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The Kurdish Janus: The intersocietal construction of nations

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Abstract
Existing accounts of Kurdish nationalism can be mapped onto the main theories of nationalism, that is, primordialism, ethnosymbolism and modernism. These theories, however, suffer, respectively, from essentialism, circularity and aporia, manifest in their common inability to digest the Janus-like character of nations, that is, their display of simultaneous modernity and antiquity. This paper develops an alternative account through a critical application of the theory of 'uneven and combined development' (UCD) to the Republic of Kurdistan of 1946. The argument unfolds in three steps. First, we argue that the failure of mainstream theories of nationalism to explain the nation's historical ambiguity lies in their 'internalism'. Second, we show that UCD overcomes internalism through its plural social ontology and enables a retheorising of nations as interactive products of the geopolitical mediation of historical capitalism's expansion through societal multiplicity. Central to this process was the emergence of nationalism as a defensive and emulative ideology of geopolitical self-preservation. This involved reversing the sociological and political moments of the originary formation of the British imperial nation. We argue that this historical reversal underpins the Janus-like form of nations, including the Kurdish nation. Third, we substantiate the argument through a brief case study of the Republic of Kurdistan.
January 22, 1946 is a momentous day in Kurdish history. On this day, the Republic of Kurdistan was officially proclaimed in the town of Mahabad in north-western Iran. The republic was founded under the auspices of the newly established Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP). It was the Kurds’ first experience of de facto modern sovereignty, ruling over the Northern third of Eastern (Iranian) Kurdistan (henceforth ‘Rojhelat’, its common Kurdish name). The republic lasted only 11 months. But during this short period, areas under its control experienced unprecedented developments. The Pahlavi state’s coercive political centralisation and cultural homogenisation launched in the early 1920s were sharply reversed. Modern Kurdish schools were founded; primary and intermediate education was made compulsory (Saleh & Saleh, 2007, p. 72); a local Kurdish press emerged; Kurdish language, literature and art were cultivated; women’s participation in politics and civic life was encouraged; party politics grew; and Kurdish nationalism, the political genesis of the republic, was organisationally and discursively further consolidated.

The Republic of Kurdistan embodied the idea of Kurdish national sovereignty. As such, it was a decidedly modern phenomenon. And yet, it emerged in one of the most backward regions of Rojhelat, namely, Mukriyan. Mukriyan was dominated by precapitalist social relations and premodern forms of collective identity and political loyalty. Economic and commercial infrastructure were rudimentary at the time, most of the population was illiterate and the urban bourgeoisie was minuscule and largely dependent on the central government. The dominant forces in the region were tribal and feudal landlords. They owned around 87% of arable land (Ghassemlou, 1988, p. 16). As modern-day vassals of the Pahlavi autocracy, they ruled over a large class of landless peasants living in semi-servile conditions.

How did a national republic, the emblematic form of modern sovereignty, emerge in a premodern social context? The answer is logically bound up with the broader question of the origins and dynamics of Kurdish nationalism, the founding force of the Republic of Kurdistan. However, despite its remarkable longevity, political potency and global significance, Kurdish nationalism remains theoretically understudied. Indeed, seminal texts of nationalism studies either completely ignore Kurdish nationalism or mention it only in passing (Maxwell & Smith, 2015, p. 772). By contrast, the relevant branches of area studies are home to a growing literature on Kurdish nationalism. This literature, however, tends to uncritically deploy canonical theories of nationalism, namely, primordialism, ethnosymbolism and modernism, and in so doing reproduces their explanatory problems.

‘Primordialism’ assumes nations’ givenness and antiquity (Armstrong, 1982; Gat, 2013). Accordingly, primordialist accounts of Kurdish nationalism presuppose the existence for centuries, if not millennia, of a Kurdish nation cohering around a common language, ancestry, territory and customs (e.g., Edmonds, 1971; Izady, 1992). Thus, they arguably mirror, albeit in a resistive mode, unhistorical conceptions of the Arab, Turkish and Iranian nations whose sovereign domination of the Kurds involves the denial of Kurdish nationhood. However, attributing primordiality to the Kurdish nation contradicts the historical fact that as late as the early 20th century, Kurdistan, like the Ottoman and Qajar states enveloping it, was marked by a multiplicity of sub-national (tribal and kinship) and supra-national (religious) collective identities and decentralised political loyalties (Hassanpour, 1992, p. 55; van Bruinessen, 1992, p. 6). Primordialist accounts of Kurdish nationalism, therefore, assume the very phenomenon they are supposed to explain. As such, they mirror primordialism proper in being ‘unsociological, unanalytical and vacuous’ (Eller & Coughlan, 1993, p. 183).

‘Modernism’, by contrast, considers nations as ideological by-products of modernity (Anderson, 2006; Breuilly, 1993; Gellner, 1983). Modernist accounts of Kurdish nationalism, therefore, foreground the Kurdish reaction to the centralisation of the Ottoman and Qajar empires during the 19th century and the subsequent formation of the centralised unitary nation-states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria during the early 20th century (Ozoglu, 2004). However, they rarely interrogate the sociological assumptions of the modernist theories that frame their analyses of
the Kurdish case (cf. Vali, 2003a). Such an interrogation would reveal that these theories’ derivation of nationalism, and hence the nation, from the practical or ideological requirements of capitalism, industrialisation or functional division of labour (Breuilly, 1996; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 2000) flies in the face of the empirical fact that in the majority of cases nationalism has preceded capitalist development or industrialisation (cf. Breuilly, 1993, pp. 413–414). In other words, almost all nations have emerged in social contexts where what modernist theories of nationalism consider their fundamental causes were absent (Matin, 2019, p. 2).

Meanwhile, ‘ethnosymbolism’ occupies an intellectually liminal position between primordialism and modernism. It views the nation as a modern reconfiguration of ancient ethnies by nationalism (Smith, 1979, 1991). It thus appears to avoid both primordialism’s essentialist undertones and the disjunction between theory and history that besets modernist approaches. It also ‘satisfies the emotional gap that primordialism’s collapse has left behind’ (Maxwell & Smith, 2015, p. 784) and therefore appeals to many Kurdish scholars and researchers sympathetic to the Kurdish national movement who have deployed ethnosymbolism implicitly or explicitly (e.g., Ghassemlou, 1988; Hassan, 2013). In some accounts, ethnosymbolism is combined with modernism (e.g., Koohi-Kamali, 2003), in other accounts (e.g., Bajalan, 2013; Hassan, 2013; Hasssanpour, 1992; Koohi-Kamali, 2003; Romano, 2006) with some form of stagist periodisation inspired by Miroslav Hroch (1985). Invoking the late 17th century epic of Mem u Zin by Ahmad Khani, many of these accounts posit the existence of a precocious Kurdish nationalism, albeit ‘feudal’ (Hassanpour, 1992, 2003), predating European nationalism. However, Khani’s lament for Kurdish political disunity and call for a unifying Kurdish king arguably indicates a dynastic conception of rule whose decline, along with that of religion, formed the basis on which the nation could actually be imagined (Anderson, 2006, p. 7) as an ‘abstract community’ (James, 1996) of horizontal solidarity and formal equality embodied in popular sovereignty. These paradoxes of ethnosymbolist accounts of Kurdish nationalism reflect ethnosymbolism’s circular argument that ‘nationalism’ constructs the ‘nation’ from pre-existing ‘ethnies’ (Smith, 1991). This turns *explanandum* (i.e., nationalism) into *explanans* and displaces the antiquity of nations onto ethnies as their historical precursors hence teleologically concatenating them (cf. Soleimani, 2016, p. 7; Vali, 2003a, p. 2). This has earned ethnosymbolism the title of ‘soft primordialism’ (Joireman, 2003, p. 28).

The analytical problems besetting the main theories of nationalism and their Kurdish iterations are, we argue, ultimately rooted in the inability of these theories to explain the nation’s *differentium specificum*, that is, its simultaneous modernity and antiquity. This historical ambiguity has been best captured in Tom Nairn’s (1977) famous phrase, ‘the modern Janus’. Nations are Janus-like in both cultural and sociological senses. First, they combine the modern idea of impersonal, territorial, popular rule (*modern* sovereignty) with an *ancient*, culturally coherent collective identity (national identity). And second, almost all nation-formation processes have begun in tributary states hence combining sovereignty with an ancient, culturally coherent collective identity. Thus, nations and nationalism. Primordialism elides the question by denying nations’ modernity altogether. Modernist theories deny the nation’s antiquity theoretically only to be confronted by its ideological facets empirically. Ethnosymbolism irresolutely sits on the fence. It temporally stretches nations’ Janus-like form rendering their modernity and antiquity empirically separate and analytically distinct but leaves their relationship sociologically untheorised. None of the canonical theories of nationalism is therefore able to adequately explain the nation’s Janus-like character.

Against this intellectual background, our intervention has necessarily a dominant theoretical aspect. We argue that the difficulty faced by the main theories of nationalism arises from their ‘internalism’. Internalism refers to the assumption that phenomena and dynamics internal to a given social formation have theoretical and methodological primacy in explaining phenomena within that social formation (Tenbruck, 1994; cf. Rosenberg, 2006; Matin, 2013, pp. 5–9). Internalism presupposes a *singular social ontology* that theoretically obscures the intersocietal dimension of historical change and hence the resulting condition of developmental hybridity of which the nation’s Janus-like character is a prime, but by no means the only, example. This circumstance marks all three approaches to nations and nationalism. Primordialism’s essentialism is incompatible with the intrinsically relational character of the formation and evolution of collective identities. The internalism of modernist theories of nationalism is, on the other
hand, manifest in their search for ‘objective’ predicates of nations *inside* their claimed or actual boundaries. This search inevitably fails because of the pre-modern nature of social structures from and through which most nations have emerged. And ethnosymbolism’s circular argument that nationalism politically and institutionally upgrades primordial ethnies into nations is a result of its intellectual internalism inherited from Weberian sociology. Weber’s ‘ideal-types’ are ‘logical’ (as opposed to historical) constructions formed through an intellectual procedure that involves imputing internal coherence and autonomy to units (Matin, 2013, pp. 7–8). This underlies ethnosymbolism’s reproduction of primordialism at the anterior level of ethnies and the related inability to offer a sociological account of the historical transformation of ethnies to nations.

Our alternative account of Kurdish nationalism, therefore, involves a prior retheorisation of the rise and expansion of the nation around a critique and supplanting of ‘internalism’. Here, we draw on the theory of ‘uneven and combined development’ (UCD). UCD rests on a *plural social ontology* that underpins an intrinsically interactive and multilinear conception of socio-historical change (Matin, 2007; Rosenberg, 2006). Thus, we demonstrate how processes of uneven and combined development involve the mutual constitution of the societal level (where the modern sociological basis of the nation was absent but nationalism arose) and intersocietal level (where this modern sociological basis was present through the effects of its geopolitical mediation). This thesis, therefore, unlocks the problem of nations’ Janus-like character. It retheorises the emergence of nationalism as a political ideology and praxis that is rooted in *modern* capitalist sociality but articulated through *nonmodern* social structures. Kurdish nationalism is, as we shall show, an important case in point.

Our argument involves an intellectual sublation (*Aufhebung*) of two influential accounts of Kurdish nationalism developed by Amir Hassanpour (1992, 2003) and Abbas Vali (2003a, 2003b, 2014). It incorporates Hassanpour’s dialectic of class power and political power and his implicit recognition of the causal significance of the intersocietal in its account of the geopolitically charged self-comparison of stateless Kurds with the surrounding non-Kurdish states in the epic poem of *Mem and Zin* by Ahamd Khani (1650–1707). But it avoids his ahistorical attribution of nationalism or nationhood to the 16th-century Kurds. Our argument also integrates Vali’s dialectic of (Turkish, Persian, Arab) ‘sovereignty’ and (Kurdish) ‘statelessness’ as the key dynamic of Kurdish nationalism. But it avoids the tension between its poststructuralist and Marxist moments of analysis. It does so through integrating Vali’s mesolevel account of Kurdish nationalism into a broader, theoretically explicit account of extra-discursive, historically specific and intersocietally overdetermined conditions of the possibility of the modern (capitalist) sovereignty as the *differentium specificum* of the nation and nationalism.

The remainder of the paper is divided into two main steps. First, we introduce the theory of uneven and combined development and show how it overcomes internalism. This enables a coherent theorisation of the historical ambiguity of nations and nationalisms as the effect of the intersocietal—rather than internal or global—development of capitalist modernity. In the second and final step, we recast the rise and fall of the republic of Kurdistan in the theoretical framework of uneven and combined development. In the conclusion, we recapitulate our argument and briefly reflect on its wider implications.

2 | BEYOND INTERNALISM: THE UNEVEN AND COMBINED DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATION

As noted above, internalism is a product of an ontologically singular conception of the social (Matin, 2013, p. 8; Rosenberg, 2016, p. 140). Overcoming internalism, therefore, requires a plural social ontology, that is, the basic assumption of the interactive coexistence of multiple societies. Leon Trotsky’s idea of ‘uneven and combined development’ is premised on precisely such an assumption. It begins from the recognition of the fundamental ‘unevenness’ of social reality (Trotsky, 1985, p. 27). Unevenness theoretically foregrounds societal multiplicity and developmental difference. From the basic premise of intersocietal unevenness flows the second premise of ‘combined development’, that is, ‘a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, *an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms*’ (Trotsky, 1985, p. 27, emphasis added). This amalgamation, we recall, is the socio-historical content of nations’ historical ambiguity, its Janus-like character.
Combined development takes place through three key mechanisms: ‘the privilege of historical backwardness’, ‘the whip of external necessity’ and ‘substitution’ (cf. Matin, 2013, pp. 17–19). The privilege of historic backwardness ‘… permits, or rather compels, the adoption of whatever is ready in advance of any specified date, skipping a whole series of intermediate stages’ (Trotsky, 1985, pp. 26–27). ‘The whip of external necessity’ involves geopolitically shaped conditions of ‘coercive comparisons’ (Barker, 2006, p. 78) and ‘defensive modernisation’ (cf. Matin, 2013, pp. 56–57). And ‘substitution’ refers to the mobilisation of various replacements, native and foreign, in backward societies, for the agency, institutions, instruments, material or methods of earlier processes of capitalist development (Matin, 2013, p. 19).

The intrinsic unevenness and combination of the historical process means that ‘development’ is an inherently interactive and multilinear process. Uneven and combined development, therefore, captures—at the level of a ‘general abstraction’ (Rosenberg, 2006, p. 319)—the interlocking of different societies’ patterns of development such that their interactive coexistence is constitutive of their individual existence and vice versa (Matin, 2013, pp. 16–17). It, therefore, captures key consequences of societal multiplicity, that is, ‘difference, coexistence, interaction, combination, and dialectical change’ (Rosenberg, 2016, pp. 135–141).

At this point, it is important to note the basic difference between the theories of ‘uneven and combined development’ and ‘uneven development’. The former, which implicitly informs some modernist theories of nationalism (e.g., Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 2000), is derived from the internal dynamics of capitalism. It therefore excludes the causal significance of societal multiplicity (unevenness) and sociological hybridity (combination), which are central to the theory of uneven and combined development.

Framed by the theory of uneven and combined development, our alternative explanation of the nation’s historical ambiguity traces the modernity of the nation to its ‘sovereignty’ (Anderson, 2006, p. 6; Matin, 2019): the specifically modern form of rule rooted in ‘primitive accumulation’ as the historical genesis of capitalism (Marx, 1990, pp. 873–907). Primitive accumulation had two crucial, interrelated consequences. First, it created the specifically modern form of rule rooted in ‘primitive accumulation’ as the historical genesis of capitalism reinforcing by the fact that in its metropolitan home too, the British state was a multinational empire involving the de

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facto hierarchy of the English, the Scottish, the Irish and the Welsh. These two circumstances gave a developmental idiosyncrasy to the British imperial nation that precluded its replicability or ‘modularity’ (Anderson, 2006, p. 4).

Nevertheless, despite its sui generis and non-replicable configuration of modern sovereignty and imperial nationalism, British capitalism exercised mounting and irresistible geopolitical pressure on non-capitalist polities coexisting with it, above all France. France responded by mobilising and regimenting its populations through political and cultural centralisation. This was exemplified in revolutionary France’s Levée en masse (the citizen-soldier) and the Code Civil. The French substitution of the ‘impersonal collective’ of the nation for Britain's abstract individual rooted in the processes of primitive accumulation thus became the blueprint for geopolitical survival in non-capitalist polities, from Japan and Russia to the Ottoman and Qajar empires. These tributary states therefore confronted the geopolitical pressures and colonial encroachment of modernising European states through building culturally and linguistically unitary nations. This process excluded, otherised and hence antagonised those peoples within these non-capitalist polities whose culture and language were different from those with which the ‘nation’ was coercively constructed. These ‘minoritised’ peoples responded with their own nationalist projects. Kurdish nationalism is a product of this wider process of uneven and combined development of capitalist modernity in Eurasia.9

3 | THE UNEVEN AND COMBINED DEVELOPMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF KURDISTAN

The Republic of Kurdistan combined modern sovereignty with premodern sociality. This reflected Rojhelat’s strategic location at the intersection of wider international and regional processes of geopolitical competition and capitalist development. To delineate the contours of this interactive process, we present our alternative account of the rise and fall of the republic in three interlinked sections based upon the structural sequence of ‘uneven and combined development’, that is, unevenness, combination and development.

3.1 | Unevenness: Developmental peripheralisation and geopolitical liminality

This section articulates the multiple and differential spatio-temporal dynamics whose intersection in Mukriyan formed the generative context of the Republic of Kurdistan as an amalgamated political form. The republic was founded in the town of Mahabad in the Mukriyan region of Rojhelat in January 1946. Located in the north-western Iran, Mukriyan forms the northern tip of Rojhelat. It gradually fell under the Safavid empire’s suzerainty following the battle of Chaldiran in 1514, which is often seen as the first division of Kurdistan. During the long 19th century, Kurdistan lay at the intersection of three vectors of unevenness. A West–East vector extending from Western Europe to West Asia demarcated the spatio-temporally staggered ordering of political and economic modernisation. At the Eastern end of this vector lay Russia (Soviet), Ottoman (Turkish) and Qajar (Iranian) states. A second vector of unevenness captured a centre-periphery space of unequal development in which Kurdish regions were peripheralised within the wider political economies of the states encompassing them. These states had themselves become peripheral zones to the modern world-system. The third vector of unevenness consisted of geopolitical dynamics arising from the location of Mukriyan at the intersection of the Turkish, Russian and Iranian borders. This multi-vector unevenness strategically shaped the political economy and developmental dynamics of Mukriyan and Kurdistan more generally.

Up until the 19th century, Kurdistan was dominated by tribal and semi-feudal social relations, politically organised in semi-independent principalities under the suzerainty of either the Ottoman empire or the Safavi (later Qajar) empire (Yadirgi, 2017, p. 65). Persistent ideological and geopolitical rivalry between these empires had enabled Kurdish principalities to use the possibility of switching their loyalty as an effective leverage to gain levels of local autonomy considerably higher than regions closer to the imperial centres (cf. Yadirgi, 2017, pp. 70–71). This decentralised political configuration,11 rooted in these empires’ tributary modes of production, began to rapidly transform from the
early 19th century under the whip of external necessity generated by industrial and political revolutions in Britain and France, respectively. These revolutions had altered the pre-existing balance of power in Western Eurasia in favour of European empires that had successfully halted, and subsequently reversed, the Ottoman and Qajar empires’ ‘geopolitical accumulation’ (Teschke, 2003, pp. 95–115; cf. Marx, 1994, p. 491) in central and Eastern Europe and in the Caucasus. This geopolitical reconfiguration operated as a whip of external necessity under which the Ottoman and Qajar empires embarked on projects of ‘defensive modernisation’ (Matin, 2013, p. 55). Central to this was political and administrative centralisation geared towards augmenting imperial revenues required for the military modernisation on which their geo-political survival increasingly depended. Emblematic of this circumstance was the Ottomans’ reform project of Tanzimat (Reordering) of which the Qajar Nizami Jadid (New Order) reform agenda was a more limited emulation. A casualty of these reforms was the last vestige of Kurdish political autonomy, which had already been steadily weakening since the mid-17th century (Yadirgi, 2017, p. 74) following the conclusion of peace treaties between the Ottoman and Safavid empires.

The disintegration of the Kurdish principalities led to a political vacuum. It provided fertile soil for the rise of religious leaders who increasingly acted as the arbiter of communal and inter-communal conflicts. Given the trans-kinship character of religious identities, prominent Kurdish religious leaders, especially those affiliated with the organisationally and ideologically powerful Sufi brotherhoods such as Naqshbandi, also tended to act as de facto political leaders vis-à-vis external forces and in the collective interest of the Kurds who were otherwise fragmented along tribal and kinship lines. This geo-politicisation of religious leadership is exemplified in the Kurdish movement led by Sheikh Ubeidullah during 1879–1880. At the helm of the newly established Kurdish League, Sheikh Ubeidullah sought to merge Ottoman and Qajar Kurds into a single independent Kurdish state led by himself (Jwaideh, 2006, p. 80; Soleimani, 2016). This uprising took place in an historical context that was domestically charged by socio-economic impact of Tanzimat and externally by the geopolitical implications of the Russo-Ottoman war of 1877–1888. The former combined Jacobin and capitalist logics embodied in the Land Laws of 1856 and 1867 and the Conscript and the Nationality Laws of 1869 (Duzgun, 2017, pp. 267–268). Tanzimat’s juridical assault on pre-existing feudal and tribal privileges had the unintended consequence of the discursive sharpening of a universal Kurdish political subjectivity. The Russo-Ottoman war, for which the Ottomans had armed thousands of Kurds, geopolitically articulated the territorial and political implications for the Kurds of the Russian-backed Armenian ascendancy on the fragile frontiers of Russian, Ottoman, and Qajar empires. Article 61 of the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, which guaranteed Armenian security against Circassians and Kurds, deepened the Kurdish fear of Armenian predominance in the region (Jwaideh, 2006, p. 83) and highlighted the need for a trans-communal Kurdish political strategy.

Even though Sheikh Ubeidullah’s uprising originated from within the Ottoman territory, its geopolitical spear quickly targeted the weaker, Shi’a dominated, Qajar empire against which political mobilisation invoking Sunni sectarianism was easier. Ubeidullah’s revolt pierced the Qajar state in Urmia and Savojbolagh (Sablagh or Mahabad), the future birthplace of the Republic of Kurdistan. This revolt was, however, short-lived. It was defeated by a de facto alliance between the Ottomans and the Qajars (Ates, 2014, p. 754) backed by Britain. Nevertheless, and despite the Sunni sectarian discourse that overlaid Sheikh Ubeidullah’s struggle for Kurdish statehood, his movement left a deep imprint on Mukriyan where ‘only few tribes were not the sheikh’s subjects’ (Ates, 2014 p. 785). It prepared the political ground for the subsequent growth of Kurdish nationalist discourse in two main ways: directly, through articulating and prosecuting an explicit project for pan-Kurdish statehood, albeit one based on premodern, dynastic form of sovereignty; and indirectly, through accelerating the ongoing attempts at a conclusive demarcation of Ottoman–Qajar border, which extended and consolidated Tehran’s direct rule over Kurdish borderlands (Ates, 2014, pp. 743–744). This process of Turco-Persian slicing of the Kurdish communal spatiality sharpened the Kurds’ sense of territorial division. This, in turn, involved the cultivation of the logically prior assumption of the Kurds’ cultural unity and distinction and Kurdistan’s spatial boundedness.

It was within this wider context that Kurdish nationalist thought further evolved during the late 19th and early 20th century in tandem with, and in reaction to, the uneven and combined development of Turkish and Iranian nationalisms during the same period. In the late 19th century, the semi-colonial status of Ottoman and Qajar states had
solidified. It was embodied in the European-governed Ottoman Public Debt Administration (Keyder, 1987 pp. 39–42) and the Qajar state’s sale of commercial and economic concessions to European capitalists to the detriment of the native bazaar bourgeoisie. The Ottoman and Qajar states’ formalised economic colonialism exacerbated the psychological impact of their earlier military defeats by European empires and the subsequent territorial losses had had on their intellectual and political elites. These interrelated circumstances led to the development of a ‘consciousness of backwardness’ (Shilliam, 2009, pp. 6–7) among Ottoman and Qajar elites, forcing them into critical reflection on the sources of their polities’ geopolitical weakness and socio-economic backwardness, and on how to overcome them. In so doing, they increasingly turned to the Jacobin strategy of modernisation whether in its original French variety or in its politically qualified iterations in Prussia, Russia and Japan. The Ottoman and Qajar elites also drew on each other’s experiences (Tüyloğlu, 2021). The cumulative impact of their activities was a radical reconfiguration of the state-society relations towards ‘progress’ and ‘development’. The key ingredient of this project was a nationalising of both state and society (Marashi, 2008, pp. 12–13). This involved the political centralisation of the former and the cultural homogenisation of the latter. This twin process gave the emerging nation-state the character of a ‘surrogate colonial state’ (Marashi, 2014, p. 18), which acted as a whip of external necessity on Kurdistan. Mukriyan’s triple unevenness therefore provided both the developmental dynamics and historical, ideological and political ingredients for the formation of the Republic of Kurdistan as a political Janus.

3.2 | Combination: Grafting national sovereignty onto a feudal society

This section charts the broad trajectory of the process of combined development that resulted from Kurdistan’s unevenness and which transplanted a modern state-form, that is, the Republic of Kurdistan, into a premodern social context, that is, feudal Mukriyan. This process was interactively driven by a strategic and consequential substitution that underpinned both the Iranian and Turkish nation-state building projects. This substitution involved the replacement of the abstract individual of English capitalism, with the impersonal collective of a purportedly ‘organic’ and ‘authentic’ nation based on a singular and homogenous cultural identity with a purportedly linear history reaching back into time immemorial. In other words, Turkish and Iranian versions of volkish nationalism emulated the French revolution’s politicisation of the Enlightenment project’s substitution of divinely ordained dynastic rule with the notion of a people with natural rights (Birken, 1994, pp. 133–134). But in this case, ‘the people’—as the modern subject of history and sovereignty—did not pre-exist. It was defined and constructed by nationalist elites around ‘Turkish’ and ‘Persian’ cultures and languages. It therefore ipso facto excluded the Kurds and other non-Turkish and non-Persian communities. In the case of Turkey, this exclusion took the form of an outright denial of Kurdish existence. In the case of Iranian nationalism, it involved placing the Kurds at the bottom of a racially charged cultural hierarchy on top of which sat Persian culture and language as the core of Iranian national identity (cf. Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011). These experiences of discursive and political denial and exclusion through inclusion more or less immediately elicited a Kurdish proto-nationalist resistance that emerged concurrently and interactively with Turkish and Iranian, and later Arab, nationalisms. The immediacy of this emergence was partially due to the historical proximity, hence the fresh memory, of substantive Kurdish autonomy under the earlier decentralised political structure of the Ottoman and Qajar empires. Ardalan, the last major Kurdish principality in the Qajar realm, lost its autonomous status to Tehran only in the late 1880s (Bakhash, 1981, p. 37).

The main platforms of this emergent Kurdish proto-nationalism were newspapers, political parties and to a lesser extent modern artistic productions. Kurdistan, the first Kurdish newspaper, was launched in 1898 in Cairo. The first Kurdish political organisation, that is, The Kurdistan Society for Mutual Aid and Progress, was founded in Istanbul in 1908 (Ekici, 2021, p. 4). These platforms established a discursive political field around a distinct Kurdish identity and rights for the Kurdish intelligentsia, which grew in scale and impact through cross-border interactions between Kurdish intellectuals and political activists in different parts of Kurdistan. This contextual process set the stage for the subsequent development of Kurdish nationalism proper.

Several other Kurdish nationalist parties were founded in the ex-Ottoman domain of Southern (Iraqi) Kurdistan, which during the British mandate (1921–1932) and later under the rule of King Faisal II (1939–1958) enjoyed compar-
atively higher levels of social, political and cultural freedoms. These included Hiwa (Hope) in 1935 and Hizbi Rizgari Kurd (The Kurdish Liberation Party) in 1945. Under the influence of its communist faction, Shorsh (Revolution), the Kurdish Liberation Party sought ‘to unify and liberate Greater Kurdistan’, to implement comprehensive social, economic, political and cultural reforms and to ‘combat imperialism and reaction’ (Jwaideh, 2006, p. 241).

Modern theatre also provided a potent medium of artistic articulation for Kurdish nationalism (Rostami, 2019). This modern nationalist discourse filtered into Mukriyan through a steady stream of Kurdish activists and newspapers and periodicals such as Galawe (August), Jiyjan (Life) and Hawar (Clamour) (cf. Mulla Izzat, 2001, p. 72). Its message resonated with the Kurdish intelligentsia in Mukriyan, which was already politically supercharged by Ismail Simko’s uprising (1918–1922).

Simko’s movement had emerged from the intersection of the collapse of central authority in north-western regions of the Qajar state during the First World War and the political impact of Kurdish nationalists discourse in the Ottoman Empire that had emerged against the late Ottoman and Young Turks’ centralisation policies (cf. Soleimani, 2017; Vali, 2014, p. 12). Simko’s movement had revived Sheikh Ubeidullah’s project of Kurdish independence 40 years earlier through a more openly secular discourse. Helped by Abdulrazzaq Badrkhani, Simko published the Kurdish language newspaper Roji Kurd (Kurdish Sun/Day), opened Kurdish schools and established political organisations such as Komlay Jihandani (The Society for Knowing the World) and Komlay Istitklsi Kurd (The Society for the Kurdish Salvation) founded in Khoy and Urmia in 1912 and 1913, respectively (Haji-Aghaei, 2015, p. 316; Gohari, 2004, p. 22). Thus, like Ubeidullah’s movement, Simko’s political and military power was also based on tribal forces. But Simko’s was nevertheless significant as the first Kurdish movement against political centralisation in Iran and one that already showed signs of secularisation of leadership and discourse. Indeed, in a letter to the Iranian authorities, Simko’s chief advisor, Sayyed Taha Nehri, the grandson of Sheikh Ubeidullah, drew an analogy between Kurdish demand for self-rule and that of European nationalities.12

Meanwhile, Bolshevik ideas crossed the border and reached Kurdistan directly or via Azerbaijan. Qazi Mohammad, the future leader of the Republic of Kurdistan, was reportedly in contact with Bolshevik officers of Russian army occupying northern Mukriyan and Azerbaijan during the WWI (Bazyar, 2020, pp. 44–45). Following the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the subsequent formation of The Soviet Republic of Iran in the northern region of Gilan in 1920, Hama Bolshevik, a radical anti-feudal group named after its leader, was formed in Mukriyan in 1937 (Hessami, 1996, p. 141). Hizbi Azadi Kurdstan (The Kurdish Freedom Party) also appeared in Mukriyan in June 1938 (Bazyar, 2020, p. 53). These political organisations’ membership came largely, though not exclusively, from the small social stratum of educated Kurds and urban (petty-)bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, they heralded the gradual replacement of tribal and religious figures by the nascent intelligentsia and urban petty bourgeoisie as the leading social strata of Kurdish political movements. This conflictual process was largely completed by the mid-1960s.

Thus, by the late 1930s, Mukriyan’s multi-vectorial unevenness had led to the combination of nationalist and communist ideas in a broadly leftist form of Kurdish nationalism, which pursued Kurdish sovereignty in a greater Kurdistan. This broadly left-leaning Kurdish nationalism struggled against religious conservatism, tribalism and feudalism as the sources of Kurdish socio-economic backwardness and political subordination (Karimi, 2008). It found organisational expression in The Society of the Revival of Kurdistan, or Komlay Jianaway Kurdstan in Kurdish, better known as Komlay J. K., which published the seminal Kurdish nationalist periodical Nishtiman (Homeland).13 Komlay J. K. was founded in 1942 following the 1941 Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran. This removed Reza Shah Pahlavi from power, leading to the collapse of the central government’s authority in Kurdistan. Komlay J. K. set up branches in Hawler (Erbil) and Sulaimaniya in Iraqi Kurdistan (Shahpasandi cited in Saleh, 2007, p. 22) and in several Iranian cities (Hawrami, 2008, p. 120). The radical-modernist orientation of Komlay J. K. was reflected in its domination by intellectuals, merchants, urban petty bourgeoisie and civil servants working in the central government’s bureaucracy in Kurdistan (Mulla Izzat, 2001, pp. 76–80; Gohari, 2004, pp. 30–40). Indeed, initially, Komlay J. K. had an explicit policy of denying membership to tribal chiefs, feudal landlords and religious figures. This membership policy was, however, relaxed once Komlay J. K. stopped being a clandestine organisation and began operating publicly in 1945.
Komalay J. K.'s change of tack resulted from a fundamental dilemma that Kurdistan's uneven and combined development had posed to the emerging Kurdish nationalism, that is, how to carry out national mobilisation in a pre-national social context. This dilemma was bequeathed to Komalay J. K.'s successor party, that is, The Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP), which was founded in Mahabad on 24 October 1945. The KDP's political programme attempted a conservative solution. Rather than seeking direct peasant mobilisation through a policy of land redistribution as a surrogate for 'primitive accumulation', the KDP allied with feudal and tribal landlords as the political and military bedrock of the Kurdish nationalist project embodied in the republic of Kurdistan. In so doing, it avoided, or at least deferred, the sociological consummation of the republic as a specifically modern form of sovereignty. In other words, in the absence of the abstract individuals of capitalist relations—the modern subjects of nationhood—the republic came to rely on the concrete persons of precapitalist social relations whose political loyalty and collective identity were by definition sub-national and impervious to any direct appeal by Kurdish nationalist discourse. The ideological expression of this circumstance was a class-blind and explicitly primordialist conception of the Kurdish nation that rested on ancient, if not timeless, cultural and linguistic traits of the Kurds. Thus, the KDP's and the republic's main organ, the newspaper *Kurdistan* stated that 'since time immemorial, the Kurdish nation has participated in the waves of human developmental stages and has evolved accordingly' (reproduced in Saleh & Saleh, 2007, p. 255).

This self-subordination of the nationalist elite to pre-nationalist power and interest was reflected in the fact that of 73 signatories of the KDP's founding declaration, 44 were either large landlords or tribal leaders, and three were religious figures. The majority of the remaining 26 signatories came from a (petty-)bourgeois background. The leader of the party however was an urbanite lawyer, Qazi Muhammad (cf. Bazyar, 2020, pp. 420–421). Tribal and feudal landlords had joined the cause of the republic for two basic reasons: recovering their political power, which Reza Shah's autocratic modernisation had undermined, and avoiding the Soviet-desired administrative subsumption of Mukriyan under the Tabriz-centred and communist-led Azerbaijan National Government whose radical socio-economic policies were anathema to the Kurdish privileged classes. Thus, Article 1 of the KDP's founding declaration demands that 'The Kurdish nation in Iran should be free in administrating its own affairs and enjoy autonomy within the borders of Iran' (Bazyar, 2020, p. 88).

The political dominance of feudal-tribal landed classes within the KDP and the republic was signified in the vague and conservative nature of the KDP's agrarian policy. Article 5 of the KDP's founding declaration stipulated that 'a compromise between landlords and subjects should be reached such that it secures the future of both' (Bazyar, 2020, p. 88).

The class affiliation of the republic's leading personnel and its socio-economically conservative orientation reflected the strategic contradiction of early Kurdish nationalism. This consisted in the fact that it had emerged in a precapitalist sociological context inhospitable to 'the nation' as an abstract community of juridically equal individuals, the hallmark of capitalist sociality. In this, Kurdish nationalism was similar to its enemies, that is, Iranian and Turkish (and later Arab) nationalisms. However, Kurdish nationalism lacked the crucial political, economic, military and diplomatic resources that a pre-existing state had offered Iranian and Turkish nationalists in their nation-state building projects. Thus, the combined development of the Republic of Kurdistan had a structural constraint built into it that was insurmountable within Mukriyan's developmental resources. The very circumstances that had enabled the rise of the republic pre-empted its longevity.

### 3.3 Development: Victory in defeat

This final section is a brief account of the political results of the parallelogram of non-synchronous historical forces that Mukriyan's developmental liminality had welded together. Despite its inner contradiction, the Republic of Kurdistan exercised formal Kurdish self-rule for almost a year thanks to the Soviet military presence in northern Iran, a presence that provided the republic with de facto protection against the superior army of the
central government in Tehran. But the premodern resources on which the republic rested structurally arrested the
development of the modern nationalist agenda beyond cultural and educational reforms. Militarily, the republic
rested on tribal armies, including that of Mulla Mostafa Barzani who had taken refuge in Mukriyan following a
military offensive by the Iraqi army in the summer of 1945 (Eagleton, 1963, pp. 91–92). In fact, the republic relied
on loyal tribal military forces not only in resisting the central government but also in dealing with hostile tribes
and landlords who were angry at their loss of revenue from selling tobacco to the central government in Tehran
following the formation of the republic. They were also loth to accept the political leadership of Qazi Muhammad,
an intellectual, ‘by the rather unusual means of party machinery and the support of the urban population’

Under these circumstances, the republic’s nationalist project of military, cultural and administrative modernisation
and centralisation came to rely on taxation. Indeed, Kurdistan, the republic’s main newspaper, described taxation as
the ‘spirit of the nation’ (reproduced in Saleh & Saleh, 2007, p. 25). But taxes were directly collected by the republic’s
tribal backers who had no appetite for sharing them with the republic. They also found the administrative and political
secularisation and rationalisation that centralised taxation was intended to finance a threat to their traditional author-
ity. This underlay the hostility of Mangoor, Mamash and Debokri tribal leaders towards the republic, which the central

Another strategy that the republic pursued in its attempt to economically bypass feudal and tribal landlords was the
promotion of trade and agriculture. A key step in this direction was the formation of ‘The Kurdistan Progress Company’
with the help of several Mahabadi merchants. It was intended to facilitate export of tobacco, cotton and tragacanth
to, and the import of manufactured goods from, the Soviet Union (Sardashti, 2011, p. 149). However, Mukriyan lacked
its own logistical infrastructure to directly trade with the Soviet Union. And to make matters more difficult, the Soviet
Union insisted on conducting its dealings with the Republic of Kurdistan via the Azerbaijan National Government.
Thus, in the short run, the republic remained deeply dependent on The Azerbaijan National Government based in
Tabriz (Mulla Izzat, 2001, p. 350). Moreover, the Kurdistan and Azerbaijan governments had a territorial dispute over
the towns of Maku, Salmas, Urmia and Miyandoab. The republic’s economic dependency on Tabriz blunted its political
dge in countering Azerbaijan’s territorial claims, which were tacitly supported by the Soviet Union.

The Republic of Kurdistan therefore remained an essentially elite nationalist project. It had emerged in the
absence of Kurdish abstract individuals as the social basis of its modern sovereignty. This process was a direct result
of Kurdistan’s uneven and combined development that had bestowed on it a politically potent form of the privilege
of historical backwardness. This contradictory circumstance was, however, also the republic’s political Achilles’ heel.
For it forced it to rely on precapitalist forces of tribal and feudal landlords who depended for their social reproduction
on formally hierarchical social relations incompatible with the formally horizontal relations of solidarity central to
the modern phenomenon of the nation. The republic was therefore fundamentally vulnerable to external shocks.

This vulnerability was on fatal display when, under American diplomatic pressure in the United Nations, and
enticed by Iran’s (never implemented) offer of the establishment of a joint Soviet-Iranian oil enterprise, the Soviet
Union evacuated its troops from northern Iran in April–May 1946. In December 1946, the Iranian army overran Azer-
baijani forces and destroyed the Azerbaijan National Government in Tabriz. Qazi Mohammad negotiated a peaceful
surrender of himself and Mahabad to the Iranian army in return for Iranian forces’ respect for the life and property
of the Kurdish people. An informal agreement was made. Iranian troops entered Mahabad in mid-December 1946.
Shortly afterwards, Qazi Mohammad, his brother Sadr-i Qazi and his cousin Sayf-i Qazi were arrested. Following trial
in a secret military court, they were hanged in Mahabad’s central Chuwar-Chra (Four Lights) square on 31 March 1947.
The Republic of Kurdistan thus ended. It became one of the first casualties of the emerging bipolar order and the Cold
War. But this was a victory in defeat, for the collective memory of the republic’s rise and fall very quickly became,
and remains, a politically and symbolically potent driver of Kurdish nationalism, which has gained in momentum and
influence in tandem with the growth of capitalist social relations in Kurdistan (Matin, 2020). The rise and fall of the
Republic of Kurdistan therefore ought to be seen as a strategic nodal point in the history of Kurdish nationalism, one
that furnishes it with an ideological genealogy and a discursive coherence in shaping the Kurdish political imaginary.
How could the Republic of Kurdistan as a modern form of national statehood emerge in a socio-economically premodern context? We have argued that addressing this question requires a solution to the basic problem of ‘internalism’ in the main theories of nationalism that inform existing accounts of Kurdish nationalism. Internalism obscures the interactive dimension of social development, including the formation of nations and nationalisms, and therefore fails to explain the Janus-like character of the nation, its combination of modern and premodern features. We have shown that thanks to its plural social ontology, the theory of uneven and combined development overcomes internalism and enables a retheorisation of the nation as an abstract community whose modernity lies in its political form of capitalist sovereignty embodied in an abstract, impersonal form of state. This modern form of sovereignty was based on the abstract individual generated by capitalist development whose first systematic form occurred in England.

However, geopolitical and geo-economic pressures generated by the rise of English capitalism precluded a linear repetition of England’s historical experience of capitalist development and modern sovereignty. Under English capitalism’s whip of external necessity, non-capitalist countries launched top-down projects of defensive self-modernisation that involved selective importation and the ‘substitution’ of capitalist forms and products by native, non-capitalist material. This process created hybrid socio-political forms irresolvable to either capitalism or pre-existing pre-capitalist contexts. The most consequential instance of this dialectical process was French ‘Jacobinism’ (Duzgun, 2017; cf. Shilliam, 2009). Jacobinism politically codified the formal equality of the citizens who collectively formed the subject of modern sovereignty as the exclusive property of ‘the nation’. Unlike the British imperial nation that rested on the abstract individual born out of a prior process of primitive accumulation, the French form of the nation was formed as an ‘impersonal collective’ politically constructed in law and defined in terms of a singular culture. This geopolitically driven redefinition of capitalist sovereignty around a singular culture obviated the need for the prior production of the abstract individual through a radical transformation of non-capitalist property relations, which would fatally undermine the dominant power of precapitalist ruling elites. It therefore created a national form that unlike British imperial nation was ‘modular’, that is, ‘capable of being transplanted ... to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations’ (Anderson, 2006, p. 4).

Crucially, the construction of the nation(-state) from above based on a single culture and language in multi-cultural contexts entailed the formation of subalternised ‘minorities’ (Mamdani, 2020) who launched their own nationalist projects. The Kurdish case is one of the historically and internationally significant instances of this wider process of uneven and combined development.

More specifically, we have argued that the development of Kurdish nationalist politics in the Mukriyan region of Rojhelat and the foundation of the Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad were the result of Mukriyan’s intense geopolitical and developmental liminality. Lying at the intersection of the interactive transformation of Russian, Ottoman and Qajar empires into modern states, Mukriyan was particularly hospitable to the combinatory dynamics of uneven and combined development. This condition underpinned the confluence in Mukriyan of three main political and ideological currents: Kurdish independence politics in the Ottoman empire (Iraq and Turkey post-WWI) developed in interaction with Turkish Jacobinism, Russian communism and the Persian-centred Iranian volkisch nationalism. The resistance against the latter politically propelled Kurdish nationalism in Iran. Thus, like the French case, and Turkish, Iranian and Arab nationalist projects that more immediately animated it, Kurdish nationalism was also a modern Janus. It emerged within and through a wider process of uneven and combined development central to which is the production of contradictory hybrid phenomena combining modern and premodern forms. The Republic of Kurdistan of 1946 was the first institutional expression of this process.

Our argument has also wider implications. It extends the explanatory reach of uneven and combined development to nationalism studies and demonstrates the way in which IR’s basic premise of ‘societal multiplicity’ (Rosenberg, 2006, 2016) can shed a new light on the analytical limits of canonical theories of nationalism. In so doing, it also contributes to reviving theoretical debates on nationalism studies’ foundational topic of nations’ genesis, which...
has been overshadowed by the recent focus on the discursive construction (e.g., Wodak, 2009), performative reproduction (e.g., Billig, 1995) and ‘gender’ and ‘racial’ dimensions (e.g., Mulholland et al., 2018; Nagel, 2003) of nationalism. Moreover, our argument’s deployment of the historical experience of a non-Western people to retheorise the nation also contributes to decolonising Area Studies as an academic field that has traditionally been a consumer of Eurocentric theories based on the false universalisation of European experiences. And finally, our argument also contributes to a better understanding of the historical interlocking of Capital-State-Nation into a ‘Borromean knot’ (Karatani, 2014, p. 27) and therefore advances the international historical sociology of capitalist modernity and the challenges faced by counter-hegemonic projects seeking a post-capitalist and post-nationalist world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
We are grateful to two anonymous reviewers of this paper for their constructive comments.

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ENDNOTES
1 Also known as ‘The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad’ and ‘The Mahabad Republic’.
2 Our main consideration with regard to the transliteration has been to convey the phonetic structure of Arabic, Kurdish, Persian and Turkish words according to their current usage in Rojhelat. We have omitted all diacritical remarks. All English translations from non-English sources are ours. Non-English sources are furnished in the bibliography with an English title only and are marked by [Persian] or [Kurdish].
3 We use the terms ‘tribe’ or ‘tribal’ in a purely sociological sense of kinship-based communal association devoid of any normative connotation (cf. Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2019).
4 For an extensive bibliography on uneven and combined development visit www.unevenandcombined.com
5 The distinction between ‘global’ (or ‘transnational’) and ‘intersocietal’ (or ‘international’) phenomena is important here. The former arise and operate despite ‘societal multiplicity’ and the latter because of societal multiplicity (we owe this formulation to Justin Rosenberg).
6 Here, ‘societies’ are broadly understood as ‘all historical forms of social coherence in mutually recognized integrities’ (Matin, 2013, p. 3). The ‘societal’ emerges when these ‘integrities’ acquire political definition through their interactive development (Rosenberg, 2010).
7 Our use of the term ‘backwardness’ involves no moral judgement whatsoever (cf. Knei-Paz, 1978, p. 63). Like Trotsky, we use it to demarcate a highly dynamic and generative condition of socio-historical uniqueness unconveyable through terms such as ‘less developed’ or ‘under-developed’. For an analysis of European modernisation in terms of the concept of ‘backwardness’, see Shilliam, 2009.
8 Our argument critically draws on Nairn’s incisive work. However, our framework differs from his, for Nairn never fully explored the wider theoretical implications of his observation that political multiplicity (existence of many states) ‘calls the very essence of the Marxist world-view into play’ (Nairn, 1977, p. 88). We argue that ‘uneven and combined development’ involves the dialectical incorporation of a third intersocietal dimension to historical materialism’s premise of ‘double relationship’ (Matin, 2013, pp. 153–154).
9 This argument also sheds a new light on the phenomenon of ‘elite nationalism’ (Whitmeyer, 2003). By virtue of occupying liminal political and intellectual spaces, precapitalist elites and literati had direct political-bureaucratic and/or indirect ideological-discursive exposure to, or interaction with, ‘other’ polities and communities. Consequently, they tended to develop a precocious conception of collective identity more expansive and abstract than that held by ordinary members of their communities. Nonetheless, the transformation of elite nationalism into popular nationalism is primarily shaped not by its discursive robustness but by the growth of the sociological conditions subtending modern sovereignty as the historical kernel of nationalism.
10 ‘Semi-feudal’ because unlike European feudalism peasants were not tied to the land (cf. Matin, 2007).
11 As late as 1907, Article 90 of The Supplementary Fundamental Laws drafted following the constitutional revolution of 1906, which is commonly seen as the foundational moment of the Iranian nation-state, contains the phrase ‘protected realms’ [Foundation for Iranian Studies, https://fis-iran.org/en/resources/legaldoc/iranconstitution [accessed 30 July 2021].
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Komalay J. K. is the Kurdish word for ‘society’ or ‘league’.

Komalay J. K’s de facto dissolution and renaming as KDP had reportedly been recommended by its Soviet interlocutors to align it with the post-WWII prominence of the discourse of democracy (Eagleton, 1963, p. 45).

Less than a decade later, Mohammad Mosaddeq’s movement for nationalising oil industry in Iran suffered from the precisely same condition of ‘nationless nationalism’ (Matin, 2013, Chapter 4).

This autonomist articulation of the republic is in tension with independist elements of the KDP’s constitution. Articles 16 and 17 stipulate the right of the Kurdistan Autonomous Government to establish international cultural and economic relations. Article 18 states that the Kurdish government must have the authority to grant licences for mining and extraction of Kurdistan’s natural resources’ (Bazyar, 2020, pp. 422–423).


Yadigiri, V. (2017). *The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey: From the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316848579


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**How to cite this article:** Matin, K., & Mahmoudi, J. (2023). The Kurdish Janus: The intersocietal construction of nations. *Nations and Nationalism*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12932