefs to flourish, be transmitted, and coexist. As mentioned elsewhere, the term *Kurdistan* – which denotes the land that is dwelled by the Kurds – was first coined during the era of Seljuk Empire. However, there is a clear terminological and historical split between *Kurds* as people and *Kurdistan* as a homeland. Although some evidence suggests that the Kurds may have been the residents of the ancient Mesopotamian region, tracing the Kurds to one particular ancient group will formulate dense anthropological fallacies.

Hittites, Karduchoi, Medes, Akkadians, Mitannis, Elamites, Hurrites, and Guttians, among other tribes and groups, inhabited the Zagros and Taurus Mountains in ancient times and, on the basis of light evidence, are sometimes claimed to be the ancestors of modern-day Kurdish people. Some of these tribal groups and communities initially practiced the indigenous and monotheistic religion of Mithraism. Subsequently, Zoroastrianism widely held the ground among these groups and later, as a political ideology, became the bedrock religion for the empires that flourished in the area – particularly the Median, Achaemenid, and Sassanid empires. Other religions, such as Buddhism, animism, and some types of paganism also existed. In the pre-Islamic epoch, Christianity and Judaism also staked out a spot among these groups.

As the era of Islamic expansion was unfolding, the Kurds and their urban territories became integrated into the Islamic empire in its early stages. The conversion of Kurds to Islam was consolidated partially by using force, which often took the form of massacres and genocides. However, this integration underpinned radical shifts in the beliefs and social practices of the Kurds, paving the route for consecutive phases of intellectual enlightenment, more complex tribal and societal patterns, the dominance of *Sheikhs* of Sufi orders as the ruling elites, and the fulmination of frictions and conflicts between the major principalities in the quest of authority, starting from Medieval times.

While the overwhelming majority of the Kurds adopted the Sunni sects of Islam, other sects and teachings, such as Shi'ism and Sufism, also gained

ground. Moreover, subsequent to the adoption of Islam, other beliefs, including Bahatism, Yazidism, and Kaka'i or Yarsanism, flourished. To this day, almost all the religions, sects, and beliefs mentioned above are present in Kurdistan to some extent, but the dominant role is still the Sunni sect. This chapter offers a historical overview about the religions and belief systems of the Kurds, starting from the early stages of developing societies in their homeland to the downfall of the Ottoman Empire.

7.1. Zoroastrianism and Mithraism

By the second or first millennium BCE, Zoroastrianism became one of the most practiced religions of the residents of ancient Mesopotamia, who followed the holy book, the Avesta. Ahura Mazda, the god of benevolence in Zoroastrianism, is the most important deity in the ancient Iranian pantheon, but this does not mean that he was the only god of the Iranians, who did not follow Zoroastrianism exclusively. Alongside the goddess Anahita, Mithras was another of the chief deities in the area. This was the god who crossed the borders of the Persian world to become the most important deity in the esoteric-mystical religion that was common at the time of the Roman Empire. Mithras is often mentioned in the Avesta and modern Zoroastrian literature. The Avesta also dedicates an entire hymn to him – *Mihr Yasht* or “Hymn to Mithras” (Darmesteter, 1898).

The worship of Mithras and Anahita continued even after the foundation of Zoroastrianism with the arrival of the prophet of Ahura Mazda, Spitama Zoroaster, also known as Ashu Zarathustra, Zoroaster, Zarathustra and Zarathustra Spitama. This worship demonstrates the compatibility of Zoroastrianism with ancient divine pluralism. It is useful here to point out the role of Mithras as an advocate of ‘Asha’, the order and truth – the basic principle of the ancient Iranian-Hindu as well as Zoroastrian religion – which saves Mithras from the stain of the divine pluralism that Zarathustra originally condemned.

It is generally believed that Mithras is older, perhaps, than the date of the separation of the branch of the Indo-Aryan invaders from their Iranian origin, because he is mentioned in the ancient Persian and Sanskrit documents. The Iranian cult of Mithras, the god of the sun, justice, contracts, and war, entered Rome, in the first and second centuries AD. This deity had believers who followed him as part of loyalty to the army, but the religion was always suspect, more so as emperor worship increased, and with the imposition of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire by Emperor Constantine at the beginning of the fourth century AD, Mithraism was defeated, replaced to some extent by Christianity replaced it (Fayadh, 2013).

The religion of Mithraism was built mainly on this Iranian deity, but then developed, historically and geographically, according to the places it reached or the date of its arrival. It is a mystical religion with a closed structure, like other esoteric religions, and its basis is an idea of a god who goes through a series of complex events without defeat. Although Mithraism is a religion with Iranian roots, which is indicated by the fact that Mithras has always been known as a Persian deity, the religion took its general form outside Iran, especially when it spread within the Roman Empire. The Roman Christians incorporated some of Mithraism's traditions and rituals into its practices, such as the celebration of Jesus's birth on December 25 (Abruzzi, 2018).

Mithraic temples and caves were decorated with stucco reliefs and figurative paintings, in addition to statues of influential gods and statues of planetary deities. Near the wide benches in every temple, on either side, were two narrow aisles. On the benches, believers could be observed, either kneeling or in a reclining position. At one end of the aisle there was always an inscription or depiction of the sacrifice of a bull, but the inscription was sometimes transformed into a rotating statue, and its background represented the feast between Mithras and the sun god. While it is unlikely that the ritual sacrifice of a bull was always carried out, the feast in which all participated, in the ritualistic introduction ceremonies, was a regular feature of the Mithraic religion.

In any case, the bull sacrifice rite is one of the most important Mithraic ceremonies, but we do not know whether this type of ritual celebration was practiced before the existence of Zoroastrianism. Zoroaster denounced this kind of sacrifice, so it seems that this ritual celebration was part of ancient Iranian paganism. This result is reinforced by a Hindu document that shows Mithras reluctantly participating in the sacrifice of a deity called Soma. This deity appears in the form of a moon or a white bull. In Roman monuments, we find Mithras reluctantly sacrificing a white bull, which turns into the moon. This detail accompanying the painting seems to suggest that the ceremonial bull sacrifice rite dates back to pre-Zoroastrian times (Fayadh, 2013).

Some scholars assert that the Dionysian god of Greece is actually Mithras, as he first emerged in Zagros rather than Greece. Due to the insufficient involvement of the Kurds in the historical record, the association of Mithraism with political life can hardly be traced. However, the symbolism of Mithraism is scattered among Yarsanism, Yazidism, Kurdish folklore, Sufism, and Zoroastrianism (Qaderi, 2013). Zoroastrianism sanctifies truth and honesty, and is centered around one absolute god, who creates two gods, one of whom chooses good and light in the name of god, called Ahura Mazda. The second, who chooses evil and darkness in the name of god, is called Ahriman. That is why this religion is called dual monotheism or dualism, in opposition to the concept of pluralism, but it does not cancel the character of monotheism. Theologians

and experts are divided on this point. Some believe, it is a monotheistic religion, some say it is a dualistic religion and some say it is a polytheistic religion. Our research understands it as a monotheistic religion and with the passage of time the two attributes of good and evil turned into deities. Therefore, people call it a dualistic religion. Zoroastrianism provides logical explanations for the existence of the universe, the world, and good and evil attributes of god, as it teaches the existence of the god Ahura Mazda, who is one god without second in the divinity, the creator of all that is good in existence, and the god Ahriman, who is the source of all evil and darkness in existence. These two attributes of god are in a constant struggle to the end of the world, where the god of good triumphs over the god of evil, and evil disappears from the world in the final conflict between them.

The name Zoroastrianism came after its prophet and founder Zoroaster or Zarathustra. Zoroaster was born in Urmiah and spoke a Kurdish dialect, Hawrami (Szanto, 2018). As such, Kurdish speakers were among other early believers in something like monotheism; that is, they believed in one god, in dual power, and in the concept of eternal conflict between the two powers. The intent of dualism is the duality of good and evil, goodness and corruption, light and darkness, the upper world and the lower world, ugliness, beauty, heaven, and hell.

Zoroastrianism teaches about tolerance and mercy, and it encourages using science, reason, logic, conviction, and thinking about life and the destiny of humans. In addition, Zoroastrianism teaches the existence of the four elements – water, fire, air and earth – that control existence and are among the most sacred things created. Zoroaster is an important religious, reformist, and moral figure who influenced the course of spiritual, human, and civilized life in the world. His teachings have greatly influenced the subsequent world religions that came after him such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Zoroaster is famous in the ancient world as a man of wisdom and knowledge. The Greek philosophers looked at him with respect and admiration, and philosophers still respect him as a wise man who did much to serve humanity and to propagate decent morals in the world (Eduljee, 2011).

The Iranian prophet Zoroaster was born in the second or first millennium BCE in the rural areas of the northwestern part of Iran and Azerbaijan, around Urmiah. Within this chronological range, historians differ on the precise period in which he lived. Some claim that he lived three centuries before the campaign led by Alexander the Great in the fourth century, and some think he was born much earlier, in the middle of the second millennium BCE.

There is no evidence that the Avestan language is still used among Kurds, but the Kurdish language was hugely influenced by the Avestan language, and enriched its oral and literary heritage. Several Avesta- derived vocabulary and

grammatical features can be found in Kurdish, particularly in its ancient forms. A robust comparison between the grammatical structure with which the Avesta is written on one side, and Zazaki and Hawrami dialects, on the other, sheds light on many points of intersection. Essentially, the formal language of the Sassanid empire can be categorized as Hawrami (Aloian, 2021).

Zarathustra spent time in the mountains and deserts during his search for the truth, and he was also known for being in frequent contact with poor people, defending them against their enemies, and participating in providing aid to the poor, the sick and the needy, especially in times of difficulties, famines, and natural disasters. Zarathustra remained generous and loving to his family and to all of humanity.

At the same time, he was also known for his isolation from his family and people so that he could meditate and connect to God, to the universe, and to life, and to think about the sufferings of humanity, so that his soul would be purified and would shine. He swore once that he would not return unless he had the answer to the questions that were running through his mind about human suffering. Thus, he reached the truth that God is one and that the planets, stars, and natural phenomena cannot be gods and it is not right for them to be worshiped, and they must accept one ruler, someone who brought them into existence, whose name is Ahura Mazda, God of light (Fayadh, 2013).

He learned and preached the truth and taught people how to fortify the soul and make it safe from temptation by following the law of piety and righteousness in life. He also spread sacred knowledge about the four elements and taking care of them in earthly life. First, he tried to preach to his people and his family, the Medes, but they took a hostile position against him, so he migrated to the Khwarazm region. Later, the entire kingdom embraced his religion and helped King Vishtaspa to spread his teachings in the neighboring regions (Khanbolouki, 2016).

7.2. Yazidism

Yazidism, probably a branch of Zoroastrianism, is a major religion of the Kurds. The Yazidis have been living in Iraq, Syria, Iran, and modern-day Turkey for thousands of years. While some have accused them of paganism and of being devil worshipers, this is false: their religious texts and practices do not support such a claim. Despite having been subjected to many genocides and a campaign of ethnic cleansing throughout their history, the followers of this ancient religion are still present in their mother land (Shakir, 2021).

There are ongoing controversies about the origins of Yazidism. Some historians contend that the word Yazidi is derived from Yazid ibn Mu'awiya, the

second caliph of the Umayyad Caliphate. Yazidis, nevertheless, widely reject being the followers of Yazid ibn Mu'awiya. In fact, their rituals and religious traditions had been orally transmitted throughout generations, and the coherent onset of their written history is related to the last century. The roots of Yazidis probably date back to hundreds of years as one of the indigenous ethno-religious communities inhabiting this region (Shakir, 2021).

Furthermore, Yazidis assume that their ethnic links are intertwined with the Medes, Zoroastrians, and King Solomon (Izady, 2015). Names of the Kurds and Yazidis first appeared in historical texts after the Islamic Empire annexed the territorial landscapes of Kurdistan. Yazidis predominantly speak Kurmanji, a dialect of Kurdish language. The word Yazidi in Kurmanji means "the One Who created me" (Shakir, 2021).

The history of Yazidism might date back to the period in which the Sumerian and Babylonian civilizations flourished, if Yazidism gradually evolved from nature worship to a monotheistic religion, which would explain some of the rituals and beliefs of this religion, whose followers believe in nature and its phenomena, on the one hand, and unite their worship to one creator, on the other hand. The Yazidis lived under various conquerors, so they adopted different symbols and rituals, and added many elements to their original beliefs. Nothing explains the steadfastness of their religion, especially in light of the change in Eastern religious beliefs and governance, and socially and politically, except perhaps that they embraced some practices from each era, including elements of the religion of their rulers and neighbors. But to preserve the essence of their religion, they kept themselves in religious and ethnic isolation (Al-Khalidi 2018).

The Yazidis, according to the book *Al-Milal wa al-Nahl* by Muhammad al-Shahristani (1153), do not marry outside their religion and their creed, and their religion is not missionary. The social organization of the Yazidi community is hierarchically structured on a caste system. Entitlements are determined by birth. Among the Sheikhs, the three subdivisions of Qatanis, Shamsanis, and Adanis are privileged to appoint the leaders of the Yazidi community. Qatanis appoint the Mir, the Prince, who monopolizes the highest sociopolitical authority among the Yazidi community; then comes Baba Sheikh, who is from a lineage of Shamsanis and appointed by the Mir, and retains the highest spiritual power. He is followed by Pesh-Imam, who is from Adanis, and accompanies Baba Sheikh in his spiritual duties and presides over marriages. The Pirs come after Pesh-Imam, and are entitled to attend social ceremonies and manage the holy shrines. At the lower strata of the caste system, there are Kocheks, Faqirs, and Murids (Shakir, 2021 and Allison, 2017).

Apart from the fact that they speak a Kurdish dialect, through which they perform their duties and supplications, Yazidis have three prayers a day, in

which they turn towards the sun, which they consider “the greatest of God’s creatures.” They also believe that a supreme, holy spirit lives in everything, especially in the elements of nature, and that these parts or spirits, according to their belief, belong to God. They also practice the ritual of fasting, which is open to anyone who wants to fast throughout the year, with the exception of three obligatory days, in the middle of December of each year (Moran, 2017).

Their holidays are linked to natural phenomena and seasons. They have up to eight holidays per year, except for the month of April, during which marriage, hunting, and farming are forbidden. They faced persecution and genocides more than once because they were accused of worshiping the devil. The religion survived, in part, because of the revivalist Adi bin Musafir, who was born in the 1070s. There are no prophets in the Yazidi religion, but rather men who served the religion and preserved its teachings throughout history, the most prominent of whom is Sheikh Adi. Having studied in Baghdad with a famous Muslim Sufi, Abdalqadir al-Gailani, he later became one of Yazidi *Khudans*.³⁵ Sheikh Adi made his way to Lalish, the most sacred and holy site for Yazidis, and quickly gained prominence as a Sufi figure in the region (Shakir, 2021).

Yazidis gave extreme importance to a supreme angel, Malak Tawus or the Peacock Angel, who is considered to be the head of Archangels. Contrary to the narrative of the Abrahamic religions, the Yazidis believe that Malak Tawus is the one who refused to prostrate to Adam and when God asked him: Why were you not among those who prostrated? He said: When you created us, you commanded us to prostrate only to you. Therefore, I did not and will not prostrate to anyone other than you (Fahid, 2017). Yazidis believe that the request to prostrate to Adam was a test, and that the Peacock Angel was the only one who passed it successfully (Shakir, 2021).

Moreover, according to the Yazidi texts, the Peacock Angel is the second celestial power after God: “I attest that my faith is given, in the names of God and Malak-Tāwūs” (Asatrian and Arakelova, 2014, p. 9). And because Satan is the one who refused to prostrate to Adam in the Abrahamic religions, the reverence of the Peacock Angel among the Yazidis caused them to be accused of being followers of the devil. Not only that it is contrary to the truth, it is also important to mention that as the Yazidis do not believe in the existence of demons at all.

The Yazidis believe that God is present in everything, and that every creature is a part of his soul. And because these things or parts are subordinate to the whole, the idea of their sanctification of cosmic phenomena such as the

³⁵ *Khudan* is a term that Yazidis use to describe “friends,” “companions” or “family members” of Sheikh Adi. These *Khudans* are considered to be chosen guides. Yazidis also use the Arabic term “*Sahaba*,” the same term that is used by Muslims for the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (Shakir, 2021).

sun, light, and moon is based on the fact that these phenomena are part of the divine essence and an embodiment of God's supernatural power. In fact, some researchers as well as the Yazidis say that Yazidism is a monotheistic religion, as displayed in the faith declaration prayer:

The testimony of my faith is one god,
Sultan Sheikh 'Adi is my king,
Sultan Yazid is my king,
Malak-Tāwūs [the Peacock Angel] is the Symbol [of Faith] and my faith.
Indeed, by God's will [we] are Yazidis,
We are called by the name of Sultan Yazid.
God be praised, we are content with our religion and our community
(Asatrian and Arakelova, 2014, p. 3)

The Yazidis do not believe in the existence of evil spirits or demons, because they believe that acknowledging the existence of other forces means that people are guided, and not given a choice. Therefore, humans, in the Yazidi faith, are solely responsible for what they do: God is all good, but evil comes as a result of human actions. They believe that the conflict between good and evil is basically a struggle between the soul and the mind. If the mind triumphs over the soul, the person will gain good, and if the soul will triumph over the mind, the person will gain evil.

7.3. Yarsanism

Yarsanism is another popular religious belief in Kurdistan. From the religious point of view, the followers of Yarsanism and the Kaka'i belief system belong to a union that includes movements called Ahl al-Haq, which means the people of truth. There are many disputes about whether this belief is an independent religion in its own right, or an extension of the development of Sufi movements descended from Islamic and Zoroastrian roots and beliefs that were spread in the Kurdish areas (Taha, 2015).

The history of the spread of the beliefs of the Ahl al-Haq among the Kurds dates back to the fourteenth century CE. It first appeared through a Sufi named Sultan Sahak, who studied in Lorestan and Hamadan when he was young. He died around 1395. During his life, he was a Sufi poet and singer. He inspired many people who then founded Yarsanism. Despite the agreement of the followers on a set of common beliefs, they differ in customs and rituals according to their geographic areas, which created confusion among those searching for their identity and religious roots.

The followers of Ahl al-Haq are only found in Kurdistan and are of Kurdish origin, which prompted some researchers to consider that Yarsanism is purely a Kurdish religion. Like the difference among the followers of Ahl al-Haq in customs and rituals, the followers are also known by different names such as Yarstan, Taifsan, Sarlu, Din Yar, Nasiri, and Al-Qalam Hajia. This belief is well-known among the Kurds of Iran, and its name is composed of two parts (yar) and (san) meaning the friend of the sultan – the leader – the king or the guide of truth. Kaka'i is the most common name among the Iraqi Kurds.

Except for the name Ali Elahi, which was given to them by the western visitors, Yarsan's followers accept all of the names given to them. They oppose the one name because it is an affront to their religious history, as they do not believe in Ali bin Abi Talib's absolute divinity, nor do they believe in his superiority over the faith's founder, Sultan Sahak, whom they believe will reappear before the Day of Judgment, and as soon as he appears, life will end (Nikitin, 2007).

Yarsanism originated in the Kurdish areas located in Lorestan and the regions of Qaramsin, or Kermanshah, in the mountains, during the 11th century CE. With the passage of time, it moved to Shahrzur and Azerbaijan, and later on, the Kurdish areas within Iraq became its main center. The Yarsani beliefs were popular at first among the Kurds, who, before entering Islam, embraced beliefs such as worshipping the sun and believing in reincarnation. The historical news from Lorestan shows that the founder of the Ahl al-Haq, Sultan Sahak, relied on seven companions to spread his teachings. Among them there was a famous Kurdish poet, Baba Taher al-Hamdani, who died around the year 1058 CE.

The Yarsanis believe in the oneness of God, and the existence of a greater Creator of the universe, but on the other hand, they believe that the spirit of God is manifested, or rather incarnated, at different stages of time. Parts of their belief system resemble Hinduism. The Yarsanis believe in the transmigration of souls and they symbolize the death and the exit of the soul from the body with a goose that disappears in water in one place and then appears again in another place (Taha, 2015). The resurrection of the dead varies; if it is good, one appears in human form, and if it is not, then one appears in the body of a predatory animal. This pattern of incarnation is also apparent in Hinduism. It is a sort of divine measure imposed after the resurrection day to award the good deeds and punish the wrong ones.

Their sacred book of the Yarsanis is known as the *Kalâm-e Saranjâm*, and it was forbidden to reveal its secrets or repeat its teachings in different periods of their history. It consists of a set of religious texts and chants which forbid alcohol, lying, and adultery. It obliges its followers not to despise any religion or denounce any faith. Religious teachings, according to the holy book *Kalâm-e*

Saranjâm, recognize the oneness of God, believe in the Islamic message, which was brought by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and believe in angels as well as in Adam and Eve.

Between October and November, the followers of Yarsanism are obligated to fast for three days. This is commemorated because Sultan Sahak and his followers were besieged during this month. Fasting gives believers a spiritual and moral commitment, and after three days, they have spiritual solidarity with the impoverished and indigent (Sanjabi 2017). Sufism has an imprint on the rituals and practices of Yarsanism. The mythology of creation embodied in Yarsanism can be related to the Sufi teachings. For example, the story narrated in the Kaka'i book *Tazkara al'Ala* about the creation of creatures recalls the same story told in *Merşād al-'ebād* by Najmaddin Razi, a Persian Sufi (Hussein, 2017). Furthermore, the Yarsani texts pay great respect to Sufi figures such as Abd al-Qadir Gilani, Hasan Basri, Abu al-Hasan Kharraqani, and Junaid Baghdadi. These points of intersections are clear indications of a strong connection between Yarsanism and Islamic Sufism (Hussein, 2017).

7.4. Judaism

Judaism's first arrival to Mesopotamia was in possibly in the first century BCE with the establishment of Adiabene – in Aramaic *Hadyab* – which was a vassal kingdom along the upper Tigris River Valley in the Parthian empire (Gottesman, 2011). The kingdom of Adiabene arose within the geographical framework in which the state of Assyria ruled, or in the area that included the northern part of the Mesopotamian civilization, from the Euphrates River to the west and including most ancient Assyrian cities. It might be an Aramaic name, mentioned in classical sources by the name Adbabiti.

Perhaps this name is derived from the word Zab, because Zab in Aramaic is pronounced as *dab*. The meaning of *dab* or Hadyab is a valley between the region of Zabin and Assyria. The name Hadyab might also be taken from the word Adiabene, which was used to refer to the region during that period of time. The meaning of Hadyab might also be the country of the Kurds and correspond to the Syriac *Beit Qarataway*, which includes the area extending from the Great Zab to the Little Zab to the Zagros Mountain chain parallel to the Tigris River (Habib, 2010). As for the capital of the kingdom, it was likely the city of Erbil, which is one of the few cities whose continuous human habitation extends to several thousand years.

The well-known Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela, who lived in the second half of the twelfth century CE, mentioned that Kurdistan had around a hundred Jewish settlements and a large Jewish population. After Benjamin

headed south to the region of Babylon, and to Mosul in particular, he said there were approximately seven thousand Jews in this region, led by a rabbi of King David's dynasty, and that he was their chief. Several synagogues are named after the prophets who lived in this area, such as the Synagogue of the Prophet Obadiah, the Synagogue of the Prophet Jonah Jones, and the Synagogue of the Prophet Nahum (Adler, 1907).

In the twelfth century CE, after the Islamic conquest of their holy areas and the Levant, the Jews left their areas and moved to Kurdistan and Iraq, where their Jewish brothers enjoyed prosperity and wealth, as they had a commercial and spiritual center. Many Jews were afraid of Muslim persecution, so many of them fled from Syria and the Holy Land of Babylon to Kurdistan. The Jews of Mosul and Kurdistan enjoyed a semi-autonomous rule during the Islamic period, represented by the independence in managing their religious affairs.

Kurdistan was home to several prominent Kurdish-Jewish figures. The religious guide Asnat Barzani was born in Mosul in 1590. She was the daughter of Rabbi Samuel Barzani in Kurdistan, and later married Rabbi Yaakov Mizrahi (Schmidt, 2018). Asnat al-Barzaniyya was famous for her knowledge of the laws of the Torah and the Talmud. After the death of her husband, she became the head of the religious school in Amadiyah and a renowned professor. This professor was nicknamed "Asanat Al-Tana'iyya" which means a scholar and researcher like the scholars in the Mishnah and Talmud period around the first century to the third centuries CE (Habib, 2010). She also composed poems in Hebrew.

Among the important Jewish archeological sites in Kurdistan, there are the tombs of the prophets, whose names are mentioned in the Bible, such as the Prophet Nahum in the city of Alqosh in northern Iraq, the Prophet Jonah in the ancient city of Nineveh, and the Prophet Daniel in Kirkuk. Generation after generation, the Jews of Kurdistan lived in peace and tolerance. Around fifty thousand Jews migrated to the State of Israel during the years 1951-1952, but their good relations with the Kurds who lived side by side with them remained in their memory.

7.5. Christianity

Christianity was first preached in Kurdistan by Apostle Andrew in the first century CE. In 338, a Kurdish ruler from a Hawrami tribe converted to Christianity (Mardokhi, 1999). As far as Christianity in Kurdistan is concerned, there are three main sects: Armenians, Nestorians, and Jacobites. Armenians are further divided into two categories: those who follow the Roman Catholic Church, and those who refuse its supremacy. The Nestorians, who recently

adopted the title *Assyrians*, however, constitute the majority of the Christian population in Kurdistan; and they are connected with Kurds through inter-marriage (Driver, 1922).

The conversion of the Adiabene royal family from Judaism to Christianity in the early fifth century was an important turning point in the spread of Christianity in Kurdistan. The Sassanid Empire was not on good terms with the West, therefore, anyone connected to the West was not treated well. In the sixth century, the Christians residing in the Persian Sassanid Empire changed their fellowship to the eastern Nestorian

Church and broke from Rome and Constantinople due to safety concerns and the persecutions they were facing. The Kurds were troubled by the Sassanid authorities as well. When Islam was gaining ground in the region in the seventh century, the predominant population in some regions of Kurdistan was Christian (Izady, 2015).

The Assyrians embraced Christianity in the first century CE and left their ancient pagan religion. They adopted the rational Nestorian Christian doctrine in the fifth century, and their secular leadership merged with religious leadership into theocratic rule. They were predominantly settled in the Alqosh area north of Mosul, then moved to Ain-Kawa near Erbil, and finally to the village of Qojans near Gole Merk in the Hakkari Mountains during the reign of Mar Shimon XIII (Farah, 2006).

When Kurdistan was integrated into the Islamic Empire, a substantial number of Nestorian Christians decided to abandon their Kurdish identity and align their ethnicity with the neighboring Semitic Christians. Furthermore, they retained their indigenous cultural patterns, including language and the religious traditions of the Nestorian Church. The Nestorians nevertheless remained inhabitants of the mountainous Kurdistan, and it is after World War I, they interacted with the lower parts, modern-day Iraq (Izady, 2015). It is evident that the overwhelming majority of people in Kurdistan – either forcibly or willingly – converted to Islam. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, many churches were found in the mountainous areas in Kurdistan, where Christianity was practiced (Yohannan, 1895).

7.6. Islam

During the early stages of Islamic expansion in the Arabian Peninsula in the beginning of the seventh century, the Kurds were living as tribal groups within the Sassanid Empire. They were not a political entity of their own, thus were an integral part of the empire. In order to conquer the region, Islamic forces attacked the Sassanid forces and fought the battles of Qadisiyah, Jalawla, and

Nahawand, in which the Muslims were victorious. As a result, friction occurred between the conquering Muslim Arabs and the Kurds, but the Muslim forces were too strong for the unorganized Kurds. Therefore, the majority of the Kurdish cities, such as Cizre, Erbil, and Amid, were soon incorporated into the Islamic empire (Bruinessen, 1999). A few areas, such as Sharazoor and Lorestan, however, demonstrated strong resistance. Fierce battles took place between the Muslims and the Persians, supported by the Kurds, but the Muslims prevailed.

Gradually, most of the Kurdish regions converted to Islam, and the process of Islamization of Kurdish society began to go in full swing. The Kurds' loss of their Median state, their image of being non-actors in the international arena and becoming a subordinate population dented their image. They saw it as a blessing in disguise and instead of being ruled by the Achaemenids, Greeks, and the Sassanids, they welcomed Islam as a means of transition to a better situation than they were in. They eliminated the oppression of the Persians, and the complexities of the Zoroastrian clergy, who were forcing on them traditions and rituals that they did not accept (Mar'i, 2011).

After some initial killings and forced conversions, Muslims did not touch the ethnic identity of the Kurds within their homeland, but rather helped them to control the non-Muslim population within and bordering Kurdistan, especially on its northern edge. This was one of the reasons that the Kurds welcomed this new religion. Non-Muslims and especially Yazidis suffered a lot at the hands of Muslims throughout history. They were subject to repeated persecution and genocide, which resulted in mass migrations of these minorities (Shakir, 2021).

Sufism played an important role in spreading Islam in the region. Several prominent Islamic scholars and Sufis were of Kurdish origins. The famous jurists Mahdi Maymun and Ibn al-Kurdi, who lived in the Islamic empire in the 18th and 19th centuries respectively, were ethnically Kurds. Moreover, Najmuddin Kubra, the founder of the Kubrawiyya Sufi order, was a disciple of the Sufi Ammar Yasir al-Bidlisi, a Kurdish Sufi scholar who taught Bitlis. Furthermore, there is some evidence that Abd al-Qadir Gilani, the renowned Sufi who consolidated the Sufi order of Qadiriyyah, was of Kurdish origins (Bruinessen, 1999). Ibn Khalkan (1211 AD – 1282), a famous judge, historian, and writer in the history of Islam, was also a Kurd (Shumaysani, 1990).

When talking about the role of Kurds in Islamic history, we are reminded of the military leader Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, who defeated the Europeans and expelled them from Jerusalem, and established a strong Islamic state, the Ayyubid dynasty. In general, the Kurds were loyal soldiers and fighters in the Muslim wars and conquests, spreading the Muhammadan message and adhering to the Islamic Caliphate State. The Kurdish Sheikh Said Piran led an Islamic uprising against Mustafa Kamel Atatürk's abolition of the Ottoman Islamic Caliphate and his declaration of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

Kurds also participated in the military campaigns of Islamic expansion. Salahuddin Ayyubi, a Kurdish Muslim born in Tikrit in the year 1138, whose roots go back to the Harir region northwest of Erbil, was one of the most important figures in Islamic history. Muslims remember him for his leadership of the campaign to liberate Jerusalem from the occupation of the Crusaders in the twelfth century, as well as many achievements such as political and urban reforms in Egypt and the Levant (Mahlooji, 2021).

He participated with his uncle, who led the army of Nur al-Din Zangi in his campaign to Egypt to rescue the Fatimid Caliph al-Adid against his opponents, and there he took over the ministry and command of the army. He ended the rule of the Fatimids and became the leader of Egypt (Malczycki, 2005). After the death of Nur al-Din Zangi, the Levant witnessed disturbances that Salah al-Din was called to control, and he calmed the situation, united the surrounding countries, and commenced reforms. At the height of his power, his Ayyubid dynasty encompassed Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, Yemen, and Hijaz (Sayfo, 2017).

Salah al-Din left Egypt for the last time in 1182, heading to the Levant to confront the Crusaders. He entered with them in many battles until the decisive battle in Hattin in 1187, which broke the thorn of the Crusaders, and the army of Salah al-Din liberated Jerusalem. He was a just ruler, and even his enemies appreciated his justice. He ordered his soldiers to treat the prisoners kindly.

A Kurdish scholar and jurist, Sheikh Badi Al-Zaman Al-Nursi, influenced the history of modern Turkey with his knowledge and position, and fought political battles defending the Holy Qur'an and Islam. He lived a life full of scientific achievements, jurisprudence, and Sharia. In 1910, he visited Kurdish tribes and clans to teach them about Islam, and hoped that the second constitutional era in the Ottoman Empire (1908-1920) – which restored parliamentary rule – would aid the Kurds socially and contribute to their quest for freedom. Hence, in his visits to the Kurdish tribes, he emphasized the importance of constitutionalism (Filiz, 2018).

Another Kurdish religious figure is Sheikh Said Piran. He is a descendant of a religious Naqshbandi family. He memorized the Holy Qur'an, studied jurisprudence and Islamic law, and became a guide for the Naqshbandi Order in Balu following the death of his father. Sheikh Saeed engaged in political work since the establishment of associations in the Ottoman Empire in 1908, and established links with large Kurdish families in the various Kurdish regions. He was known for his preoccupation with science and his quest to modernize religious sciences (Lahdili, 2018).

The Turks stood against his will. In 1924, he assumed the presidency of the Kurdish Independent Society, Azadi, which undertook a comprehensive armed movement against Turkish rule to obtain what they described as the

national rights of the Kurdish people. After Ataturk arrested some leaders of the Azadi and retracted his promises to the Kurds to grant them autonomy in return for their help in his wars against his enemies, an armed movement erupted before the spring of 1925. Soon the battles spread to 14 states, representing most of the Kurdish lands in southeastern Turkey. About 600,000 Kurds participated in it, along with groups of Circassians, Arabs, Armenians, and Assyrians (Olson, 2013).

The Kurdish fighters managed to achieve important military gains and besieged the strategic city of Diyarbakir, but Ataturk's forces broke the siege and were able to suppress the movement severely and harshly. Sheikh Saeed tried to escape with his fighters by calling them to retreat, but the Turkish forces tightened the cord around them, and arrested Sheikh Saeed and the movement's leaders in mid-April, 1925. He was sentenced to death, which was carried out against him along with 47 Kurdish leaders on May 30 of the same year (Lahdili, 2018).

In conclusion, throughout history, the terrain of modern-day Kurdistan has been fertile land for cultural, military, political, agricultural, spiritual, and religious beliefs to grow. Different groups set their followers on the collision course. Islam, for instance, took the hardline against Zoroastrians when the Islamic Empire stretched to Kurdistan, killing and intimidating thousands as the believers of the former showed resistance. In the Kurdish cities and villages, people were coerced to convert to Islam in order to preserve their life and property. Christianity, on the other hand, flourished as an idea without the utilization of force.

Nevertheless, the Kurds, by embracing Islam, spared themselves the scourge of many conflicts and wars, especially religious ones, that the region witnessed. The battle of Chaldiran August 23, 1514, between two Islamic empires, the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid Empire, constituted a historical turning point in the life and history of the Kurds. Thus, as with the rest of the Islamic peoples and nations, Islam constituted one of the most important factors of the Kurds' strength and the reasons for their demographic expansion.

In addition, Islam, through mosques and religious schools, played an important role in the social and cultural development of the Kurdish people. Islam has become one of the most prominent elements and components of the Kurdish identity. With the emergence of Kurdish national awareness and Kurdish identity, Kurdish nationalists began to pay attention to their own affairs, interests, and issues, leaving behind the focus on Islam. The historic encounter between the Kurds and Islam led to profound social and political impacts. The adoption of Islam has revived the Kurdish clerisy class, familiarizing it with Persian and Arabic culture in addition to the robust Islamic teachings and establishments. This chapter shed lights on the historical roots of Mithraism,

Zoroastrianism, Yazidism, Yarsanism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and has underlined some of the cornerstones of their beliefs. However, other faiths do exist today in Kurdistan; Baha'is, Sabians, and Mandaeans have a presence in Kurdistan, and they exercise their religions freely.

Chapter Eight

The Concept of Masculinity and Femininity among the Kurds

In the traditional sense of the words, masculinity is defined as the characteristics that are attributed to men, and femininity as the characteristics that are attributed to women. However, the classification of characteristics to genders varies greatly from one culture or a period of time to another. Meaning there are very few – if any – characteristics that all parts of the world and history have deemed to be undeniably masculine or undeniably feminine.

Despite having a mostly conservative and conventional definition of the concepts of masculinity and femininity, Kurdish history is filled with examples of individuals stepping out of those restrictions and defying the social expectations of their gender, which mean that these norms are social construct, they were not there since the beginning and they are not to be there forever. Some have already disappeared and some will perish in the coming decades. It goes without saying that those who were able to do so are a part of a privileged bunch, and they were awarded with opportunities that the majority did not and still do not get.

The history of people existing outside the traditional masculine and feminine constructed characteristics is not new. Colonialism tried to diminish all the gender-nonconforming people that existed throughout the world. Gender nonconforming people have existed, but the thing that has changed over time is the discriminatory language used to describe them and the active erasure of them. The US in the 20th century wanted to become the ultimate civilized empire by making white supremacy and patriarchy the norm for everybody else. Bederman supports this and points out that they needed “the most perfect manliness and womanliness the world has ever seen” (Bederman, 1995, p. 26).

This means that they needed to distinguish and rebrand the US masculinity from their predecessors so they made it aggressive and rugged as compared to before it was controlled and elegant. They redefined gender norms to facilitate racial aggression and conquest. Masculine violence became a patriotic duty in the US. In 1893, physician James Weir said “let us train up our boys to be manly men, and our girls to be womanly women” (Boag, 2011). This is due to his belief that the fall of the Greek and Roman Empires was because they allowed gender- nonconformity.

As a result, they developed specific gender roles and erased LGBTQ+ people from the white race in the US. The colonizers came up with a powerful tool, gender binary, to establish gender norms and discard gender nonconformity even for their colonies. People were and are forced to integrate into a western gender binary as a tool of colonization. White colonizers developed the binary categories and made it universal while in many cultures this was not the case. When we say man or woman, we are actually referring to a white man or white woman. The gender binary is the invention of western societies and it was not universal to every society in the world. Kurds got exposed to this gender binary as well through the British in the 1900s. Gender norms' history is a tradition that we need to transform in Kurdistan to escape the shackles of imperialism.

Considering that these characteristics differ from one place to another, it is understandable that there would be different interpretations of these concepts within different parts of the same culture as well. Imperialism has impacted and changed Kurdish femininity and masculinity as well. This statement holds true in the Kurdish community as well, but due to the different ideas and politics of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, Armenia and other parts of the world, the Kurds have differing definitions of masculinity and femininity.

Despite the fact that nowadays Kurds are distinguished based on their forced affiliation with the nation states and nationality, their perspectives towards such matters rarely ever mirror each other due to the fact that Kurds are dominated by different countries which oppose the Kurds to different policies thus creating different definitions of masculinity and femininity. Kurds are divided territorially, linguistically and religiously. There are diverse discourses for the depiction of femininity and masculinity among the Kurds due to the territorial differences, political consciousness and sociopolitical incongruities in relation to the Kurdish definition of gender norms. The way that people from southern Kurdistan identify masculinity and femininity is different from the way it is perceived by people from northern Kurdistan, so on and so forth.

The specificities of these definition might greatly differ, so the focus is mainly on southern Kurdistan. In southern Kurdistan there appears to be a common agreement from the Kurdish community as a whole on the definition of most of the fundamental aspects of these concepts. This common agreement undoubtedly stems from their shared environment and factors such as religion and tradition. These standards have a great value amongst the southern Kurdish community, however, they are always subject to adjustments. Many of the characteristics that were once exclusively reserved for one of the genders are not viewed in the same light today.

8.1. Definition and Historical Background

There is very little written history in regards of the way Kurds have viewed masculinity and femininity throughout the ages. With that said, it is not that preposterous to assume that due to various external influences the community indulged into a more conservative lifestyle and supported ideals of patriarchy. Otherwise, it has been proven by the historians that for centuries Kurds have been using their mothers' first name as their last name and this is an ongoing practice in south Kurdistan (Hamarash, 2022). With the passage of time and because of external influences, Kurdish society turned into a tribal society. This is due to the fact that the Kurds are and have always been a community that holds traditions in an extremely high regard, even before the arrival of Islam. Dr. Kamaran Mohamad explains this by adding that "the Kurdish society's structure is based on tribalism" (Mohamad, 2020, p. 66).

The way southern Kurds have defined the concepts of masculinity and femininity is very similar to the definitions of any other conservative society. Lorber explains this by saying that "most people find it hard to believe that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life" (Lorber, 1994, p. 1). In the Kurdish community, the word 'masculinity' is synonymous with bravery and stoicism. Any characteristic that is linked to masculinity has a favorable implication among the people even if they are not very favorable by nature. A masculine person is someone who's big, tall, and strong, with a great amount of facial and body hair. They are the angry heads of the household and leaders of the community. For example, to say that you give word to do something the phrase "a man has talked" is used in Kurdish or to say that someone is brave and loyal you would say "he is a man". This shows that patriarchy is deeply rooted in the language itself and it has become routinely normalized for people to say such phrases.

Femininity on the other hand is linked with fragility and softness. In this community, the word 'femininity' is historically used as a degrading term, whether that is to reaffirm the narrative of women being inferior to men, or to insult men who do not fit in with the conventional stereotypes that are associated with being a man. A *feminine* person is someone who is weak, shy, and tends to display their emotions as opposed to bottling them in. Their role in the community for women is to be mothers and nurturers and obey their masculine superiors, whether that's their fathers and brothers or their husbands. As Lorber explains this by saying that "from society's point of view, however, one gender is usually the touchstone, the normal, the dominant, and the other is different, deviant, and subordinate" (Lorber, 1994, p. 7).

The dominant gender, as we know, is male and the subordinate one is female. That is why when a man does something that is socially acceptable as

something only for a woman, he is ridiculed for it. Hooks says that “to choose to appear as “female” when one is “male” is always constructed in the patriarchal mindset as a loss, as a choice worthy only of ridicule” (Hooks, 1992, p. 285). For example, in Kurdish Sorani the phrase ‘feminine’ is used in a degrading way for men who respect and listen to their wives. The new trendy word used by youth is ‘Moo narm’ which translates to ‘soft hair’ which also refers to a man who may be feminine or who respects and listens to women in general.

By contrast, another characteristic that is prevalent throughout Kurdish history is the sense of progressiveness and Kurds’ willingness to accept exceptions to the standards that they have set for themselves and individuals of their community. This implies that even though there is a clear set of characteristics that is linked to each gender, deviations from that said set are very likely. Similar to many other conservative communities, Kurdish community also has patriarchs, bigots and conservatives who resist change, but the revivalist always have their way to penetrate and transform conservativeness into progressiveness. What is astonishing is that most of the time, the majority of the community seems to be accepting of those instances.

8.2. Masculinity

The history of Kurdish masculinity and Kurdish men might just be exactly what one would expect it to be. Men have always been presumed to be the natural leaders of women and superior to them, and therefore the label of masculinity and being masculine has always been associated with whatever would be considered ‘superior’ in that given situation. It is also very evident in each and every sector of life, an outspoken and confident woman is always referred to ‘strong like a man’, a daughter who feeds a family is called ‘the son’ and an emotional man is always referred to ‘weak or sentimental like women.’ It shows that Kurdish community has a long way to go when we talk about overcoming stereotypical attitudes and gender biases.

There are countless examples from male poets and authors throughout Kurdish history who request equal treatment for women in the community and speak of their significance to the Kurdish cause. However, it is near impossible to find any writings that criticize the Kurdish definition of masculinity or portray men as anything but masculine. A writer might present himself in a vulnerable image when speaking about love, but even in that relationship it is implied that the man would be the one in charge. The vocabulary of submission is part of the conquest.

The community has a history of shaming and degrading men who fail to meet standard masculine characteristics. They are labeled as ‘not real men’

and in extreme cases might even be subjected to exclusion or even murder. Because of this, it is very rare that we see prominent men breaking out of the social constructs of masculinity in a public image.

However, there is one example of such a character that we can discuss and that is the case of actor Omar Chawshin. In the 1960's and the 1970's, the Kurdish public still did not accept the idea of having Kurdish women involved in the artistic expressions of theater and acting. Having Kurdish women on stage, acting side by side with stranger men, and being on public display for strangers to watch was considered extremely shameful. If someone would do, they would be accused of soiling and damaging their families' honor, and their husbands, fathers, and brothers would be seen as lesser men (Jinha, 2021)

Nonetheless, the stage still needed women characters if they were to reach their full potential, and this is where Chawshin comes in. To fill this massive void, Chawshin took it upon himself to portray the female characters on stage. Although we often see men portraying women in media in cheap attempts at comedy, this was not the case with Chawshin's roles. The actor took these roles very seriously and gave everything he had in order to provide genuine portrayals of these female characters. Chawshin is credited with over 20 different productions throughout his career where he plays female characters (Bakhawn, 2008).

There were, and still are, people who ridiculed the actor for taking on feminine characters because when men do something that is socially expected from a woman, they are ridiculed for it. Hooks says that "to choose to appear as 'female' when one is 'male' is always constructed in the patriarchal mindset as a loss, as a choice worthy only of ridicule" (Hooks, 1992, p. 285). However, the majority of the community acknowledges and appreciates Chawshin's role in strengthening and improving Kurdish theater, and his career is remembered very fondly. In an interview in 2019, Kurdish actor and comedian Ahmad Jolla stated, "we are forever indebted to him," when speaking about Omar Chawshin (Khak TV, 2019).

8.3. Femininity

To say that femininity and feminine characteristics in Kurdish culture are perceived as a bad trait would be an understatement. It almost always implies weakness and inferiority, and is used in a derogatory fashion regardless of whether it is directed at women or men. Men are labeled feminine if they appear submissive, cowardly, sensitive and emotional. Using the terms feminine, for men not falling under the stereotypical image of men or machismo, in that manner is actually more of an insult to women and all their traits, than it is to men.

While one might blame the culture and traditions for such mindsets, these concepts go way beyond that. They are systematic and integrated into the minds of the Kurdish population as a whole. To name a few examples, even though the parliament is presumed to be an intellectual body of representatives elected by the people, in a 2020 sitting of the Kurdistan Parliament, Member of Parliament Hawre Mala Star pointed out issues he saw in the government and then proceeded to state that “the government is feminine” as a way to insult the institution (Jangiz, 2021), but that is not to dismiss the fact that “the Kurdish Regional Government has more women than both the U.S and U.K governments” (Women in Kurdistan, The Kurdish Project, 2016). In fact, at the end, there are still issues related to gender inequality, honor killings, forced marriages and female genital mutilations (FGM) (Charter for the Rights and Freedoms of Women in the Kurdish Regions and Diaspora, 2011)

This lack of respect towards women and womanly characteristics has historically led numerous passionate Kurdish women to portray themselves as more masculine (by the community standards) in hopes of getting more serious treatment which Hooks asserts is “...also about power. To cross-dress as a woman in patriarchy – then, more so than now – was also to symbolically cross from the world of powerlessness into a world of privilege” (Hooks, 1992, p. 284). Imitating masculinity is more respected and accepted as opposed to femininity, whether that is on the battlefield, the political scene, or any other role within the community which is typically associated with masculine men. These women needed to adapt to the environment in order to leave their mark.

Contrary to how it was in the case of non-masculine men, it is much easier to find examples of Kurdish women who refused to act within the confines of the Kurdish definition of femininity. This is mainly because the community tends to be more accepting of women being masculine as they are to men being feminine. This difference of treatment again goes back to the mindset that anything masculine is superior and preferable due to patriarchy.

8.4. Kurdish Literature

There are records of Kurdish poetry dating all the way back to the 7th century; however, Kurdish literature would not reach its full potential until the 20th century. It would come as a surprise to no one that in addition to being physically, financially, and socially more capable, Kurdish men were also more likely to receive a better education and have better opportunities to reach their horizons. Therefore, it is understandable that most Kurdish literature of the past comes from male writers (Mahmoodpur, 2021).

However, according to Joseph Saud in Kurdish literature there are both patriarchal and matriarchal portrayals of femininity and masculinity. For instance, in the ballad of “Las and Khazal” female rulers openly fight over a lover in a matriarchal society while in patriarchal societies they are the victims of male violence (Saud, 2003). This shows how even the different portrayals of femininity and masculinity according to patriarchal and matriarchal societies changed what was acceptable as inherently feminine or masculine.

The majority of these writings could be categorized into two specific genres: Romance or Nationalism, and in some instances a mixture of both. The writings that would be categorized as patriotic generally glorify the role and sacrifice of the Kurdish freedom fighters, mainly men or masculine figures. Due to the fact that the Kurdish language does not have gendered pronouns, we cannot claim that the writings were inclusive of women as well. However, since bravery and courage are traditionally linked with masculinity, we can assume that the majority of these writings were directed at men as well (Osman, 2019).

That is not to say that the authors of that time were not in support of gender equality. In fact, there are countless poems and other writings in which a male author advocates for women rights and education. Fayaq Bekas, one of the greatest Kurdish poets of all time, has many writings in which he implores women of his community to pursue an education, break social barriers, and become more involved with the movement (Ashna, 2004).

Writing about love and romance, Kurdish male authors would paint the image of the female love interests in the most delicate and conventionally beautiful way. They would meticulously describe her lips, her eyes, and her female figure in perfect detail. More often than not, they would portray themselves as defenseless before her beauty, some going as far as writing about worshipping their beloved. The female love interests are almost always portrayed in a very feminine manner (Osman, 2019).

Then there are the examples of writings that would combine both aspects. This style of writing would see the author talking to and about their beloved in a tragic manner on the surface, but in reality, they would be a love letter from the author to their country and the hardships and sacrifices they have had to endure in hopes of freedom (Osman, 2019). The authors, poets and singers identify their homeland with a woman that they desire her dearly. Even though female authors are often shadowed by the works of their male counterparts, Kurds have a rich history of female authors as well. Mastoureh Ardalán was a Kurdish poet and writer from Iran from the 19th century, and she is often regarded as the first published historian in Iran (KRG Austria, 2019). Similar to the men, female Kurdish writers would be more present from the 20th century.

The style of writing of female authors from that era is described as very eloquent and very different from all the works before them. While most of the

previous works were written from the perspective of the male gaze by male authors, these women focused more on what would be categorized as feminine characteristics. Writing about their feelings, their issues and the inequalities that women are subjected to in the community (Ahmad, 2019). Their writings provided a fresh perspective into the problems of the community's, often disregarded other half, straight from the women themselves. In addition, as it was the primary concern at the time, many women could be seen writing about nationalism and their support for the Kurdish cause and the courageous Peshmerga (Ahmad, 2019).

8.6. The Role of Women in the Kurdish Cause

Regardless of the misogynistic and patriarchal nature of the community, no one could deny the significant role that Kurdish women have played in helping the Kurdish cause throughout the years. Kurdish women have walked side by side with their male compatriots every step along the way, but irrespective of their capabilities, they had to serve in a secondary role to men. Despite of the fact that a huge number of women had join the resistance only few were officially recognized and given the role as a leader (Hardi, 2021). And even though to be more authentic, they have needed to channel a more masculine version of themselves to get their voices heard, their femininity is eventually acknowledged and revered.

The most obvious example is female freedom fighters. Kurdish women have fought and continue to fight as soldiers of the Kurdish armed forces, the Peshmerga. Although fewer in numbers than men and portrayed either masculine or symbol of beauty, Peshmerga women fought valiantly alongside the men in the Kurdish revolution against the Iraqi regime. And at the moment, freedom fighters of northern Kurdistan carry on this tradition and are globally renowned for their heavy female presence. The Women's Protection Unit (YPJ), Civil Protection Units for Women (YPS JIN), Êzîdxan Women's Units (YJÊ), Women's Defence Forces (HPJ) are known globally for their battles against ISIS. The YPJ forces alone killed over 100 ISIS fighters (Dirik, 2014).

Even though being a leader in the Kurdish community is a role historically presumed to be exclusively for men, Kurdish women have taken on major political roles throughout history and continue to do so. It is important to mention here that although we see politically active women throughout Kurdish history, majority of these women were from a privilege political background. It was always hard for a common woman to stand against the patriarchal and misogynistic notions of the society. The oldest historical account that we have of Kurdish women being involved in politics in a major way is through the

book *Sharafnama* written by the Kurdish author Emir Sharafkhan Bidlisi in 1597, in which he speaks of three Kurdish women being the leaders of Kurdish principalities (Bidlisi, 1597).

Jumping to the 20th century, we have the example of Lady Adela, or as she is known in Kurdish *Adela Xanm*. Adela was born in 1847 in Sanandaj (Sine), the capital of Eastern Kurdistan. She married King Osman Pasha of the Jaff tribe, one of the biggest and most prestigious Kurdish tribes in history. After the death of her husband, Adela would become the ruler of the city of Halabja and the leader of the giant clan. She would soon be nicknamed the Crownless Queen of Shahrazur, the plain over which she reigned (Taha, 2020).

Lady Adela exercised her powers to perfection in every aspect, and not only from a political standpoint. She established a court of justice in Halabja, supervised the construction of numerous wonderful buildings and establishments, and took Halabja from a forgotten, economically struggling town under the rule of the Ottomans, to a vibrant center of politics and commerce. She was given the moniker “Princess of the Brave” by the British. She would rule until her passing in 1924 (PUK Media, 2014).

One of the earliest, and perhaps most famous, Kurdish feminist icons was Hapsa Khan Naqib. Hapsa Khan was born to a prominent Kurdish family in 1891 in the city of Sulaimani. She was the daughter of Sheikh Ma’ruf, who was the cousin of Sheikh Mahmood, King of Kurdistan. Because of her family, she had the privilege of receiving the best educations, at a time where most women in the region were illiterate (Omar, 2016).

During her lifetime, Hapsa Khan heavily advocated for gender equality and the rethinking of the gender roles in the Kurdish community. Whenever women from the region were facing social or financial struggles, they would line up at her doorsteps and she would conduct a thorough investigation and help them find the best solutions for their problems. As she believed in the power of education and its significance for the feminist movement in the region, Hapsa Khan established the first women’s school in Iraq in her own house, as well as the Kurdish Women’s Association, the first Kurdish organization of its kind, in 1930. She continued on her quest until her passing from cancer in 1953 (Bakhawan, 2008).

The 1970’s were a very sensitive time for the Iraqi region of Kurdistan as the Kurds were fighting for their freedom against Saddam’s Ba’ath regime. During these times, a national hero would arise by the name of Layla Qasim. A symbol of the struggle and sacrifice of the Kurdish people. Layla Qasim, one of the very few women in the history of the Greater Kurdistan who belonged to an underprivileged segment of the society, was born to a poor Feyli Kurdish family in 1952. After getting accepted into the University of Baghdad, Qasim would begin to publicly advocate for the Kurdish cause (Bakhawan, 2008).

Qasim was an active member of the Kurdish political movement, joining the Kurdistan Democratic Party, as well the Kurdistan Student Union at her university. In addition to her political quest, Qasim also fought for women's rights and gender equality. Unfortunately, her tireless defiance of authority and the government led to her and four of her colleagues' public execution in 1974. Qasim's execution would become a driving force that would propel the Kurdish fight for freedom for years to come. To this day, she is still remembered as one of the most revered martyrs in the nation's history (Bakhawan, 2008).

The presence of strong female political leaders in the Kurdish community continues to this day and in even greater numbers. As of 2021, The Kurdish Parliament has a reserved 30% of the seats (34 seats) for female candidates (Ahmad, 2018). Even more impressively, the current president of the Kurdish parliament as of December 2021 is Rewaz Fayaq, and she is preceded by Vala Fareed, who was the first female elected president of the parliament (Sbeyi, 2019). Although most of these women parliamentarians belong to strong political families and advocate as well as protect the vested interests of patriarchy, their presence gives a hope that in future the Kurdish community can have a true women representation in Kurdish Parliament.

As a result of persecution, genocide and forced migration, Kurdish women have flourished in the other parts of the world and are active in various fields of life. There are also numerous Kurdish women who are currently members of the Iraqi, Turkish, and Swedish parliaments. The examples of inspiring Kurdish women go on and on, proving that if provided with the right environment and setting, Kurdish women are more than capable of proving their worth within the community and breaking out of the stereotypes that are associated with femininity in the Kurdish community.

8.7. Public Reception

Despite the fact that the aforementioned examples are considered by the majority as respectful pillars of the community's history, the public reception remains the greatest obstacle in the way of eradicating the conservative norms attributed to masculinity and femininity. Even if those figures are cherished today, it is only natural to assume that they were met by a lot of backlash during their own time. Omar Chawshin is a good example of that, as he was constantly harassed and mocked for having portrayed feminine characters, and that treatment continues to this day by some of the people who had witnessed him during the 1970s. If anyone were to attempt doing something similar to that of Chawshin, they were guaranteed to become social outcasts of the community.

One would not even dare to touch on the subject of homosexuality and LGBTQ+ rights, as it remains a complete taboo anywhere in the region. No member of the LGBTQ+ community would be greeted with open arms, if they were to publicly embrace their more feminine/masculine sides that is the opposite of what the community expects from them. They would undoubtedly be shamed for speaking their truth, and most likely become subjects of rape, arrest, and murder. For example, when the Kurdish singer Darin came out as gay, he received a lot of hate, although he also got a lot of support. Roy is also a gay man, a makeup artist who lives in Erbil. He is very influential on Instagram; he gets hate messages sometimes, but due to his high-class privilege he is left alone most of the time.

The Kurdish community takes a lot of pride in the bravery and the unyielding need for freedom that their fighters possess, whether they are male or female. However, women in the Peshmerga and the freedom fighters of the North are often given shameful labels due to their association with these forces. They are often called ‘not real women’ or are considered nothing more than sexual relief tools for the men in those forces (Hamarash, 2019).

Despite the major role that women played in freeing the Kurds of Iraq, eventually all the credit was given to the men who were viewed as the knights in shining armor who had arrived to save and protect the fragile and weak women and children of the community. The situation is even worse for the female fighters of the North, who are constantly subjects of defamation, specifically by religious leaders and clerics (Hamarash, 2019).

Having a woman as the president of Parliament is a feat nothing short of extraordinary, and would be an accomplishment celebrated by even the most progressive countries and nations. However, the way that the community treats Fayaq is often nothing but unjustified hate simply on the basis of her gender. Even if her opponents claim that the reason for the hate is her political stances, it does not justify the constant hate-fueled objectification that she is subjected to. Even in the cases of Lady Adela, Hapsa Khan, and Layla Qasim, the main attention in their stories are given to their advocacy for Kurdish freedom, while their attempts for reconstructing gender norms and gender roles within the community are often ignored.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that those, men and women, who were able to break the shackles of gender segregation and oppression are a part of a privileged bunch, and they were awarded with opportunities that the majority did not and still do not get, but this is an evidence of Kurdish men and women being able to achieve greatness in the fields in which they were not expected to. Their success stories calls for radsuggest that reconstruction of gender roles in the Kurdish community is possible, and this will involve redefinition of the terms ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ and the implications that are associated with them.

Gender is constructed in such a binary way that we need to deliberately disrupt it for us to notice how it is actually produced through our expectations of how men and women should be. With the Kurdish LGBTQ+ youth in Kurdistan there is hope for a different and new ways of understanding gender norms in the sphere of Kurdish social life. It is always surprising and shocking when gender non-conforming Kurds are openly imagining and building new ways for others on social media. Social life is created by this binary view of men and women, but it is questioned when a positive representation of people like Darin the openly gay Kurdish singer, is seen on social media or in real life. Gender is a “social construct, it is a culturally specific, Western bourgeois social construct” (Thomas, 2007, p. 49). When LGBTQ+ Kurds challenge gender norms, they are challenging the ideas of the western gender binary that was forced on us under the guise of civilization.

When we implicitly advocate for gender nonconformity by presenting images that go beyond the gender binary through self-identity, it subverts and displaces the norms of gender that are normalized through patriarchy. Butler supports this idea by saying “to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity” (Butler, 1990, p. 79). By not conforming to gender norms, Kurdish society can cause the disruption in the binary system that illuminates the foundational false beliefs in the gender categories that exist.

In essence, gender non-conformity has existed throughout history despite the tactics of colonizers to erase it. The history of gender is a racial one created by colonizers to support white supremacy and patriarchy. Gender non-conformity is integral in challenging the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal system that we live in.

Chapter Nine

Kurds and The Way Forward

Excerpt from “Mem o Zin” by Ahmed Khani

If we had a proud leader
Generous and a patron of literature
Our currency would be minted coinage
Not so doubtful and worthless exchange
If we had a king
God had seen him worthy of a crown
He would have looked after us, orphans
The Turks would not have beaten us all
Our lands would not be ruined under the owl
I wonder at the wisdom of the Lord
The Kurds at the state of the world
For what reason is their deprivation
For what purpose is their condemnation
They seized by sword the city of fame
And forced a resolute country of tame
That is why they are disunited
Always rebellious and divided
If we could have an agreement
Together establishing a leading establishment
The Turks, Arabs and Persians entirely
All would have been our servants
We would have completed the religion and the State
We would have attained the knowledge and wisdom
(Khani, 2008, p. 29-32)

This chapter is dedicated to summarizing and presenting the observations, findings and the way forward for the Kurdish cause. It also gives recommendations to transform internal conflicts of the Kurds such as their division between Sunni, Shia, Yazidi, Yarsanis, Zoroastrian, Mandaeans or Sabians and other religious groups who are from Kurdish backgrounds. Kurds, the natives of the ancient Mesopotamian region have been targets of vilification and disapproval of their ethnic uniqueness from neighboring nations, who have oppressed

them for centuries. Through state sponsored narratives the Kurds are labelled a sub-group of Turkish origin that did not emerge as a nation until the 20th century, but if we look at the research of various historians and archeologists, we realize that the Kurdish identity is older than the Turkish identity.

Ahmed Khani's poetry and Sharafhan Bitlisi's writings witness the Kurdish notion of having an independent state; the idea of the Kurds having a nation existed in the 16th and 17th century. As pointed out by Ahmed Khani, the obstacles to the Kurdish nation included lack of leadership, tribal mentality, preferring personal gains over collective goals and denying the fact that these divisions exist. In order to rectify a problem, one needs to identify it first and this is where the Kurds are having problems. Therefore, it is important for the Kurds to continue further research to highlight the state of denial and improve the deteriorating condition of Kurdish society. This book has evaluated historical, socio-economic, geopolitical, socio-political and socio-religious influences that contributed in forming the Kurds as a nation and creating circumstances that destroyed their dream of a united and independent Kurdistan.

While looking at the historical background of failed uprisings, oppression, persecution, genocides, internal socio-political and socio-religious divisions, tribal mindset, lack of effective diplomacy and failed referendum, it is obvious that things do not look great for the Kurds. The political canvas seems a tangle of ideas and different colors and somewhere in this chaos the Kurdish cause went to the background. Therefore, it is essential for the Kurds to have a thorough analysis of what needs to be done in order to have to a common goal and for that I offer my observations and recommendations.

In order to answer some of the questions connected to the failure of the Kurdish cause and to have better insight into the Kurdish community and its internal divisions, I opted for a thought-provoking journey, which brought me some shocking results. The culture of internal animosity is nothing new; it is deeply rooted in Kurdish society. Whether it is a question of survival in the mountains, or oppressing fellow ethnic groups because of different religious beliefs, whether it is supporting Arabs or Persians against fellow Kurds, or siding with the Ottomans or Safavids for personal and temporary gains, or a matter of the leadership of the Republic of Mahabad or a political party, or being with Iraq or Iran or toeing the western narratives or having their own political agenda, the Kurds have always found themselves in the midst of conflicts. History tells us that along with imperial powers, colonial manipulation and external influences, internal divisions and short-sightedness of the Kurds are the main causes of their failure.

Over the years, similar to other ethnicities, the Kurds have fallen into different division, but their problem has always been the lack of capability to overcome these internal conflicts. They have fought various wars with each

other as well as killed millions of people from the opposing forces, but it is difficult to say whether they have learned any lesson from it or not. First, they were forcefully converted to Islam by the Muslims invaders starting with Omar bin al-Khattab and then for centuries they were indoctrinated that religious identity is the only true bond. Therefore, whether it is Kurdish leader Muhammad ibn Shaddad, Hasanwayh ibn Husayn, Badh ibn Dustak, Saladin Ayyubi or any others, they fought in the name of religion. They believed that it was a battle of religious survival and religious ideologies. They forgot that ethnically they have the same origin, but in the Kurdish case religion played an important role in eradicating ethnic unity.

Although the Kurds had fought with each other before, and oppressed, persecuted and killed many Kurds, the era that divided Kurds into two major opponents and brought them face to face was the Ottomans and the Safavids' reign. It was a war of dominance between these two giants and they turned this political battle into a religious one. This was the time when the Ottoman Empire became the largest empire in history to that point, and other political forces of the region were fading away. In order to gain strength and be able to fight the mighty Ottomans, the Safavids needed to do something different. So, they decided to cash in the religious card and make it a war between the oppressors, the Sunni Ottomans and the oppressed, the Shia Safavids, the followers of *Imam* Ali and *Imam* Husayn. The Battle of Chaldiran forced the Kurds to fight against each other, and a personal and political desire of sheer dominance of the Ottomans and the Safavids weakened already oppressed Kurds.

The Kurds could not recover from that loss and the Baath regime picked up where the Ottomans and the Safavids had left off. They turned their political struggle to dominate the region into an ethno-religious fight. On one hand, the Baath regime oppressed Shias within Iraq and on the other hand, when the Kurds looked to Iran, after their disappointment from the West, who gave them hope of an independent Kurdish nation through President Woodrow Wilson's speech on 8 January 1918 but did not help them to establish an independent country, the Baath regime attacked and killed hundreds of thousands of them. When the regime found it convenient, they used the religious or sectarian card, and whenever possible, they also used the ethnic card. The international community also played a part in using the Kurds whenever they needed, but turning their back whenever the Kurds needed their support, which resulted in catastrophic genocides and ethnic cleansing with more than 182.000 casualties.

As mentioned before, Yazidis, as the descendants of Zoroastrians, along with Assyrians and Sabians, were natives of the ancient Mesopotamian region. In the seventh century, during the caliphate of Omar bin al-Khattab, when Muslims invaded this region and ever since then the Yazidis have been subject to forced conversions, persecutions, genocides and marginalization at the hands

of Muslims. People who followed the same belief system before Islam became each other's worse enemies. Whenever there was conflict between the rulers, opponent forces or Shias and Sunnis, the Yazidis served as the scapegoats to defuse the tension and bring back the peace within the community. No leader stood up and tried to unite the Kurds under Kurdish identity and the gulf within the Kurdish community kept expanding with each passing year.

Yazidis who are also Kurds were singled out and marginalized because of their belief system, which started the division among the Kurds. Continuous struggle and resistance of the Yazidis forced Muslim rulers to use religion against them, and Yazidis were falsely accused of being Devil Worshipers. This was helped by the Western travelers and researchers, who spread this propaganda. Although the Yazidis denied these accusations, a lot was written about them to insinuate that they were Devil Worshipers. Epistemic violence was used against them when they were told that they worship the devil. This accusation damaged their reputation and they became an easy target for the Muslims. It is believed that due to this, Yazidis suffered up to seventy-four genocides.

The historical events, combined with my talking to the general public during my research, suggest that religion is extremely important for the people of this region, and that it is easy to manipulate and use people's sentiments to achieve one's personal and political objectives. Throughout the history of this region, religion has been used as a tool to encourage one group to attack, target and marginalize the other. It is also important to emphasize, once again, that it was not religion that motivated its followers to persecute others, but that it was politics and personal desire to dominate the adversaries, and religion was used for this goal.

Historically, religion and ethnic identity are very close to the hearts and minds of the Kurds, and for centuries, people have been practicing religion and dreaming of an independent Kurdistan. Over the years, religion, culture, tribal mindset and ethnic identity have mixed with each other in such a way that it is hard to differentiate among them. Religious practice favors the society, family structure, political agendas and patriarchy, thus can easily be manipulated. The lack of political understanding and transparency between religious and cultural obligations has also played an important role in nurturing the division within the Kurds.

Whenever it was needed, the Kurds were divided or united in the name of religion or ethnicity. This confusion and manipulation is also reflected in the education system in Kurdistan. Whoever has been in power has tried to indoctrinate the population with the help of a biased education system. People were forced to learn and follow the religion and language of the oppressors even though they had nothing to do with either. Umayyads, Ottomans, Safavids and the Baath regime have all used the same tool to propagate their culture, language and ideology which brought nothing but division among the Kurds. In order to gain unity and bring the Kurdish nation under one flag, following points should be considered.

9.1. Recommendations

After completing this research, I have developed some recommendations that could help to improve the current condition of the Kurds and pave the way for a better future. First and foremost, I would recommend developing and teaching a uniform history that reflects critical thinking. The Kurds are divided into various political, religious and ideological groups. Although their destination is the same, they opted for completely opposite paths. Every group has a biased approach towards history and tries to hide the crimes of their ancestors and to promote a better image of them. Most histories blame their adversaries for wrongdoings. Lack of acceptance and acknowledgement of personal failures and absence of empathy leads to nurturing further hatred among people.

Most of the people with whom I talked – PDK followers, PUK members, PKK and YPG supporters, Sunnis, Shias, Yazidis and Yarsanis – had different opinions and reasons behind the failure of the Kurds to achieve unity. Some blamed the political system, some pointed out lack of sincere leadership, some accused religion and some said tribal mentality prevails over the liberal minds and that is why the Kurds are where they are. A standard and unified education system can educate the generations to come that diversity is the beauty of a society and tolerance strengthens communities. Therefore, for Greater Kurdistan, there should be a standard syllabus that introduces the common history of the Kurds, their struggles, and all the religions and religious sects. This type of curriculum will make people aware of their common history and explain their common struggles for one cause.

The education system is the backbone of any society and plays an important role in development, progression and equality. Intellectual dishonesty in education can leave long lasting effects and it can instill ignorance and arrogance in the youth in a way that the future of a nation can be destroyed. We have learned from history that using a combination of religion, culture and politics for personal or political gains leaves a very negative impact on society. The education policy of Kurdistan needs to be changed so as to introduce subjects that explain the difference between religion, culture and politics, and to promote a secular approach. Either religion should not be taught, or, if the authorities insist on teaching religion, there should not be any discrimination. Students following any religion should learn about that specific religion, along with all others. Another important part of the curriculum is the introduction to the history of religions present in ancient Mesopotamia and modern-day Kurdistan. To develop a better understanding of various religions and to inform each other that one religion does not discriminate against the followers of another religion, it is necessary to take these steps.

Another important thing about the Kurdish society is that due to various betrayals, political rifts or civil wars of the past, ongoing conflict, persecutions and marginalization the Kurds have developed mistrust for each other. It is difficult to live in a society and integrate with each other if there is no trust among people. Political, social and religious communities should come forward to bring the members of their respective communities to rebuild the lost trust.

Some incidents of the past, especially the Kurdish civil war in the 1990s, lack of ability to support other Kurds across the borders and the Yazidi genocide of 2014, have deepened this feeling of mistrust among the Kurds in general and among the Yazidis in particular such that anyone from a different religious, geographic or political background is not trustworthy. Some Yazidis I met told me that what ISIS did was believed by ISIS to be in accordance with the Quran, and that they used the verses of the Quran. Muslims also have a negative image of the Yazidis, so in order to eradicate these misunderstandings and misconceptions, it is important to introduce such subjects that promote freedom of expression, freedom of choice, tolerance as well as religious and ethnic harmony.

The Kurdish constitution and legal system are also extremely biased, religious and Muslim-centric. They are based on Islamic laws and favor Muslims, which, in letter and spirit, promotes inequality. Yazidis, Assyrians, Sabians, Kaka'is, Yarsanis and other non-Muslims are forced to follow Muslim laws which brings resentment, frustrations and disunity. They even have to get married according to Muslim law. Shia Kurds also feel left out, even marginalized because the Kurdish political arena is dominated by the Sunni Muslims across the borders and Shia Kurds, as well as other Kurdish religious minorities feel underrepresented.

Because of the history of persecution, marginalization, discrimination and ongoing genocide, the Yazidi Kurds have begun a process of becoming an ethno-religious group. Many Yazidis from Russia, Armenia, Georgia, Europe, Australia and Kurdistan, including Nobel Laureate Nadia Murad, do not identify themselves as Kurds anymore. They consider Yazidism a religion as well as an ethnicity and when I questioned some of them, they said that if they were Kurds, the other Kurds would not have discriminated and persecuted them. Therefore, Kurdish leadership has to step up and stop this ethnic erosion. For a better outcome and a larger representation of the society, the constitution, legal and political systems need to be secular because in regions such as Kurdistan, which are multi-religious and multilingual, to keep the essence of diversity it is important to introduce and promote secular laws and constitution. This will let everyone feel represented.

Political divide and using sectarian politics and the policy of divide and rule are additional problems of Kurdistan's political arena. Political parties work and focus on their personal and political goals rather than developing policies

and making decisions which are beneficial to the population or help in uniting people under one flag for one agenda: a united, independent and prosperous Kurdistan. Their focus is on winning the election, not building a nation. It is important to bring political unity and to develop people-centered policies, because without political unity and consensus it is impossible to bring about change and equality.

The Middle East is the “Hot Spot” of conflict and all the Superpowers of the world are keeping an eye on what is happening here. Kurdistan is in the middle of and divided among Iran, Syria, Turkey and Iraq, and all these countries are direct or indirect stakeholders in Kurdish politics. This is why, historically, Kurdistan has been used, and is still being used, for regional proxy wars. This scenario makes Kurdistan even more vulnerable, fragile and conflict prone.

Therefore, along with addressing internal problems, Kurdistan needs to develop a neutral, but strong foreign policy that protects Kurdish interests. At the same time, Kurdistan also needs to adopt an aggressive diplomatic strategy and effective lobbying that helps the Kurds to promote their viewpoint and make friends and allies in the international and regional arena because one of the reasons behind not achieving the independence and failed uprising attempts was absence of international lobbying and diplomacy.

Up until now, Kurdish leadership across the board and across the borders failed to establish their relationship with the regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Qatar except their sweet and sour relationship with their oppressors. Kurdish political parties such as the PDK and PUK are accused of being supported by Turkey and Iran respectively, but it is more for personal gains, bribes and to stay in power than for a common Kurdish cause. These parties collect tax revenues from the borders along Turkey and Iran to strengthen their political standing. Other than this, it is difficult to see any diplomatic effort to fight or the case of the Kurds.

The Kurds had a very strong connection with Israel and many Jewish Kurds have served at ministerial posts in Israeli governments. With current developments and Israeli-Arab connections, the Kurds should see it as an opportunity to use Israel-US diplomacy to establish connections with these three giants Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Qatar. This move would not only put the Kurds on the map as a serious regional actor, but it would also create an opportunity to gain regional support for the Kurdish cause. For the same balance of power in the region and to keep check on Iranians and Turks increasing their influence on the Kurds, this is an excellent choice for Saudi Arabia, Israel and the US. Therefore, it is crucial for the Kurdish leadership to realize their importance and cash in on their vital position.

If we look at the political history of the Kurds in terms of active politics and struggle for independence, Kurdish diaspora is nowhere to be seen. The

Kurdish diaspora has been very focal and active when it comes to keeping Kurdish culture and identity alive, but political parties have failed to cash in on and translate this enthusiasm into a political tool. The Yazidis, who are ethnically Kurds, were able to catch much more attention and political support than the Kurds in general. Kurdish political parties should bring all religious and political minorities together and use the Kurdish diaspora to promote their case internationally.

Many times, in the past, the international community, especially the west, has abandoned, betrayed and turned their backs when Kurdistan and the Kurdish people needed them the most. The Kurds have lost so many lives because of these decisions. The conflicts, civil wars and genocides that the Kurds have suffered were due to the regional and international exploitation of Kurdish dependency and vulnerability. The time has come for Kurdish society in general and Kurdish leadership in particular to reflect on these decisions and to stop being used as someone else's tool. They should come up with a way forward that can place Kurdistan on the world's map as an organized, united, educated and peaceful nation, not a nation famous for conflicts, civil wars, genocides and revolts.

Before concluding this chapter, I would like to say that we started this journey with one aim: to understand and compile the history of the Kurds and the Greater Kurdistan in a way that anyone who wants to have an idea of who the Kurds are, what they have been struggling for, what kept them away from attaining an independent nation state and what the way forward for the Kurds is, can have a better understanding. When, a couple of decades ago, I started my research about the Kurds and later during my PhD work, I faced many difficulties finding detailed information about Kurdish history. Upon conclusion of this book, I can say that not only did it provide me with a deeper understanding of Kurdish history, but it also answers many questions that readers are curious about.

Chapter Ten

History and Evolution of Kurdish Flag

Although the idea of a nation is relatively new in relation to all of history, it has greatly influenced every segment of human life. Everything that we do – participating in economy, defense, education, development – strategies or permitting someone to enter or exit territories, or carrying out international or regional relations, political ideologies, and internal or foreign policies revolves around our national interest. The notion of self-interest and our national interest first promotes the idea of ‘us vs. them’ or othering those who are out of our realm. Therefore, the idea of nation-state is a violent idea, but when we look at nationalistic slogans, patriotic anthems, and national symbols, it gets even more intense.

Flags are also an integral part of national symbols and play an important role in creating and promoting the identity of a nation or ethnic group. The origin of flags is unknown, but it is believed that the first flag was used on the Indian subcontinent or in the region of China in the first millennium BCE. Some historians also believe that hoisting a flag dates back to the Medieval era (Eriksen, 2007). The purpose of creating a flag is also unknown, but one can assume that it represented hegemonic dominance and the presence and the existence of a leader or a group of people.

This chapter is dedicated to documenting and explaining the history and evolution of the Kurdish flag. The Hasanwayhid Dynasty and the Annazid Dynasty are considered to be the first two Kurdish dynasties to rule the ancient Mesopotamian region from the 10th to the 12th century, but the founder of the Ayyubid Dynasty, Saladin Ayyubi, was the first major Kurdish leader who ruled over Egypt and Syria from 1174 to 1193 and he had a distinctive flag. Due to his religious ideology, some Kurds do not consider him a Kurdish leader, but a Muslim leader. In the 16th century, the Soran Dynasty was the first Kurdish dynasty that used its own flag. In the following section, we will explain the history of the flags used by the Kurdish leaders and political parties in various parts of the world from 1174 to 2022.

The history of the Kurdish flag as a nationalistic symbol has gone through immense changes over the eras. The design that we have now was first introduced by the movement for independence (*khoyboun*). However, every Kurdish flag represents the struggle for the recognition of Kurds in the ancient

Mesopotamian region which is why you will see many variations that actually enrich the Kurdish ethnicity, rather than diminishing it. Each flag represents the movements that came about under different states, and the Kurds adopted and responded to those changes as we can see in the changes of the flags.

Flags used during the Ayyubid Dynasty.



Initial Flag



Flag in Egypt and Syria



Personal Flag

The Soran Emirates

Although the Battle of Chaldiran, between the Ottomans and the Safavids in 1514, dented Kurdish identity and the struggle for recognition and forced the Safavids to cede a huge part of their territories, it helped the Ottomans to grow stronger and become the dominant force. The Soran Emirates was one of the autonomous governments in the region, but after the Battle of Chaldiran, it came under the rule of the Ottomans. In the 1530s, it gained independence, but later was reintegrated into the Ottoman Empire as a semi-autonomous region, and it was revived in the 19th century under the leadership of Mir Muhammad Rawandzi (Ghalib, 2011). The Soran Emirates used a flag with two stripes, black and white.

Flag used by the Soran Emirates.



Republic of Ararat

The short-lived Ararat Revolution (*Agiri Dagh Revolution*) used the Kurdish flag as a symbol of resistance against the Turkish regime and also to declare its own Kurdish nation. This flag was the symbol that kept the revolution

going from 1927 to 1931. The revolution was defeated, but the flag remained as a basis for other revolutions. The Kurds modified this flag according to their own needs. The design of the Republic of Ararat's flag was created by the Independence movement (*Khoyboun*) in 1927. The Republic of Ararat's flag had four colors. The first stripe is red, the middle white, and the lower part green with a sun with sixty rays.

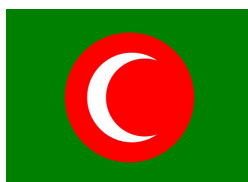
Flag used by Republic of Ararat.



Kingdom of Kurdistan

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds under the leadership of Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji started a series of revolts and independence movements against the British mandate in the southern part of Kurdistan. In September 1921, the Kingdom of Kurdistan was founded and Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji declared himself as a King. The city of Sulaymaniyah was named the capital of the kingdom and the kingdom lasted for almost four years.

Flag used by the Kingdom of Kurdistan.



Republic of Mahabad

The Republic of Mahabad used the flag from the Ararat Republic with some changes to unite the Kurds from diverse religio-political backgrounds. The flag had the same colors as the one from the Ararat Republic, but the size of the sun and its rays was decreased. They added a pen and a grain of wheat to the flag. The Republic itself did not last long, and was defeated on December 15, 1946. The leader of the Republic, Qazi Muhammad along with other leaders

of the Republic were executed on March 31, 1947, in the center of Mahabad, the place where they declared the creation of the Republic.

Flag used by the Republic of Mahabad.



Semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region (Northern Iraq)

In 1992, the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq came into existence and also followed the pattern and adopted the previously used design of the flag. Dr. Mehrdad Izady and Dr. Bijhan Eliasi added a sun to this flag. To this day, the flag remains the same and it has become a symbol of Kurdish national identity everywhere. This flag has four colors. The design is more similar to that of the Ararat Republic, but the number of rays in the sun was changed to twenty-one, which holds deeper nationalistic sentiments for Kurds. This number represents rebirth in Yazdanism, which is considered to be Kurdistan's native religion. It also signifies the Kurdish New Year which occurs on the twenty-first of March. The Kurdish flag is recognized under article 38 in Iraq's constitution, but its display is not allowed in Turkey or Iran. The flag of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region represents almost 9 million Kurds living in Iraq and many who live in diaspora. The following political parties are the major political parties of Kurdistan in Iraq: Kurdistan Democratic Party, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Gorran Movement, New Generation Party, Kurdistan Justice Group, Kurdistan Islamic Union, Sardam Coalition, National Unity Alliance and Azadi (Freedom) Party.

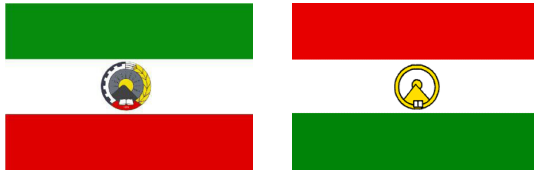
Flag used by the government of semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region (South Kurdistan – *Bashur*)



Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI)

Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran was founded by Qazi Muhammad on 16 August, 1945 and the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad came to existence under KDPI. It is also considered one of the first Kurdish political parties. It is well-known for its struggle against the Shah of Iran and it strives for the right of self-determination for the Kurds. Therefore, it is banned in Iran.

Flag used by Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) – Rojhelat



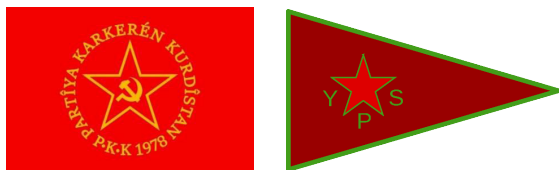
Kurdistan Workers' Party – PKK

Emergence of Abdullah Öcalan as a Kurdish leader inspired many Kurds to actively participate in politics and revive Kurdish political movements. In 1978, he formed the Kurdistan Workers' Party, known as PKK to promote his political ideology based on democratic confederalism. It was founded in Lice, Turkey and initially, it was a political movement that believed in the political process, but after he realized that political movements are often suppressed by force, he started armed struggle. The PKK's ideology is a mixture of revolutionary socialism and Marxism–Leninism combined with Kurdish nationalism that struggles for Kurdish independence; its headquarters are in Qandil Mountains. The PKK provided an umbrella platform to the YDG-H, a youth wing that later created several youth resistance movement with a prefix *Yekîneyên Parastina* – Protection or Defense Units (YP). Initially, all the resistance movements having prefix YP worked under the PKK or had the PKK influence.

Flags used by Kurdistan Workers' Party – PKK



PKK (1978-1995)



Civil Protection Units – YPS Civil Protection Units – Women



The Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement – YDG-H



People's Defense Units, Rojava, Syria

In 2004, during a football match some Arab fans raised the image of Saddam Hussein and praised him which angered Kurdish youth. It resulted in yet another Kurdish uprising known as the Qamishli uprising, which forced the Syrian government to intervene; many civilians were killed. The Kurdish youth organized to defend themselves against Arab oppression, but until the Syrian civil war in 2011, the Kurds were quiet. During the civil war, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) established the

Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC) and supported the People's Protection Units (YPG) militia to defend Kurdish-inhabited areas in northern Syria.

Flag used by People's
Defense Units – YPG



Flag used by Women's
Protection Units – YPJ



Kurdistan Communities Union – KCK

The Kurdistan Communities Union is an umbrella organization that follows Abdullah Öcalan's idea of democratic confederalism. It was founded on 20 March, 2005 in Turkey. It combines the idea of revolutionary socialism, communism, Marxism–Leninism and Kurdish nationalism. This union includes the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Êzîdxan Women's Units (YJÊ), the Shingal/Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ), the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), and the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PÇDK). After 2007 genocide suffered by the Yazidis in Bashiqa and Shingal at the hands of Islamic extremists, the Shingal/Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ) and the Êzîdxan Women's Units (YJÊ) were formed to protect the Yazidis in Shingal and surrounding regions. The majority of the fighters are from the Yazidi religion.

Flag used by Kurdistan Communities Union – KCK and Shingal Resistance Units



Flags used by Shingal/Sinjar Resistance Units – YBŞ and Êzîdxan Women’s Units – YJÊ



Democratic Union Party, Rojava, Syria

The Democratic Union Party is a Kurdish political party established on 20 September, 2003 in Rojava, in the north of Syria. It believes in left wing political struggle and democratic change.

Flag used by Democratic Union Party, Syria – PYD



Kurdistan Free Life Party

The Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) is a leftist political party that was established in Rojhelat also known as Eastern Kurdistan, in 2004. Similar to its other sister political parties, PJAK also believes in democratic confederalism. It also possesses two armed sub-divisions, Eastern Kurdistan Units (YRK) and the women’s armed wing called the Women’s Defence Forces (HPJ). They have signed a deed of commitment with Geneva that assures they will never use children in the hostilities.

Flag used by Kurdistan Free Life Party, Rojhelat, Iran – PJAK



Yazidi Movement for Reform and Progress

After the US invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein when Iraqis were allowed to participate in the political process, the world witnessed emergence of several political movements and Yazidi Movement for Reform and Progress was one of them. The Yazidis, a socio-religious group originated from the ancient Mesopotamian region, established their political movement in 2005.

Flag used by Yazidi Movement for Reform and Progress



Êzîdxan Protection Force – HPÊ

The Yazidi genocide at the hands of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in August 2014 took the world by storm. Many governments and civil societies came together to support the Yazidi community. A Yazidi military commander Haydar Shesho also took the initiative to establish the Protection Force of Êzîdxan or Êzîdxan Protection Force (HPÊ). The HPÊ played a very significant role in liberating Shingal from the ISIS militants.

Flag used by Êzîdxan Protection Force – HPÊ



Eastern Kurdistan Units, Rojhelat, Iran

The Eastern Kurdistan Units (YRK) was founded to establish semi- autonomous Kurdish federal states in Iran, Turkey and Syria following the footsteps of the Kurdistan Regional Government in southern Kurdistan. It believes in armed resistance and is based on secularism, Kurdish nationalism, feminism and democratic confederalism

Flag used by Eastern Kurdistan Units (YRK)



Women's Defence Forces, Rojhelat, Iran

Women's Defence Forces, HPJ promotes women's defense mechanism and teaches how women can defend themselves as well as support their fellow men in achieving a common goal of having a semi-autonomous Kurdish government. Since 2010, they were working under the name of HJRK, but in spring 2014 they changed the name to HPJ.

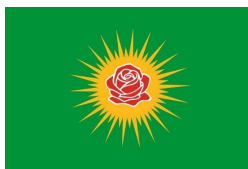
Flag used by Women's Defence Forces – HPJ



Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party

The Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party was established in 2002, but was not successful like PKK and PYD. After a few years and failed attempts to win any parliamentary seats, on Turkish pressure, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) banned the activities of Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party and arrested several members of the party, but it still operational.

Flag used by Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party – PÇDK



Communist Party of Kurdistan, Turkey

The Communist Party of Kurdistan was established as a branch of the Communist Labour Party of Turkey (TKEP) in 1982, but later it emerged as an independent political party.

Flags used by Communist Party of Kurdistan – KKP



Socialist Party of Kurdistan, Turkey

The Revolutionary Party of Kurdistan, the Socialist Party of Turkish Kurdistan, known as the Socialist Party of Kurdistan, or the PSK is based on Marxist-Leninist principles. After the 1980 coup, it was suppressed, but its leadership was able to escape to the diaspora.

Flag used by Socialist Party of Kurdistan – PSK



Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan

The Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan commonly known as Komala is an ethnic Kurdish political party that also takes its political philosophy from Communist Parties and is based on Marxist-Leninist principles. Komala's political ideology believes in armed resistance and it was a major actor during the 1979 Kurdish rebellion in Iran and in the Iran–Iraq war. It took on a severe armed conflict against the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI) in the 1980s and early 1990s. It declared a ceasefire until 2017, but it has resumed armed conflict with Iran.

Flag used by Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan



International Freedom Battalion and Anarcho-Communist Group, Rojava

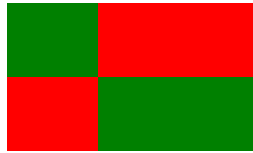
The International Freedom Battalion, abbreviated as IFB or EÖT, is a revolutionary socialist group that believes in armed struggle for freedom. It was founded in June 2015 and gets its political ideology from anarchism, Marxism–Leninism, Hoxhism, Maoism, and anarcho- communism. They supported the People's Defense Units in the Syrian Civil War in the Rojava Revolution and fought against the Turkish Armed Forces, the Syrian National Army, and the Islamic State.

Flags used by International Freedom Battalion and Anarcho- Communist



Zazaistan, Zazakistan or Alevistan

Zaza Kurds speak the Zazaki dialect of Kurdish language and mainly live in Dersim, Turkey. Similar to the Yazidis, some Zaza people consider themselves a different ethnic group than the Kurds. Their majority are Alevi Shias also known as Qizilbash or Kizilbash. They have been in constant conflict with the Turks. While fighting against the Turks, they would wrap their red flag around their head, therefore, the Turks would call them Qizilbash or Kizilbash (red head). The following flags have been used in their socio-political campaigns.



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The ancient Mesopotamian region is home to a wide variety of religio-spiritual practices including ancient Kurdish religions such as Yazidism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Yazdanism, also known as the Cult of Angels, Mithraism and Manichaeism. Followers of these religions dominated parts of this region for centuries. Historical evidence suggests that the roots of the Kurds could go back as far as the Akkadians in the third millennium, or to the Indo-European and mixed groups of the second millennium, such as the Kassites and Hurrians, or to the Medes of the later second millennium. Their cultural identity is one of the oldest in the region. With the passage of time, their DNA might have been mixed with the other ethnic groups, but there is no doubt that the Kurds are an ethnic group with early roots.

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