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Constructing Kurdish Nationalism: *On the emergence of a contemporary Kurdish identity*



Area of the Middle East inhabited mainly by Kurds.
Map by the Central Intelligence Agency (1992)

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Abstract

The idea that Kurds are a distinct people that deserve a nation state of their own is rooted in modern nationalism, the concept that one's supreme loyalty and identity is derived from a state where all people share the same cultural and ethnic roots.

In this paper, I argue that Kurdish nationalism is not the result of an awareness of essential, ancient identity, but rather a construct that was devised by scholars and writers in the 20th century. It is only during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that these ideas were developed, as a response to other nationalization projects by neighboring peoples. Armed rebellions by Iraqi and Turkish Kurds and a semi-autonomous Kurdistan in present day Iraq would not have occurred if it was not for the intentional campaigning by advocates for national awareness in earlier years.

Constructing Kurdish Nationalism:

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Introduction

It may not take long before the Kurds in Iraq declare their autonomous region, Iraqi Kurdistan, an independent state. For many Kurds, this would be the realization of a long-standing dream: Kurdistan, the homeland of the Kurdish people. A Kurdish nation would most likely comprise of northern Iraq, a region that for more than sixteen years has been semi-autonomous and the only region where Kurdish independence might become a geopolitical reality in the short run. Kurds however, are spread out over a large area that besides northern Iraq consists of eastern Turkey, west Iran and even parts of Syria and Armenia.¹

The idea that Kurds are a distinct people that deserve a nation-state of their own is rooted in modern nationalism: the concept that one's supreme loyalty and identity is derived from a state where all people share the same cultural and ethnic roots.² Kurdish claims that they are an ancient people who are entitled to a nation for themselves are backed by essays, poems and epics written by Kurdish writers of the past, in which present day nationalists see a clear, crystallized Kurdish identity shining through. The most well-known example is Ahmadi Khani's *Mem û Zîn*, a love story from 1692 that contains a few sentences about the suffering of Kurds and how this would end if only they had a land to call their own. This story about two lovers who can not be together has come to symbolize the separation between the Kurds and their imagined homeland.

Interestingly though, the concept of a nation state is new even in the west. Michael M. Gunter in “The Modern Origins of Kurdish Nationalism” says: “...many would argue that [nationalism] only began to develop in the latter part of the 18th century and specifically during the French Revolution which began in 1789. The concept is even newer in the Middle East.”³ If the idea of nationalism is that new, it is strange to see that Kurdish claims for independence point to sources that are much older than the very idea of nationalism.

In this paper, I argue that Kurdish nationalism is not the result of an awareness of essential, ancient identity, but rather a construct that was devised by scholars and writers in the 20th century. Their ideas would gain momentum only during the interwar period, when Kurds were oppressed in the countries in which they constituted a minority. Kurds of past centuries identified mostly with their tribe, their village or fellow Muslims. However, after World War I the nationalistic ideas of writers began to trickle down to the people, especially tribal leaders who used the new idea of Kurdish nationalism to try and restore power they lost with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. The result of these nationalistic efforts though, is that many Kurdish people nowadays really feel like Kurds and that Kurdistan should be more than just an idea.

My argument begins with a short analysis of the current situation in Iraqi Kurdistan, the part of Iraq with a predominantly Kurdish population which has been semi-autonomous ever since the end of the Gulf War of 1991-1992. After that, a brief history of the Kurds with an emphasis on their diversity will show that Kurdish unity has never been a historical reality. How this reality was constructed is the next part of the paper, in which events and persons essential to the construction of a Kurdish

identity are introduced. I conclude with a brief summary of recent tragedies which helped consolidate the idea of Kurdishness among people who suffered together under the hands of oppressors and an assessment of the chance a viable Kurdistan has in the light of geopolitical developments.

The 'state' of Iraqi Kurdistan

Present day Iraq is not really a country anymore. The nation that was created after World War I to serve as a British dependency had always contained a large number of people from different ethnic, cultural and religious origins, including Kurds. Its formation was for geopolitical reasons only, mostly to secure oil for the British. The country became independent in 1932 but was still subservient to Britain. After numerous coups d'état, the Ba'ath party came to power in 1968. Its leadership used a doctrine of Arab nationalism to try and unite the different people living in Iraq. The flimsiness of this doctrine, weakened by its own corruption as it was, became apparent after the US invasion of Iraq on 19 March 2003, to remove dictator Saddam Hussein. The Bush administration accused Hussein of being in league with the Islamic extremist terrorist organization Al-Qaeda, responsible for the September 11 attacks in 2001. Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs in the south and Kurds in the north, as well as numerous other groups (sometimes not even Iraqi) are now struggling for control in a nation that may only still exist in the mind of its government.⁴

Iraq nowadays is swamped in tribal, ethnic and religious sectarianism. The only area the government can effectively rule is a green zone in its capital Baghdad, heavily guarded and fortified by the American army to shield it from outside attacks. Hussein's regime was quickly toppled by the US invasion army, but the reasons for

going to war were proven to be false. There were no weapons of mass destruction and there were no ties to Al-Qaeda. Today, the Americans do not have the resources or experience to keep the peace in a country that suffers from a power vacuum. As Brendan O’Leary, John McGarry and Khaled Salih argue in the beginning of their book *The Future of Iraqi Kurdistan*, “The US- and UK-dominated Coalition fought the war without significant advance institutional planning, either for the management of regime collapse [...] or for coherent, constructive regime change and transformation.”

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The paradox is that one phoenix seemingly rose from the ashes of sectarianism. The predominantly Kurdish region of north-Iraq, semi-autonomous ever since the US imposed a no-fly zone there after the first Gulf War of 1991, is the only region in Iraq that is relatively stable. The Kurds were ‘undoubtedly the most enthusiastic about the invasion of the country, writes Ali Abdul-Amir Allawi in *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*. Allawi was Minister of Trade and Minister of Defense in the cabinet appointed by the Interim Iraq Governing Council (September 2003 until 2004), and after that Minister of Finance in the Iraqi Transitional Government between 2005 and 2006. He recalls that Kurdish *peshmerga* (“those who face death”) fighters had “participated effectively with US Special Forces before and during the war in northern cities such as Kirkuk and Mosul.”⁶ The Kurds in Iraq comprised about 23 percent of its population back in 1992. It is likely that this number has grown since.⁷ If Iraq as a nation state fails, further autonomy for the Kurds seems likely, even though there are numerous setbacks:

In the past as well as nowadays, western powers avoided upsetting countries like Turkey, Iran or Syria and proved to be untrustworthy allies of the Kurds. “At particular junctions each great power has decided against sovereign or autonomous Kurdistan because it prefers different allies, or to avoid provoking its current enemies”, write O’Leary and Khalid in *The Future of Iraqi Kurdistan*. Furthermore, “...the neighboring host states [of Kurdish minorities] shared a common perceived interest in repressing Kurdish nationalism and generally acted on that interest.”⁸

That interest is clear: the formation of a Kurdish state could mean loss of territory for the neighboring countries. Turkey as direct neighbor of northern Iraq in particular has been suspicious of recent developments. Not only because Turkey has a sizable minority of Kurds in its eastern part who would feel inclined to join their territory with its Iraqi counterpart. “The re-formation of Turkey’s main Kurdish insurgent group, the PKK, against the Turkish army had fought a decades-long dirty war, in northeastern Iraq, was also looming as a critical Turkish national security problem,” writes Allawi in *The Occupation of Iraq*. The presence of Turkomen, a fellow Turkic people in north Iraq also gave Turkey reason to protest against Kurdish sovereignty or autonomy. The fear that the oil fields of ethnically diverse Kirkuk in the north might fall in Kurdish hands was another important factor. In his book Allawi states that in recent years “Thwarting the plans for an emergent Kurdish state or an Iraqi confederation became a main feature of Turkish policy in Iraq.”⁹ The fact that Turkey is a NATO ally of the United States makes it unlikely that America would support official Kurdish independence.

Nevertheless, in an earlier chapter Allawi points out that “Their years of struggle against the central government, and the unprecedented ferocity of [Saddam Hussein’s] regime’s attacks on their civilian population, raised serious doubts in the minds of most Kurds about the desirability of any connection with the Iraqi state.”¹⁰ In this part he refers to the killing of thousands of Kurdish civilians during the Saddam Hussein era, most notably the gassing of Kurds in 1988 (The Al-Anfal Campaign). The calls for Kurdish autonomy or independence are justified by Kurds themselves by pointing out the distinct ‘Kurdishness’ of the people inhabiting the region of Iraqi Kurdistan and Kurdish minorities elsewhere. They claim an ancient and indivisible national identity. They point not only to literature of the past in which the Kurdish identity is praised and a collective history of oppression by foreign powers, but also to their de facto independence in the present.¹¹ A country for themselves seems justified and long overdue.

The narrative about centuries of united Kurdish struggle against outsiders who would usurp them, is however only partly true. It is only during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that these ideas were developed, as a response to other nationalization projects, most notably that of Turkey, the successor state of the Ottoman empire. Kurdistan is not an essential reality, it is a construction. This does not mean that calls for an independent Kurdistan are not justified. Current realities must be taken into account. I merely wish to point out how nationalism may shape a nation and not the other way around.

Origins of the Kurds

Trying to trace the origins of the Kurds is no easy task. Several writers have differing opinions about their ancestry. Kerim Yildiz, being an advocate for Kurdish nationalism, makes clear that “They are the native inhabitants of their land and as such there are no strict ‘beginnings’ for Kurdish history and origins”. He writes that the Kurds as an ethnic group are the end product of thousands of years of evolution stemming from tribes as diverse as the Guti, Kurti, Medes, Mard, Carduchi and many others. He compares the Kurds to the Scots in that they have a clan history, with over 800 tribes in Kurdistan. He calls the languages of the Kurds ‘dialects’ of an overarching Kurdish language.¹²

Kevin McKiernan, author of *The Kurds: A People in Search of Their Homeland* describes the Kurds as ‘once being powerful and prominent’. He quotes the Greek writer/historian Xenophon who wrote about a people who “...dwelt up among the mountains, were a warlike people, and were not subjects of the king.” McKiernan supposes that these disobedient tribes of fighters are the likely ancestors of the Kurds.¹³ It should be noted however, that McKiernan is a staunch supporter of Kurdish self-rule. In his book he draws comparisons between the Kurds and Native Americans, describing how they were both usurped by other powers and killed, displaced and made to forget their own culture. A comparison between Kurds and Indians is likely to be intended to instill a sense of responsibility in the minds of American readers, whose country’s military is actively involved in the region.

The description by David McDowall of Kurdish origins is quite different. He calls it “extremely doubtful that the Kurds form an ethnic coherent whole in the sense

that they have a common ancestry.” The first mention of Kurds was made by Islamic conquerors in the seventh century, who called them “Akrad” (nomads), which is the Arabic plural of Kurd. This became the meaning of the word ‘Kurd’ during the first few hundred years of recorded Islamic history and did not necessarily refer to an ethnicity. In his book *A Modern History of the Kurds* McDowall warns readers and scholars not to make the mistake of thinking Islamic sources always mean ethnic Kurds when they actually talk about nomadic tribes of any origin. Most Kurds however, did have a tribal way of life. “By the time the Kurds were first clearly recorded [...] they were almost certainly an amalgam of Indo-European tribes that had made their way into the region by different routes and at different periods.” At other times, Arab and Turkish tribes melded with Kurdish tribes and vice versa.¹⁴ Other sources, like Christopher Houston in *Kurdistan: Crafting of National Selves* call Kurds the descendents of Aryan tribes, stressing the point that they were invaded and occupied by their Turkish, Arab and Persian neighbors and that much interbreeding ensued.¹⁵

There are numerous myths concerning a common origin of the Kurds, notably one that tells the Kurds are descended from children who hid in the mountains to escape Zahhak, a child-eating giant. Another story claims that Sarah, the wife of the prophet Abraham, was Kurdish. This story links the Kurds to Islam. Whatever the story, McDowall argues that these are important tools in creating an ethnic identity.¹⁶

The first mention of the name Kurdistan was done by the Saljuqs in the twelfth century. The geographical extent of this definition has shifted over the centuries, but it generally means the mountainous area between modern day Turkey, Iraq and Iran.

The area gained political significance when it became the border area between the Ottoman empire and the Safavid empire of Persia in the 16th century. The people in the region often switched sides, depending on their own political agendas. The numerous tribes often fought each other, sometimes in the name of the Ottoman sultan and at other times for the Persians. During the height of the Ottoman empire in the 16th-17th century, Kurdistan was mostly under Turkish influence. Local tribes enjoyed a great deal of autonomy, leading to feudal battles with neighboring tribes.¹⁷

It is important to keep in mind that the Kurds in this time did not view each other as one people, but identified mostly with their tribe, religion or political affiliation. To say that the Kurds of this time were all subject to a foreign power, is reading history backwards because it assumes the Kurds already had a clear sense of themselves as one nation. The area that is now called 'Kurdistan' by nationalists was a feudal territory and would remain so until the centralization efforts of the Ottoman empire in the 19th century. After World War I and the collapse of the empire, there was a possibility of the Kurdish tribes being granted their own nation by the west. This did not happen eventually, as it was not in the interest of the allies, most notably Great Britain, to lose control over such an oil-rich area. 'Kurdistan' became divided between the newly founded Turkish republic, Iran and British-controlled Iraq.

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Nowadays, according to McDowall about 24-27 million Kurds live in the Middle East. Half of them live in Turkey, while the others are dispersed over Iraq, Iran, Syria and Armenia. There is a Kurdish Diaspora of about 700,000 in Europe, most of them live in Germany.¹⁹

The creation of an ethnic identity

Whatever the precise origins of the Kurds, it is likely that these were incredibly varied and that Kurds cannot reasonably be considered to be descended from one people nor did they behave as one political or cultural entity during the times of Ottoman and Persian occupation. However, in the late 17th century, a poem was written by Ahmedi Khani (sometimes spelled as Ehmedî Xanî) that later generations would come to see as proof that Kurdistan and the idea of a Kurdish ethnicity were longstanding concepts. The poem, called *Mem û Zin* (Mem and Zin) is basically a love story, but Khani devoted a few sentences to Kurdish suffering. That is at least how later generations interpreted the following text:

*Ger dê hebuwa me padişahêk
[...]
xalib nedibû lis er me ev Rom*

(“If only we had a king [and a throne, and a crown, and all the other symbols of power,...], then the Ottomans would not dominate us.”)

And further on:

*Ger dê hebuwa me ittîfaqek
Vêk ra bikira me înciyadek
Rom û ‘Ereb û ‘Ecem temamî
Hem’yan ji me ra dikir xulamî
Tekmil-i-dikir me dîn û dewlet
Tekmil-i-dikir me ‘ilm û hîkmet*

(“If only there were unity among us, and we would obey one another, then all of the Ottomans and Arabs and Iranians would become our servants, we would reach perfection in religion and politics, and we would become productive in knowledge and wisdom.”)²⁰

The poem was written in Kurmanji, one of the main Kurdish dialects. That was unusual for a time when poetry was mostly written in Persian. According to Martin Van Bruinessen in his article “Ehmedî Xanî’s *Mem û Zin* and Its Role in the Emergence of Kurdish National Awareness”, Khani did this to raise the standard of

the Kurdish language, so that the people who spoke it would be counted as a civilized race as well. Khani himself writes: “So that people won’t say that the Kurds have no knowledge and have no history; that all sorts of people have their books and only the Kurds are negligible.”²¹ The result of the decision to write in the Kurdish Kurmanji language instead of a more widespread language was that the audience for *Mem û Zîn* was quite limited. Not even Kurds who spoke Sorani, another major Kurdish language, could understand it. It was certainly not a popular manifesto and only gathered momentum when it was first published using modern printing techniques in 1889.²²

Van Bruinessen writes that if Khani had indeed called for a Kurdish state, he certainly did not mean a nation in which Kurds and Kurds alone would live. It is much more probable that he meant a Kurdish empire like that of the Persians and Ottomans, in which other ethnic groups would live but be subjected to the Kurds.²³ That is a completely different idea than modern nationalism and more in line with how states were viewed in those days. Still, although Khani can not be called a nationalist by modern standards, by writing in his own language and viewing his people as a whole, he might have been way ahead of his time.

According to Van Bruinessen, the first person to recognize a nationalist message in the poem was a southern Kurdish author called Haji Qadir Koyi (spelled in Kurdish as Hacî Qadirî Koyî). Qadir Koyi (1817-1897) grew up in Istanbul during the days when the last autonomous Kurdish emirates were abolished by the Ottomans in their campaign for a more centralized form of government.

Koji translated the poem in Sorani and made it accessible to Kurdish people who spoke the southern dialect. (Mostly spoken in present-day Iraq). His own work was influenced by the poem as well. He nostalgically refers to the 'golden age' of Kurdish history and laments the period that came after that: "Once they [the old rulers] died, hypocrisy appeared; see how they became like straw and fire and oil. One on this side takes side with Persia, and those on that side become each other's enemies." It is important to note that the golden age of unity Koji refers to, did not necessarily exist. He displays a typical romantic and idealistic nationalism. During the years of Ottoman decline and after the first World War, Koji's translation of *Mem û Zin* and the many poems inspired by the epic, continued to play an important role in awakening Kurdish awareness, even up to the 1960's, when the overthrowing of the monarchy in Iraq gave rise to the Kurdish movement as mass movement.²⁴

Koji was not the only writer to gain fame among the Kurds. Many others followed in his footsteps. Michael M. Gunter names ten in his article "The Modern Origins of Kurdish Nationalism"²⁵ Apparently their appeal was large, but the profound influence of these literary works can however only be explained against a much greater framework. The first development towards a more ethnically-defined identity (although this cannot yet be called modern nationalism!) happened during the days in which Ahmadi Khani wrote *Mem û Zin*. Kurds were aware that the two great powers between which they saw themselves caught i.e. the Ottoman and the Safavid Persian empires, constantly waged war against each other. In his article "Impact of Islam on Kurdish Identity Formation", Hakan Özoglu says that the constant struggles between the Ottomans and the Safavids from the 17th century onwards "threatened the wellbeing of the local communities in Kurdistan."²⁶ Muslims fighting Muslims was

against the Islamic doctrine that all believers are united in a single community or *umma*. Faced with the political realities of the day, Kurdish leaders began to look for a new identity for themselves that would not collide with the idea of *umma* but still allowed them to protect local interests. Özoglu writes:

“As the political fragmentation in Islam became more visible and disruptive due to the emergence of rival Ottoman and Safavid states, and as this competition increasingly interrupted the lives of local peoples, intellectuals of Kurdish origin [like Ahmadi Khani] began emphasizing the distinctness of Kurdish identity and called for an alternative state which could protect the interests of local communities.” Özoglu also warns the reader not to mistake such efforts for modern nationalism. “Ahmadi Khani’s emphasis on the Kurdish identity as distinct and his desire for a Kurmanji king to rival the Ottoman and Safavid empires should be viewed in this context, rather than a nationalistic one.”²⁷ During the following period, up to the 20th century, the Kurds negotiated between a Kurdish and Islamic identity, because Islam typically opposes the idea of believers fragmented by national borders. This period can then be seen as a dialogue between local and religious identities.

Abbas Vali claims that true Kurdish nationalism evolved only because Kurdishness after World War I became an issue in the countries where Kurds constituted a minority. Especially in Turkey, were under the nationalist banner of Atatürk all other ethnic denominations besides Turkish were declared non-existent or at least unfavorable in the interwar period. This made people rethink their identity again, but this time in favor of ethnicity. In “Genealogies of the Kurds: Constructions of Nation and National Identity in Kurdish Historical Writing” Vali quotes Esat Bozkurt,

Minister of Justice of Turkey in the 1930's, who stated that "Those who are not of pure Turkish stock can have only one right in this country, the right to be servants and slaves." Vali himself continues: "Spoken Kurdish was no longer the language of difference, but of otherness –of antagonism and opposition. It questioned at once the identity of the sovereign and the legitimacy of the new [secular, nationalist, republican] order."²⁸

The Turks actively persecuted non-Turkish elements in their new country. Hamit Bozarslan in his article "Kurdish Nationalism under the Kemalist Republic" describes how Kurdish villages and territories were considered 'internal colonies' and how uprisings were violently put to an end. "The previous Ottoman-Muslim-Kurdish identity that allowed many rural and urban dignitaries to behave as Kurdish while remaining fully loyal to the state could simply not survive in these conditions."²⁹ Being faced with discrimination and oppression, the Kurdishness of people who formerly may have mostly identified with their tribe or fellow Muslims, became apparent to all, including themselves. Similar things happened in Iraq, where pan-Arabism became the unifying factor and in Iran under the rule of Reza Shah. The rise of Kurdish nationalism was therefore a response to the nationalization efforts of the new countries in which the Kurds found themselves and thus a mostly reactionary struggle. The literary works of prolific Kurdish writers like Haji Qadir Koyi, who sought to unite the oppressed Kurds under a single banner using even older writings like that of Ahmadi Khani, gained the most widespread popularity in this era. They opened up the minds of readers to the idea of an imagined, shared origin and subsequently added fuel to the fire.

Uprisings in the name of nationalism

The 20th century saw the rise of armed, organized resistance groups of Kurdish warriors who under the flag of nationalism tried to establish a territory of their own. I wish to argue that this would not have happened if it wasn't for the intentional campaigns of awareness by Koji and other writers in earlier years. The attempts to carve out a nation for themselves were often part of larger conflicts on the world stage. This caused Kurdish groups to become entangled in geopolitical games of power which they could not oversee and eventually led to many of them losing their lives. Sharing a collective memory of tragedies helped bolster even more nationalistic feelings among the Kurds, for which the writings of the past had already laid the groundwork.

The first important attempt after the Second World War was the foundation of the Republic of Mahabad in Iran under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani. This was only a short lived experiment as the Soviet-backed republic became too entangled in the politics of the emerging cold war to gain the approval of the west. The republic dissolved in 1946 as Iran regained control over the area, delivering a massive blow to Kurdish confidence.³⁰ There were more tragedies during the latter half of the 20th century, but the biggest one happened in 1988. When Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein declared war on Iran in September 1980, some Iraqi Kurds took sides with the Iranians. During the closure of the eight year long war, Hussein took revenge on all of them. "The price they eventually paid during this war was the worst catastrophe in their modern history. In the infamous Anfal campaign of the summer of 1988, the Iraqi government used chemical weapons in Halabja and other places, destroyed thousands of Kurdish villages, and, according to Human Rights Watch, killed at least

50,000 people”, writes Ofra Bengio in “Autonomy in Kurdistan in Historical Perspective”.³¹ Three years later, after the US Army drove Hussein's forces out of Kuwait, the Kurds rebelled against the dictator, only to be crushed once more.

Although nationalism by this period was firmly rooted in the minds of the Kurds, they stayed divided even during the 1990's, an echo of old tribal divisions. After the installment of a no-fly zone over Iraqi Kurdistan, which made this part of the country *de facto* autonomous, different parties of the *Kurdistan Regional Government* (KRG) in Iraq fought each other because they could not reach an agreement over oil revenues and land disputes.³² The west, most notably the USA, also made a distinction between ‘good Kurds’ and ‘bad Kurds’. The ones in Iraq who opposed Saddam Hussein were the good ones, while Kurdish rebels in Turkey, most notably the PKK led by Abdullah ‘Apo’ Öcalan, were considered ‘bad’ because Turkey is a NATO member and ally to the US.³³ Both the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ Kurds wanted the same thing however: an independent Kurdistan.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the forming of a Kurdish national identity was not a sudden awareness of a shared origin, but a deliberate and conscious effort by Kurdish writers and other intellectuals to unite the different tribes and groups living in the area that is sometimes called Kurdistan. They did this by taking poems and epics of the past and pointing out how these reflected on a shared origin and a common suffering. Building upon these old writings, authors like Haji Qadir Koyi created their own contemporary work and inspired local Kurdish leaders and citizens. Local Kurds had already felt for a long time that the 'Islamic infighting' of the Ottomans and the Persians was hurting their interest as they began looking for another point of identification while not abandoning their faith. When Kurdishness became an issue with the rise of nationalism in neighboring countries, it became clear that there was no place for Kurdish identity in places like Turkey. As a response, Kurdish nationalism emerged as a mass movement.

During the 20th century the efforts to create a national identity led to armed uprisings of Kurdish groups. Getting caught up in global conflicts in which the Kurds had to endure massive blows only helped to further develop a feeling of unity, although political realities continued to drive groups apart.

As stated in the introduction, the only place where an independent Kurdistan might become a reality in the short run is the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. Even so, an actual declaration of independence would cause another set of problems. Neighboring Turkey will certainly oppose the idea of an independent Kurdistan on its doorstep. The Turkish government in Ankara might fear that the huge Kurdish minority living in eastern Turkey wants to join that part of the country to

their new neighbors. The United States, still a major player in the region, would most likely oppose the idea of independence as to not upset NATO-ally Turkey.

Maybe a relatively safe, autonomous region in a country that is divided by sectarian violence is the best thing the Kurds can hope for right now. As long as they keep extremist jihadists out and keep cries for complete independence to a minimum, it is unlikely that the Iraqi Kurds will be bothered. Oil rich areas like the one near Kirkuk, just outside Kurdish territory, might be reason for trouble though.

As Kevin McKiernan says in *The Kurds: A People in Search of their Homeland*, Kurds in Iraq now have “independence in all but name.” He writes in his epilogue: “The talk of ‘Iraqi’s first’ would remain a fiction for outside consumption, a necessary means to an end, and the Kurds would go along with it a while longer as they tried to navigate a would-be ship of state in a sea of regional powers.”³⁴ While the idea of a unified Kurdistan has long been just a nostalgic fable, the construction of a national identity might just made it a reality, because it made Kurdistan real in the heads of the Kurdish.

¹Endnotes

David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), map 2.

² Michael M. Gunter, "The Modern Origins of Kurdish Nationalism," in *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2007), 7.

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ Thabit A. J. Abdullah, *A Short History of Iraq from 636 to the Present* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2003), 123-135, 164-177.

⁵ Brendan O'Leary, John McGarry and Khaled Salih, "Preface," in *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq*, ed. Brendan O'Leary, John McGarry and Khaled Salih (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), xv.

⁶ Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 134.

⁷ Brendan O'Leary and Khaled Salih, "The Denial, Resurrection and Affirmation of Kurdistan," in *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq*, ed. Brendan O'Leary, John McGarry and Khaled Salih (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 11.

⁸ Ibid., 8-9.

⁹ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 314.

¹⁰ Ibid., 73.

¹¹ Gunter, "The Modern Origins of Kurdish Nationalism", 1-17.

¹² Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iraq* (Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2004), 7-8.

¹³ Kevin McKiernan, *The Kurds: A People in Search of Their Homeland* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 9.

¹⁴ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 9.

¹⁵ Christopher Houston, *Kurdistan: Crafting of National Selves* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 16.

¹⁶ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 4.

¹⁷ Ibid., 21-31.

¹⁸ Ibid., 115-125.

¹⁹ Ibid., 3-4.

²⁰ Quoted in Martin van Bruinessen, "Ehmedî Xanî's Mem û Zin and Its Role in the Emergence of Kurdish National Awareness," in *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Abbas Vali (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2007), 42-44.

²¹ Ibid., 42-43.

²² Ibid., 50.

²³ Ibid., 45.

²⁴ Ibid., 47-53.

²⁵

Gunter, "The Modern Origins of Kurdish Nationalism", 6.

²⁶ Hakan Özoğlu, "The Impact of Islam on Kurdish Identity Formation in the Middle East," in *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2007), 34.

²⁷ Ibid., 32-35.

²⁸

Abbas Vali, "Genealogies of the Kurds: Constructions of Nation and National Identity in Kurdish Historical Writing," in *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Abbas Vali (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2007), 98.

²⁹ Hamit Bozarslan, "Kurdish Nationalism under the Kemalist Republic: Some Hypotheses," in *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2007), 42-44.

³⁰

Ofra Bengio "Autonomy in Kurdistan in Historical Perspective," in *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq*, ed. Brendan O'Leary, John McGarry and Khaled Salih (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 174.

³¹

Ibid., 175.

³² Ibid., 179.

³³ McKiernan, *The Kurds: A People in Search of Their Homeland*, 119.

³⁴

Ibid., 361.

Annotated bibliography:

Abdullah, Thabit A. J. *A Short History of Iraq: from 636 to the Present*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2003.

This book offers a general history of Iraq, with an emphasis on its modern history. An important theme throughout this title is the constant struggle between peoples of different origins, since Iraq has always been a disputed region. The author acknowledges the many different ethnicities in Iraq, but definitely views the country as a viable nation state. This book was useful to me because I could use it to describe the advent of Kurdish nationalism against the backdrop of Iraqi history.

Allawi, Ali A. *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

The writer of this book, Ali Abdul-Amir Allawi was Minister of Trade and Minister of Defense of Iraq from 2003 until 2004 and Minister of Finance between 2005 and 2006. He describes the process of the American occupation of Iraq by the Americans from his own perspective. He strongly favors an Iraq made up of autonomous zones, something that was against the wishes of the Americans and British when he proposed such a plan in 2007. His recollection of how the Kurds think about Iraq was the most useful to me.

Bengio, Ofra. "Autonomy in Kurdistan in Historical Perspective," in *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq*, edited by Brendan O'Leary, John McGarry and Khaled Salih. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.

Most chapters in this book contain analyses of and recommendations for the constitutional design of a future Iraq, in which Kurdistan would be a (semi-) autonomous part. The book makes clear that political, ideological and tribal infighting among Kurds in Iraq has not been as abundant as in other countries where Kurds make up a minority of the population. The chapter by Bengio described the way in which especially Iraqi Kurds have suffered by the hands of oppressors. I used this information to back up my claim that these tragedies further helped bolster nationalism.

Bozarslan, Hamit. "Kurdish Nationalism under the Kemalist Republic: Some Hypotheses," in *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, edited by Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2007.

Dedicated to the 'proud, free-spirited and independent minded Kurdish people', the authors of this book make it clear from the beginning what their viewpoint on Kurdish nationalism is: something that is wholly justified and undeniable. The different writers of the different chapters -several authors are Kurdish or of Kurdish descent- wish to systematically trace the origin of Kurdish nationalism in countries where Kurds constitute a sizable minority. Bozarslan's article was of interest to me because it explained how local Kurdish leaders turned to nationalism as a way of justifying their struggle to regain lost power.

Bruinessen, Martin van. "Ehmedî Xani's Mem û Zîn and Its Role in the Emergence of Kurdish National Awareness," in *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, edited by Abbas Vali. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2007.

Van Bruinessen analyses the important role the epic by Ahmadi Kahni has played in the creation of a Kurdish national identity. Of special importance to me was the history of how the Kurdish writer Koji gave the poem a second life by translating it in Sorani and use it as inspiration for countless other poems. This article proved one of the most important for this paper, because it gives a prime example of how national identity can be created.

Gunter, Michael M. "The Modern Origins of Kurdish Nationalism," in *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, edited by Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2007.

This article describes how Kurdish nationalism is unmistakably modern, citing well known definitions of modern nationalism in the process. This article was selected because it provided me with more information on what nationalism really is, as well as a list of nationalistic Kurdish authors.

Houston, Christopher. *Kurdistan: Crafting of National Selves*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

The author of this book explores the ways in which Kurds have constructed their own, secular 'national' identity in the recent past. The crafting of national selves through an ideology that Houston calls 'Kemalism' plays a big role in the book: the same process that helped shape modern day Turkey, Iran and Iraq during the Ba'ath era. Of importance to me was his take on the origins of the Kurdish people. His claim that they have many different origins supported my thesis.

McDowall, David. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004.

This is an extensive history of the Kurds, describing how they came to be known as a distinct, although divided mountain people to the point where they played a pivotal role in World War I and their subsequent division between multiple, newly formed states. In other chapters, McDowall focuses on different countries in which Kurds constitute a sizable minority and how their struggle for independence plays out differently in each country. The main reasons to use this book were the chapters on pre-19th century history, since not many other books I used covered these older periods in great detail.

McKiernan, Kevin. *The Kurds: A People in Search of Their Homeland*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006.

In his book, McKiernan combines the history of the Kurds with his own personal experiences during his time in 'Kurdistan'. He is sympathetic to the Kurdish cause and compares their struggle to that of Native American Indians, who, as he says, have also been oppressed and struggled to preserve their language and culture. His book was useful to me because it told a distinct tale about the origins of the Kurds, and provided an interesting look on the future. Also, McKiernan points out the ambiguous relationship the US has with the Kurds. This author apparently has high hopes for an independent Kurdish state.

O'Leary, Brendan and Khaled Salih, "The Denial, Resurrection and Affirmation of Kurdistan," in *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq*, edited by Brendan O'Leary, John McGarry and Khaled Salih. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.

This first chapter in a collection of articles is written by the editors. They paint a brief history of how the idea of Kurdistan emerged, became repressed by the leaders of the countries in which the Kurds lived, only to emerge again after the Gulf War of 91-92. I used this article to explain how the Kurds' neighbors and western powers have acted against the interest of Kurdish nationalists.

Özoğlu, Hakan. "The Impact of Islam on Kurdish Identity Formation in the Middle East," in *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, edited by Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2007.

The article by Özoğlu has an interesting angle on the role Islam played in the forming of a Kurdish identity. According to the author, Kurds once looked to their religion to separate them from their warring neighbors who did not adhere to the notion of *umma* (congregation of believers). This fighting disrupted Kurdish societies and the Kurds felt like better Muslims by distancing themselves from the Ottomans and Persians. This did not stop infighting amongst Kurds themselves however.

Vali, Abbas. "Genealogies of the Kurds: Constructions of Nation and National Identity in Kurdish Historical Writing," in *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, edited by Abbas Vali. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2007.

In this lengthy article, the author analyses two outlooks on Kurdish nationalism. One being the essentialist view, the other the constructivist view. Vali supports the latter, explaining that Kurdish nationalism is a construct that was formed in response to the nationalist movements in states with a Kurdish minority. Of interest to me was the part on how Kurds struggled to keep their identity in modern Turkey.

Yildiz, Kerim. *The Kurds in Iraq*. Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2004.

This title describes the history of the Kurds in Iraq, but mostly the situation concerning human rights, democracy and economy in the semi-autonomous region of North Iraq. In the preface, it is made clear that Kurdish Human Rights Project was involved in the writing of the book. It is therefore unmistakably pro-Kurdish independence. The history section was the most important to me, it provided me with a specific take on Kurdish origins.