Liminal lineages of the “Kurdish question”

Article  (Published Version)


This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/105438/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

**Copyright and reuse:**
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

http://sro.sussex.ac.uk
Kurdistan is a liminal space. It has been at the geopolitical interface of both old empires and modern states. The historical dynamics of this geopolitical liminality have been and remain the primary determinant of Kurdish politics and history. Prior to the modern era, the central vector of these dynamics was Kurdish resistance to the expansionist tendency of the surrounding agrarian-commercial empires that sought to incorporate the Kurds into their political and economic structures. Given Kurdistan's geostrategic importance and significant natural resources—situated on Asia-Europe trade routes and important waterways of the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers—the region's modern states have also pursued colonial incorporation of the Kurds, in turn eliciting further resistance. Anti-colonial resistance and struggle for self-rule have therefore been central to Kurdish history. The so-called Kurdish question is shorthand for the causes and consequences of this resistance in the modern era.
The Taurus and Zagros mountains have been the Kurds’ most effective weapon in their struggle against foreign subjugation. Covering much of the Kurdish heartland, they form a natural defense against constantly encroaching empires and states. The mountains provided the Kurds with a material basis for political leverage since they supported a predominantly semi-nomadic mode of life that in turn enabled the Kurds to develop formidable cavalry armies skilled in mounted archery. Such armies were of strategic interest to tributary empires. Ottoman and Safavi empires, for example, sought Kurdish military resources for their pursuit of wars of territorial expansion, which were central to the reproduction of all tributary empires.

The dual function of Kurdistan’s mountains as a natural defense and a source of political leverage gave rise to a mutually beneficial *modus vivendi* between
the Kurdish ruling elites and their imperial interlocutors. The historical phenomena of Kurdish principalities, such as Ardalan, Baban, Badinan, Bitlis and Bohtan, arose from these circumstances. The principalities were essentially dynastic vassal states that enjoyed high levels of local autonomy in return for a defined annual tax and the provision of troops for their imperial suzerains’ wars of conquest elsewhere. This autonomy reached a particularly high level during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Kurdish principalities exploited their strategic location between the rival Ottomans and Safavi empires to extract maximum political concessions.[1] The majority of Kurdish principalities, however, fought with the Sunni Ottomans against the Shi’i Safavids in the battle of Chaldiran in 1514. The battle ended with the decisive victory of the Ottomans and determined the contours of the border between the two empires, which ran along a north-south axis through Kurdistan. Formalized in the 1639 Peace Treaty of Qasr-i Shirin, the border remains broadly intact to this day in the form of Iran’s border with Turkey and Iraq. The battle of Chaldiran therefore marks the first division of Kurdistan.

Modern Re-division of Kurdistan and Its Consequences

Similar to its rise, the decline of Kurdish principalities’ ultra-autonomy was also an intrinsically international process. Under geopolitical pressure from industrial European powers, the Ottoman and Qajar empires launched emulative modernization and coercive centralization projects to finance military modernization as an immediate response to their repeated military defeats at the hands of European states.

Similar to its rise, the decline of Kurdish principalities’ ultra-autonomy was also an intrinsically international process.
Thus, in the nineteenth century the Ottoman and Qajar empires launched reform programs known as *tanzimat* (reordering) and *nizam-I jadid* (new order), respectively. These reforms sought to shore up imperial finances through centralizing the pre-existing tributary system that left tax collection and the levying of troops to local elites. Financial and political centralization weakened Kurdish polities fiscally, leading to their decline. These processes paved the way for the political empowerment of religious orders (*tariqats*) in Kurdistan, as occurred in many anti-colonial movements in the Middle East and North Africa. Leaders of the orders used their prestige to mediate inter-communal relations, which gave them power and wealth.[2] The latter development explains the leadership by religious figures, such as Sheikh Ubeydullah (1831–1883), of some of the subsequent proto-nationalist Kurdish uprisings of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

World War I terminated whatever was left of Kurdish autonomy. The secret Anglo-French Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, concluded before the defeat and collapse of the Ottoman Empire, led to the formation of several new states, including Iraq and Syria, out of the Ottoman territories. The subsequent Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 stipulated provisions for the formation of an independent Kurdistan but these were dropped in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. The removal of the provisions was partly due to the fact that European imperialists sought the consolidation of strong pro-Western regional states such as Turkey and Iran as a bulwark against the Bolshevik revolution, which despite their best efforts had survived post-revolutionary civil war. Thus, Ottoman Kurdistan was divided between Iraq, Syria and Turkey, with the latter incorporating the largest part. No change was made to the Ottoman-Iranian border. Iran therefore retained the Kurdish regions the Safavis had
incorporated since the sixteenth century.

Turn of the century Kurdistan therefore experienced a second division. Kurds now found themselves subjected to the sovereignty of four different states—Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria—which dominated northern, southern, eastern and western Kurdistan, respectively. In contemporary Kurdish political discourse, the Kurdish equivalents of these geographical terms—Bakur, Bashur, Rojhelat and Rojava—respectively, are used to refer to the four parts of Kurdistan.

The modern geopolitical division of Kurdistan was highly consequential for Kurdish politics and created two significant circumstances. The first circumstance consists of a developmental disjuncture between different parts of Kurdistan since they were integrated into separate states with different political economies and different modes and levels of incorporation into the capitalist world system. For example, the earlier and deeper capitalist transformation of land regime and property relations in Turkey and Iran, and these states' membership of the Western camp in the Cold War era, provided a process of class formation and a political and ideological environment conducive to the growth and strength of radical left tendencies within the Kurdish national movement. This result is exemplified in the political hegemony of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey and the political prominence in Iranian Kurdistan of the Revolutionary Organization of the Toilers of the Iranian Kurdistan (ROTIK), better known as Komala. The weakness and belatedness of comparable processes in Iraq arguably accounts for the hegemony of classical nationalist forces in Iraqi Kurdistan, chiefly represented by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).
There is an even more important political dimension to the developmental disconnect between different parts of Kurdistan. Each branch of the Kurdish movement and its various ideological streams devises its particular political strategy based primarily on the socio-political conditions and international relations of the particular state it opposes. These internal conditions and external relations are different in each country and largely shaped by wider domestic and international socio-political processes which are historically unsynchronized. This context means that the strategies of different branches of the Kurdish movement might diverge from, or even clash with, each other and in the process undermine the Kurdish movement as a whole. For instance, during the late 1960s the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq was supported by the US-backed Pahlavi monarchy in Iran in its struggle against the Soviet-backed Iraqi Ba’ath regime. The Iraqi Kurdish movement led by Molla Mostafa Barzani therefore viewed the anti-Iranian insurgency initiated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (PDKI) during 1968-1969 as a danger to its tactical alliance with the Shah of Iran and therefore decisively suppressed it by force of arms. More recently, the PKK’s prioritization of its fight against the Turkish state and friction with the PDK in Iraq, which has close ties with Turkey, have blunted its anti-Iranian policy. This “Bakur first” policy has put the PKK at loggerheads with some Kurdish nationalist parties in Iran that charge the PKK with collaboration with Iran.

The division of Kurdistan has entailed a fundamentally unfavorable balance of power, both political and demographic, between each particular branch of the Kurdish movement and the unitary nation-state it resists.

Secondly, the division of Kurdistan has entailed a fundamentally unfavorable
balance of power, both political and demographic, between each particular branch of the Kurdish movement and the unitary nation-state it resists. For example, Kurds in Syria form a small proportion of the total, mostly Arab population of the country. The relative political weakness resulting from this demographic imbalance is compounded by the effects of the Syrian Ba’ath regime’s decades of de-development and Arabization policies in the Kurdish regions. Some versions of this circumstance also prevail in the other parts of Kurdistan.

The political effects of the small size of the Kurdish population relative to the total population in each of the four states that Kurds inhabit are compounded by the ideological and cultural efficacy of colonial nationalism—a combination of colonial practice and nationalist discourse—in the nation-states dominating the Kurds. This discourse sanctifies the territorial integrity of the existing Turkish, Arab and Persian-dominated nation-states and relentlessly portrays the Kurdish movement as a foreign plot to partition these states. The effects can be seen in modern Turkey and Iran where the ideological and political basis for forming effective, broad-based political alliances between the Kurdish movement and non-Kurdish progressive forces for a project of decentralization that ensures Kurdish democratic self-rule have been undermined. The collapse of the Soviet Union has exacerbated this circumstance by making some leftist forces more susceptible to the colonial nationalist discourse of their central states. Some of these leftist forces used to support the Kurdish movement out of their doctrinal adherence to the Leninist principle of the oppressed nations’ right of self-determination.

The combined impact of internal demographic imbalance and colonial nationalism has structurally oriented Kurdish political movements toward
exploiting external geopolitical competition as a key element of their strategic calculus. This dynamic tends to be expressed in tactical alliances with foreign powers, regional or international, that are also in tension or conflict with the states that dominate the Kurds. The most recent case of this otherwise old pattern is the cooperation of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the United States in Syria against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In addition to the immediate exigencies of defeating ISIS as an existential threat to the Kurds, the SDF increasingly saw this cooperation as both a bargaining chip in any future negotiations with Damascus and a vitally needed protective measure against the Turkish state. And yet, eventually the United States abandoned the Syrian Kurds and allowed Turkey’s brutal invasion of parts of Rojava, which involved de facto ethnic cleansing and war crimes.

**Kurdish political forces’ tactical alliance with external states and actors have rarely produced their intended results.**

Kurdish political forces’ tactical alliance with external states and actors have rarely produced their intended results, for two main reasons. First, the international legal architecture of the modern world order sanctifies the sovereignty of existing nation-states to the strategic detriment of relatively belated national movements such as that of the Kurds. This situation has generally held except during transitional periods in world order such as the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet bloc and its Western-facilitated geopolitical disintegration. The international legal architecture tends to reduce Kurdish demands for self-determination to a domestic issue under the jurisdiction of the very states that violently and systematically deny Kurdish people’s national rights and demands.
Second, foreign states that tactically partner with Kurdish forces always subordinate their relationship with the Kurdish movement to grand strategic agendas that rarely, if ever, include Kurdish democratic demands. American support for Syrian Kurds was, in the words of the US Special Representative for Syria Engagement, James Jeffery, “temporary, tactical and transactional” and in service of the more strategic goals of balancing Russia, containing Iran and weakening the Syrian president Bashar al-Asad’s regime.[3] Similarly, US opposition to the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2017 was motivated by US support for the formation of a new Iraqi nationalist government in Baghdad that would roll back Iranian influence. The United States also sought to protect its NATO ally, Turkey, from the inevitable demonstration effects of Kurdish independence in Iraq.

All in all, the recurrent theme of betrayal and abandonment of the Kurds by their foreign allies—exemplified by the phrase “Kurds have no friends but the mountains”—therefore reflects a key structural effect of Kurdistan’s international division and geostrategic location.

**Agendas of the Kurdish Movement**

Whether subject to colonial denial in Turkey and to some extent in Syria or colonial assimilation in Iran or Iraq, Kurds mounted resistance movements that increasingly drew on the discourse of modern nationalism, which the elites of the states dominating the Kurds had also used in their violent construction of unitary nation-states. Kurdish nationalism’s ideological coherence and discursive sophistication grew in tandem with the unfolding of top-down, coercive modernization projects pursued by central states. Its political appeal and power to mobilize the population varied across time and place and were
co-determined by the broader domestic socio-political context in each country and the regional and international environment within which it operated.

Nevertheless, in the longue durée of modern Kurdish history and beneath the ebb and flow of Kurdish political movements, the marriage of print capitalism and primitive accumulation cultivated the sociological soil of a Kurdish imagined community in quest of sovereignty.[4] For over a century Kurds have consistently questioned and challenged, in different political and ideological idioms, their de facto colonial subordination by nation-states that to varying degrees are themselves products of European colonialism. Thus, if the “Eastern question” refers to the European colonial powers’ conflictual management of the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the “Kurdish question” captures colonial attempts by postcolonial states in the region to contain the rise of the Kurdish national movement for democratic self-rule.

The Kurds’ shared experience of national resistance has not produced a common and unified Kurdish movement. Indeed, Kurdish political forces have been ideologically diverse and politically fragmented, even conflictual. This circumstance too has its roots in Kurdistan’s geopolitical division and class structures that are implicated in, and co-constituted by, the wider processes of “uneven and combined development.”[5] In contemporary Kurdish politics, however, three main ideological-political tendencies, each containing different strands, can be identified: classical nationalism, revolutionary socialism (including Democratic Confederalism) and Islamic self-governance.

Classical nationalist forces are ideologically, though not necessarily politically, seeking Kurdish independence. Revolutionary socialism has two broad strands, one demanding the right of self-determination up to independence for
the Kurds and the other pursuing Democratic Confederalism. And finally, Islamist forces advocate Kurdish Islamic self-governance. All three tendencies are represented in all parts of Kurdistan, but the first two secular movements have been, and remain, dominant both overall and in each part of Kurdistan. The PDK in Iraq and PDKI in Iran are important examples of the classical nationalist tendency, and the PKK in Turkey and Komala in Iran represent the revolutionary socialist tendency. Hüda-Par in Turkey and The Islamic Union of Kurdistan (IUK) in Iraq are branches of the Sunni Islamist tendency.

Unlike the nationalist, Islamist and more orthodox revolutionary socialist tendencies, Democratic Confederalism is a more recent and novel project within the Kurdish movement. It is the brainchild of Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK’s imprisoned leader, who developed the idea to supplant the PKK’s old combination of Kurdish nationalism and Marxist-Leninism. Central to this paradigm shift is the idea of “killing the dominant male” and abolishing the state in order to build a society based on gender equality, direct democracy and an environmentalist economy centered on communal property and cooperative production of use values.[6] Democratic Confederalism for Öcalan is both the socio-political form of “democratic modernity” and a non-nationalist solution to the Kurdish national question.

The significance of the feminist thrust of Democratic Confederalism cannot be overstated. It is perceived to be both central to overcoming the state and the survival of Democratic Confederalism. Political equality and the institutional autonomy of women within the Rojava revolution and other pro-PKK forces is strategically intended to deepen and broaden the dynamics of direct democracy in Kurdish society and to arrest the statist impulse of patriarchy in the political community and society at large.
Political equality and the institutional autonomy of women within the Rojava revolution and other pro-PKK forces is strategically intended to deepen and broaden the dynamics of direct democracy in Kurdish society.

The system of co-leadership (one man and one woman) and equal representation of women in all institutions and organs of Democratic Confederalist structures and the formation of autonomous, all-female militia are the primary institutional features of this radical feminist praxis.

Öcalan's description of Democratic Confederalism is rather detailed but his discussion of its implementation and consolidation rather limited. He seems to suggest that an existing nation-state within which a Democratic Confederalist project is being pursued must be weakened to a certain extent for Democratic Confederalism to become empirically possible. This weakening can result either from external dynamics, such as war and revolution, or from the successful struggles of democratic forces using whatever political resources constitutional states can offer. The former scenario occurred in Syria and the latter in Turkey where the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) gained significant political influence before its suppression by the Turkish state. However, Öcalan also argues that if a nation-state refuses to compromise with Democratic Confederalist forces or violently represses them, then the movement has the legitimate right to self-defense.[7] In fact, Öcalan argues that Democratic Confederalism can be called a “system of self-defense of the society” and that in the last analysis, everything depends on the concrete balance of forces.[8]

Prospects for the Kurdish Movement
İsmail Beşikçi famously described Kurdistan as an “international colony.”[9] The international perspective of Beşikçi’s argument is crucial to understanding the Kurdish movement and its likely prospects since global and geopolitical dynamics remain decisive in shaping Kurdish resistance movements. The Palestinian experience and the Kurds’ own political history amply demonstrate the massive and enduring impact that the statist structure of the world order has on political movements of stateless nations by locking them into a strategically disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the states that dominate them. It is the recognition of this structural problem that partially explains Öcalan’s invention of the idea of Democratic Confederalism as a non-statist project and illuminates his emphasis on the importance of the regional spread of Democratic Confederalism, since, the reasoning goes, regional states will find it challenging to suppress multiple, concurrent movements.

**Looking ahead, the international pressure on Kurdish political movements is bound to intensify as the United States continues its pivot to the East and China expands westward through its Belt and Road Initiative, inevitably intersecting in the Middle East.**

Looking ahead, the international pressure on Kurdish political movements is bound to intensify as the United States continues its pivot to the East and China expands westward through its Belt and Road Initiative, inevitably intersecting in the Middle East. China’s expansion is heralded by the recently revealed strategic treaty between China and Iran and China’s growing economic and diplomatic ties with Turkey and Arab states. China’s entanglement with states that Kurds inhabit is bad news for the Kurdish movement at least in the short and medium terms. China has a disdain for liberal internationalism and rigorously respects other states’ sovereignty lest it...
inadvertently fuels its own secessionist movements in Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. In this sense, China is extremely unlikely to lend any support to Kurdish movements, even tactically. But it might encourage, if not pressure, regional states with an active Kurdish movement to quickly and peacefully solve their own "Kurdish question" so that China’s massive capital investment and infrastructural projects can be safely implemented. Indeed, the “new silk road economic belt” component of China’s massive multipronged Belt and Road Initiative is projected to cross all four parts of Kurdistan before reaching Europe via Istanbul.[10]

While the rise of China, peaceful or otherwise, seems unstoppable, its formal eclipse of US world hegemony will likely involve a turbulent transitional period as shown by the phenomena of Trump and Brexit both of which have been convincingly linked to global effects of the economic rise of China.[11] The nature and duration of this period depends to a large extent on the course of domestic American politics. If President Donald Trump wins re-election in November 2020 he is likely to continue his appeasement of Turkey in order to elicit its support in balancing Russia and the Syrian Ba’ath regime and to bring the US maximum pressure campaign on Iran to fruition. This turn of events would obviously be bad news for Rojava and the PKK. The Rojava administration’s recent deal with a US oil firm is arguably an attempt to preempt a new Turkish invasion by entrenching American interests in the region. The efficacy of this tactic will largely depend on domestic political developments in Turkey where popular support for Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s semi-fascist Islamist government is rapidly declining due to a financial and economic crisis. A new government formed by the main pro-Western opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) might reverse
Erdoğan’s Eurasianist grand strategy and realign Turkey’s Syria policy with that of the United States. The United States might continue to offer some support to Rojava in order to undermine Asad and at least partially balance Russia and Iran. Whether Erdoğan’s potential departure would also reinvigorate peace talks between the Turkish state and the PKK partly would depend on the HDP’s electoral performance and partly on the results of Turkey’s still ongoing and massive operations against the main PKK bases in Iraqi Kurdistan.

On the other hand, the United States under a Democratic Joe Biden presidency is likely to initiate a rapprochement with both Turkey and Iran. A Biden administration is also likely to have a more coherent and determined project to contain China and Russia and weaken the Asad regime. A viable Kurdish-led entity in Rojava will facilitate achieving these aims. A potential Biden administration might therefore define and enforce clear limits on the Turkish state’s intervention in the region, which will politically benefit Rojava but is also likely to dampen its revolutionary spirit.[12]

Regardless of who is the next president of the United States, the Kurdish movement in Iran is unlikely to enjoy the kind of geopolitical opportunities that Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria stumbled upon in 1991 and 2011, respectively. Both Trump and Biden are averse to a new major war in the Middle East and are likely to strike some sort of deal with Iran. At any rate, since the mid-1990s, the main Kurdish parties in Iran have settled in a series of border camps in Iraqi Kurdistan under the auspices of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). These parties’ policy options, especially with regards to armed struggle, have therefore come to be more or less entirely determined by the strategic calculations of the KRG’s main ruling parties—PUK and PDK—which
for commercial, security and diplomatic reasons cannot afford to antagonize Iran. As a result, despite maintaining armed wings, these parties have been unable to launch significant or sustained military operations against Iranian forces since the mid-1990s.

Moreover, military drone technology that Iran and especially Turkey have mastered over recent years has significant implications for the Kurdish movement. Iran has increasingly used armed and reconnaissance drones in Kurdish regions. Turkey has deployed armed drones to devastating effect against Kurds in Syria and Iraq and more recently against its enemies in Syria’s Idlib and Libya.

The growing strategic use of drones by Iran and Turkey, with Syria and Iraq likely to follow, confronts the Kurdish resistance movement’s time-honored guerrilla warfare strategy with a huge obstacle. How fast and how effectively Kurdish armed forces can adapt to the age of armed drones is not clear. But without counter-weapons, which only states can acquire, traditional Kurdish guerrilla tactics will not be as efficient as in the past.

The KRG’s pro-Iran posture and a sharp military imbalance of power means that any major advance of the Kurdish movement in Iran will most likely be a result of domestic political upheaval, which is not unlikely given the increasingly unbearable levels of repression, poverty, unemployment and governmental corruption and incompetence in the country, all of which have been exacerbated by US sanctions. The efficacy of such upheaval also
depends on the degree of coordination and synchronization of protests in Rojhelat and the rest of Iran and their strategic leadership.

Baghdad’s military annulment of the results of the 2017 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan and the state’s recapture of oil-rich Kirkuk, facilitated by the PUK’s collaboration with Iran, hugely weakened the KRG and confined it again to its pre-ISIS domains. The Iraqi state, however, has not recovered from the devastating impact of the 2003 US invasion and remains politically fragile. Moreover, ISIS is reportedly rapidly regrouping and could return with vengeance. The intersection of these circumstances might once again provide Iraqi Kurds with unexpected political opportunities.

All in all, the experience of the past 100 years demonstrates that there is no military solution to the so-called Kurdish question. International forces and geopolitical dynamics continue to constrain the Kurdish movement, but they are also likely to provide it with unexpected and unintended opportunities for political advance. Unless the states that currently dominate the Kurds embrace a plural conception of nationhood, decentralization and radical democracy, Kurdish movements will probably be even more geopoliticized and their centrifugal dynamics intensified.

[Kamran Matin is associate professor of international relations at Sussex University.]

---

**Endnotes**


