

**Asking the ‘Kurdish Question’ Today: Institutional  
Paths to Self-Determination for “the Largest Ethnic  
Group without a State”**

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## **Part I: Introduction**

The ‘Kurdish question’ has been one of the most persistent and difficult political problems facing the Middle East for the past century. Most commonly referred to as “the largest ethnic group without a state”<sup>1</sup>, the millions of Kurds<sup>2</sup> who live in the area known as Kurdistan<sup>3</sup> in the Middle East are divided across the borders of four states: Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey (See Fig. 1, p. 121; these four countries will be referred to collectively as “the regional states”). Within each of these states, the Kurds have faced economic discrimination, cultural persecution, and, at times, forced relocation or murder at the hands of government institutions. This experience of repression strengthened Kurdish nationalist sentiment, which has found expression through various political parties, armed groups and other organizations. The discrepancy between the idea of the Kurds as a people and their division and persecution, which seems to run contrary to the norm of self-determination and the right of peoples to decide how they are governed, constitutes the ‘Kurdish question’. For this ‘question’ to be resolved, one of two things must happen. Either change must occur within the regional states to the extent that their Kurdish populations feel enfranchised and identify with the states as their own, or the Kurds must create their own institutions to enable self-rule. The history of the last century and current events demonstrate that the first scenario is not very likely in the near future, as the regional states have almost always reacted negatively to expressions of Kurdish identity or autonomy, in some cases

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<sup>1</sup> Stansfield xi, Filkins, 42, Ghassemlou, 3 and many, many more.

<sup>2</sup> Estimates range widely, from 25-40 million, from sources that tend to have a political agenda interested in over- or under-stating the actual figure.

<sup>3</sup> The word Kurdistan is most commonly used to refer to a region similar to the one shown in Fig. 1 (p. 121), but has also been used as a local name within the states. For many state-seeking Kurdish nationalists, Kurdistan refers to the non-existent Kurdish state, while the whole region is Greater Kurdistan. In this paper, the term is used to refer to the entire territory, or specific regions, i.e. Iraqi Kurdistan.

denying the existence of Kurdish culture. As far as institutional forms are concerned, the ubiquity of the description of the Kurds as “the largest ethnic group without a state” reflects the fact that the discussion of Kurdish self-determination has long been oriented around the nation-state, as if it poses the natural solution. However, despite the central role played by the state in this discussion and other matters of political theory, there are many reasons to doubt it as a practical or desirable solution in the Kurdish case, and alternatives created by the Kurds themselves are worth considering.

Today, this question is more important than ever. The Middle East is in a period of upheaval, with an ongoing civil war in Syria, the rise of the Islamic State group, and the aftershocks of the Arab Spring uprisings all presenting challenges to the pre-existing balance of power in the region. In moments of instability, the potential for radical change is the highest. The periods following both World Wars, both of which were times of upheaval for regional regimes, saw the two moments in history when a Kurdish state seemed closest. This volatility has led observers to muse on whether the current moment could be seized by the Kurds to create a state, with headlines like “Kurds get closer to a state of their own”<sup>4</sup> or “Could a state for Greater Kurdistan be on the horizon?”<sup>5</sup> appearing on major news outlets. However, recent history has also seen the Kurds implement non-state institutions, such as the federal territory of Iraqi Kurdistan or the autonomous cantons established in Northern Syria. In any event, the attention of the world has been drawn to the Kurds to a level unprecedented in history. Where before they were best-known for being gassed by Saddam Hussein, today they are known for the defense of the city of Kobane or the ability of the peshmerga fighters of Iraqi Kurdistan to beat back ISIS where the Iraqi military failed. There is a widespread sense within both the international

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<sup>4</sup> Lake

<sup>5</sup> Escobar

community and Kurdish society that the current moment represents an important one for the ‘Kurdish question’.

If the Kurds must create new political forms to achieve self-determination, and the current moment represents the potential for the reformation of regional politics, the real issue at stake is what type of institutions should be sought in this opportune time. Much of the contemporary writing on the subject tends to be state-oriented, and tends to fall into one of two camps. The first is a rational or realist one, arguing that an independent Kurdistan would advance a certain country’s strategic interests. These tend to be Americans or Israelis who see a Kurdish state as a potential strategic ally in the region which would be more accommodating to Western values and interests than its neighbors. An editorial from the Wall Street Journal states this position plainly: “The time has come for America and the West to support Kurdish independence and, simultaneously, to set up U.S. bases in Iraqi Kurdistan that would make it America's military hub in the region”.<sup>6</sup> The other is a normative one, arguing that as “the largest ethnic group without a state”, the Kurds ‘deserve’ a state after all that they have been through. While arguments can made from either perspective, both tend to assume that an independent state would be the optimal outcome for the Kurds without considering other political solutions. This paper will take a slightly different approach, evaluating institutional options in terms of the grievances of the Kurdish nationalist movement rather than strategic interest or strictly normative concerns.

With the goal of providing a comprehensive consideration of the case of the Kurds and the most reasonable options present today, this paper is divided into two primary sections. The first frames the issue of Kurdish nationalism within the literature, examines the particular,

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<sup>6</sup> Foreman

multifaceted nature of Kurdish identity and society, and explains what issues are at stake in the ‘Kurdish question’. The second section considers the three political forms with regards to the concerns of the Kurds: the state, federalism, and democratic confederalism. These three forms were chosen due to their direct relevance to this case. As mentioned previously, the Kurds are most commonly described in terms of their statelessness, and historically many Kurds have sought an independent state. The other two forms have been implemented by Kurds in the regional states today, with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) acting as a federal state of Iraq, and the Rojava region in Syria practicing an early form of democratic confederalism. For each form, a brief history of the idea with relevance to the Kurdish case is given, as well as the relative advantages and disadvantages of each arrangement in addressing Kurdish concerns. Through this analysis, I conclude that despite the ubiquity of the idea a Kurdish nation-state would not advance Kurdish interests, and that democratic confederalism is better suited to the circumstances of the regional situation today.

## **Part II: The Kurdish Nation and its Grievances**

The ‘Kurdish question’ would not exist as such without the history of activism and mobilization of the Kurdish people. If the Kurds had been fully assimilated into the cultures of the regional states, and if they had not formed nationalistic political parties and rebel against state governments, no one would be asking what should be done with the Kurds. However, this is not what happened; instead, they are known as “the largest ethnic group without a state”. With such a perspective, it’s understandable why a state seems like the obvious solution. This description assumes that the Kurds are an ethnic group, that ethnic groups are the possessors of states or can belong to certain states but not others, and that the Kurds do not have a state. Combine these assumptions with a normative priority for the self-rule of peoples, and it merely follows that a state is what the Kurds need. However, these assumptions are not necessarily in accordance with the reality of Kurdish identity and the reasons that have motivated Kurdish mobilization. This section seeks to provide these pieces of the puzzle in two parts. The first considers the nature of Kurdish identity and how scholars have categorized the Kurds, and concludes that it may be more productive to think of the Kurds as a nation which conceives of itself in ethnic terms, but that the categorization is not terribly important as Kurds and non-Kurds alike seem to conceive of and act upon a difference between groups. The second section turns to the history and composition of Kurdish society to locate the sources of Kurdish discontent with the regional states and the issues that a new Kurdish polity would ideally address. Put together, this background will provide the general framework for evaluating the institutional solutions covered in Part III.

- ***Kurdish Identity***

The Kurds are widely recognized internationally as a distinct people, but it is not immediately obvious what form this identity takes. Generally speaking, a people described by a proper noun in academic circles tends to be described as belonging to at least one of several categories. They can be citizens of a certain state (Americans), share a common ethnicity (Tamils) or religious affiliation (Muslims), possess a common interest or ideology (Marxists), or be members of a nation (the Cherokee Nation). These categories are not always well-defined, and one word can be used in several of these contexts. In the case of the Kurds, some of these categories obviously do not apply- the Kurds do not belong to any one religion or inhabit any one state. Most commonly, they are known as an ethnic group - a group of people shares a particular form of a quality known as ethnicity.

A definitive, widely-accepted definition of ethnicity has proved elusive. The word gained popularity in academic circles during the second half of the twentieth century as a substitute for the word 'race', which fell out of favor due to its heavy use in Nazi ideology. In political science, definitions tend to draw attention to the connection between ethnicity and the past. Max Weber described ethnic groups as "human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both"<sup>7</sup>; another influential definition was put forward by Donald L. Horowitz in 1985, who wrote that ethnicity "is based on a myth of collective ancestry, which usually carries with it traits believed to be innate...[this definition of] ethnicity easily embraces groups differentiated by color, language, and religion; it covers "tribes," "races," "nationalities," and castes"<sup>8</sup>. In these and other definitions, the two predominant features of ethnicity is that it is a category of identities linked to

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<sup>7</sup> Chandra, 402

<sup>8</sup> Horowitz, 54

descent, and that this linkage is subjective to members of the group.<sup>9</sup> Ethnicity is consistently portrayed as an identity that one inherits from their parents and ancestors in a very biological sense- thus we speak of someone being “half French, half Italian” because one of their parents was French while the other was Italian.<sup>10</sup> It is not something one can choose- you might be able to assimilate to French society such that you consider yourself culturally French, but it is not usually understood to be possible to acquire French ethnicity if you were not born with it. Thus, “ethnicity manifests membership in a set, as opposed to the more demanding forms of membership associated with communities and organizations”.<sup>11</sup> Membership in an ethnic group is commonly associated with shared culture experiences, such as a particular territory, common language, or religious practices, as well as a certain profile of physical traits such as skin color associated with the group. When the Kurds are described as an ethnic group, it is implied that this type of categorization applies to the group as a whole.

Yet in the case of the Kurds, it is difficult to make the case of ethnicity rooted in common ancestry. Modern origin myths of the Kurds often refer to the descendants of an Indo-European tribe known as the Medes that migrated from central Asia to the Middle East around 600 B.C., but their military encounters with other tribes, both in victory and defeat, led to high levels of intermixture. This is supported by the fact that early uses of the term “Kurd” usually did not refer to a specific people, but rather one of many nomadic tribes that dwelled in the region.<sup>12</sup> The Kurds were usually defined in their relationship of other-ness to established and geographically settled populations. One of the earliest and most commonly-cited expressions of Kurdish identity comes from a piece by the seventeenth-century poet Ahmed-i Khani which described the Kurds

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<sup>9</sup> Chandra, 398

<sup>10</sup> Yack, 93-4

<sup>11</sup> Yack, 94

<sup>12</sup> Entessar, 3

as being caught between Turks, Arabs and Persians.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps most tellingly, investigations into the physical characteristics of the Kurds “have concluded that the most significant feature is their similarity with neighboring non-Kurdish communities”.<sup>14</sup> While it is possible that all Kurds share a common ancestry, what seems more likely is that the term and who it encompassed has evolved over time as the boundaries of regional communities shifted.

Older conceptions of ethnicity, before the term came to replace ‘race’ in academic discourse, held that “race was about biology, but ethnicity was about culture and consent” and could therefore be located in cultural institutions such as language or religion.<sup>15</sup> However, among the Kurds there exists a wide range of cultural features. In the case of language, “Kurdish” can refer to three different lingual groups, each with their own dialects: Kurmanji, Sorani, and Pehlewani, each of which in many cases is not intelligible to speakers of the other two.<sup>16</sup> There are also two other major lingual groups, Zaza and Gorani, which are debated as belonging to the Kurdish language or not, but differ greatly from the three main branches.<sup>17</sup> The story is similar with religion: although the majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, there exist large populations of Shia and Sufi Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and more distinct faith groups such as the Yezidis, who number around 50,000 and practice a particular branch of Shia Islam. These cultural divides tended to run along clans and tribes which formed the primary social units of Kurdish society, and were just as complexly divided (see Fig. 2, p. 122). Historically the majority of Kurds were pastoral nomads, but this is no longer the case as more Kurds became educated, urbanized and otherwise more diverse socio-economically. Broadly speaking, there do seem to exist some differences in culture between the Kurds and other ethnicities in the region,

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<sup>13</sup> Bruinessen, 17, McDowall, 5

<sup>14</sup> McDowall, 8

<sup>15</sup> Spickard

<sup>16</sup> “Kurdish Language”

<sup>17</sup> “Kurdish Language”, McDowall, 10

such as the traditional clothing of the Kurds, their roots in tribal societies and languages which are distinct from Arabic, Turkish and Persian. Within Kurdish society however, there exists great diversity within nearly every category of culture which defy simple unification.

Another feature associated with ethnicity is shared inhabitation of a geographically continuous region. While this does apply to the Kurds, it is imperfect as a sole determinant of ethnicity due to the ethnic heterogeneity of the region. However, it is worth considering the impact that the geography of Kurdistan has had upon the development of Kurdish culture. The heart of Kurdish lands lies in the Zagros mountain range and the plateaus and hills that surround it. Early Kurdish tribes practiced agriculture and stockbreeding in the region, driving large flocks of goats and sheep from pasture to pasture in a climate that a British Foreign Office handbook described as “bracing all the year round”.<sup>18</sup> The terrain played a decisive role in the political history of the Kurds by informing their interactions with institutional authority. Political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott, in describing the non-incorporation into states of hill- and mountain-dwelling peoples in Southeast Asia describes the way that many aspects of these peoples’ livelihoods and social organization, such as “their physical dispersion in rugged terrain, their mobility...their kinship structure, their pliable ethnic identities...serve[d] to avoid incorporation into states and to prevent states from springing up among them”.<sup>19</sup> A form of this dynamic was at play for the Kurds, with similar factors keeping Kurdish-inhabited areas from being incorporated into centralized, territorially-based governments such as the Ottoman and Persian empires, instead existing as a liminal or peripheral region. Kurds fleeing from military forces have often fled to the mountains with the knowledge that the pursuit would prove too much trouble. Although the development of flight and telecommunications technologies have

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<sup>18</sup> McDowall, 6

<sup>19</sup> Scott, x

lessened the inaccessibility of the region, in addition to demographic shifts towards urbanization which have reduced the portion of Kurds that live in the mountains, the geography of Kurdistan played a prominent role in shaping its people.

Part of the reason definitive identification of peoples can prove difficult is due to the fact that identity assertion is a highly subjective and variable process. For instance, at many points throughout Ottoman rule, many Kurds described themselves as Muslim subjects rather than a certain ethnicity. More recently, there have been periods of ethnic repression in the four regional states when Kurds found it safer to identify as the dominant ethnicity in that society. Finally, there are case of willful assimilation and mixed cultural upbringing. For instance, many Iranian Kurds identify more with the Iranian state than Kurdish nationalism, while there exists a large population in Turkey whose parents are Kurdish but speak whose only language is Turkish. This reality is in line with performative theories of identity, which argue that individuals demonstrate their identity to others through their repeated presentation of themselves, both in visible or symbolic moments (such as responding to a census) but also day-to-day interactions with others (like going to the market or place of worship).<sup>20</sup> How you dress, what language you speak, who you are seen with, and other similar choices on the part of the individual determine how one is perceived by others. Because of this, Kurdishness and which people consider themselves “Kurdish” has not remained constant across time and space.

In considering complex cases such as these, some scholars have highlighted the relatively recent nature of ethnic identity, arguing that it may be constructed as groups undergo a process of ethnicization or racialization, where “one set of people writes a story of essential, indelible difference (and frequently inferiority) onto another set of people”, thus grouping and

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<sup>20</sup> Butler, 519-520

categorizing them in new ways.<sup>21</sup> This process can be seen as occurring in Middle East during the late Ottoman period, as European ideas concerning ethnicity and the nation began to spread throughout the region. Arabs, Turks and Kurds began to question what type of ties mattered the most to them, ethnic and kinship bonds or religious ones. This awareness of difference between peoples was heightened by the dissolution of the Empire, which seemed to create states designated for the Turkish, Persian and Arab nations. To a varying extent, each of these states pursued nation-building campaigns which emphasized a certain ethnic identity, which further stimulated sentiments of Kurdish nationalism and difference. However, this process did not occur uniformly across all four regional states, for all Kurds. The separation of the Kurds by state borders, and therefore the varying processes of interacting with the states and their institutions, created different experiences of “formal education, military service, state radio and television and participation in different political systems...[which] have made the Kurds [in the different states] more different from one another than they had been before”.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Kurdish ethnicity seems to have arisen alongside the articulation of other ethnic identities in the region, and informed by Kurds’ interactions with the regional states.

For these reasons, although the Kurds are widely considered as an ethnic group, this identity does not seem reducible to factors usually associated with ethnicity such as shared heritage or common cultural institutions like language and religion. This does not make Kurdish identity ‘false’, as many other peoples labelled ethnic groups, which might appear cohesive at first glance, actually possess similarly complex histories, which policies of nation-building seek to deny or erase. However, it means that when we ask what is best for the Kurds, we cannot ask “What is best for Kurmanjî speakers?” or “What is best for the descendants of this particular

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<sup>21</sup> Spickard

<sup>22</sup> Bruinessen, 23

central Asian tribe?” An alternative is presented by the other term most commonly used to describe the Kurds as a group: a nation.

As with ‘ethnicity’, there is no single, accepted definition of ‘the nation’. Bernard Yack’s defines the term as

“a categorical community in which the sharing of a singular and contingent cultural heritage inspires individuals to imagine themselves connected to each other- and to certain territories- through times by ties of mutual concern and loyalty.”<sup>23</sup>

This definition of nation shares many features with most definitions of ethnicity- singularity, shared cultural heritage, connection between individuals and territories, and an appeal to the past. However, it is significant here that nations are explicitly created. As mentioned earlier, some scholars believe that ethnicities are social constructs as well, but on their face ethnicities are thought to have existed forever. In comparison, nations are explicitly formed, identity groups composed of significant events in the past and a shared destiny moving forward. Members of an ethnicity could spread out around the world and would still share their common ancestry despite having no interaction with one another, whereas a nation is deliberate and continuous- it moves as one, or else ruptures. Yack’s definition follows closely from Benedict Anderson’s description of the nation as “an imagined political community...imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”<sup>24</sup>—imagined as most members of a national group will never meet each other yet feel an intangible connection, limited because each nation has limits beyond which other nations lie, and sovereign because the idea emerged at a point in history when the concept of the divine monarch was being challenged by notions of freedom and man-made legitimacy which were tied to national units (significantly, Anderson writes that “the gage and emblem of

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<sup>23</sup> Yack, 70

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, 6-7

this freedom is the sovereign state”).<sup>25</sup> Anderson’s view has to a large extent replaced theories which, like earlier theories of race and ethnicity, held that nations have existed from ‘time immemorial’ and that nationalist perspectives grew naturally out of these pre-existing units. Thus, nationality shares many features with ethnicity, but is acknowledged as a social construct with legitimating ties to political institutions.

The concept of the nation is rarely discussed without another related idea: nationalism. Nationalism has a variety of meanings within different disciplines<sup>26</sup>, but in political science it most often refers to the attachment of national identity to a political agenda. The most basic form of a nationalist political agenda is the belief that the political authority wielded over members of the nation should be somehow connected to the population of the nation and its composition. Within that framework, scholars have identified several categories of nationalism and how they relate to the state. Two of these bear particular relevance to the Kurdish case: what the relationship of influence between a particular form of nationalism and the state is, and how nationalist ideologies describe their ultimate goal with regards to the state.

Nationalism can align itself with or against the state. On one end of the spectrum, a particular nationalist ideology can be associated with a particular state regime which then pursues a policy of nation-building. In such a case, the state uses its capacity to attempt to create or strengthen national ties within its population, through means ranging from peaceful measures such as the celebration of national artists or achievements or nationalizing educational curriculums to more coercive measures such as forced assimilation or persecution of non-conforming populations. Such campaigns were undertaken in the regional states as they attempted to consolidate their legitimacy along national lines by subsuming regional identities

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<sup>25</sup> Anderson, 6-7

<sup>26</sup> For example, in art history there is a rich body of work on how national identities have been embodied in paintings and sculpture.

under the national one, with Kurdish identity sticking out like a sore thumb. In such cases, Kurdish identity began to take on the form of the other end of the spectrum: sub-state nationalism or minority nationalism. In its general form, sub-state nationalism arises where a certain subgroup of a state's population feel an affinity that does not extend to the entire population of the state, such as Québécois identity in Canada or Basque identity in Spain. Such ideologies often take on an ethnic dimension, uniting population groups based on a perception of shared ethnicity, which scholars label as ethno-nationalism. Kurdish nationalism has always been sub-state<sup>27</sup>, and in many cases, ethno-nationalist, stressing its non-alignment with nation-building programs of the regional states.

The other relevant dichotomy of nationalist ideologies is what their aim is towards the state. John Breuilly divides nationalist groups into three categories of goals: Separation (“to break away from the present state”), reform (“to reform [the state] in a nationalist direction”), and unification (“to unite it with other states”).<sup>28</sup> Kurdish nationalist movements have often had elements of all three groups. In its pan-Kurdish expressions, it has sought to unify territories currently separated by the political boundaries of the regional states. Similarly, Kurdish regions within a particular state have at times sought to separate, as we shall see in the case of the Mahabad Republic in Iran or the early Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey. When they are not advocating for one of these options, many Kurdish political organizations have agitated for legal reform and improved treatment within the confines of the regional states. However, of the three, the most common thread has been separation: as the regional states have consistently been openly hostile to their Kurdish populations, the Kurds do not feel represented by those nation-states and wish to live under a different political authority. This most commonly takes the

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<sup>27</sup> Although Kurds have collaborated across state borders, Kurdish nationalism has never been enacted through a state apparatus.

<sup>28</sup> Breuilly, 9

form of the explicit desire for a nation state, or state-seeking, but more autonomous forms of federalism such as the KRG might fall under this category as well. Overall however, it is important to keep in mind that nationalism can have goals besides separation and does not always equate to state-seeking.

By now it should be clear the level of reduction embedded in the description of the Kurds as “the largest ethnic group without a state”. Depending on one’s definition of ethnicity, the Kurds may constitute an ethnic group, but they do not share any simple marker of ethnic unity such as shared heritage or language. However, they have mobilized along a perception of shared ethnicity and constituted themselves as a nation, arguing that they possess an intrinsic right towards greater self-rule than has been enacted within the regional states. Kurdish nationalism is a sub-state phenomenon that has at times sought to unify Kurds across state borders, establish an independent Kurdish nation-state, or reform the political institutions of the regional states to better address Kurdish concerns. Their ties cannot easily be reduced to purely ethnic ones and their goals cannot be simply reduced to a state of their own. However, when they have sought a state, it is not simply for the sake of it- it is because they believe it will address several specific concerns. The next section will examine these concerns with an eye towards their relationship with potential resolutions to the ‘Kurdish question’.

- ***The Grievances of the Kurdish Nation***

The persistence of the 'Kurdish question' for the past century reflects the fact that Kurds have consistently mobilized politically along nationalist lines. These nationalist organizations draw upon a host of issues which constitute their *raison d'être*, for if these matters were resolved to the satisfaction of the Kurdish people, there would be no need for political agitation to address them. As such, many of them arise from the Kurds' history of oppression within the regional states, which has led them to desire new political institutions. These issues include economic, political and cultural factors, which a state or other type of polity can stand to influence greatly.

It is worth noting that not every movement has raised every single one of these issues, and some of them are more relevant in one region than another.<sup>29</sup> However, taken together, these issues represent the problem to which Kurdish nationalism seeks to offer an answer.

### Basic Security

The Kurdish people have consistently been placed in a position of insecurity in the region. Most commonly, this came in the form of state violence; the most infamous example of this is the Al-Anfal campaign during the Iran-Iraq war, in which the Iraqi military targeted minority communities (Kurdish being the most populous) in Northern Iraq with a range of tactics, including aerial bombardment, forced deportation and chemical weapons. This operation came in response to Kurdish insurgency in the area and resulted in a death toll in the tens of thousands; the scale and targeted nature of the campaign has led many observers to label it as genocide.<sup>30</sup> The period of Ba'athist rule in Iraq was marked by similar state crackdowns in response to Kurdish mobilization, although none of them were as deadly. A similar pattern was displayed in Turkey, most notably in the Dersim area in the late 1930s, and to a lesser extent in Syria and Iran. Whether due to ethno-nationalist policies on the part of the government, desire for resources or capital on Kurdish-inhabited land, or in response to Kurdish mobilization, the regional states have frequently targeted the Kurds with their military and police apparatuses.

However, violence has come from other sources than the states. Most recently, ISIS has posed a direct threat to Kurds in Iraq and Syria, fighting them over territory and employing tactics such as mass murder, forcing captives into slavery, and most recently, allegations of the

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<sup>29</sup> For instance, the Kurdish regions in Iran have little oil to speak of, while Kurdish language rights are fully enjoyed in Iraqi Kurdistan.

<sup>30</sup> "Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds", "Killing of Iraq Kurds 'genocide'"

use of chemical weapons.<sup>31</sup> Reduced state influence in Iraq and Syria has engendered an environment comprised of armed non-state actors, many whom have agendas hostile to the Kurds. It is also worth noting that Kurdish armed organizations have themselves been a source of insecurity. During the PKK's struggle against the Turkish state to separate Kurdish regions from the country, the government often supplied money and weapons to certain leaders or tribes to fight the PKK in the 'village guard' system. In turn, the PKK would target the village guards, which led to large Kurdish casualties on both sides.<sup>32</sup> Another example was the conflict during the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)'s infancy between its two main political parties, each of which had their own militias. Unable to form a coalition government, the two parties fought openly on and off from 1994 to 1998, resulting in the death of thousands of Kurds (at least a thousand peshmerga fighters, and untold more civilians).<sup>33</sup> These current and past threats represent the potential for violence against the Kurds which they naturally seek relief from.

Regardless of the particular history of the region, politics has long been tied to defense. Thomas Hobbes wrote in *Leviathan* that states arise from individuals' desire for mutual security from one another, and that governments lose their legitimacy once they can no longer provide security. Political institutions are almost inevitably linked to coercive apparatuses such as military or police forces, as without such capacities their decisions hold little weight. Through the exercise of these powers, states are seen as responsible for the security of their populations. Those which cannot provide a baseline of daily security from external threats such as other militaries, or internal threats such as guerilla forces or organized crime, are labelled failed states. Those which turn these powers upon populations within their recognized territory are condemned internationally and labelled oppressive or illegitimate. To a large extent, the regional states can

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<sup>31</sup> "Kurds Say ISIS Used Chemical Weapons"

<sup>32</sup> McDowall, 429.

<sup>33</sup> "Patriotic Union of Kurdistan"

be seen as having failed to uphold these principles with regards to their Kurdish populations, driving the Kurds to seek another way. There also exists a growing refugee population in the area, which underlines the importance for security if they are ever to return or resettle; as long as conflict persists, less permanent communities will be able to survive and the more problems associated with dislocation will arise. Any Kurdish polity must be able to provide for the security of its population- a fact that sounds obvious but one that the Kurds have not been able to take for granted.

### *Economic Concerns*

The prosperity of a people is tied to their economic prosperity, and the Kurdish people have lagged behind their neighbors in this regard.<sup>34</sup> This is due to a number of factors, including discrimination by the regional states, the forced resettlement of Kurds from their traditional lands, and structural relationships which permitted high levels of hierarchical corruption. The relative poverty of the Kurds heightened alienation from the regional states and lent support to assertions of sub-state nationalism. Perspectives which emphasize the constructed and functional nature of nationalism argue that material factors such as economic deprivation are in fact the main source of nationalism, rather than cultural or ethnic connections. Whether this is the case or not, Kurds have turned to nationalism and its advocacy for new institutions to improve their economic lot.

To be sure, a pattern of ethnic discrimination by the regional states has played a defining role in the economy of Kurdistan. To some extent, this proceeded naturally from political disenfranchisement. The absence of Kurds in governmental positions in the regional states meant that there was no one advocating in the state for Kurdish interests, resulting in state policies

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<sup>34</sup> Although recently, the KRG has performed favorably in economic metrics than the rest of Iraq, see section III.

ranging from indifferent to hostile. This is most directly reflected in the underdevelopment of Kurdish-inhabited areas in the regional states throughout the twentieth century and a relationship between peripheral areas and state centers that some scholars and nationalists have categorized as “internal colonialism”<sup>35</sup>. In Iran, “Kurdistan was exiled to the edge of economic progress”<sup>36</sup>, and lagged behind the rest of the country as measured by metrics such as the percentage of households with electricity, plumbing or an income above the poverty line.<sup>37</sup> When Iran experienced an economic boom in the 1970s due to increasing oil production and an increase in oil prices, “Iranian Kurdistan’s share of this multi-billion dollar influx of oil revenue was minimal”.<sup>38</sup> When public works were developed in Kurdish regions, it was often in order to consolidate state power. In Iraq, Kurdish areas were similarly underdeveloped, with the main infrastructure developed under Ba’athist rule being roads and compact clusters of houses built in order to make it easier for military forces to move in and prevent contact with peshmergas.<sup>39</sup> In Turkey in the 1970s, the Kurdish-inhabited east became more economically important as Turkey’s sole domestic source of oil; despite massive revenues, “less than 5 percent...were spent for the development of the Kurdish region...[great disparities existed compared to western regions] in living standards, economic development, access to health care facilities, and overall quality of life”.<sup>40</sup> Also practiced was out-and-out legal economic discrimination, such as restriction of employment opportunities in Syria<sup>41</sup>, state-led Arabization of important economic sectors in Iraq, or a policy of “officially sanctioned discrimination and neglect” in Turkey.<sup>42</sup>

These issues are often tied to language rights, for state-sponsored education and economic

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<sup>35</sup> Entessar, 6, “Nationalism”, Historical Dictionary of the Kurds

<sup>36</sup> McDowall, 258

<sup>37</sup> Entessar, 6

<sup>38</sup> Ghassemlou, 101

<sup>39</sup> Entessar, 8

<sup>40</sup> Entessar, 91

<sup>41</sup> McDowall, 477

<sup>42</sup> Entessar, 8-9

opportunities tend to be offered in the official language; if Kurdish is not recognized, Kurdish-speakers are put at a disadvantage. These policies on the part of the regional states have left an impact upon the economic vitality of Kurdish-inhabited regions that remains to this day.

The lack of a secure Kurdish homeland has been made more acute by a pattern of migration under duress. Under Ba'athist rule in Iraq, this took the form of a policy of Arabization in Northern Iraq.<sup>43</sup> Especially prominent in the 1980s, as Iraq began to place a higher importance on its oil, this policy led to the government constructing a series of homes called the Arab Circle around the Kurdish quarters in Kirkuk, deporting Kurds from their homes, granting land deeds only to Arabs, and renaming Kurdish localities in Arabic.<sup>44</sup> In Turkey, there was a particularly large wave of migration in the second half of the twentieth century from villages in Eastern Turkey to Turkish urban centers as a result of being caught between the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, whether as the result of entire villages being forced to evacuate by the military, from PKK intimidation towards those who did not support their cause, or simply the pressures of living in a conflict zone with few economic opportunities.<sup>45</sup> While Syria never embarked on as widespread a campaign as either Turkey or Iraq, it did encourage Arab settlement in traditionally-Kurdish areas and broke up large Kurdish-owned agricultural estates to give to Arabs under the name of land redistribution<sup>46</sup> in the 1970s.<sup>47</sup> These policies had the effect of forcing many Kurds to relocate to urban areas such as Damascus and Aleppo. More recently, the events of the Syrian Civil War and ascent of ISIS have added legions of Kurds to the growing ranks of refugees in the area. Stable settlement, the possession of land and access to

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<sup>43</sup> McDowall, 332

<sup>44</sup> Natali, 58

<sup>45</sup> Celik, 139

<sup>46</sup> Of course, it really was a program of land redistribution, but that name usually connotes a more purely political or economic-minded policy, as opposed to the blatant ethnic motivations here.

<sup>47</sup> McDowall, 475.

opportunity are all essential for economic success on a social level, but have proven elusive for much of the Kurdish population due to hostile state policies and endemic violence in the region.

However, not all economic issues originate from without. The structure of traditional Kurdish society and the relation of Kurdish leaders to economic actors has functioned as a source of economic exploitation of the Kurdish masses and added another layer to other economic problems. Although Kurdish society became less dominated by tribal structures in the twentieth century, historically such units have been integral to the political and economic lives of many Kurds. Kurdish communities were traditionally overseen by leaders known as aghas; the term is flexible, and doesn't "distinguish between leaders of the tribe, clan or lineage...[but] an agha is apparently a leader who *rules*".<sup>48</sup> Aghas tended to rule in a feudal manner, such that they possessed a claim over the land under the rule and demanded a share of any agricultural yields. The majority of tribal Kurds produced food at sustenance levels, not to sale for market, and accumulated surplus was often rendered to the aghas, which made upward economic mobility unachievable for most.<sup>49</sup> This hierarchical system was recognized by governments in the region, who would play leaders against one another and grant economic boons which conferred directly to the aghas in return for political or military support. While the agha system has receded in recent years as the demographics of Kurdistan have shifted, the legacy remains: for instance, the two major parties in the KRG, which are hierarchical and clan-based, face charges of corruption and using their position to enrich themselves. These top-down economic relationships have had a precarious history with regards to the advancement of the Kurdish people, and must be considered when proposing new institutions.

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<sup>48</sup> Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 80, emphasis original

<sup>49</sup> Tahiri, 23-5

Finally, the region's natural resources pose important questions, especially its oil. The areas of Rumaylan in Syria, Batman and Silvan in Turkey, and Kirkuk and Khaniqin in Iraq all possess oil fields and have significant Kurdish populations.<sup>50</sup> Those three states are all dependent upon oil as a major source of income, and while they have reserves in other parts of their countries, they are still highly interested in these regions. Historically, the distribution of oil revenues within oil-producing states has always been a sticky subject, in many cases leading to rent-seeking behavior on the part of domestic actors who argue they deserve a piece of the action. However, in most cases the disenfranchised Kurds were entirely cut out of the dividends of oil extraction. The regional states sought to change the demographics of Kurdish-inhabited areas with oil by settling non-Kurds and appointing non-Kurds to local positions in government and the oil industry. One of the most prominent examples of this is the oil-rich Kirkuk region in Iraq. At the time of the creation of the Iraqi state, Kirkuk had a majority-Kurdish population, but "had been subjected to campaigns of ethnic cleansing, its Kurdish majority reduced by waves of expulsions and Arab migration from the south" as part of Baghdad's Arabization policies.<sup>51</sup> The oil in the rest of Iraqi Kurdistan was left undeveloped by the central government, and has only begun to be tapped under the KRG. Once the oil was out of the ground, the money was shifted out of the region: as already noted, the eastern Kurdish-inhabited regions of Turkey received very little in the way of oil revenues despite being the sole producing region.<sup>52</sup> It is also worth noting that the greater Kurdistan area has large amounts of water; while no major conflicts have yet arisen over it, many regional observers predict this to be a prominent issue in the future.<sup>53</sup> How to respond to the legacy of the region's history and provide an economic future for the

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<sup>50</sup> McDowall, 7. See Figs. 4 & 6 (pps. 124, 126)

<sup>51</sup> Filkins, 49

<sup>52</sup> Entessar, 91

<sup>53</sup> McDowall, 6, Gunter

Kurds, as well as best utilize the region's natural resources, constitutes a significant portion of the 'Kurdish question' and the challenge faced by any new Kurdish polity.

### Cultural Concerns

The core principle of nationalism is that the way a nation is ruled should be in accordance with the people and culture of that nation. Governments play a tremendous role in the culture of the populations they rule, with the power to promote or suppress certain ideas and identities in the public realm. One major factor that has stopped further Kurdish assimilation within the regional states is their exclusion from the national identities constructed by the states. Instead, Kurdish identity and expressions of it have repeatedly come under fire. On the face of it, this might not always be a cause for mobilization; as discussed above, Kurdishness is not necessarily an identity that individuals feel they identify strongest with, and in many cases might feel tribal, religious, state-based, or other ethnic affiliations are more important. However, all four regional states have embarked on nation-building through the state in such a way that emphasizes one identity (Arab, Persian, and Turkish) at the expense of all others; in such a scenario, to not be the supported ethnicity was dangerous.<sup>54</sup> This was taken to its furthest extent in Turkey. During the Turkish War of Independence, it seemed as though the revolutionary government was attempting to construct a Turkey based on Islam. In a 1920 speech, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the leader of the newly formed Grand National Assembly, declared "the people whom this assembly represents, are not only Turks, are not only Çerkes, are not only Kurds, are not only Laz. But it is an intimate collective of all these Muslim elements".<sup>55</sup> However, this discourse soon shifted. Instead of one of several "sibling nations" which would make up the state of Turkey, the Kurds were

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<sup>54</sup> Notice again how the distinction of whether the Kurds are "really" an ethnicity or not is moot, because they were targeted as such.

<sup>55</sup> Altinay, 19

dismissed as “mountain Turks”- Turks who had wandered into the mountains and forgotten their Turkish heritage, which the government began to exalt above all else. Iraq, while having been acknowledged as multicultural from its inception, was always dominated by Arabs in governance, leading many Kurds to not identify with the state. In Iran, various shahs over the twentieth century embarked on programs of “Persianization”, which emphasized Iran as the inheritor of Persian heritage, and “heightened ethnic distinctions and reinforced the Kurd’s sense of Otherness”.<sup>56</sup> This cultural exclusion has historically been combined with political exclusion, through the gerrymandering of districts so as not to have a Kurdish majority, or in flat-out refusal to seat Kurdish political parties in government or outlawing them. In the light of such exclusion, it should hardly be surprising that the Kurds desire a polity that fully acknowledges and enfranchises them.

By far one of the most important aspects of cultural recognition in this case has been the use of the Kurdish language. With their coercive strength and interest in monitoring and controlling communication, states have had a unique capacity to privilege or suppress various languages. Moreover, the status of an ‘official language’ creates cultural hierarchies by tying access to government services to a certain lingual community and branding other languages as illegitimate and not associated with the identity of the state. States have long recognized this fact in their attempts to assimilate minority populations in cases such as the United States government forcing Native American youth to attend English-language schools. Recently, the connection between the identity of a people and their language has become more widely recognized. In 2013, the United Nations Independent Expert on Minority Issues stated that “language is particularly important to linguistic minority communities seeking to maintain their distinct group and cultural identity, sometimes under conditions of marginalization, exclusion

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<sup>56</sup> Natali, 134

and discrimination”, and urged that the UN treat the issue of language protection as a priority.<sup>57</sup> State repression of language rights is a common grievance of nationalist movements, and Kurdish ones are no exception.

Kurdish has historically been repressed by the four states in the region. This has served to widen the gap between these states and their Kurdish populations, as well as stunted the growth of a Kurdish literary culture by ensuring that many Kurds cannot speak, read or write in the language. The issue of language rights tends to crop up in several arenas: the language of state government, the language of education, the language of public discourse, and in the recognition of names of places and people. These states have also cast doubts upon whether Kurdish can be considered a ‘real’ language or as merely a dialect of other languages such as Arabic and Turkish, thereby attempting to delegitimize Kurdish claims of unique ethnicity. Each regional state has targeted the Kurdish language to attack Kurdish identity and nationalism.

In Turkey, repression of the Kurdish language dates back to the foundation of the modern state in the 1920s following the Turkish War of Independence. The Kemalist government, in seeking to cement the purely Turkish identity of the new state, passed a decree in 1924 that outlawed the use of the words “Kurd” and “Kurdistan”, as well as the use of the Kurdish language in both public and private; later laws would require Turkish surnames for citizens and enact internal relocation policies based upon lingual culture.<sup>58</sup> In 1980, the most recent of a series of coups established Turkey’s current constitution, which defines Turkish as the “mother tongue” of the country and declares that “aside from Turkish, no other language shall be studied by or taught to Turkish citizens as a mother tongue in any language, teaching, or learning

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<sup>57</sup> "Thousands of Minority Languages Threatened by Assimilation, Conflict and Forced Displacement – UN Expert"

<sup>58</sup> Cemiloglu, 29-31

institution”.<sup>59</sup> This was followed by a 1983 law that placed further restrictions upon the use of the Kurdish language, banning it in public and for use in publication or broadcast.<sup>60</sup> This ban was formally lifted in 1991, and Kurdish-language media has begun to flourish in the country; however, fights with the state over wider use and names of localities continue to this day.

Similar histories exist in the other three states. Immediately after World War I, Persian was the sole language recognized by the Iranian state, and expression in Kurdish was repressed. Following the Iranian Revolution, Kurdish-language publications were banned until 1989, and education in Kurdish continues to be a thorny issue.<sup>61</sup> The Syrian state in many cases denied Kurdish residents formal citizenship, and has passed a variety of restrictions upon the use of the language, including “replacement of Kurdish place names with new names in Arabic; prohibition of businesses that do not have Arabic names; not permitting Kurdish private schools; and the prohibition of books and other materials written in Kurdish”.<sup>62</sup> In Iraq, the Kurdish language was illegal until a 1970 law granted limited autonomy to Northern Iraq; this remained in effect until the new constitution was signed in 2005, which recognized Kurdish as an official language. All four of the regional states have perceived use of the Kurdish language as hostile to their projects of nation-building and attempted to destroy it within their borders.

International recognition of the importance of language to cultural identity, combined with the expansion and increased accessibility of telecommunication technologies, have drastically improved the outlook for the Kurdish language in the last several decades. There now exists a growing number of broadcast networks, publishers and periodicals in Kurdish, accessible both within the region, as well as the global Kurdish diaspora. However, the history of the

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<sup>59</sup> "Restrictions on the Use of the Kurdish Language"

<sup>60</sup> "Restrictions on the Use of the Kurdish Language"

<sup>61</sup> Natali, 153

<sup>62</sup> "Syria: The Silenced Kurds". These restrictions have not been enforced during the ongoing civil war.

official status of the Kurdish language, as well as unresolved legal issues in several states, mean that language rights are still an important issue. This and other matters of cultural expression have caused friction with the regional states and compelled the Kurds to seek new political institutions.

*Political Concerns and Self-Determination*

At the heart of all of these issues is the principle of self-determination. This principle was famously interests invoked in Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, which stated that in "questions of sovereignty the of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined... other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development".<sup>63</sup> This came at a time in history where old standards of authority, in particular the monarchies and empires that dominated for much of history, were being subverted by new ideas of popular sovereignty. Most scholars attribute the awakening of a Kurdish national consciousness at around this era as one of several modern nationalisms to emerge in the region, alongside Turkish, Arab and Persian.<sup>64</sup> Nationalists are people "who seek sovereignty- or cultural preservation of some other good- for the members of their own community".<sup>65</sup> The Kurds have been constituted as a community, both by their own subjective but shared sense of unity, as well as by the pattern of suppression by the regional states which cast them as 'other'. If the governments of the regional states were more representative of their Kurdish populations, the Kurds might be said to have self-determination on the basis of their citizenship rather than ethnic or national identities. Indeed, it is worth noting that many of these concerns date back through the last century, and in many respects the regional

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<sup>63</sup> Wilson

<sup>64</sup> McDowall, 4

<sup>65</sup> Yack, 114

states have changed their policies towards the Kurds. However, this may be too little, too late, as many Kurds now see themselves as a distinct people with an inalienable right to self-rule.

Control over political institutions has a direct impact on all of these concerns, including security and the direction of economic and cultural policy. A new Kurdish polity would ideally enfranchise the Kurdish people in these dimensions and end the pattern of their repression by state institutions.

- ***From Identity to Nationalism***

These factors constitute the nature of the “Kurdish question” and why it remains a pressing matter to this day. The Kurds can be understood as a nation in which membership is linked to perceived ethnic identities. Kurdish identity has been envisioned and expressed through nationalist organizations and ideas created both in response to and in spite of nation-building policies of the regional states. Within the regional states, the Kurds have faced economic discrimination, targeted and incidental violence, suppression of their language, and political disenfranchisement. These factors and a strong autonomous streak have led much of Kurdish society to reject the regional states in their current forms as their own and seek to create new polities to address these issues and the challenges posed by the future. With this understanding of the reasons driving their pursuit, let us now consider the political solutions the Kurds have sought to create.

### **Part III: Institutional Responses to the 'Kurdish Question'**

If the 'Kurdish question' represents the discontentment of Kurdish populations within the regional states, the answer must lie in a new relationship between the Kurdish people and political institutions, either within the regional states or through the formation of new ones. In its various forms, Kurdish nationalism has rejected the status quo offered by the regional states and has instead agitated for a different set of institutions. Three different institutional forms are worth examining due to their connection to the history of the issue: an independent state, federalism, and democratic confederalism. The Kurds have been defined in terms of their statelessness, and the prospect of a Kurdish state looms over any news story written about them. Meanwhile, systems of federalism and democratic confederalism have been established by Kurdish political organizations in Iraq and Syria respectively, providing two more natural options for consideration. Each of these possibilities brings its own strengths and weaknesses, and address to varying degrees the grievances of Kurdish nationalism. To be accepted, any institutions would have to meet some baseline of legitimacy, including providing basic security to most of the

Kurdish population and allowing the use of the language; otherwise, they would not necessarily be considered 'Kurdish' as such. Beyond that however, there exists a great deal of potential variation with important consequences. This section gives a brief history of each form within the regional context and considers their advantages and drawbacks with regards to the concerns of the Kurds.

### **A. The Nation-State**

#### ▪ *Definition*

Like many other concepts discussed in this paper such as nations and ethnicities, there does not exist a clean and universal definition of the state. Debate over what constitutes a state as opposed to a failed state, pseudo-state or other categories will surely continue for years to come, and ultimately lie beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes it will suffice to distinguish the state from other institutional forms of political society with relevance to the Kurdish case. As the concept of a Kurdish state is so frequently invoked, there must exist some common aspects of state-ness that connects them. One of the most famous definitions of the state comes from the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, which defined a state as a polity which possess all four of the following attributes:

1. A defined territory
2. A stable population
3. A government which governs over the territory and population
4. The capacity for diplomacy with other states<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> "Convention on Rights and Duties of States."

Another well-known definition is Max Weber's conception of a state, which he describes as "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory".<sup>67</sup> These elements can be seen within the currently existing regional states, and it stands to reason that any Kurdish polity would not be able to join the international state community without these features.<sup>68</sup> These definitions contain an element of stability, with population and territory understood to remain constant, and the coercive power of state institutions being used to enforce a baseline of security. The Montevideo Convention definition draws attention to the fact that states comprise the membership of the international order and are mutually exclusive from one another. Closely related to both definitions is the concept of sovereignty, or ultimate authority, within a given territory. In its ideal form, the state holds the final say in all domestic and foreign affairs, which is diffused through institutions, including but not limited to coercive and security bodies such as police and military, legislative and executive bodies and offices, and administrative units such as regulatory organizations. This is in contrast with federalism or democratic confederalism, which hold themselves as sovereign in some matters but might defer questions of economy, defense or international relations to a larger state body.

When a Kurdish state is mentioned, it is most commonly envisioned in the form of a nation-state. In its ideal form, the nation-state is a state whose population consists of a national unit which shares a common culture and language, and is therefore governed by members of the nation in line with nations' inherent right of self-determination.<sup>69</sup> In practice of course, states vary in their degree of national heterogeneity, and like many abstract concepts there does not

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<sup>67</sup> Weber, 1

<sup>68</sup> Although international recognition can be withheld for other reasons. Consider Taiwan, which possesses all the discernable feature of a state but is not universally recognized by other states due to China's claim of sovereignty over it

<sup>69</sup> Tivey, 13

exist a “perfect” nation-state; minority populations and non-national members are often governed by such states whether they like it or not, and this conflict has proven to be one of the most significant challenges to the concept in the last century. Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the regional states have presented themselves as nation-states: most notably Turkey as a Turkish nation-state, but also at some points Iran as a Persian state and Iraq and Syria as Arab nation-states. The nation-state stands in opposition to the idea of a multinational state, which recognizes several distinct nations within its territory and population but unites them within a single state- examples include India or the former Yugoslavia. So a Kurdish state would be one that acted as a state, operating centralized and hierarchical institutions to exert supreme authority over a designated population and territory, and likely but not necessarily be constructed as a nation-state with strong ties to a particular idea of Kurdish identity.

- ***Forms of the Kurdish State***

Since the emergence of a stable state paradigm in the Middle East, Kurdish political organizations have attempted several times to create a state. These efforts sought to create a geographically independent entity out of some territory claimed by at least one of the regional states but clearly proved unsuccessful in the long term. While the circumstances were different in each case, two prominent themes stick out: a lack of unity among the Kurdish population within the proposed polity, and an inability to sustain the project without foreign support. Following both World Wars, changes in the regional order seemed to create possibilities for Kurdish statehood, which failed to be realized to a large extent due to those two factors. These historical episodes prove instructive as to the modern prospects of Kurdish statehood.

- ***The Treaty of Sèvres***

At the end of World War I, the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled over almost all of Kurdistan<sup>70</sup>, was dissolved. During the war, the Allied powers had already drafted several partition schemes to be implemented in the case of an Ottoman defeat. The most infamous of these was the Sykes-Picot agreement between the United Kingdom, France and Russia, signed in secret in May of 1916. Under this agreement, the majority of the Ottoman lands were to be divided into imperial spheres of influence. For the Kurds, this would have meant their division into four zones under British, French and Russian influence or direct control.<sup>71</sup> However, this agreement was scrapped after it was publicized in 1917 by the new Bolshevik government in Russia who wanted no part in it. This left the task of partition to the remaining Allied Powers: Great Britain, France, Italy and Japan.<sup>72</sup> With Sykes-Picot off the table, it was decided that the imperial domain of the Ottomans was to be replaced not with a new European imperial order, but with the state system that had begun to emerge in Europe. This was to be accomplished under the terms of the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, signed by the Allied Powers and the remnants of the Ottoman government. The countries of Iraq and Syria were created as League of Nations protectorates of Great Britain and France respectively, functioning in many ways as colonies but with a goal of eventual independence, as well as an independent Turkish state.<sup>73</sup> In this way, the Western partition of the Ottoman Empire played a determining role in the current political boundaries of the Middle East.

However, another territory was conceived which does not exist today. Section III of the treaty called for the formation of an autonomous Kurdish region accepted by the new Turkish

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<sup>70</sup> With the notable exception of modern-day Iran, which was Persia at the time

<sup>71</sup> "Sykes-Picot Agreement", Historical Dictionary of the Kurds

<sup>72</sup> The United States did not express a particular interest in the division of Ottoman lands, but merely stressed their desire for a resolution and stable end to hostilities.

<sup>73</sup> Iraq would gain independence in 1932, Syria in 1946, and Turkey in 1923. Iran was still the Persian Empire at this time, but the transition to a state model is widely associated with Reza Shah, who ruled from 1925-1941.

government and with potential independence conditional on the approval of the League of Nations:

“A Commission...shall draft...a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas [in the east of modern-day Turkey]....The Turkish Government hereby agrees to accept and execute the decisions of [this Commission]...If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within [East modern-day Turkey] shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas.”<sup>74</sup>

This treaty represents the first major proposal for Kurdish independence. Under Ottoman and Persian rule, there had been periods of regional autonomy under imperial supervision, but these tended to be limited in scope and short-lived.<sup>75</sup> The Sèvres region lay in the south-east of modern-day Turkey (See Fig.3, p. 123), and would exist on its own, separate from the Persian-, Arab- and Turkish-majority polities that surrounded it. However, territorial difference did not mean true independence in this case; the region’s existence was highly dependent upon Allied support.

By the end of the war, the British were in a particularly strong place to dictate the future of the region, as its forces occupied most of present-day Iraq and Turkey. Britain had been interested in expanding Iraq (then Mesopotamia), especially to include the economic hub of Mosul, slightly south of the current Iraq-Turkey border. With this in mind, they had already reached out to Kurdish leaders during the war in hopes of eventually establishing a Kurdish region under British influence as a buffer between Mesopotamia and whatever Turkish state and French holdings emerged from the war. This proved difficult, for as one British official

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<sup>74</sup> "The Treaty of Sèvres, 1920", Articles 62-64.

<sup>75</sup> Tahiri, 35-37

complained, “no such thing as ‘Kurdish opinion’ in the sense of coherent public opinion can be said to exist...few [Kurds] looking higher than tribal aghas or religious Sheikhs amongst whom there is little common ground”.<sup>76</sup> The British eventually settled on the figure of Sharif Pasha to act as a figurehead. Pasha, an Ottoman notable living in exile after the war, presented himself as a representative of the Kurds but had no constituency to speak of among them, claiming only a handful of fellow Kurdish exiles as his supporters. Despite his dearth of support, he received the position because he was more attractive to the British than a number of other candidates who were either too closely linked to the French or had antagonistic relationships with the Armenians or other Kurdish groups.<sup>77</sup> As a consultant at the negotiations for Sèvres, he outlined the region’s borders in his *Memorandum on the Claims of the Kurdish People*, including much of Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan but notably excluding Iranian and Syrian Kurdistan.<sup>78</sup> While its borders are known, it is less clear is what the political structure would have looked like. If British-mandate Iraq was any indication, it would have functioned at a very low level of state capacity or popular support and been propped up by British military might.<sup>79</sup>

The question of political structure proved a moot one, as Article III of the Treaty of Sèvres never came to pass. After the Ottoman parliament was dissolved, a burgeoning Turkish nationalist movement organized its own assembly and declared a revolution, sparking a war the revolutionaries would ultimately win against the Allied proxies of Greece and Armenia. The nationalist movement emphasized the importance of territory, and when it came time to negotiate a new peace deal they were adamant about maintaining control of what they perceived as Turkish land. The Treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923, recognized the new state of Turkey with

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<sup>76</sup> McDowall, 132

<sup>77</sup> McDowall, 123-6

<sup>78</sup> Pasha, 8-9. See Fig. 3 (p. 123)

<sup>79</sup> For instance, he British installed Faisal I as the King of Iraq after he was ejected from the position of King of Syria by the French.

its current boundaries, relegating the situation of the Kurds as an internal Turkish matter. By the time this treaty was signed, the Allies were weary of fighting and politicking in the region, and with its signature Great Britain demonstrated its priorities lay with regional stability, not Kurdish independence. Within the ranks of Kurdish notables, there was widespread disagreement: some still favored independence but wanted to be at the head of it, while others felt stronger affinities with their Islamic or Ottoman identities and supported the Turkish revolution; “in any case, there were many Kurds who were against Kurdish self-determination”.<sup>80</sup> Tribalism was still at a high point among Kurds and there was no mass movement to speak of- leaders of local confederacies had considerable manpower but few ambitions of unity or independence, while political figures such as Sharif Pasha had the ambition but small constituencies. Today, this incident is a point of frustration for many Kurds, often seen as the moment it all went wrong. Whereas many Kurds at the time thought that life would not be much different under the post-Ottoman regimes, these states wound up pursuing nation-building policies which attacked Kurdish culture. If the Kurds had been more unanimously in favor of independence, or if a powerful ally such as Great Britain had advocated their cause all the way, the potential was there for an independent Kurdistan. Instead, the Kurds were divided, the great powers were primarily interested in regional stability, and the Turkish nationalist movement was unified, powerful and assertive. A couple of decades later, a new Kuridsh state in Iran would prove to be short-lived for many similar reasons.

- ***The Republic of Mahabad***

The end of World War II saw another opportunity for Kurdish independence in the establishment of the short-lived Mahabad Republic in Iran. In August 1941, Iran was occupied by British and Russian forces in order to secure supply lines to Russian troops, who subsequently

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<sup>80</sup> Tahiri, 45-47.

forced the Shah at the time to resign.<sup>81</sup> This regime change enabled Iranian Kurds to organize and communicate like never before, both due to the overall weakening of government institutions which had repressed them and the removal of some formal political restrictions against Kurds.<sup>82</sup> These developments allowed for the formation of several political groups, most notably Komala-I Jiyani Kurdistan (The Committee for the Revival of Kurdistan), commonly referred to as Komala. Komala's ideology was devoutly nationalist and devoted to Kurdish ethnic identity; membership was restricted almost entirely to individuals with Kurdish descent on both sides of their family.<sup>83</sup> While it is unclear to what extent the organization initially sought full-on state independence, they certainly argued for greater autonomy and placed the issues of language rights and economic reform at the forefront of their program.<sup>84</sup> Komala's following came at first mostly from educated urban Kurds, but as it spread rapidly it began to gain limited support even within rural tribes.<sup>85</sup> The group made a key step in October 1944 when it invited Qazi Muhammad, a prominent figure in the Kurdish city of Mahabad, to be the leader of the group. The son of a powerful regional patriarch and a respected jurist, Qazi appeared to have the local clout and authoritative personality necessary to fill the power vacuum left by the absence of both Iranian and Soviet troops in Mahabad after hostilities ended.<sup>86</sup>

The growth of such an organization attracted the attention of the occupying British and Russian forces. The British did not support Kurdish independence due to its interests in Iraq, as to support Iranian Kurds could be seen as supporting separatist Iraqi Kurds and therefore anger

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<sup>81</sup> "Reza Shah Pahlavi"

<sup>82</sup> Natali, 125

<sup>83</sup> Roosevelt, 250

<sup>84</sup> McDowall 238

<sup>85</sup> McDowall 237

<sup>86</sup> Eagleton, 31-2

Iraqi Arabs.<sup>87</sup> However, the Soviets, who controlled Northern Iran, became interested in Iranian separatist movements after unsuccessful negotiations with the central government in Tehran for oil concessions in 1944.<sup>88</sup> In September of 1945, a group of Russian officers and officials invited a delegation led by Qazi Muhammad to a meeting to discuss the future of the Kurds. The Soviets were also encouraging Iranian Azerbaijanis to secede from Iran, and the Soviet representatives initially implored the Kurds to throw their lot in with that of the Azerbaijanis, as the majority of the Iranian Kurdish and Azerbaijani populations lived near one another in the Azerbaijan province in Iran.<sup>89</sup> However, Qazi emphatically rejected this proposal in favor of an independent Kurdish state, and the representatives pledged the USSR's support, both in the form of political solidarity but also material aid such as military equipment and the possibility of economic support.<sup>90</sup>

To better coordinate with the Soviets and gain more international legitimacy, Komala reformed itself as a political party named the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI).<sup>91</sup> This announcement was made by way of a manifesto which declared the Iranian government had “not let Kurdistan become an independent province administered by a provincial council... We must fight for our rights... [This party] will be able to secure its national independence within the borders of Persia”.<sup>92</sup> The party's platform called for autonomy for Kurds within the Iranian state and the use of Kurdish as the language of education and government, among other more specific administrative clauses and a call for legal reform regarding land management.<sup>93</sup> Developments

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<sup>87</sup> Roosevelt, 250

<sup>88</sup> McDowall 240

<sup>89</sup> Eagleton, 44

<sup>90</sup> Eagleton, 45

<sup>91</sup> Confusingly, a completely unrelated Iranian Kurdish group called Komala was founded in 1969, which has gone on to feud with the KDPI.

<sup>92</sup> McDowall 240

<sup>93</sup> McDowall 241, Nisan 57

came quickly after the declaration: In October of 1945, the KDPI took in around 1,000 Kurdish fighters fleeing from an unsuccessful rebellion in Iraq, adding to their numbers and providing needed military might. In mid-December, the Azerbaijani Democratic Party (an equivalent to the KDPI) drove out Iranian troops from their territory and declared the authority of the Azerbaijan People's Government. This emboldened the KDPI to make a move, and five days later a ceremony was held in Mahabad to announce the foundation of the Kurdish People's Government, which declared formal autonomy in January of 1946 (See Fig. 4, p.124).<sup>94</sup> Qazi Muhammad became its president, his cousin Minister of War, while members of other prominent clans filled the remaining cabinet seats. Most of the core of Komala was included in the administration, "but the weight of power had now shifted decisively in favor of the established families of Kurdistan".<sup>95</sup>

The newly formed state came to be known as the Republic of Mahabad. The new government came to power in relatively stable economic standing, thanks to a strong harvest in 1944 and the number of expensive items such as arms, printing presses and vehicles being provided by the Soviet Union for free.<sup>96</sup> However, the state appeared unable to perform much else aside from basic administration and military control. The region had been severely underdeveloped under the reign of Reza Shah, and although the Kurdish language was finally permitted there didn't exist any secondary schools to teach it in.<sup>97</sup> While limited urbanization had taken place in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Kurdish population was still largely poor, illiterate and rural, meaning "Qazi Muhammad and his small group of Sunni supporters and Kurdish notables had marginal influence among the Iranian Kurdish masses, the majority of whom were...tied to

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<sup>94</sup> Eagleton, 63

<sup>95</sup> McDowall, 241

<sup>96</sup> Eagleton, 87

<sup>97</sup> Natali, 128

traditional social structures”.<sup>98</sup> These uneducated masses largely followed tribal leaders, who were skeptical of the new intellectual class Qazi Muhammad represented but feared being left on the sidelines; at the same time, the intellectuals regarded the tribal leaders as backwards but necessary for the numbers they were able to muster.<sup>99</sup> This uneasy alliance between different strains of the region’s society was pivotal, and the Republic proved unable to outlast it.

Just as quickly as events had moved to lead to the creation of the Republic, so they began to head towards its destruction. In March of 1946, the USSR received the oil pact it was seeking with the Iranian government and prepared to leave the area. The agreement with Tehran declared that “since it is an internal affair, peaceful arrangements will be made between the government and the people of Azerbaijan<sup>100</sup> [province]”, effectively removing their support from the Mahabad government.<sup>101</sup> In mid-June, the Azerbaijani People’s Government struck a deal with Tehran to be reincorporated into the Iranian state, leaving the Mahabad government politically isolated. Internal support from the tribal leaders eroded, as they began to see independence as more of a liability, calculating it as better to cut their losses and come back as citizens with hats in hand than be slaughtered by an Iranian military back on its feet. Seeing the writing on the wall, Qazi traveled to Tehran in August of 1946 to attempt to broker a deal that would reincorporate Mahabad into Iran as a semi-autonomous province, but this came at an inopportune time politically for the Prime Minister of Iran and was rejected.<sup>102</sup> On December 13, 1946, Iranian troops re-entered the area, and the following day accepted the submission of many chiefs and notables. Without either Soviet or domestic Kurdish support, the Republic didn’t stand a chance against the advancing Iranian army. In the following weeks the army unmade many of the

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<sup>98</sup> Natali, 128

<sup>99</sup> Tahiri, 95

<sup>100</sup> Azerbaijan here refers as well to Mahabad, which was known as East Azerbaijan

<sup>101</sup> Eagleton, 73.

<sup>102</sup> McDowall, 244

signs Mahabad had ever existed, in particular targeting the Kurdish language- printing presses and books in Kurdish were destroyed, and the language was once again banned for teaching.<sup>103</sup> In March of 1947, Qazi Muhammad was hanged publicly along with his brother and cousin, ending this brief foray into Kurdish independence.

The episode of the Republic of Mahabad contains one possible form of a Kurdish state in history. Geographically, it comprised much of East Kurdistan, and was populated by Iranian Kurds in addition the contingent of Iraqi Kurds who had followed Mustafa Barzani into Mahabad. It functioned as a state, albeit a weak one, ruled by a small minority drawn from an emerging, educated Kurdish elite who largely refused to share power with traditional leaders who still held much sway or Kurds from other regions.<sup>104</sup> Mahabad's leaders "regarded the government as an exclusive entity, belonging only to Iranian Kurds", and only some of them at that, as most Iranian Kurds outside of Mahabad's borders were not invited to join.<sup>105</sup> The bureaucratic institutions that make a state function depend on some degree of centralization, and the Kurdish population of Mahabad before the establishment of the republic was neither geographically nor politically consolidated, divided into dozens of smaller informal associations. It emphasized its Kurdish identity, prioritizing the education of the language and declared in the name of the Kurdish people, but enjoyed only temporary domestic support, conditional upon how tribal leaders thought the winds were blowing. It relied upon military and economic aid from the USSR, and collapsed to the established Iranian state once it recovered from World War II. This fact portrays the double-edged nature of foreign support: here it was instrumental in the initial establishment of the republic, but devastating when it was withdrawn. This support also

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<sup>103</sup> McDowall, 245

<sup>104</sup> Tahiri, 98

<sup>105</sup> Tahiri, 98

came from a single world superpower with its own priorities; perhaps if Mahabad had found more allies or worked closer with the Azerbaijanis it could have lasted longer. Similarly double-sided was the geographic scope of the state. It was contained to a small cluster of Iranian territories to avoid drawing the ire of any other states; however, because it was contained to Iran other Kurds did not necessarily feel solidarity with Mahabad, especially due to the exclusive policies of the Mahabad administration. The progression to independence had moved at breakneck speed, with Komala being founded as the first Iranian Kurdish political organization in 1941 and within five years acting as the government of an independent state. Many scholars also emphasize the persistence of tribal (and more importantly, non-national) perspectives among much of the population, suggesting that Iranian Kurdish society was not politically developed enough for the creation of a state.<sup>106</sup> All of these factors contributed to the failure of the Republic of Mahabad.

- *Other Attempts and the Kurdish State Today*

Throughout the twentieth century, there have been a number of other attempts to establish independent Kurdish states, which took the form of armed insurrection against state forces. Some of the more prominent examples (and their political inclinations) include Mullah Mustafa Barzani's revolt in Iraq in the 1970s and the Ararat rebellion in the 1920s (tribal), the first several years of the PKK's insurgency against the Turkish state in the 1970s and 1980s (Marxist), and Sheikh Said's 1925 rebellion in Syria (Islamic). As these rebellions were so numerous and short-lived, it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine each of them in detail, but they do reflect the persistence of visions of a Kurdish state and the different forms that has taken.

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<sup>106</sup> Tahiri, 100, McDowall, 246, Roosevelt, 269

In discussions of the modern emergence of a Kurdish state, there are two axes of potential expressions of statehood that are worth considering. The first is whether it would be a Kurdish nation-state or a multinational state. As many Kurdish nationalist movements have drawn upon ethnicity to justify their existence, and the talk of a “Kurdish state” which attaches Kurdish identity to the state *per se*, a nation-state seems more likely, at least in rhetoric. Nonetheless, the difficulties of actually building a homogenous state in such a diverse region, as well as shifting political views among Kurds, could result in an openly multinational state. The other important axis is the geographic scope of the state. The Sèvres state and the Republic of Mahabad were both confined to limited areas of Ottoman and Iranian territory respectively, and due to historical developments shaped by the political boundaries in the region, there exists more organizational cohesion among the Kurds in any one state than at a pan-Kurdish level. However, there exists in most Kurds a very clear vision of a Greater Kurdistan comprising of territory from all four states, and nationalist groups tend to at least acknowledge Kurds in other states in their rhetoric, and in many cases viewing them as integral. Also significant but harder to anticipate is the exact structure of the government that would arise, but suffice to say there exists a range of Kurdish political sentiments from communism to Islamic governance or Western liberalism, any of which could inform the nature of the government of a new state. With these possibilities and the history of previous attempts in mind, this section considers the relative advantages and disadvantages of a state model to current Kurdish national interests.

### ***Advantages of the State***

- *Global State Paradigm/Clarity of Concept*

One of the primary arguments for the state model is its ubiquity. At this point in history, just about the entire world has been brought, at least nominally, under the state system. As the

Middle East is currently split between a number of states, and Kurdish-inhabited lands between four, it stands to reason that a new state could emerge and the borders of other states be redrawn accordingly. Although uncommon in recent years, territorial modifications in the region are not unprecedented; as recently as 1990, the current state of Yemen was split between two states. A year later, Iraq unsuccessfully tried to annex Kuwait. Furthermore, the state plays a central role in most modern political theories such as realism or liberalism. This state-centrism is so prevalent as to be almost invisible. Will Kymlicka and Christine Straehle describe the issue thusly:

“Most modern political theorists have taken for granted that the theories they develop should operate within the boundaries of the nation-state. When theorists develop principles of justice to evaluate economic systems, they focus on national economies; when theorists develop principles of rights to evaluate constitutions, they focus on national constitutions; when theorists develop an account of the appropriate virtues and identities required for democratic citizenship, they ask what it means to be a good citizen of a nation-state; when theorists discuss what ‘political community’ can or should mean, they are asking in what sense nation-states can be seen as political communities.

This focus on the nation-state is not always explicit. Many theorists talk about ‘the society’ or ‘the government’ or ‘the constitution’ without specifying what sort of society, government or constitution they are referring to. But on inspection, they almost always have nation-states in mind. And this shows how widespread the paradigm is. The assumption that political norms apply within nation-states, conceived as single integrated ‘societies’, is so pervasive that many theorists don’t even see the need to make it explicit”<sup>107</sup>

This bias towards the state has certainly been present in discourse surrounding the ‘Kurdish question’. After all, the presence of a nationalist movement does not necessarily imply a desire for a state. Although they are commonly conflated within the concept of the nation-state, it seems evident that being a member of a nation is different from citizenship in a state. However, many formally organized Kurdish nationalist movements have been explicitly state-seeking ones.

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<sup>107</sup> Kymlicka & Straehle, 65

States are thought of as the primary actors in important sectors such as diplomacy, trade and military operations. If the Kurds had a state, the logic goes, they would be able to directly receive the benefits of statehood rather than be denied them by the regional states. There has also been a sense of the exhaustion of other options, as Kurds have long campaigned for greater regional autonomy within the states where they live but have been generally unsuccessful.<sup>108</sup> If the Kurds created an independent state, everyone within it and in the global community would clearly understand what that meant and how to interact with the new state, something that cannot be said of the other two forms.

- *Symbolic Power*

Similar to its explanatory power, the state also serves as a potent embodiment of the political rights sought by Kurdish nationalism. Could there be any clearer declaration of Kurdish independence and self-determination than their own state? This is the logic of many normative arguments for a Kurdish state: after all, if the Kurds are “the largest ethnic group without a state”, they deserve one of their own. Until a Kurdish state is created, it seems likely that they will retain that dubious title. The creation of such a state would put a clean end to the narrative of oppression and disenfranchisement that is commonly told of the Kurdish people. As Kurdish nationalism came of age in an era of states, and the fact that a large extent of its expressions have been state-seeking reflects this. It stands to reason that if an independent Kurdistan was established from the territory of one or more of the regional states, Kurds remaining in the regional states would look positively upon it and perhaps aspire to join it, either through

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<sup>108</sup> The KRG in Iraq is the obvious exception, but it is worth noting that they were only able to achieve their current level of autonomy because it was being enforced by foreign military intervention, while today prominent figures within the KRG muse openly about the prospect of secession.

migration or expansion of the country<sup>109</sup>. This view certainly seems to be shared by the regional states, who have opposed the formation of an independent Kurdistan from the territories of other states due to the psychological effect they believe it would have on Kurds within their own territory. Overall, the creation of an independent Kurdish state would transform the international image of the Kurdish community and act as a potent symbol of Kurdish autonomy.

- *International Recognition*

The creation of a formal sovereign state would grant the Kurds a level of international interaction they have never been able to enjoy in various political or military organizations. Independent statehood would come with things like membership in international organizations such as the United Nations and the ability to conduct direct trade or other negotiations. Sub-state polities, such as the KRG and Rojava, have had difficulty getting NGOs or other international actors to work within their territories because these actors do not wish to upset the central government or norms of sovereignty. In an increasingly globalized world, access to open diplomacy and trade is extremely valuable, determining a community's access to supplies such as medicine, food, technology and military supplies. The denial of such access has played a detrimental role in the economic and political health of the Kurdistan region, and a recognized state would be able to serve as an advocate for the Kurds on the international stage.

An independent Kurdish state would also be granted inclusion in international norms and institutions governing states. If a Kurdish state was internationally recognized as sovereign, it would be more difficult for one of the regional states to attempt to retake territory or conduct other military operations within the state's borders without facing condemnation. A Kurdish state would also be able to enter into formal alliances with other states. Previously, sub-state groups

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<sup>109</sup> Although as the Republic of Mahabad showed, pan-Kurdish support is not unconditional and cannot be assumed. Perhaps an exclusive or oppressive Kurdish state, or one that allied itself with historical enemies of the Kurds, would not win broader support

have pursued short-term alliances with other states, but these states were under little to no pressure to maintain these relationships when they proved disadvantageous. A formal state would be due a certain level of respect by other states. Finally, if a Kurdish state was comprised of only part of Kurdistan, it would be in a position to apply pressure on the other regional states to improve domestic conditions for their Kurdish populations. Formal statehood would confer norms upon interactions between the Kurds and other groups which could improve their position.

### *Disadvantages of the State*

- *International Opposition*

Perhaps the greatest material difficulty inherent to Kurdish statehood is international opposition. This opposition comes most directly from the regional states, each of which has no intention of ceding territory to a new Kurdish polity, thus making the peaceful and simultaneous creation of a Kurdistan composed of territory from all four states highly unlikely. However, the creation of a partial Kurdish state would not necessarily calm the states which remained intact, fearing that the creation of an independent Kurdistan would provoke domestic unrest among Kurds. This prospect has been brought up most prominently with regards to Iraqi Kurdistan and the KRG, which has flirted with independence rhetoric in the past. Speaking on the prospects of statehood, former KRG Prime Minister Barham Salih painted a pessimistic picture: “Turkey, Syria, Iran and Arab Iraq would all declare war, with the Turks invading almost immediately to preempt the spread of a “Greater Kurdistan”. Kurdistan’s oil would be landlocked by hostile forces...An independent Kurdistan would unite the region in opposition”.<sup>110</sup> The historical hostility of the regional states towards their Kurdish populations would not vanish overnight if the Kurds established their own state, but would be directed at that state.

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<sup>110</sup> Lawrence, 312-13

In particular, Turkey has been adamant in its opposition to the creation of a Kurdish state in one of the other states. Despite having strong economic ties to the KRG, the Turkish government has opposed its independence, fearing that it might reshape Iraqi politics in an unfavorable way, and more significantly that it would provoke Turkey's Kurds to become more mobilized towards independence themselves.<sup>111</sup> Additionally, there are still some Turkish nationalists who consider the territory as rightfully part of Turkey, looking back to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. At multiple points before the creation of the KRG, the Turkish military invaded northern Iraq, and during the Iran-Iraq war "there was a public debate in Turkey about military plans for the occupation of the region in the case of a breakdown of the Iraqi front".<sup>112</sup> While there has not been as much substantial talk of independent statehood for either Iranian or Syrian Kurds, it seems likely the Turkish position would still be one of opposition.

The opposition of Turkey is an important influence on the role of another significant actor in the region: the United States. The US views Turkey as a very important strategic ally in NATO and the war on terror, and has largely deferred to the Turkish position on this issue. The United States has an additional vested interest in maintaining the regional integrity of the Iraqi state, both for the sake of its own image, as well as in the interest of keeping Iraq as a regional ally and fears that Kurdish independence might undo the rest of the state they worked so hard to create. This interest has led the United States to move to block the KRG from selling its oil unilaterally, without going through the Baghdad Iraqi Oil Ministry. In late 2014, conflict between the government of Iraq and the KRG made its way to US soil as a tanker full of Kurdish

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<sup>111</sup> More recently, the Turkish government has sent out signals suggesting it would support the partitioning of Iraq. However, one has to imagine that if they allowed for an independent Iraqi Kurdistan, they would only do so as long as it remained economically and/or militarily dependent on Turkey, and with a guarantee that it would not spread to Turkish territory.

<sup>112</sup> Bruinessen, *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism*, 62

oil headed to Texas, and the Iraqi government filed a motion in American courts saying that “that the crude cargo belongs to the Baghdad Ministry of Oil and that it was never the property of the Kurdistan Regional Government”.<sup>113</sup> While stopping short of formally seizing oil tankers with Kurdish oil, the United States have effectively blacklisted it, with the State Department saying “If we hear of potential buyers, we alert them that buying this oil could expose them to serious legal risks and they should consult legal counsel about that”.<sup>114</sup> Seeing as how central a role oil plays in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, everyone involved realizes that if the Kurds are able to sell their own oil on the world market it would bring them a step closer to independence and further disentangled from the government in Baghdad. In the fallout of the tanker conflict, a new revenue-sharing agreement was reached between the two parties, which was met with the formal approval of American Vice President Joe Biden.<sup>115</sup> As one of the most influential actors in the region and internationally, the opposition of the United States to an independent Kurdistan does not bode well for the prospect of international recognition.

The reluctance of international actors to permit anything that might lead to independence has also been demonstrated through the struggle against ISIS. The United States has recognized the Kurds as an important ally in the fight against ISIS, and in both Iraq and Syria has provided aerial support for Kurdish fighters. However, the United States has hesitated to provide more direct aid. In Iraq, the US has declared its policy that “that all arms transfers must be coordinated via the sovereign central Government of Iraq”, and therefore that arms intended for the KRG peshmerga must first flow through Baghdad.<sup>116</sup> However, many of the shipped equipment never makes its way to Iraqi Kurds, leading them to take to media outlets to criticize the system in an

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<sup>113</sup> Mufson

<sup>114</sup> Mufson

<sup>115</sup> Pamuk

<sup>116</sup> “Daily Press Briefing - February 9, 2015”

attempt to goad the US into providing more direct support.<sup>117</sup> This has also been used as a domestic talking point, with some scholars and politicians such as Ted Cruz calling for the Obama administration to arm the Kurds directly.<sup>118</sup> Syrian Kurds battling ISIS have received even less international support. During the conflict in Kobane, a majority-Kurdish city on the Turkish-Syrian border, Turkey blocked the movement of Turkish Kurds into Syria to go fight until international attention became focused on the city.<sup>119</sup> In that conflict and some others, the United States has again provided airstrikes, but there has been no talk of providing arms or providing training, as the US has done for the KRG and some Syrian rebel groups.

Communication between US military forces and the main Kurdish party in Syria fighting ISIS, the Democratic Union Party (YPG), has reportedly been limited, usually only pertaining to troop positions, and air strikes have been infrequent at best.<sup>120</sup> Again, the US reluctance to go further can be seen as largely informed by its alliance with Turkey, who mistrust the YPG based on their affiliations with the PKK, and are widely seen as being more concerned with ousting Assad than fighting ISIS.<sup>121</sup> If the international community has proved reluctant to ally with the Kurds against a foe such as ISIS, there is even less reason to believe it would support the Kurds in a conflict with an established regional state.

Interestingly, there does exist one prominent supporter for Kurdish statehood in the region: Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has publicly stated his government's support for independence, at least for Iraqi Kurds, in the wake of the spread of ISIS and destabilization of the Iraqi state.<sup>122</sup> While his remarks came at an interesting time, as ties between the KRG and

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<sup>117</sup> "Kurdish Peshmerga Forces Fighting ISIS in Iraq Desperate for Military Supplies"

<sup>118</sup> Atran, Carroll

<sup>119</sup> Spencer

<sup>120</sup> "Syria Kurds Yet to Be Fully Embraced by US in Anti-IS Fight"

<sup>121</sup> Zeynalov, Nevins

<sup>122</sup> "Israel's Prime Minister Backs Kurdish Independence"

Israel had not been especially close, and this stance directly contradicts the American priority of territorial integrity for the state of Iraq. However, Israel and Iraqi Kurds have worked together in the past, and some observers sense something of a cultural affinity between Jews and Kurds as persecuted minorities in an Arab-dominated region and a desire to create an allied buffer state between Israel and Iran and Sunni extremists such as IS, in addition to whatever more opportunistic motives lay behind Netanyahu's remarks.<sup>123</sup> However, Israel is not in much of a position to act as a direct ally to the Kurds. The only regional state they share a border with is Syria, but this lies in the non-Kurdish south. Besides, most of the comments by the Israeli government have concerned the Kurds in Iraq, which Israel could not directly give military or economic aid in the face of opposition by other states. Attaching Israel to Kurdish sovereignty might ultimately hurt its prospects due to Israel's unpopularity in the region. A Kurdish state that declared independence today would find itself with few international allies and enemies at its borders.

- *Internal Divisions Within Kurdish Territory*

Even if a state was established and made secure despite the opposition of other states, the heterogeneity of identity and ideology in the region poses a significant challenge towards state-building. As noted before, it can be difficult to point out one defining feature of Kurdishness. While the majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, there exist sizable populations of Shia and Christian Kurds, as well as smaller religious minorities such as the Yezidis. In addition, there are at least three distinct Kurdish lingual groups. These differences would bear particularly acutely on a Kurdish nation-state: if Kurdish identity is to be tied to the government, who gets to say which language or religion gets preference? Other material disparities exist as well: while an increasing proportion of the Kurdish population has become urbanized in the last several

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<sup>123</sup> Alpher

decades, there is still a sizable population that live in villages, and within both groups there exist large differences of wealth which could stymie pan-Kurdish collaboration. Although a large portion of Kurds might support the idea of a state in the abstract, it is unclear how feasible it would be to unite them all behind one *particular* state program.

This difficulty is exacerbated by the wide range of political views among Kurds. The two most prominent groups which hold sway in all four regional states, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), present starkly different visions of a Kurdish polity: the former capitalist, centralized and statist, the latter decentralized and informed by the ideas of Karl Marx and Murray Bookchin. If a partial Kurdish state were to emerge anywhere but Iraq (where it would likely grow out of the KRG), both factions would attempt to influence it. However, in addition to these two groups, there exist a host of other Kurdish political parties who fall somewhere between the two ideologically, as well as Kurds who feel more closely affiliated with religious or state identities than their ethnicity, and would sooner seek political change through those avenues than an explicitly Kurdish one. While it is not impossible that these groups would be able to coexist underneath one government in some elaborate power-sharing algebra, what is for certain is the history of conflict within these groups, many of which have their own military forces. The two main parties in the KRG (the KDP and PUK) have warred on and off for most of their existence, with their current arrangement only emerging from a 3 year civil war in the 1990s. The PKK has often fought against other Kurdish groups, such as the KDP or the village guards armed by the Turkish government, as well as birthing several splinter groups. Recently, there have been some reports of small numbers of Kurds joining ISIS and other Islamic fundamentalist groups.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Collard

These intra-Kurdish divisions have a history of instability that have stymied pan-Kurdish unification. Although some groups would most likely clash on their own accord, ethnic, political and religious divides have frequently been exploited by external actors, especially regional governments, wishing to meddle in Kurdistan. This practice dates back at least to the Ottoman Empire, for whenever “a tribal leader rebelled against the government there was always a relative of the leader who would be willing to side with the government against him”.<sup>125</sup> Later, the regional states would often support or arm one faction of Kurds, most commonly against other Kurds. The KRG civil war in the 1990s is a prominent example, which became intensified and ultimately resulted in something of a proxy war due to international interests on both sides, as the KDP was supported by the Iraqi government and Turkey while the PUK allied with the PKK, Iran and received limited support from the United States. The fact of the matter is that while most groups give verbal support to pan-Kurdish liberation, “pan-Kurdish nationalism has rarely found organizational expression. Generally, the Kurdish movement has operated within the confines of international borders”.<sup>126</sup> The unification of these groups under one central authority with a monopoly on violence, when these groups have historically waged armed conflict against one another, is a tall order in the current climate.

A final complication comes in the considerable ethnic diversity within the Kurdistan region. In all four regional states, Kurdish-inhabited regions are also home to populations of ranging size of many other ethnicities and cultural groups, including but not limited to Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arabs, Arameans, Turks, Armenians, Chechens, Azeri, and Lurs peoples.<sup>127</sup> Despite the current divided condition of the multinational states of Iraq and Syria, often along ethnic and cultural lines, this diversity does not necessarily lead to trouble; for instance, in the KRG, the

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<sup>125</sup> Tahiri, 27

<sup>126</sup> Bajalan, 1

<sup>127</sup> Stansfield, 39, “The Constitution of the Rojava Cantons”

Assyrian, Turkish and Armenian populations have their own political parties and have designated seats in the parliament. However, the more ethnicized a potential Kurdish nation-state was, the more it is possible to see how these minorities could become disaffected. If nothing else, these non-Kurdish populations could be used by the regional states to justify territorial seizures or military actions. The integration of non-Kurdish populations is essential to any long-term polity in the region, but could prove disastrous for many potential agendas of state-building. Overall, the Kurdistan region is characterized by divides, both within Kurdish society itself as well as between Kurds and other groups. It is not obvious that a state, which would need to pacify many of these groups and present a clearly articulated identity to unite its citizens, is a structure well-suited for such circumstances.

- *Kurdish Perceptions of the State*

The history of interactions between the Kurds and state power cannot be ignored when a Kurdish state is imagined. They have experienced formal and informal discrimination, forced relocation and murder, political disenfranchisement, economic exploitation and marginalization, and been denied the right to use their own language or express their culture. Isolated acts of ethnically-motivated violence or discrimination can arise from smaller circumstances, but the pattern of Kurdish repression was only made possible through the hostility of coercive state apparatuses. It does not seem clear at all that simply giving Kurds the reins of a state apparatus would eliminate the problematic relationship between the state and Kurdish identity, especially if the Kurdish state was envisioned as a nation-state. In its initial years, the PKK claimed it sought statehood, but has since renounced this as a goal. Writing on this change, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan had the following to say:

“...with a view to issues of ethnicity and nationhood like the Kurdish question, which have their roots deep in history and at the foundations of society, there seemed to be only one viable solution: the creation of a nation-state, which was the paradigm of the capitalist modernity at the time. We did not believe, however, that any ready-made political blueprints would be able to sustainably improve the situation of the people in the Middle East. Had it not been nationalism and nation-states which had created so many problems in the Middle East?”<sup>128</sup>

Perhaps due to similar considerations, Kurdish popular support for an independent state has waned. While Kurds everywhere have a host of grievances which they continue to organize around, they are increasingly not speaking of an independent state as the answer to their problems. The PKK, once the face of the movement for Kurdish independence, now says it does not seek an independent state. Within the Turkish-Kurdish diaspora, much of which lives in Germany, “active assistance for the creation of a Kurdish state appeared to be waning... [few express] strong support for the establishment of an independent Kurdish state, and instead articulated a passionate commitment to the idea of a cultural Kurdish space”.<sup>129</sup> The Kurds in Syria have repeatedly emphasized their willingness to work with a new Syrian government when it emerges if it makes some concessions towards Kurdish autonomy and cultural rights, and vehemently does not seek an independent state. Although the episode of Mahabad took place in Iran, support for Kurdish separatism has not gained much traction since the Islamic Revolution due to a mix of state repression but also due to the state’s semi-successful accommodation of its Kurdish population, a significant portion of which is Shia and seems to identify with the project of the Islamic Republic.<sup>130</sup> The situation is such that with the exception of intermittent statements supporting independence from the KRG, “all important Kurdish organizations aim at cultural rights and political autonomy within the borders of the existing states.”<sup>131</sup> For “the largest ethnic

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<sup>128</sup> Ocalan, 7-8

<sup>129</sup> Eccarius-Kelly, 95

<sup>130</sup> The Kurds - a contemporary overview

<sup>131</sup> Kurdish Ethno-nationalism vs nation-building states, 62

group without a state”, Kurdish desire for a state is assumed; however, among the actual Kurdish population there is nothing resembling a consensus on the state as the best path towards self-determination.

- Oil

While not a ‘disadvantage’ *per se*, the region’s oil reserves are a tricky variable in the calculus of independence. Kurdistan has large enough reserves that represent enough potential wealth to keep a government well-funded, as it has in many states around the region. But control over the resources is key. The regional states, already reluctant to cede land, will be especially attached to resource-rich areas.<sup>132</sup> And Kurdistan is rich in oil: the KRG in Iraq is its most visible face, with billions of barrels in estimated reserves and at least twenty-seven international oil companies working in the area.<sup>133</sup> In Turkey and Syria, large portions of the states’ oil productions come from majority-Kurdish regions: around 60% of Syria’s oil lies in the vicinity of Rojava (See Fig. 7, p.127), while nearly all of Turkey’s oil comes from the Kurdish-majority south-east.<sup>134</sup> Wresting control of these areas from any one state would be difficult, and the importance of these regions enhances the regional states’ opposition to secession. Without any oil, however, a new state would be hard-pressed to sustain itself economically.

While difficult to achieve, the territorial control of oil does not guarantee its rewards. Receiving value from extraction depends upon getting the oil refined elsewhere, as the area does not have sufficient facilities to do so domestically<sup>135</sup>, and getting it shipped around the world to be sold. Attempts to sell the oil of Kurdistan has already led to conflicts. The KRG and Iraqi

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<sup>132</sup> Such as the currently-looming standoff between the KRG and GOI over Kirkuk, which the KRG now controls but GOI still claims, sidelined until the more immediate ISIS threat is dealt with.

<sup>133</sup> “List of International Oil Companies in Iraqi Kurdistan”

<sup>134</sup> Duman, “Production”

<sup>135</sup> There were some refineries in Roajva, Syria, but these were mostly destroyed by US airstrikes against ISIS. Some refining is done in cruder, small-scale operations, but the level of industrial-scale refineries necessary to fully exploit the region’s oil are non-existent.

government are engaged in an ongoing battle over oil revenues and unilateral sales of oil by the Kurds. Under the Iraqi Constitution ratified in 2005, the federal government shall distribute “oil and gas revenues in a fair manner in proportion to the population distribution”, which was set at 17%.<sup>136</sup> But in January 2014 the Baghdad government stopped sending the full amount to the KRG in response to an oil deal the KRG struck directly with Turkey without going through the central Iraqi Oil Ministry. The two parties recently came to a temporary agreement, with the central government providing money in exchange for Kurdish barrels, but the agreement “did not even touch on larger, thornier issues, including whether Baghdad will continue to allow the Kurds to export their own oil and who will control the rich Kirkuk oil field”.<sup>137</sup> The US, in a move to support the territorial integrity of Iraq, has backed the Iraqi government by effectively blacklisting the Kurdish oil, threatening that the sales may be considered illegal. Without outside buyers and allies, the KRG’s oil (or oil elsewhere in Kurdistan) is landlocked. So far, Turkey has been that ally for the KRG, but they agree with the US position that sales must be conducted according to the constitution, and would not be likely to continue to import the oil and allow access to ports such as Ceyhan in the event of an independent Kurdistan.<sup>138</sup> In Syria, the Rojava cantons have faced a similar problem. Currently blacklisted by the US and other states due to their connections with the terrorist-labelled PKK, they have resorted to selling their oil on the black market. The oil of Kurdistan would seem to offer a path towards independence with the economic independence it could bring; however, so far the actual process of selling the oil has shown the Kurds the interdependency of their situation with surrounding actors. These difficulties would apply to any Kurdish polity, as they can ultimately do nothing to change the

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<sup>136</sup> “Iraqi Constitution”, Article 112

<sup>137</sup> Hubbard

<sup>138</sup> Filkins, 53-4

location of Kurdistan. However, they are particularly acute for a state, which would have few of the local allies necessary to profit from oil.

- Centralization

Many of these issues come from the structural requirements of a state as a centralized and hierarchical set of institutions. Kurdish lands have always existed on the periphery of government regimes, from the days of the Persian and Ottoman Empires as well as the modern regional states. Early attempts to bring Kurds into the fray were frustrated by the rough, mountainous terrain of the region, the geographically dispersed distribution of Kurdish populations, and widespread tribalism which meant that the membership of a group of Kurds was often contingent upon the support of mutually antagonistic local leaders. Although demographic shifts towards greater population concentration and technological advances such as motor vehicles and telecommunications have greatly increased the accessibility of the region, it is now divided between four states and remains peripheral in all of them. The most important political structures for individual action have existed at a much more local level. The Kurdish nation has never known one overarching authority, but instead spent its entire history avoiding them.

The composition of the region itself presents difficulties in attempts at unification and centralization. The larger an area any one political venture tried to encompass, the more diverse in culture it will be and more likely to include groups that have feuded in the past. Over a broader territory, the centralized nature of a state would become very difficult to balance against these divisions. If a state was tied to Kurdish identity, it would have to define what form Kurdishness takes and how non-Kurds are represented. Also important are questions of distribution of wealth, particularly with regards to the region's resources. Any Kurdish state would naturally take interest in the management of the region's oil, but determining what to do

with it would most likely devolve into a rent-seeking competition, with various factions fighting over their piece of the pie. Although outright tribalism has receded as a feature of Kurdish society, many political movements are still organized very strongly around leaders and relational ties which could produce problematic levels of favoritism and nepotism and such as have already been alleged in the KRG. The formation of larger institutions, invested with larger resources and capacities, creates higher stakes for uses and abuses of those powers. A majoritarian government might result in a situation similar to Iraq, which has seen governments alternate from Shia to Sunni and the dividends of the state shift accordingly. Such concerns have led skeptics of secession and the formation of an independent state to invoke fears of greater intra-Kurdish fighting or a scenario of Balkanization<sup>139</sup> where an initial secession engenders further splits and overall greater destabilization of the region.<sup>140</sup> The institutional priorities of a state towards centralization of political decision-making, economic wealth and coercive capacities is contrary to the fractured composition of the region.

- *Summary*

When Kurdish nationalism is discussed, the conversation often revolves around the idea of an independent Kurdish state. The Kurds are often described as “the largest ethnic group without a state”, and in an area populated by nation-states they are seen as one nation but live in four different states. The formation of a Kurdish state would be seen by many as the vindication of years of oppression and a clear symbolic declaration of the Kurds achieving self-determination at last, nearly a century after Woodrow Wilson famously endorsed the doctrine in his Fourteen Points. By joining the state system, the Kurds might be able to reverse the political marginalization they have experienced in the regional state and emerge as a prominent actor on

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<sup>139</sup> The breakup of one unit into “smaller and often hostile units”, named after events in the Balkan peninsula following World War I (Merriam-Webster)

<sup>140</sup> Invisible Nation, 161

both the regional and global level. The notion of a Kurdish state has re-emerged in recent years in response to current events in the Middle East, with some scholars and politicians around the world endorsing the idea. If the Kurds were to create new institutions in response to their national grievances, much of the global community would expect them to take the form of a state.

However, the creation of a Kurdish state would not come as simply as redrawing the map. Difficulties which faced previous attempts such as the Sèvres region or the Republic of Mahabad, an independent Kurdish state are still present today. An independent Kurdish state would require some international allies, for economic and defense reasons. Currently, there are simply no attractive or reliable allies in the region, with the regional states opposed to Kurdish independence on principle and no great powers such as the United States interested in standing behind the Kurds. Besides, while powerful international actors such as the United States or Russia have proven important in terms of short-term military security, the Kurds have always been the first ones to be left behind in their negotiations, and have grown reasonably wary of putting all their eggs in one basket. Without international allies and with the assured opposition of the regional states, any attempts at secession would quickly come under attack.

Similarly, just as previous attempts to form Kurdish states were undermined by intra-Kurdish divisions over culture, allegiance and political beliefs, the modern condition of Kurdistan does not seem any more amenable to state formation. Although expressions of Kurdish identity have flourished as Kurds have slowly won greater cultural rights and gained the ability to communicate more with one another, there still exist deep fissures of language, religion, allegiance and political views. There also remains the issue of non-Kurds in the region: if the state is too based strictly based upon the Kurdish nation, these populations will become

marginalized and may resist the state project or be recruited by opponents of the Kurdish state (such as the regional states which lost territory). These divisions are particularly ill-suited for the centralized, top-down type of power wielded by a state, where important decisions about security, priorities and distribution must be made by a select few. Even in a parliamentary system, the rules of the game must be determined somehow, and a meeting of groups that have historically fought (religious and secular, neoliberal and socialist, Kurdish and Arab, Turkish, and Assyrian) sounds ripe for bitter fights over structure and or a situation of Balkanization. Already lacking foreign support, it is unclear how an independent state would even be able to achieve a level of domestic unity necessary for a functioning state.

The assumption of a Kurdish state is intertwined with the dominant narratives told about the Kurds as a people and about politics in general. The Kurds are known as a stateless people, and the nation-state is widely seen as the main viable option for political authority in the modern world. The situation in the Middle East today seems to share several similarities with the two most prominent attempts at a Kurdish state. A large-scale armed conflict (WWI & WWII then, the Syrian Civil War and rise of the Islamic State today) has diminished the coercive powers of regional governments which had suppressed movements towards Kurdish independence, and actors both within and without the region see potential benefit in inserting a novel Kurdish polity into the mix. However, in those cases the withdrawal of needed international support and an internal lack of cohesion within Kurdish society undermined both of these attempts. The situation today is not significantly different in these regards. While the idea of a Kurdish state is perhaps the neatest institutional solution, in fact it has the most barriers towards its creation and survival.

## **B. Federalism**

- *Definition*

One alternative to a unified and centralized state is federalism. As a structure, federalism refers to a system of government divided “between a unitary government with administrative decentralization and a confederacy composed of independent states that choose to coordinate their activity in some realms, such as defense or trade”.<sup>141</sup> At the state level, this form is most famously exhibited in the United States, where state governments operate at a different level of

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<sup>141</sup> Bednar & Parinandi

authority and with separate jurisdictions from the federal government, but is also practiced around the world in countries such as Canada, India or Switzerland. In a multinational or ethnically diverse state, the argument for federalism is that by making “the boundaries of the constituent federal units coincide with the boundaries of each ethnic group...the political unit of a given ethnic group can settle, without disturbing the rights of other ethnic groups, the question of...language” and other cultural issues.<sup>142</sup> As applied to the Kurdish case, this solution would grant regional autonomy to Kurdish areas in the regional states through the establishment of federal units. This model is most famously practiced by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, although similar models have been proposed but not enacted in the other regional states. As we shall see, the KRG enjoys a greater level of autonomy when compared to states in many other federal models such as the United States. However, they remain bound by the Iraqi Constitution, acknowledge the sovereign borders of the Iraqi state and are institutionally linked to the central government in other ways. Any new federal regions would share at least these characteristics of their relationship to a state.

- ***Federalism in Iraq: The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)***

As one of several states to emerge from the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire, Iraq was recognized from the beginning of its existence to be nationally heterogeneous. Its British-sculpted provisional constitution of 1921 asserted that “Iraq was composed of two ethnic groups- Arabs and Kurds- and that the Kurdish language had equal status with Arabic” in an optimistic attempt to keep the government pluralized.<sup>143</sup> Iraq’s Kurdish population was concentrated in its oil-rich north (See Fig. 5, p.125), which the British had deliberately sculpted the borders of Iraq

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<sup>142</sup> Glazer, 71

<sup>143</sup> Natali, 27

to include. Throughout the twentieth century, Kurds were alternately repressed or courted by various administrative schemes, as the central government shifted from a British mandate to a monarchy, to a nominal republic, and finally the period of Ba'ath rule under Saddam Hussein. However, from its beginning Iraq was viewed as a country divided between its Kurdish north and Arab South (which was in turn divided between Sunni and Shia Islam). As such, the problem of Kurdish rule arose early and often.

Initially, progress seemed to be made in 1970 when the region was granted token autonomy in an agreement with the government of Iraq (GOI), but the decades that followed saw a pattern of uprisings by the Kurds and repressive measures by Hussein's regime, including the al-Anfal campaign near the end of the Iran-Iraq war infamous for its use of chemical weapons against Iraqi Kurds. However, the history of Iraq's Kurds entered a new chapter during the First Gulf War. Near the end of the war, with the Iraqi military devastated, the Kurds staged an apparently spontaneous uprising<sup>144</sup> in early 1991, resulting in the expulsion of GOI administrators and clashes between Iraqi military forces and peshmerga fighters.<sup>145</sup> After the war ended, the Iraqi military regrouped and prepared for a counter-offensive to retake the region. The governments of the US-led Coalition came under harsh criticism for protecting Kuwaiti oil interests while potentially allowing Saddam to commit further atrocities against the Kurds. In response to this, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 688 on April 5<sup>th</sup>, which condemned "the repression of the Iraqi civilian population...including most recently in Kurdish-populated areas",<sup>146</sup> followed shortly after by the Coalition initiative "Operation Provide Comfort". Initially conceived as a humanitarian relief project to deal with the refugee crisis (fearing a repeat of al-

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<sup>144</sup> The uprising was allegedly inspired by broadcasts of speeches by President H. W. Bush which tacitly implied there was "another way" to deal with Saddam--namely that the people of Iraq rise up. After the war ended, administration officials backpedaled, saying they didn't necessarily mean Iraqis should do so right away.

<sup>145</sup> McDowell, 371-3.

<sup>146</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 688, Iraq

Anfal, hundreds of thousands of Kurds had begun fleeing for the border with Turkey), Coalition forces airdropped food and medical supplies to cities in northern Iraq. The United States had been hesitant to re-enter the country, considering the war over, but decided it “would rather inflict the refugee crisis back on Saddam than...Turkey”, in addition to wishing to avoid further criticism from the international community.<sup>147</sup> This led to a military intervention in the form of declaring a no-fly zone north of the 36<sup>th</sup> parallel in Iraq enforced by American and French air forces, forbidding Iraqi military forces to conduct operations within the zone, which remained in effect until the Second Gulf War began in 2003.

With the relative security enabled by the no-fly zone, the Kurdish region was able to develop its own political structures. Since its inception, the KRG has been dominated by two political parties: The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which are linked to the two most influential families in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Barzanis and Talabanis respectively.<sup>148</sup> The KRG got off to a rocky start, with the results first parliamentary elections held in 1992 being contested. In order to settle this, the two parties agreed to a power-sharing agreement that “exhibited stability for only as long as the two main parties refrained from fighting”, but which fell apart in 1994, resulting in a three-year armed conflict marked by an absence of coherent governance.<sup>149</sup> However, since the parties made peace in 1997, the government has functioned smoothly, holding periodical elections (most recently in 2013). Under the new Iraqi Constitution signed in 2005, the Kurds were able to win even greater claims vis-à-vis the central government, including a greater share of oil revenues for the KRG and a

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<sup>147</sup> Lawrence, 58

<sup>148</sup> These parties represent other divisions in Iraqi Kurdistan as well. The KDP is concentrated in the northwest of the KRG’s territory, the PUK in the southeast. Each party has their own units in the peshmerga forces, and there are some lingual divides between the two regions.

<sup>149</sup> Stansfield, 98.

provision which gave local law precedence over federal law in conflicts.<sup>150</sup> The relief from attacks from the Iraqi government provided by American military intervention allowed the region to develop its own institutional culture independent from the state.

In this period of relative stability, the KRG has adopted many of the institutional trappings of a state without technically compromising the borders of Iraq. The peshmerga forces have become a formal defense force, with Iraqi military forces not permitted in the area under normal circumstances. Independent elections are held for local KRG positions, while the region participates in national elections as well. The government collects its own taxes, and has wholeheartedly welcomed the economic prosperity driven by foreign investment within its borders, as evidenced by the thirty some multinational corporations (including major players such as ExxonMobil and Chevron) working within Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>151</sup> A section on the KRG's website entitled "The Kurdistan Region In Brief" notes that "Foreign visitors are warmly welcomed. Among the growing number of visitors are international media and business people" and that "A new, liberal foreign investment law was ratified in June 2006, providing incentives for foreign investors such as the possibility of owning land, up to ten-year tax holidays, and easy repatriation of profits".<sup>152</sup> The KRG publicly prides itself on its capitalistic success and clearly prioritizes this status. In a speech in June 2014 outlining the program of the newly sworn in cabinet, Prime Minister Barzani almost immediately noted with regret how frictions with the central government were having "a negative impact on Kurdistan's economy and investment".<sup>153</sup> The KRG even conducts limited unilateral international relations, meeting with leaders from Turkey, the United States and other regional powers regularly. The freedom of a federal model

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<sup>150</sup> Filkins, 48

<sup>151</sup> "The Fight Of Their Lives"

<sup>152</sup> "The Kurdistan Region In Brief"

<sup>153</sup> "Programme of the Cabinet"

has allowed the Kurdish region of Iraq to develop own economic, political, military and diplomatic structures connected only tenuously, if at all, to the central GOI.

This independent streak has not always sat well with the central government, and recent developments have amplified the rift between the KRG and GOI. Early encounters between ISIS fighters and Iraqi military forces usually ended in the Iraqi army fleeing, resulting in a state of affairs where the KRG has managed its own defense with its peshmerga almost since the beginning of the conflict. The failure of the Iraqi army to muster a strong defense has resulted in important gains in Kurdish-claimed territory, most notably extending to the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. The city has historically been claimed by both the KRG and the GOI, and was “jointly overseen by the peshmerga and the Iraqi Army—and, until 2011, by American soldiers”.<sup>154</sup> In early June 2014, ISIS advanced on Kirkuk, and the six Iraqi Army divisions guarding the town dissipated. Recognizing the strategic importance of keeping Kirkuk out of IS hands, the secretary of the Iraqi Prime Minister called the Kurdish leadership to request that they seize control of the city before ISIS did, reportedly saying “It would be a good thing if you moved in”.<sup>155</sup> While the future of the area is uncertain, it remains under KRG control, with peshmerga soldiers operating checkpoints around the city, despite claims by Baghdad it does not belong to the Kurds.<sup>156</sup> This conflict reveals that final consensus has not been reached over what should constitute the limits of the Kurdish region and the KRG’s authority.

A bigger sign of friction came this year over Iraq’s oil revenues. Under the Iraqi Constitution ratified in 2005, the federal government shall distribute “oil and gas revenues in a fair manner in proportion to the population distribution”.<sup>157</sup> This had historically meant that the

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<sup>154</sup> “The Fight Of Their Lives”

<sup>155</sup> “The Fight Of Their Lives”

<sup>156</sup> “Iraqi Minister: Kurds Cannot Define Kirkuk Borders.”

<sup>157</sup> “Full Text of Iraqi Constitution”, Article 109.

KRG received 17% of Iraq's gross oil revenue; however, in January 2014 the Baghdad government stopped sending the full amount to the KRG in response to an oil deal the KRG struck with Turkey directly rather than going through the central Iraqi Oil Ministry. The two parties recently came to a temporary agreement, with the central government providing money in exchange for Kurdish barrels, but the agreement "did not even touch on larger, thornier issues, including whether Baghdad will continue to allow the Kurds to export their own oil and who will control the rich Kirkuk oil field".<sup>158</sup> The issue of Kurdish oil exports are critical to the autonomy of the KRG- it represents both its primary source of revenue, but also the ways in which it has begun to exercise sovereign economic powers by entering into contracts with foreign nations and oil companies.

These conflicts, as well as the relative autonomy enjoyed by the KRG, have brought talk of independence nearly since the beginning of the federal arrangement. Publicly, the KRG has presented a mixed stance. For many years, especially after the Second Gulf War, the Kurds stressed that they were committed to a cohesive Iraq, seeing the support of America behind the idea and not wishing to incite conflict with its neighbors. However, the topic has resurfaced in recent years as the façade of Iraqi unity has weakened. Contemporary international discussion of an independent Kurdish state (such the headlines mentioned in the introduction) has largely been focused upon Iraq's Kurds, which already have a defined territory and government. The KRG has shown signs of interest as well. In July of 2014, KRG Prime Minister Barzani spoke to the BBC about holding an independence referendum, saying:

Everything that's happened recently shows that it's the right of Kurdistan to achieve independence...From now on, we won't hide that that's our goal. Iraq is effectively partitioned now. Are we supposed to stay in this tragic situation the country's living? It's

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<sup>158</sup> "Iraq and Kurds Reach Deal on Oil Exports and Budget Payments"

not me who will decide on independence. It's the people. We'll hold a referendum and it's a matter of months.<sup>159</sup>

In the light of the escalating threat posed by ISIS and the passage of the oil deal, Kurdish leaders have since backpedaled on this stance, speaking of “changed priorities” and a focus on providing security for all.<sup>160</sup> However, the cat cannot exactly go back in the bag- Barzani’s remarks clearly show that independence is on the minds of Iraq’s Kurds, at both a popular and governmental level. For now, however, the KRG persists as the face of Kurdish authority at a federal, non-state level.

- *Federalism in Other States*

Federalism has been mentioned as an option for the Kurds in Iran, Syria and Turkey for several decades. Historically, it has never been actively attempted in these states, but the relative longevity and stability of the KRG has given the idea more momentum. In Iran, parties such as the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran and Komala have advocated for federalism as a way to resolve the Kurdish question, but have faced hostility from the government which has tended to view “claims to self-determination...as a national security issue...rather than as a political question requiring a response”.<sup>161</sup> This attitude, coupled with the close linkages between religion and the government where religion “is used as a basis for identification within the state”, makes it seem that a federalist model is unlikely in Iran in the near future.<sup>162</sup> In Turkey, federalism has been proposed by a variety of groups but has been traditionally shot down by the state over fears of the potential influence of rightist Islamic parties in such a system, as well as charges that federalism for the Kurds would be the first step towards secession.<sup>163</sup> However, the idea has re-

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<sup>159</sup> "Iraq Kurdistan Referendum Planned."

<sup>160</sup> "Kurdish Push for Independence Derailed by ISIS?"

<sup>161</sup> Sharifi, 62

<sup>162</sup> Sahriji, 65

<sup>163</sup> Örmeci

emerged in recent proposals for Turkey to transition to a presidentialist model, but this could likely only be achieved if there were limitations on the level of Kurdish autonomy as to assuage fears of secession. In Syria, the idea has not been as widely supported, but has been proposed by several observers as an eventual resolution to the civil war.<sup>164</sup> Generally, as multinational states have begun to disintegrate in the Middle East, the logic of federalism has seemed more attractive as a solution to problems such as the ‘Kurdish question’.

- *Advantages of Federalism*

The KRG has established itself as one of the most prominent and visible reflections of Kurdish politics and self-determination. While it is by no means universally supported by Kurds in the other regional states (or even within Iraq), it has raised hopes for the possibility of coexistence and self-determination without formal secession. As such, when discussing Kurdish federalism in other states, the KRG is impossible to ignore and often responsible for the conversation happening in the first place. While other such federal regions would surely take various different forms based on the particular situation of the state and people, the core of the federal model clearly holds some attractions for peoples seeking self-determination.

- *Cultural Expression & Self-Determination*

The history of the regional states demonstrates the challenge faced by centralized nation-states to peacefully integrate minority populations within their territory. When these minority populations are geographically concentrated, this can be especially challenging, as they may begin to organize politically and present a challenge to the state, perhaps going as far as to attempt secession. Federalism seeks to recognize such minority cultural units and grant them political power without resorting to total independence. A federal system is thereby “informed by the desire to acknowledge, protect, and encourage diversity within [a given territory], while at

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<sup>164</sup> Moradi

the same time maintaining the territorial integrity of the state”.<sup>165</sup> For instance, one of the most prominent and recurring conflicts between the regional states and their Kurdish populations is the use of the Kurdish language. A federal region would allow Kurdish citizens to interact with their government in their own language and not fear retribution for publishing or broadcasting in their own language. As the cultural differences which divide the regional states as well as the Kurdish nation tend to fall along geographic fault lines, there is a certain logic to distributing political institutions amongst concentrations of various cultural units. A federal model devolves questions of culture to a level below the state and all the problems that accompany it.

A similar logic is at play with the relationship between federalism and the principles of autonomy and self-determination. The creation of a federal territory implies some right to self-rule for its citizens that could not or is not being represented through the central state. This is in line with the traditional concept of popular sovereignty, but in this case “the expression of this sovereignty is tied to the existence and entrenchment of regional, territorial units”.<sup>166</sup> In the ideal scenario, this corresponds to a sub-state nation, such as Quebec in Canada; however, the Kurds present an interesting case of a nation that resides in several different states. Still, given the fact that there tends to exist greater solidarity among Kurds within a single state than all of Kurdistan, it is not wholly illogical to talk of the right to self-determination of Kurds in Iraq or Turkey. While any one federal unit such as the KRG does not resolve the question of national self-determination for all Kurds, it can be seen as a mechanism to enfranchise the Kurds in any one given state.

- *State-Like but not a State*

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<sup>165</sup> Guibernau, 50

<sup>166</sup> Guibernau, 52

A federal model offers autonomy and structural benefits provided by a state without formally being a state. This is attractive in the Kurdish case, as many countries in the region are steadfast in their opposition to an independent Kurdish state. The fact that KRG has existed for as long as it has without being invaded is a testament to this balancing act (as well as the efficiency of the no-fly zone in limiting the GOI's influence). By existing in a grey area of sovereignty, the Kurds of Iraq have been able to create "a country in everything but name, and [in a way that] none of the neighbors could accuse them of trying to redraw the map".<sup>167</sup> By the Montevideo Convention, the KRG is all but a state, having its own population, defined territory (although this has changed in the wake of IS) and government which rules the territory and population; it does not fully conduct its own foreign relations with other states, in many cases working through the Iraqi government, but it has undertaken independent interactions with important actors such as Turkey, the United States and international oil companies. Even a less independent federal region in another state would be able to reorient local political, military and economic institutions towards greater Kurdish participation.

The flipside of non-independence is that it grants sub-state groups with the wealth of resources and military protection enjoyed by the whole state.<sup>168</sup> The KRG is actually not the best example of this, as it has its own military and oil reserves, but this has held true in other federal models like America or Switzerland. But a Kurdish federal region in Iran, Syria or Turkey could hypothetically manage their own local affairs while being represented by a central government in international affairs, and all the benefits that state status bring to that realm. This has not historically been the case, as the states have used their large capacities to suppress Kurdish interests rather than advocate for them, but with local management of domestic affairs and the

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<sup>167</sup> Lawrence, 321

<sup>168</sup> Hechter, 140

increased attention on the Kurdish people by the international community, a better relationship is conceivable. In the KRG and other hypothetical federal units, the structure of a federation allows local cultural units to express themselves and enjoy limited self-rule, but do so without giving up the benefits of state membership or antagonize states through secession.

- *Disadvantages of Federalism*

- Limited/Arbitrary Definition of Federal Unit

One of the thorniest issues with the formation of a federation is deciding what constitutes a single unit within the system, and making sure that definition is seen as legitimate. It has already been noted how federalism is at best a partial solution in the Kurdish case, as it can only achieve meaningful change for Kurds within a given state, and as such no federal unit would ever be able to incorporate all of Greater Kurdistan. Even if all four regional states were to grant federal autonomy to their Kurds, these federal units would still be limited in their ability to coordinate with one another due to their incorporation into the regional states, and would likely grant more momentum to calls for full independence. These challenges aside, it is not clear how the limits of a federal unit within a given state should be defined. Should the issue be put to a state-wide referendum, or perhaps only one within the proposed region (and if so, who gets to define what is in the region?) In the case of the KRG, the region's boundary was determined to a large extent by the no-fly zone, and negotiations with the GOI while the no-fly zone was still in effect. However, these boundaries proved controversial, as both sides felt they were losing too much- in particular, Kirkuk remains a contested area, formally belonging to the GOI but now under KRG control. Similar situations seem likely in the other states and would not have an explicit boundary like the no-fly zone to begin from.

Another common critique of federal systems, especially ones drawn upon cultural lines, is the threat of further divisions or Balkanization. By segregating different political units based on their culture, federalism can work to highlight differences, both between sub-state units (“Here is the Kurdish federal state, there is the Arab federal state”) as well as within them (“This is the Kurdish federal state but I am not a Kurd”). Such internal divisions have reared their head in the KRG recently, where Arabs have faced displacement from their land and travel restrictions after returning in the wake of ISIS attacks in the area.<sup>169</sup> Supporters of federalism further argue that by granting limited cultural rights, such a system should reduce the pressure for self-determination by granting limited rights, such as language rights, and therefore reduce the tension between cultural minorities and the state.<sup>170</sup> Critics of federalism counter that enshrining cultural difference leads down the path towards secession rather than coexistence and assimilation, pointing to examples such as Bangladesh’s exit from Pakistan or the dissolution of Yugoslavia into seven independent states.<sup>171</sup> Massoud Barzani’s remarks upon “the right of Kurdistan to achieve independence” seem to give credence for fears that federalism has only acted as a stepping stone for full independence. The very nature of these issues is related to the quasi-sovereignty of federal units and final resolutions to such questions seem elusive.

- *State-like but not a State*

Shrinking the geographic scope of a state-like institution does not change some of the fundamental qualities of state power. Several of the issues identified as problems with the state still exist at the federal level. The most prominent issue in the Kurdish case is the tendency towards centralization. By functioning as a state within a state, it is inevitable that aspects of the state apparatus become geographically concentrated. The KRG demonstrates some of the

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<sup>169</sup> “Iraqi Kurdistan: Arabs Displaced, Cordoned Off, Detained”

<sup>170</sup> Hechter, 142-143

<sup>171</sup> Anderson, 6-8

challenges with this- when the split between the PUK and KDP reached a civil war in the 1990s, the region had two separate capitals, government bureaucracies and military forces which did not cooperate with one another. Unless the federal regions were very small, it seems likely that the issues of divisions which face any state in the region would face any new federal units, as they have the KRG. Another is the issue of tying oil wealth to government institutions, potentially resulting in a petro-state; this scenario is discussed below under specific challenges to the KRG, but given a state-enough-like structure could play out in a federal unit in Syria or Turkey as well. By maintaining the state's emphasis on centralization, federalism runs into difficulties in succeeding in Kurdistan.

Additionally, because the government of a federal region is not the central government, it creates a warped set of incentives for local political leaders. When a federal unit is also conceived as a cultural one, as is the case with the KRG and likely would be for any new Kurdish federal unit, leaders within the unit who wish to gain local power are encouraged to play up nationalist sentiment to garner popular support, and provides these leaders with patronage and other political and economic resources which can be put towards these ends.<sup>172</sup> This structure can also encourage conflict with the central government, especially if the federal unit is seen as too separate from it: if the top of the federal region is as high as the ladder of advancement goes, political leaders will identify themselves primarily with the federal unit and will not see themselves as “stakeholders committed to the maintenance of the central regime”.<sup>173</sup> While this has not necessarily been the case with the KRG, with the notable presence of Jalal Talabani of the PUK as the President of Iraq from 2005 to 2014, there has certainly been no shortage of conflict between the KRG and GOI, with remarks on both sides often taking on an “us vs. them”

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<sup>172</sup> Hechter, 141

<sup>173</sup> Hechter, 141

dimension. The emphasis on a cultural unit distinct from that of the overall state acts a source of friction between federal territories and the state.

- *Concerns Specific to the KRG*

In addition to these difficulties which would apply to any new federal units, the KRG already faces several issues deriving from its structure and institutions. These concerns provide an important perspective for the viability of federalism as a solution not just for the Kurds of Iraq, but also Kurds in the other regional states as the KRG is held up as a model of the concept.

- *Oligarchy & Tribalism*

Although the KRG represents a major milestone for Kurdish autonomy by being the longest-lived recognized polity populated and governed for the most part by Kurds, this does not translate to an airtight claim of the fulfillment of self-determination by the Kurds within its borders. In particular, the KRG has consistently been plagued by complaints from that it remains tied to tribal power structures and functions as a form of oligarchy. The most noticeable embodiment of this is the virtual partition of the region between the two most prominent families, the Barzanis and Talabanis. The two families are linked to the KDP and PUK political parties respectively, and have historically occupied many of the prominent positions in the KRG. Many Kurds within the KRG perceive the two parties as wracked by corruption and as having shaped the region's economy into an extremely unequal one, with connections to the party machines being essential for success. Dexter Filkins, writing for *The New Yorker*, encountered two Kurds willing to speak on the issue when he travelled there in 2014:

“It took [Shunas Hussein, a Kurdish university student] only a few minutes to launch into a tirade against Barzani and Talabani. “Those two families have conquered Kurdistan – they own everything... If you look at almost any company, you will see that it is owned either by the two families or by people very close to them. Every single person in Kurdistan knows this.”

“A wealthy Kurdish businessman with ties to both parties explained that they began as guerrilla armies and changed gradually into giant family businesses, gathering power and wealth and shunning anyone who tried to change the conversation....“All these buildings you see around you,” the businessman told me, gesturing to the high-rises that puncture Erbil’s [the capital of the KRG] skyline. “They are owned by a hundred people. Those hundred people work for ten people. The ten people work for three.”<sup>174</sup>

This perception has damaged the KRG’s relationship with Kurds in other countries, as well as led to the rise of a third party known as the Movement for Change which critiques the existing two-party order. Protests organized by the Movement for Change were initially faced with a strong police presence and several deaths, demonstrating the threat such an idea poses to the status quo.<sup>175</sup> The party made serious gains in the most recent parliamentary election in 2013, gaining nearly a quarter of the seats and outperforming the PUK<sup>176</sup>; what remains to be seen is how effective they will be at addressing corruption within the government. The state-like centralization of the federal model, combined with the tribal legacy of Kurdish society, creates the potential for the political and economic benefits meant for the Kurds as a group to be divided among a few individuals atop the system.

- *Oil/Petro-State*

These structural aspects have had particularly significant implications for the region’s oil. The KRG’s oil reserves are often touted as one of the keys to its independence, and certainly the region’s oil is rich enough to make a lot of money. However, the history of the discovery of oil in other countries such as Venezuela or Nigeria has demonstrated the potential double-edged nature of oil wealth and its effect on political and economic systems, which can lead to the creation of what some scholars call a petro-state. Terry Lynn Karl identifies an ‘extractive’ state, of which a petro-state is an extreme form of, as having five unique qualities:

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<sup>174</sup> Filkins, 54-55

<sup>175</sup> Ali

<sup>176</sup> Movement for Change actually started as a splinter party of the PUK, but its support base tends to be younger and less connected than the PUK’s

- “1. Mining states are economically dependent on a single resource
2. Mining states depend on an industrial sector that is highly capital-intensive and that is an enclave
3. Mining states rely upon a primary commodity that is depletable
4. Mining countries and especially oil exporters are dependent on a resource capable of generating extraordinary rents
5. In developing countries mineral rents accrue directly to the state”<sup>177</sup>

The KRG exhibits all of these qualities. It is certainly economically dependent on oil, as its budget comes from 17% of the GOI’s budget, which in turn comes from Iraq’s oil (of which Iraqi Kurdistan possessed about 17% of). Oil extraction meets conditions 2-4, and in the case of the KRG this money is distributed through the government. The danger in a petro-state scenario is at least twofold: first, that it encourages unsustainable economic policies on the part of government. Flush with cash, petro-states embark on ambitious development programs. When oil revenues decline, they take on foreign debt rather than seek alternate revenue streams, such as raising taxes (how can you justify a tax raise when everyone knows the country has so much oil?) or other domestic sectors of industry. Secondly, it incentivizes negative behavior on the part of government actors. Without robust institutions and a culture of accountability, a petro-state risks being infected with corruption and rent-seeking, with every leader and group seeking to get their piece of the pie. The KRG has every sign of evolving into a petro-state, which has historically had troubling impacts on a region’s economic and political spheres.

There are already signs of such fears being justified. The distribution of oil revenues is perceived as opaque, with some Iraqi Kurds complaining that “no one knows where the money is going”.<sup>178</sup> On a general scale, the expansion of oil has certainly been relatively good to the region. Under Ba’athist rule, it was excluded from international trade and endemic with poverty. In the years following the Second Gulf War, its relative security has led to a flurry of activity

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<sup>177</sup> Karl, 46-49

<sup>178</sup> Filkins, 55

from multinational corporations, strong growth rate and rising GDP per capita, consistently outperforming the rest of Iraq.<sup>179</sup> However, there still exist large disparities of wealth within Iraqi Kurdistan, with a select class of connected individuals drive imported cars and commission lavish construction projects while much of the region remains poor. However, considering the KRG's reputation for hostility towards criticism and the history of its Persian Gulf neighbors such as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, a purely kleptocratic case such as Nigeria might be less likely than one which makes "its people rich but [gives] them little role in governing themselves... "Everyone lives comfortably as long as they keep their mouths shut"". <sup>180</sup> The emergence of a third party came in response to perceived ideological domination by the existing two parties, which have repeatedly been accused of repressing protests and resisting inroads from other Kurdish organizations. The parties' control of the security apparatus and systems of economic distribution, combined with the assured future wealth of the region's oil, seem to have instilled petro-state incentives within the leadership of the KRG, as they have in many other states in the Middle East.

- *Summary*

The creation of a Kurdish unit within a state federation has been proposed as a middle route between complete independence and complete repression. This idea has gained particular momentum in the last couple decades due to the creation and sustained existence of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq. The adoption of a federal system as a resolution to the claims of Kurdish nationalism has several appeals. It allows for a government structure which acknowledges and embraces Kurdish culture, something the central governments

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<sup>179</sup> "Overview: Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Economy"

<sup>180</sup> Filkins, 55

of the regional states have thus far proven unwilling to do. Significantly, it accomplishes this in a way that the regional states do not view as being as threatening to their own territorial integrity as full independence. However, this model has problems of its own. In any conventional system of federation, a level of centrality and bureaucratization similar to a state still occurs, just at a smaller level, which could prove difficult to implement (and initially was in the KRG). There also exist challenges towards the creation of the territory that is mutually agreeable to both a Kurdish population and the regional state they reside in (not to mention non-Kurds within the territory), and ensuring that its segregation does not lead to more divisive expressions of nationalism or a trend towards secession. The KRG also poses challenges of implementing pseudo-state institutions onto the complex fabric of Kurdish society and dealing with the challenge of oil extraction, leading to complaints of oligarchy, corruption, and being a petro-state. While federalism seems to be a political solution for greater cultural expression, it still faces many of the same challenges as a state model for being implemented in the Kurdish case, and does not necessarily lead to true self-determination on the part of the Kurdish masses.

### **C. Decentralized Regional Autonomy & Democratic Confederalism**

The final institutional solution with clear relevance to the Kurdish case is a relatively new concept called democratic confederalism. This term was coined by Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and describes a radical alternative to the mechanisms of the state. As a structure, democratic confederalism aims to devolve authority to the municipal level, drawing upon the ideas of Murray Bookchin that democracy functions best at a local level. Today, Kurds in three pockets of Northern Syria under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) have begun to implement democratic confederalism in their communities amidst the ongoing civil war and attacks from ISIS. However, its bottom-up structure and focus on self-sufficiency could provide an answer for other parts of Kurdistan, as well as for Rojava in the long-term. As the concept is more unfamiliar than a state or federation, this section explains the evolution of the PKK and the parallel development of the idea to give a full definition. This is

followed by a description of events in Rojava and an analysis of democratic confederalism as a structural arrangement vis-à-vis Kurdish grievances.

▪ ***History of the PKK & Definition of Democratic Confederalism***

The story of democratic confederalism begins with the story of Abdullah Öcalan. Öcalan was a Turkish-born Kurd educated in Ankara during the peak of an era of heightened sectarian violence in Turkey between left- and right-wing groups. Öcalan initially felt sympathy with leftist groups; however, within these groups, the “Kurdish question” was usually subsumed to the larger issue of overall social revolution, and Öcalan sought a movement that would address Kurdish grievances directly. In 1975 he cut ties with the left and departed Ankara with six of his friends for the majority-Kurdish southeast of Turkey, where they began recruiting followers for what would become known as the as the Kurdish Workers Party.<sup>181</sup> The movement was something of an outlier in the history of Kurdish political organization in that its support base was drawn largely from the poor working class, rather than attracting the support of local tribal or religious and securing their sub-followings as most previous groups had done.<sup>182</sup> The PKK was further unusual among Kurdish organizations at the time for its secular and anti-tribal tendencies, which were informed by the group’s roots in communist ideology. The transition of the group to a formal political-party-cum-guerilla-movement in 1978 was shortly followed by a manifesto which described the PKK as “a revolutionary party of proletariat and peasants of Kurdistan...under the guidance of scientific socialism” in the vein of the armed Marxist-Leninist groups popular in the 1960s.<sup>183</sup> However, the PKK distanced themselves from other Marxist groups within the Turkish left with an emphasis on Kurdishness, essentially superimposing “a

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<sup>181</sup> Romano, 70

<sup>182</sup> McDowall, 420

<sup>183</sup> Özcan, 86

Kurdish ethno-nationalist ideology onto its leftist revolutionary framework”.<sup>184</sup> Scholar Ali

Kemal Özcan summarizes the manifesto’s main points as the following:

- “-Kurdistan is an inter-state colony
- The Kurdistan revolution shall be a national and democratic one, and the ultimate end would, in long term, be the socialist revolution with an uninterrupted transition to a ‘classless and non-exploitative society’
- The revolution’s political objective is to establish an independent, united and democratic Kurdistan
- The primary social base and the leading class of the revolution have to be...the working class. The secondary social base of the revolution and senior ally of the working class are the peasantry and the urban petty bourgeois
- The targets of the revolution are the conquerors of Kurdistan (the Turkish state) and its native feudal-collaborators, and the imperialist powers behind them
- The all-in-one use of ideological, political and military forms of the struggle is necessary for the success of the national liberation of the colony Kurdistan”<sup>185</sup>

This manifesto served as the group’s main articulation of its worldview for the first phase of its existence. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, they waged a campaign of targeted violence within Turkish Kurdistan, attempting to show the fragility of state control and using a strategy of ‘propaganda of the deed’.<sup>186</sup> This period of the conflict was marked by brutality on both sides and resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of people. The Turkish state carried out a military campaign against the Kurdish south-east, which utilized tactics such as aerial bombardment, forced relocation, the destruction of over 3000 Kurdish villages, and the targeted assassinations of PKK leaders.<sup>187</sup> Meanwhile, the PKK targeted isolated security forces and Kurds who supported the government, including local elites and members of the “Village Guards”, groups of Kurds armed by the Turkish state to keep the PKK out. The PKK utilized tactics such as car bombs and kidnapping or extortion and targeted civilians they perceived as giving aid to the government. These tactics, as well as charges of drug smuggling to finance its operations, have

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<sup>184</sup> Eccarius-Kelly, 93

<sup>185</sup> Özcan, 87. Here I am quoting Özcan’s analysis of the manifesto, not the manifesto itself, as I was unable to find a copy in English.

<sup>186</sup> McDowall, 422

<sup>187</sup> Kemal Cengiz

led to the PKK being designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey, and since 1997, the US State Department.<sup>188</sup> In its early years, the PKK acted as a Marxist-Leninist guerilla movement with an ethno-nationalist agenda of Kurdish secession from the Turkish state.

The capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 by the Turkish government proved a decisive turning point in PKK tactics. Almost immediately, the PKK adopted a unilateral cease-fire which would last for 5 years. When the insurgency began anew in 2004, the PKK no longer attempted to hold territory, preferring hit-and-run tactics, and disavowing the killing of non-combatants. In shifting their tactics, the PKK seemed to still be taking cues from Öcalan. Although he was initially sentenced to death<sup>189</sup> (), he has continued to write books and publish opinions, acting as the ideological figurehead for the PKK. He has repeatedly emphasized the importance of peaceful negotiations, asserting that a political resolution is the only viable path and that armed resistance, while it has been an important tool in the Kurds' struggle, will not ultimately conclude the conflict. More recently, there has been attempts at a peace process between the Turkish government, Öcalan and the leadership of the PKK, but this has been complicated by developments in Syria and Iraq. The capture of Öcalan acted as the catalyst for a transformation in the PKK's strategy.

The change in tactics was accompanied by a change in goals and ideology for the PKK. As the 1990s brought the collapse of the Soviet system, Öcalan's writings had already begun to abandon classical Marxist language and overtly nationalist sentiments, opting instead for "more universal and philosophical concepts such as 'humanization', 'socialization', 'human emancipation' ...[or] 'pure human being'".<sup>190</sup> In drifting away from the group's Marxist origins,

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<sup>188</sup> "Foreign Terrorist Organizations"

<sup>189</sup> His punishment was later commuted into a life sentence after Turkey abandoned the death penalty in 2004 as part of its bid for EU membership

<sup>190</sup> Özcan, 95

Öcalan came to reject the goal of an independent Kurdish nation-state, arguing it would only further their oppression:

“We will see now why the foundation of a separate Kurdish nation-state does not make sense for the Kurds. Over the last decades the Kurds have struggled against repression by the dominant powers and for the recognition of their existence but also for the liberation of their society from the grip of feudalism. Hence it does not make sense to replace the old chains by new ones or even enhance the repression... The solution to the Kurdish question, therefore, needs to be found in an approach that weakens the capitalist modernity or pushes it back”<sup>191</sup>

Instead of a state, he has expressed support for what he terms “democratic confederalism”, the main inspiration for which he cites as Murray Bookchin. Bookchin was a far-left political thinker who proved difficult to pin down, at times embracing labels including anarchist, libertarian and socialism, before settling on “Communalism”, a term of his own invention. He was also highly concerned with the state of the environment in modern society and was very influential in the ecology movement. As Öcalan began to read Bookchin’s ideas and encourage his followers to do the same, the PKK abandoned its original goal of an independent Kurdish nation-state.<sup>192</sup>

Bookchin’s primary ideological influence upon Öcalan and the PKK stems from the two related concepts of Communalism and libertarian municipalism. Communalism grew out of Bookchin’s perception that modern society had outgrown Marx’s binary class divide between bourgeoisie and proletariat, with changes in social relations, agriculture, transportation and urbanization having replaced the ‘traditional’ working class with “a largely petty-bourgeois stratum whose mentality is marked by its own bourgeois utopianism of “consumption for the sake of consumption””.<sup>193</sup> He thought that previous leftist traditions such as anarchism and communism had gotten some things right, such as the basic project of Marxism to reorganize society towards socialism, or anarchism’s commitment to anti-statism and confederalism and

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<sup>191</sup> Öcalan 19

<sup>192</sup> Biehl, “Bookchin, Öcalan, and the Dialectics of Democracy”

<sup>193</sup> Bookchin, 82

recognition of hierarchy as a problem to be overcome through society. However, he thought that these traditions were also burdened by their own pasts and offered inadequate plans for action, like Marxism's goal to seize the state and utilize it for 'good' and the history of authoritarianism that accompanied that effort, or the intense individualism of modern anarchism. Much like Öcalan's dissatisfaction with the answers offered by the Turkish Left, Bookchin turned to create his own ideas after being disappointed by what the Left in the West had to offer.

With his theory of Communalism, Bookchin wanted to reorient the popular view of politics, which for many people occurred through the state and actually functioned highly removed from their daily lives. He thought that the best way to do this was to form polities at the level of the city or municipality, as a community of this size is the most rational one for face-to-face democracy—small enough that the actions of one member often directly impact another, but big enough to include strangers who do not feel too far removed. Bookchin wanted to replace distant state and state-like institutions with local democratic assemblies with municipal jurisdictions, at a level where individuals would feel invested in the choices faced by their communities. This would be paired with a reform of the economy:

“Its aim is not to nationalize the economy or retain private ownership of the means of production but to *municipalize* the economy. [Communalism] seeks to integrate the means of production into the existential life of the municipality, such that every productive enterprise falls under the purview of the local assembly, which decides how it will function to meet the interests of the community as a whole. The separation between life and work, so prevalent in the modern capitalist economy, must be overcome....workers of different occupations would take their seats in popular assemblies not as *workers* – printers, plumbers, foundry workers and the like, with special occupational interests to advance – but as *citizens*, whose overriding concern should be the *general interest* of the society in which they live.”<sup>194</sup>

By bringing the economic and political spheres back into the local realm and within the control of society, communities would be able to achieve a level of autonomy unknown since the advent

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<sup>194</sup> Bookchin, 103-104. Italics in original.

of the nation-state and market capitalism. Bookchin takes pains to distinguish his position of Communalism from anarchism, with which it shares several aspects. He states that ventures favored by anarchists, such as food co-ops or print shops, tend to form focused but limited communities, Communalism seeks to create “an important center of power – the municipal council- and try to compel it to create legislatively potent neighborhood assemblies”.<sup>195</sup> This type of institution, combined with the use of majority voting as the principle of decision-making, stands in contrast to many modern anarchists’ preference for consensus.

Of course, there exist plenty of matters that require coordination beyond the level of one municipality, such as issues of security, environmental sustainability, long-distance trade, and so forth. As more and more communities detached themselves from states and formed Communalist municipalities, they would be able to form confederations to address these issues. Thusly, to sum it up, Bookchin’s ideas shared an ideological lineage with leftist traditions such as communism and anarchism but departed from them in its prescription for action. Bookchin’s favored tactic was the creation of localized democratic assemblies to achieve social transformation: libertarian municipalism (the conversion of state and state-like polities into these assemblies) is the means towards Communalism (a more just and rational society than the far-flung and disproportionate impacts of the state and capitalism).

Returning to the concept of “democratic confederalism”, we can see the influence of these ideas upon Öcalan. He outlines the five principles of democratic confederalism in a text explaining the concept:

1. The self-determination of peoples includes the right to a state; however, states do not increase the freedom of a people, and have become obstacles for social progress. Democratic confederalism is the contrasting paradigm to the nation-state.
2. “Democratic confederalism is a non-state social paradigm.”

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<sup>195</sup> Bookchin, 109

3. “Democratic confederalism is based on grass-roots participation. Its decision-making processes lie with the communities. Higher levels only serve the coordination and implementation of the will of the communities that send their delegates to the general assemblies.”

4. “In the Middle East, democracy cannot be imposed by the capitalist system...the propagation of grass-roots democracy is elementary. It is the only approach that can cope with diverse ethnic groups, religious, and class differences. It also goes together well with the traditional confederate structure of the society.”

5. Democratic confederalism in Kurdistan is an anti-nationalist movement as well. It aims at realizing the right of self-defense of the peoples by the advancement of democracy in all parts of Kurdistan without questioning the existing political borders. Its goal is not the formation of a Kurdish nation-state”<sup>196</sup>

These ideas clearly overlap to a large extent with Bookchin’s. Here and elsewhere in the text, the main difference in Öcalan’s thinking lies in an emphasis on several factors relevant to the region and Kurdish case, such as diversity in identity and the oppression of women. Instrumentally, however, the concept is essentially the same, functioning through local democratic assemblies which can combine with one another. The publication of his ideas in 2011 did not have an immediate impact, besides the PKK announcing that it reflected their new program, as they did not enjoy sufficient control or freedom in any parts of Turkey to implement their ideas.

However, the civil war in Syria opened up a power vacuum and created an opportunity for Kurds in the north of the country who shared the PKK’s ideology to practice democratic confederalism today.

- ***The PYD and Rojava Cantons in Syria***

As before in history, violence which threatened the state created an opportunity for Kurdish autonomy. When civil war broke out in Syria in 2011 and 2012, most of the country’s Kurds initially remained neutral—they had often received harsh treatment from the Syrian state but did not necessarily expect better from many of the factions fighting the government.

However, throughout 2012 the Syrian state began performing less and less basic functions in the

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<sup>196</sup> Öcalan, 33-34

area, leaving Kurdish communities to perform more of these duties themselves, forming security checkpoints and rudimentary political institutions. As it became increasingly clear the state was not going to reassert itself in the region anytime soon, talk of autonomy gained momentum. The PKK-influenced Democratic Union Party (PYD) had been one of the more mobilized and organized Kurdish movements in the region, and by November 2013 it announced that with the cooperation of Arab, Christian and other populations in the area, the region was declaring autonomy and forming the three cantons: Cizîre, Kobane and Efrin, which together are referred to as Rojava (See Fig. 6, p. 126).<sup>197</sup>

Since then, the cantons have conducted an experiment in localized self-rule. This has not necessarily been in line with a prescribed program but more in line with the Zapatista principle of “walking and asking questions” as some observers have described it, or attempting change while keeping a critical perspective and without narrow expectations.<sup>198</sup> In early 2014, the cantons adopted a ‘social contract’ or charter outlining their functioning. Its language is deliberately diplomatic and inclusive: Rojava is referred to as “a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens... based upon mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society”, as opposed to more Kurd-focused rhetoric.<sup>199</sup> The charter stipulates that the People’s Protection Units, or the YPG/YPJ, which are respectively the armed male and female security forces and linked to the PYD, are “the sole military force of the three Cantons”.<sup>200</sup> As these forces grew out of the PYD, they remain majority-Kurdish, but have incorporated increasing portions of the areas non-Kurdish population. Institutionally, it follows the principles of democratic confederalism, calling for assemblies and

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<sup>197</sup> “Kurdish Declaration of Autonomy in Syria Rejected by Turkey, Larger Opposition”. Note that Rojava is Kurdish for “West”, as in West Kurdistan

<sup>198</sup> Stanchev

<sup>199</sup> “The Constitution of the Rojava Cantons”

<sup>200</sup> “The Constitution of the Rojava Cantons”

local councils, as well as for cooperation and coordination between the three cantons. These assemblies have already begun to meet, at both the neighborhood level as well as commune units of 300 people.<sup>201</sup> Assemblies and committees are held to a 40% female gender quota, and all positions of authority are held in pairs by a man and a woman. Authority builds upwards through the election of representatives with recallable mandates to various levels of coordination, culminating in the Democratic Society Congress (DTK), a general assembly with around 1,000 members, 60% of whom are elected at the grassroots level and 40% of whom come from other positions in government or civil society.<sup>202</sup> Because it only meets twice a year, the DTK creates sub-committees and a standing assembly to facilitate coordination between communes. However, this power is only used when it is requested- the vast majority of concerns which a central state would trouble itself with are handled at the local level. The cantons have begun to create the local assemblies and bottom-up power networks that form the institutional basis of democratic confederalism.

While the cantons have not been recognized by the Syrian government, the charter takes pains to be clear that although it is an assertion of autonomy, Rojava “recognizes Syria’s territorial integrity and aspires to maintain domestic and international peace” and endeavors to remain within the country.<sup>203</sup> Although some Syrian opposition factions have taken to labelling the PYD as separatist, they have repeatedly stated that they do not want to redraw Syria’s borders, merely exercise self-rule within them.<sup>204</sup> For its part, the Syrian government has expressed interest in negotiating with the Kurds. In March 2015, Minister of Information Omran al- Zoubi stated that “Kurds are part of the Syrian nation. We are ready to negotiate with the

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<sup>201</sup> Biehl, “Rojava's Communes and Councils”

<sup>202</sup> Kolokotronis

<sup>203</sup> “The Constitution of the Rojava Cantons”

<sup>204</sup> Schmidinger

Kurds as a part of the local administrative body inside Syria's borders".<sup>205</sup> Whether this would still be true after the war remains to be seen based on how the conflict is resolved, but for now both the PYD and Syrian government seem content to coexist.

In its short history, this experiment in regional autonomy has already faced several major challenges. The most prominent of these has been attacks by the Islamic State. ISIS has clashed with both KRG peshmerga and YPG/YPJ fighters, and despite including small numbers of Kurds among its ranks, has often targeted Kurdish towns, and most infamously, the Yezidi religious minority. However, the clash between Rojava and ISIS became most visible in the international spectacle surrounding the city of Kobane near the Syrian-Turkish border. The city had been under Kurdish control since 2012 but was targeted by a major ISIS offensive in 2014. ISIS initially captured around half of the city, and international observers such as the United States and Turkey declared the city all but a lost cause. However, despite expectations, the YPG, bolstered by support from Kurds who came from Iraq and Turkey, as well as limited coordination with the Free Syrian Army, managed to hold off ISIS. After international attention became focused on the city (due in a large part to being visible from the Turkish side of the border), the American military was pressured into supporting the defense with airstrikes against ISIS. As of March 2015, ISIS had been all but removed from the city and surrounding area, holding only a small number of villages on the outskirts of the region. However, the cantons have also had to contend with opposition from their neighbors in Iraq and Turkey, which have enacted an embargo of sorts against Rojava.<sup>206</sup> This has limited the flow of everything from weapons and fighters, to food, medicine and the region's oil. The cooperation of the KRG with the embargo against another Kurdish region might at first seem strange, but makes more sense

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<sup>205</sup> "Syrian Minister: We Are Ready to Negotiate with Kurds"

<sup>206</sup> Biehl, "The Embargo Against Rojava"

considering its close economic ties to Turkey and a long history of conflict between the KDP and PKK. The insecurity of the region and opposition of its neighbors have made matter difficult for the people of Rojava.

Despite these difficulties, there are signs the project in Rojava has begun to make progress. Given the intensity of the war zone and the level of opposition faced by the cantons, their basic security and continued existence should be considered a tremendous achievement in and of itself. Local councils have already been meeting for months, and in some cases years, routinizing the exercise of political power by the people and solving local problems more efficiently than state bureaucracies could ever hope to do. The cantons are beginning to implement and coordinate broader projects, in particular economic ventures such as oil refineries and mills, with the long-term goal of economic self-sufficiency acquiring a particular urgency in the face of the embargo. Foreign visitors have observed the implementation of basic social services, such as “neighborhood health clinics, a hospital, and a rehabilitation center, as well as a cultural center and a youth organization” as well as the beginnings of new schools and even a university.<sup>207</sup> In a few short years in a war-torn country, Syria’s Kurds have achieved tremendous levels of self-determination without their own state.

- *Advantages of Democratic Confederalism*

- Decentralization

Decentralization is one of the primary institutional aims of democratic confederalism, and the benefits it poses in the Kurdish case are manifold. Firstly, if these structures are truly built in a grass-roots, bottom-up fashion, they become more durable and harder to dismantle; in Rojava, no single coup or assassination could topple the cantons as they might in a more centralized state or other polity. Secondly, the lack of centralized institutions prevent the type of coercion and

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<sup>207</sup> Joint Statement of the Academic Delegation to Rojava

abuse only made possible through such institutions. There would be no grand military to conduct a targeted campaign of oppression, no cultural ministry to ban a certain language, no winner-takes-all throne to be fought over by various factions. Consider the back-and-forth dynamic at play in the history of Iraq. The regime of Saddam Hussein emphasized Arab identity to the detriment of the Kurds and Sunni Islam to the detriment of the country's Shia majority. After the Second Gulf War, he was eventually replaced by Nouri al-Maliki, whose policies greatly favored Shia Islam. Today, the Islamic State, a Sunni group, has been able to gain wider popular support within Iraq due to Sunni grievances with Maliki's rule. The decentralization of positions of authority work against such dynamics, as well as corruption or nepotism as has been seen in the centralized KRG. Thirdly, decentralized politics is more in line with the social history of the region. Much of Kurdish history has been characterized by resistance to impositions of centralized regimes and fighting for local autonomy. This historical fact, combined with the diverse composition of ethnicities, religions and political views in Kurdish-inhabited areas argue against the concentration of power and decision-making in a single center where a broad range of interests must be considered and in favor of a more limited scope of authority and implementation such as the one provided by democratic confederalism.

- *Diversity-Friendly*

Decentralization and the ideology behind democratic confederalism are well-suited to the diverse demographic composition of Kurdistan. Although no doubt the idea of democratic confederalism and the PYD & YPG/YPJ have their roots in political mobilization based on Kurdish ethnicity, the concept itself is more open to internal difference than the winner-takes-all model of a state or federal model. Recall again the Iraqi state, whose leadership has flipped

between Sunni and Shia repeatedly, as these changes at the top were accompanied by shifts in the nation deployment of state capacity to favor one group or another. By focusing its analysis of the problem, both for the Kurds and for peoples in the Middle East in general, on institutions such as the state rather than the actions of a particular ethnicity or government, it allows a new order to be formed on cooperation rather than revenge or exclusion. Öcalan's text notes that Kurdistan is home to a variety of ethnicities, as well as "many different religions and faiths living side by side... [as well as] rudiments of a clan and tribal structure" but calls these facts "a blessing for new democratic political formations" because there exist plenty of groups with a stake in the prevention of a monopoly by one group.<sup>208</sup> The introduction to the constitution of Rojava defines the polity as "a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens... based upon mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society", and there have been generally positive reports from non-Kurds residing in Rojava, including their participation in the assemblies and security forces.<sup>209</sup> For example, Christians in the Cizîre canton have testified that when ISIS began to attack the area, "they proposed to the fighters of YPG to leave them 24 hours in the Christian neighborhoods...and then they would withdraw without touching the Muslims. [But] the YPG refused and continued the war."<sup>210</sup> This and other displays of the protection of all identities has led a growing number of non-Kurds to join the YPG/YPJ. The institutions created by democratic confederalism have no mandate to pursue divisive policies of nation-building, as each community creates institutions to suit its needs. If the people which meet in one assembly speak a different language than those in another assembly, this is not a problem. In a region full of nation-states with pasts full of ethnic conflict, democratic confederalism has a strength in

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<sup>208</sup> Öcalan, 38

<sup>209</sup> Joint Statement of the Academic Delegation to Rojava

<sup>210</sup> Aretaios

acknowledging outright the difference of peoples and working to integrate these differences rather than erase them.

- *Resistant to Dependence*

As with any modern community, Rojava or a hypothetical new democratic municipality cannot be said to be completely independent from their surroundings. To be sure, the effects of the embargo and the designation of the PYD as a terrorist organization have had tremendous impacts upon the cantons, preventing more resources from being imported and hampering the region economically. Important supplies such as medicine run short, the Syrian Kurds are forced into selling their oil on the black market, and very few non-profits are willing to work in the area due to fearing reprisal from the US government. However, democratic confederalism makes self-sufficiency as one of its primary aims and focuses on empowering communities politically and economically in order to make this a reality. This is a significant departure from previous attempts at Kurdish self-determination, which have always relied upon some outside ally. The Sèvres region fell apart without the support of the great powers, the Republic of Mahabad could not outlive Soviet backing, and the KRG has become increasingly dependent upon Turkey, whose continued support is extremely conditional. The residents of Rojava have repeatedly stated that they have learned from history and harbor no illusions about the support of international actors, such as the limited cooperation of the US military against ISIS- they know that these actors will side with them for as long as it is beneficial and no longer.<sup>211</sup> This skepticism of foreign support also reflects what self-determination means to the Kurds of Rojava – they do not want autonomy by the grace of foreign benefactors or military intervention, but on their terms. Thus, the rejection of dependence upon other actors to solve the ‘Kurdish question’

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<sup>211</sup> Coles

reflects both a practical assessment of history, as well as feeding into the exercise of local democracy.

- *Self-Determination & Cultural Expression*

Much like a state or a federalized unit identified as Kurdish would, democratic confederalism represents the realization of the long-stated goal of Kurdish nationalism and political mobilization: self-determination. However, its supporters argue that it accomplishes this on a more fundamental level than either of the other two solutions could. Critics of the state contend it can never offer any meaningful extent of self-rule: Do the Arabs of Saudi Arabia possess self-determination because those who drive the state apparatus are Arabs themselves? Of course, Saudi Arabia is an extreme example- it could be argued that a robust democratic state would offer the type of meaningful self-determination the Kurds seek. But if the Western attempts at state-building in the Middle East have shown anything, dating back to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and continuing up to the formation of modern Iraq and the KRG, it is that political structures do not come in easy universal molds and cannot simply be plucked from one context onto another. Today we have conservative American politicians such as Ted Cruz<sup>212</sup> and Rand Paul<sup>213</sup> saying we should give the Kurds their own state with a goal towards advancing American geopolitical interests in the region, while we have Kurds on the ground mobilizing and fighting for greater local autonomy and disavowing a state of their own. The fact that the people have mobilized and struggled to create something suggests the value of the enterprise and their interest in moving it forward. The mechanisms of face-to-face democracy and bottom-up confederalism devolve power and decision-making to a level that keeps individuals enfranchised and engaged in their politics. While doing so, it strengthens these municipal units and grants self-

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<sup>212</sup> Carroll

<sup>213</sup> Boyle

determination in a very real sense, as these communities grow in their capacity to determine their own futures, rather than the theoretical all-at-once granting of self-determination by the creation of a centralized state. It also devolves the question of culture to the local level. Rather than force a central entity to try to cope with the heterogeneity of ethnicities and cultures contained within each borders, each municipality can address these issues, providing education and government services in whatever language its residents speak. Democratic confederalism provides the institutional means for self-determination for individual communities, and by extension, entire regions composed of such communities.

- *Adaptability*

As previously mentioned, the complex diversity of Kurdish-inhabited regions and the opposition of the regional states make the implementation of centralized political structures such as a new state or federal arrangement difficult. One of the strengths of democratic confederalism is that it can proceed in a piecemeal fashion. Both Bookchin and Öcalan recognized pragmatically that their ideas would coexist with the world of states. While in Rojava things have been able to move very quickly due to the withdrawal of state power, it is very conceivable that the development of democratic confederalism could spread at a more gradual pace. Of course, targeted state repression would be very effective in countering its progress, but consider the difference between such a system and the territorial acquisition called for by the other two systems. One of the features of a state is a defined territory, while a federal system can only really work if the federal unit has a defined territory where it operates as opposed to the central government or other federal units. Put simply, the question of territory must precede the polity (not that states can't go through territorial changes). However, democratic confederalism has no such constraints- the polity comes first, from the efforts of the people who make it. It would be

able to spread, or contract, peacefully and municipality by municipality, its presence or absence marked by the presence of non-state structures. It could spread to all four regional states without ever redrawing their borders, instead redefining the local dynamics between individual communities and processes of decision-making. In his writing, Öcalan is optimistic about the scope of the project, arguing that it represents an entirely new approach and is not ideologically bound to the Kurdish case at all- other peoples within the region and around the world could adapt the model and change it to suit the particulars of their situation, as the Kurds and other groups in Rojava have done. The Yezidi minority in Iraq in the Mount Sinjar region, near Iraq's border with Syria, are allegedly considering adopting a canton model, although the KRG has voiced their opposition.<sup>214</sup> Generally, the flexible and local nature of the structure of democratic confederalism means that it can apply to much more than the small, mostly-Kurdish areas of Northern Syria it is currently being practiced in.

- ***Disadvantages of Democratic Confederalism***

- *Links to the PKK & International Relations*

Both Rojava and democratic confederalism as an idea face an uphill climb in the current international climate due to their links to the PKK. Although the PYD claims to be independent of the PKK, referring to themselves as a 'sister party'<sup>215</sup>, there is no doubt of substantial connection between the two parties. They share an ideology and reverence of Abdullah Öcalan, and although their leadership and structures appear to be independent it seems reasonable to assume they communicate and are linked to one another. Even in a non-PYD context, the idea of democratic confederalism is inextricably tied to the PKK as it is the brainchild of its founder.

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<sup>214</sup> Taştekin, "Kurdish Rivalry Delays Victory in Sinjar"

<sup>215</sup> Schmidinger

This poses at least two issues. Firstly, the PKK has a bad reputation, both among other Kurdish factions and internationally. The PKK has repeatedly fought with the KDP, and the PYD currently is embroiled in issues with other Kurdish factions in Syria. Although the Turkish state and the PKK are currently attempting to negotiate a peace process, the relationship between the two parties is mutually antagonistic and virtually every major Turkish political party is opposed to the PKK. The PKK, and by association the PYD, remain listed as international terrorist organizations. There have been campaigns in Germany and the United States to change this listing in order to facilitate the support of the PYD; however, given Turkey's firm stance on the matter this does not seem likely in the short-term. This designation will continue to make it difficult for Rojava to achieve normalized international relations, whether with other political actors, the global economy, or NGOs, all of which are attentive to the cues of the US. Secondly, there exists a concern about the ideological nature of much of the membership of the PYD. Zaher Baher visited Rojava in 2014 and had this to say:

“Ideologists can be dangerous when they want to impose their ideas taken from what has been written in the old books, on the present situation or on the rest of us. They are very narrow-minded, very persistent, stick with their ideas and are out of touch. They do not have respect for other people who do not share the same opinion as themselves....It is very unfortunate that I found many ideologists among the PYD and Tev-Dem members, especially when it came to discussions about Abdullah Öcalan's ideas. These people are very stuck with Öcalan's principles, making them refer to his speeches and books in our discussions. They have total faith in him and, to a certain extent, he is sacred. If this is the faith that people have and put in their leader and are scared of him, it is very frightening and the consequences will not be good... [Kurdish] children are taught the ideology and the ideas and principles of Öcalan and how great he is as the leader of the Kurdish people. In my opinion, children should not be brought up believing in ideology.”<sup>216</sup>

While it is hard to discern how widespread such thinking is, it is certainly a cause for concern.

History is ripe with examples of when follow-the-leader goes wrong, and the glorification of Öcalan has troubling connections to Kurdish society's tribal roots, as well as the PKK's roots in

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<sup>216</sup> Baher

Marxism and the authoritarian expression it found under Soviet leaders such as Stalin.

Ideological rigidity will also make cooperation with other Kurdish groups or political factions difficult. Additionally, if the program of the cantons is too directly tied to a single party, it could potentially untangle in the event of a schism or other conflict within the party. For the idea to gain more widespread traction, either the international image of the PKK will have to be rehabilitated or its expression will have to come from sources not so closely connected to the PKK.

- *Inclusion, Due Process and Accountability*

One of the biggest challenges facing a model of democratic confederalism is gaining the level of legitimacy and accountability which some statist models have been able to provide. Among Syrian Kurds, there is not unanimous support for the program of democratic confederalism as it is being practiced by the PYD. At the time of the uprising, there were twenty-odd Kurdish political parties, with the PYD being the most prominent. When the cantons were established, not all of the parties were interested in joining, and this has led to ongoing tension. The biggest conflict is between the PYD and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a joint organization of fifteen of these Kurdish minority parties sponsored by the KDP in the KRG. To a large extent, this can be seen as a continuation of the historic struggle between the KDP and PKK, which includes a difference in ideology, as well as a clash for symbolic leadership of the Kurdish nation between KRG President Massoud Barzani and Abdullah Öcalan, although the issue is not merely reducible to this. In 2012, it was attempted to unite the PYD and KNC under an organization known as the Kurdish Supreme Committee to share in the rule of Rojava, but this body has not taken off and the PYD retain control. The parties in the KNC cite several common grievances with the PYD, including collaboration with the Assad regime (citing the

continued presence of government forces in the Kurdish towns of al-Hasakah and Qamishli, as well as past collaboration between the PKK and the Syrian state) and a desire to operate their own armed forces independent of the YPG/YPJ, and have declared they will boycott elections in Rojava.<sup>217</sup>

The charge of full-on cooperation with the Assad regime based on non-engagement seems spurious, as openly engaging with the Syrian military stands to gain the Kurds nothing. The YPG/J could most likely dislodge the military forces in Kurdish areas, but Assad has shown the brutal tactics he is willing to unleash upon his own citizens, and for the most part has not employed these tactics against Syria's Kurds. Focusing a front on the Syrian Army would also open up the possibility to attacks against the Kurds from IS or one of the hostile rebel factions. The KNC has not been able to produce any proof of collaboration between the regime and PYD other than their coexistence in certain areas.<sup>218</sup> However, it also cannot be ignored that this truce-like arrangement is beneficial to the Syrian regime as well. By removing forces from the area, it can concentrate them on other areas in the country, and does not have to provide for the defense of the area as the YPG/YPJ are doing that. Despite this fact, there have still been some clashes between the YPG/YPJ and the Syrian military<sup>219</sup>, and the PYD has declared publicly that "Assad must go".<sup>220</sup> So the PYD may not have engaged against Assad as head-on as the KNC parties would prefer, but in a situation as complex as the Syrian Civil War this does not necessarily make the two allies.

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<sup>217</sup> Baher

<sup>218</sup> It is also worth noting that the KDP in Iraq, the KNC's main ally, is strongly opposed to Assad for past cooperation with the PKK against the KDP, as well as their close relationship with Turkey.

<sup>219</sup> "Fighting Breaks out between YPG and Syrian Army in Hasakah"

<sup>220</sup> Schmidinger

As for the YPG/YPJ, the PYD has declared that these forces are not technically their armed wing, saying

“Of course our party founded...the YPG because we realized that they are necessary. But that does not mean that...the YPG are the forces of our political party. We want a single armed force of the Kurds and we refuse the idea of having party militias.”<sup>221</sup>

However, this claim seems pretty thin, considering that by their own admission, the PYD founded them. A more valid justification that has been given for the monopoly on force of the YPG/YPJ is that they want to avoid a repetition of the civil war between the PUK and KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1990s, and would like to incorporate members of other parties into the YPG/YPJ but this is not exactly possible while they are boycotting the system. The YPG/YPJ has been successful in gaining membership from a diverse range of groups, including many Syrian Arabs and Turks, Christians and secularists, as well as a small number of Westerners sympathetic to the cause.<sup>222</sup> Regardless of the merit or gravity of any one of these particular claims, it does not bode well for the future of Rojava if Kurdish parties refuse to participate in their supposedly inclusive system. To add to the concerns of the KNC, the Human Rights Watch conducted an investigation in the Jazira canton in February 2014 which raised several issues of accountability, including reports of arbitrary arrest and abuse in detention and reports of a demonstration in June 2013 where lethal force was used by the YPG against protestors.<sup>223</sup> The complaints were fairly limited in scope, but raise very serious concerns about the systems of law enforcement and criminal justice within Rojava. When combined with the political exclusion of the KNC parties, there seems to exist great potential for abuse on the part of the PYD to use the coercive institutions of the cantons to maintain political control.

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<sup>221</sup> Schmidinger

<sup>222</sup> Ahmad

<sup>223</sup> “Under Kurdish Rule”

These issues represent some of the negative potential within a policy of decentralization. Without a power center committed to the equal enforcement of the law throughout the land, there does exist the potential for local power struggles or abuses based on cultural divisions. So far in Rojava, this does not seem to be the case. Non-PYD parties, despite their opposition, have spoken favorably of the climate of freedom in the region, saying that their members have not been arrested, prevented from holding demonstrations, or otherwise had their activities restricted (apart from not being able to form independent militias).<sup>224</sup> Similarly, non-Kurdish ethnicities and non-Muslim religious groups have had no complaints of unfair treatment, and participate to varying levels in the new institutions.<sup>225</sup> One notable exception has been groups of Arabs, especially in the Cizîre canton, who remain loyal to the regime (many of them trace their presence in the region back to Syria's "Arab Belt" settlement policy) and view Rojava as a secessionist movement.<sup>226</sup> However, there has not been any reports of Arabs receiving discriminatory treatment or targeted with violence. Regardless of how things stand now, it is possible that once the shared sense of having a common foe dissipates, local relations could become more contentious. The structure of the assemblies is designed to counter this by fostering high levels of cooperation and participation, but there is no surefire way to prevent the abuse of power.

- *Unresolved Questions*

While the novelty of democratic confederalism is part of its appeal, it also presents some of the most important critiques or challenges to be offered against it. As an idea, it simply does not have a history to point to in the way that states and federations do, and as Rojava is very much still a work-in-progress, there remain several important unanswered questions. The first of

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<sup>224</sup> Baher

<sup>225</sup> Baher, Ahmad, "Joint Statement of the Academic Delegation to Rojava"

<sup>226</sup> "Construction of Democracy Continues in Cizîre Canton"

these is how democratic municipalities or cantons will relate to the state. Rojava has repeatedly emphasized that it does not seek secession, and while it shares the conviction with much of the Syrian opposition that Assad must go, it has expressed a strong interest in working with whatever government emerges from the civil war. However, it is not clear what this relationship would look like or what limits of state intrusion Rojava would accept. Kurdish preconditions are likely to include maintaining the YPG/YPJ as local security, while both parties interested in the oil fields in the north-east. Similarly unanswered is how the regions would integrate into the global economy. The stated goal of democratic confederalism is self-sustainability, but in the near future this is plainly unrealistic. The PYD has emphasized that it opposes the international capitalist regime, but the devastation in the area has compelled the Kurds to ask for outside investment.<sup>227</sup> While questions of economic integration are not immediately at stake in Rojava due to the ongoing embargo and domestic chaos in Syria, the issue remains for democratic confederalism as a structure. The Syrian government currently claims mineral rights in the entire country, and it seems possible a new regime would continue this. If Rojava retains control of its oil, how will it sell it? Will it work with international oil companies and global capital which it opposes on principle? How will the revenues be distributed internally? Most of the region's oil is concentrated in the Cizîre canton. While the cantons are committed to cooperation and mutual aid, will the nitty-gritty of economic distribution be left to the voluntary discretion of Cizîre or addressed at a higher level? The durability of democratic confederalism has also not been truly tested, especially compared with states and federal regions. How will communes react if others refuse to work with them or attempt to reintegrate with the state? What if a high-level assembly was attempted to be utilized to enact repressive policies? The YPG/YPJ have been able to repel ISIS, but how would they fare against a state military? Can the formation of a shared defense

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<sup>227</sup> "Efrin Is Being Rebuilt, Calls For Support And Investment"

force prevent sectarian infighting? These are all important concerns which the state and federal models can provide straightforward answers to, but remain unanswered for now in the case of democratic confederalism.

▪ *Summary*

Democratic confederalism is still in its infancy on the world stage, with only a few years under its belt and a host of unanswered questions for the future, but even in this state, it is developed enough to pose a real institutional alternative to the state or a federation. The idea arose from Abdullah Öcalan's consideration of the 'Kurdish question', not as a template borrowed from other parts of the world and made to fit. Where centralized state power must whack every non-conforming mole that pops up to maintain its precious territorial integrity, democratic confederalism devolves questions of control and authority to where they truly reside, at the municipal level. An empire no longer ruled a town once its soldiers and tax collectors departed, and territory is gained or lost community by community. Rather than attempt to impose uniform rule across a broad swath of communities as states have, democratic confederalism removes the outside power and encourages the people to do it themselves, promoting self-determination through local assemblies, community by community. This process requires none of the dramatic showmanship and coordination of secession, merely cooperation within the level of individual neighborhoods. Instead of concentrating power and wealth in a select number of positions as centralization at the state or federal level does, the decentralization of institutions reduces the stakes for their pursuit and the scope of their abuse. A hostile-minded local assembly might be able to perpetuate a massacre or two, or intimidate some groups into leaving. A hostile-minded government can commit genocide and discriminate against or displace

millions, as they often have against the Kurds. Local autonomy and democracy is better reflect the history and current situation of the Kurdsitan region than centralized statist institutions.

This is not to claim that democratic confederalism is a perfect solution. The brief history of Rojava already raises some areas of concern, and due to its novelty it has not faced many types of serious political crises. Sure, they can defend against a common foe such as ISIS, but can the PYD come to an agreement with KDP-aligned factions? How will democratic confederalism gain value from Kurdistan's rich oil reserves, opposed in its principals to the global capitalist order and its support of the state paradigm but lacking sufficient facilities and markets to do so alone? There is also the matter of foreign support—while the regional states oppose greater autonomy as a rule, the United States has proved willing to support the capitalist and statist KRG, but still designates the PKK and related parties as terrorist organizations. To gain legitimacy for Rojava, and as the public face of it, democratic confederalism, the PYD also need to show that they can provide equal political opportunity and transparent accountability measures, instead of misusing their influence and links to security forces. Even if Rojava fails to survive such challenges, its history has already dealt a blow to the claim of the nation-state as the obvious answer to the 'Kurdish question'. In the face of invading armies and trade blockades, the Kurds of Syria managed to survive and pursue a program of social change without the presence of borders, presidents or foreign recognition. Regardless of what happens to the cantons in the future, their successes so far will live on as evidence of a way towards Kurdish self-determination today outside of a nation-state.

#### **Part IV: Conclusion**

The 'Kurdish question' represents a fascinating geopolitical dilemma, but for the Kurds themselves it is not a matter of abstract theory. The question of political structure has played a life-or-death role for Kurds in the region, and they have fought in various forms for a century to construct their own. This desire for new institutions stems from wanting to avoid past experiences with the adverse consequences of state hostility, such as political disenfranchisement, destruction of communities, economic discrimination, and cultural repression, while ruling themselves as a nation and reaping the benefits of institutional connections. Today, this question seems more urgent than ever. Experiments in Kurdish autonomy are playing out in regions in Iraq and Syria while the governments of those states struggle to respond to challenges of sectarian fighting and attacks by the Islamic State. Both the regional states and their Kurdish populations alike seem to recognize that the fate of these polities affects the condition of the greater Kurdish nation and could lead to greater autonomy and self-determination for Kurds in all regions. The stakes have never seemed higher or the opportunity for change greater. There exist three obvious possibilities: first, an independent Kurdish state, second, a federal arrangement with the regional states as practiced by the KRG in Iraq, and third, democratic confederalism as practiced by the PYD in Syria.

Historically, the state has seemed the most obvious answer to this question, and hence why the Kurds are most often referred to as stateless. The Middle East has been in a state-centric paradigm for decades now, and many Kurdish political organizations were established in all four states with the avowed goal of creating an independent Kurdistan. However, all such attempts failed, owing to a lack of reliable foreign support and internal divisions within the Kurds, in addition to particular factors in each instance. Today, the case for a state does not seem much better. The regional states, as well as global powers such as the United States, are unanimous in

their opposition to an independent Kurdistan. Kurdish society remains divided, in many ways exacerbated by decades of division by political boundaries and the unique experiences of living in each of the regional states, but also by historical divides of language, religion, class, tribe and political ideology. These factors which have undermined previous attempts for Kurdish state-building, as well as increasing Kurdish skepticism about the desirability of a state and the problems in implementing a centralized regime over a geographically dispersed and culturally heterogeneous area, show us that a Kurdish state today would not likely last very long or lead to much of an improvement in conditions for the Kurds or the other peoples which share these lands.

The next option is the conversion of the regional states to a federal system, where Kurdish areas would be granted limited regional autonomy. This approach avoids several of the pitfalls of a state model, most notably by not formally being an independent state and therefore being able to garner wider international support – for instance, it is extremely telling that Turkey, perhaps the most worried about the status of Kurds in its territory, is willing to pursue such a close relationship with the KRG – without invoking fears of secession, as well as the fact that cultural differences among the Kurdish people tend to be less within the confines of political boundaries, and therefore would lead to less issues than attempting to create a Greater Kurdistan. However, while it seems to be an improvement upon the state given the current conditions, an arrangement of federalism faces limitations on the extent of self-determination it can grant to its people. Any federal system permitted by the regional states would still rely upon institutions that are inherently centralized and statist, and therefore run against many of the same problems which face a state. Despite the greater level of cohesion among Kurds within any one country, there still exist significant differences. Virtually the first act in the KRG's history after it achieved relief

from the GOI due to the US no-fly zone was a civil war between two factions split among political and tribal lines. Critics of federalism have also pointed out its indeterminate nature—states have been reluctant to grant it due to fears it might encourage later secession, and it is not at all clear what the process of determining the boundaries of such units should be and how to make sure they stay that way. The KRG reflects both of these concerns, with President Barzani saying that independence is the “eventual goal” of Kurds in Iraq, and an ongoing debate with the GOI over sovereignty of the Kirkuk region. Additionally, the creation of a “Kurdish” federal unit would likely heighten sensations of nationalism and ethnic and national difference, a dangerous game to play in such a diverse area. While the KRG already exists today, and by the mere virtue of its existence despite decades of hostility certainly represents a hope for all Kurds, it embodies virtually all of these issues, in addition to accusations of being conducted as an oligarchy and risks turning into a petro-state. In some ways, federalism represents a better option than the state, due mostly to its more realistic chances for survival, but does not seem like the best option for liberation of the Kurdish nation.

The final option that needs to be considered is the idea of democratic confederalism as championed by the PKK and currently in practice in the Rojava cantons in Syria. Like federalism, it shares the advantage of not bringing upon itself the dangers of outright independence (although whether a Syrian state will permit its existence in the long-term remains to be seen; right now, Assad has bigger fish to fry). On the count of coping with diversity, it improves upon federalism by devolving power to the level of the municipality. It is worth noting that many of the cultural divides between different Kurdish communities mentioned such as religion and language are much more likely to fall along lines of settlements rather than entire regions, and therefore it would seem that a municipal model is better-suited to accommodate

these differences. Democratic confederalism rejects the centralization and hierarchical institutions of the state which have so often been deployed against the Kurds, and instead focuses on bottom-up empowerment of local communities with the eventual goal of self-sufficiency. By devolving power to lower levels, the potential for catastrophe is reduced, both by reducing the stakes of conflict and also the extent of resources that can be mobilized by any one faction through the seizure of political power. This is not to say that democratic confederalism or the Rojava cantons are perfect; there still exist several important questions to be determined about how these autonomous zones will slot into existing structures, such as the existing states, the regional balance of power and the economy from every scale from local to global. Moreover, there have been some troubling developments in the region, from the non-participation of some Syrian Kurdish factions, to reports of unjustified violence and a lack of accountability and transparency in the criminal justice system, and the ideological rigidity of the PYD. These concerns represent the dark side of decentralization, and for democratic confederalism to achieve its potential there would need to be safeguards against local abuses of power. However, these very important issues do not detract from the view that the model of democratic confederalism is better suited to the particular facts of the Kurdish case and the region. The people there are working to gain control over their own lives, and are doing so from the bottom-up and without any dependence of foreign support. The survival of the cantons, the generally positive reports coming out of the region, and the defense of the city of Kobane demonstrate that real and significant change is going on in Rojava that deserves the attention of the world, and just might deliver to the Kurdish people the freedom of self-determination they have sought for so long.

On a core level, the 'Kurdish question' is not really the 'Kurdish question' at all, but rather the age-old question of what the relationship should be between people, land and power.

In the Middle East, tribal origins gave way to sprawling land empires, dense in the center from where its claim of authority emitted but penetrating its territory weakly, growing gradually more unintrusive the further out from easily mobilized military forces one got. Kurdistan always lay at the edge of such polities, and its inhabitants were often left unmolested to manage their own affairs as long as tribute, fealty and occasionally manpower was supplied. No empire ever ruled over all of Kurdistan, and many parts of the region were unclaimed for more of their history than not. In the early twentieth century, a new story was told of people, power and land: the nation-state. Land and power should be divided based on where distinct peoples lay, regardless of whether these distinct peoples truly existed. The Persian and Ottoman Empires gave way to the four regional states: Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, each of which envisioned as corresponding to the land of different nations. These nationalist ideologies claimed the entire land as belonging to one people, regardless of the composition of the population in those areas. Power was concentrated in the state, which was tied to a certain identity; those who did not fit in were deprived of a political voice, and in many cases their lives and land as well.

The Kurds happen to be one such group which was excluded from political institutions, but it is a whim of fate that they are known as “the largest ethnic group without a state” rather than the Turks or Arabs. In their political mobilizations, the Kurds have tried to renegotiate existing relations between the people, land and power. Previous options included syphoning a new state from the territory of a pre-existing one or empowering peripheral power centers relative to state government bodies, but democratic confederalism proposes to strengthen the peripheral regions themselves and the connections between them. Where state independence requires the dramatic break of secession, democratic confederalism proceeds incrementally, as distinct but linked cultural and geographic units create the capacity to manage their own affairs.

Given their history and the obstacles to centralized or independent authority for the Kurds in the region today, the answer which grants greater self-determination for “the largest ethnic group without a state” might be no state at all.

While the three options discussed in this paper all present different courses of action and priorities, it is not as though all of Kurdistan must choose a new way all at once. In the short term, the coexistence of the models of federalism in Iraq and democratic confederalism in Syria seems assured. The differences between different populations of Kurds may dictate that they choose their own ways forwards, rather than uniting in a Greater Kurdistan that many nationalists have envisioned but proved unable to realize. There has always loomed a fourth option: none of the above. In the absence of unifying political institutions, Kurdish regions could quickly be cast into the torrent of sectarian violence that currently divides the Middle East. These scenarios point the way towards further avenues of questioning: What are the main obstacles preventing greater pan-Kurdish consciousness and material cooperation? What is the future of multinational states in the Middle East, especially given the ongoing collapses of Iraq and Syria? How can nation-states accommodate minority groups without surrendering sovereignty? What lessons do the Kurdish case bear for other ethnic conflicts around the world? The concept of democratic confederalism deserves further study as well. How would democratic confederalism fare in other geographical contexts? What are its advantages or disadvantages compared to other attempts at radical democratic structures? What forms can the relationship between communities and the state take in such a system? Such questions would lend support or argue against the suitability of democratic confederalism for the Kurdish case, but the ultimate judge of this question will be the Kurds themselves. Democratic confederalism may be better suited in the abstract, but a state with popular support and democratic institutions would give more self-

determination to the Kurds than a guise of democratic confederalism abused by local power brokers. Only the effort and choices of the Kurdish people will be able to create new political institutions which fully realize the promise of self-determination.

## **Part V: Appendices**

### **A. Glossary**

DTK- Democratic Society Congress, highest level of assembly in Syrian Kurdistan

GOI- The central/federal government of Iraq based in Baghdad

KDP- Kurdistan Democratic Party, one of two main parties in KRG, linked to Barzani family

KNC- Kurdish National Council, coalition of Syrian Kurdish political parties opposed to PYD

KRG- Kurdistan Regional Government, federal territory in Northern Iraq, largely dominated by the two parties KDP and PUK, current president Massoud Barzani

IS/ISIS/ISIL- Islamic State, Sunni militant group which controls territory in Syria and Iraq

Peshmerga- term for Kurdish fighters, Kurdish for “one who faces death”, today associated exclusively with the security forces of the KRG

PKK- Kurdistan Workers’ Party, originally from Turkey, led by Abdullah Öcalan

PUK- Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, one of two main parties in KRG, linked to Talabani family

PYD- Democratic Union Party, PKK ‘sister party’ in Syria, prominent force behind Rojava

Regional states- stand-in term for the four states with large Kurdish populations: Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey

YPG/YPJ- People’s Protection Units, de facto armed wing of the PYD and defense force of Rojava. YPG is the male force, YPJ the female.

## **B. Maps**

Figure 1 – Kurdish Inhabited Territory in the Regional States / Overview of ‘Greater Kurdistan’

Source: Stratfor Global Intelligence

URL: <https://www.stratfor.com/image/syrian-and-iraqi-kurdish-regions>

Figure 2 – Composition of major tribes, clans and confederacies in Kurdistan

Source: Kurdish Academy of Language

URL: <http://www.kurdishacademy.org/?q=node/590>

Figure 3 - The Treaty of Sèvres (1920)

Source: Wikipedia user PANONIAN

URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurds#/media/File:Kurdistan1920.png>

Figure 4 – The Republic of Mahabad (1945-1946)

Source: Wikipedia user PANONIAN

URL: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic\\_of\\_Mahabad#/media/File:Republic\\_of\\_mahabad\\_and\\_south\\_azerbaijan\\_1945\\_1946.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Mahabad#/media/File:Republic_of_mahabad_and_south_azerbaijan_1945_1946.png)

Figure 5 – Oil in Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)

Source: Platts, McGraw Hill Financial

URL: <http://blogs.platts.com/2014/01/30/map-iraqs-oil-gas-infrastruture/>

Figure 6 – Map of Syrian Civil War / Roajva

Source: Thomas van Linge, @arabthomness on Twitter

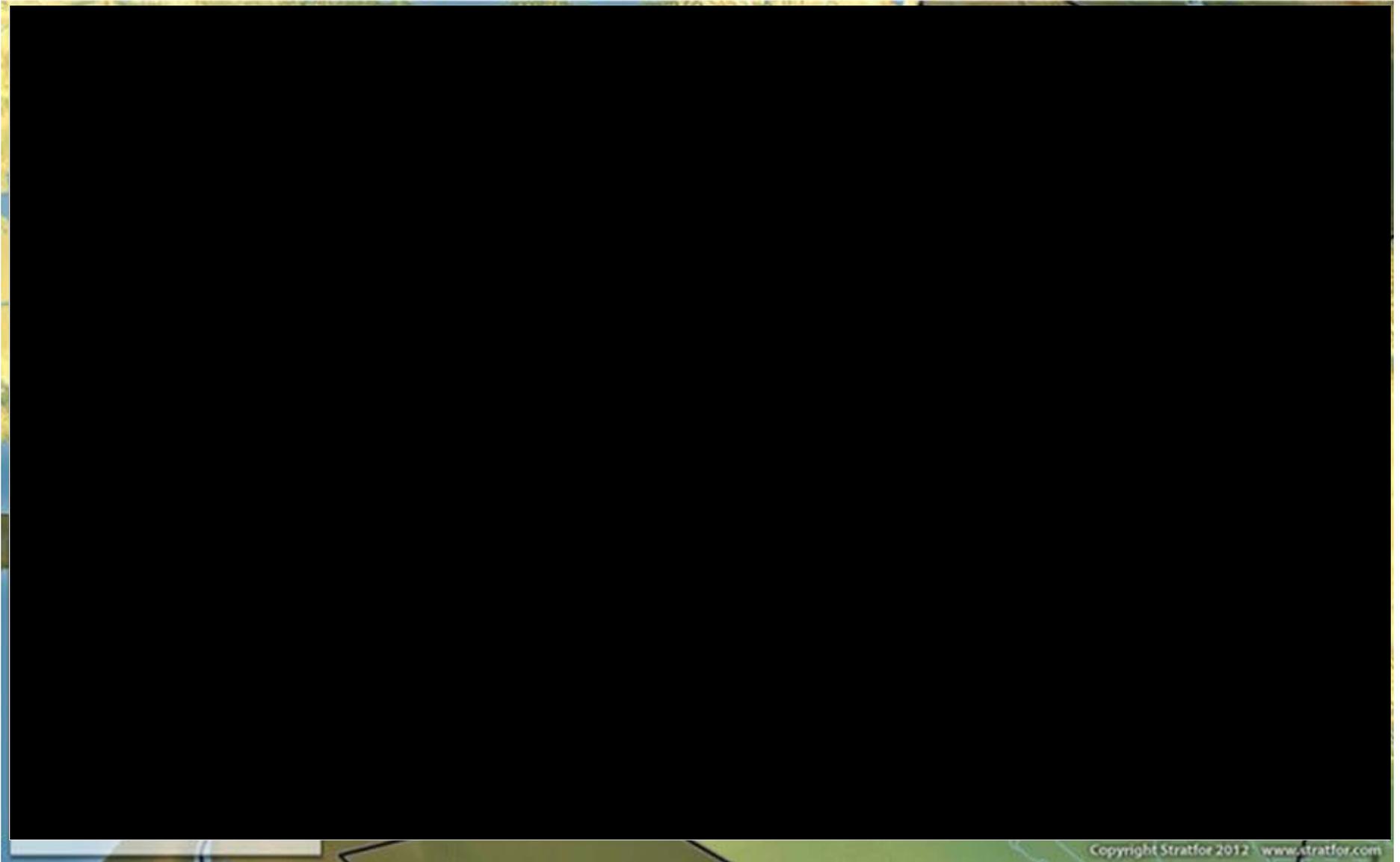
URL: <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2015/04/01/syria-map-update-dd-april-1-2015/>

Figure 7 – Oil in Syria

Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration

URL: <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=sy>

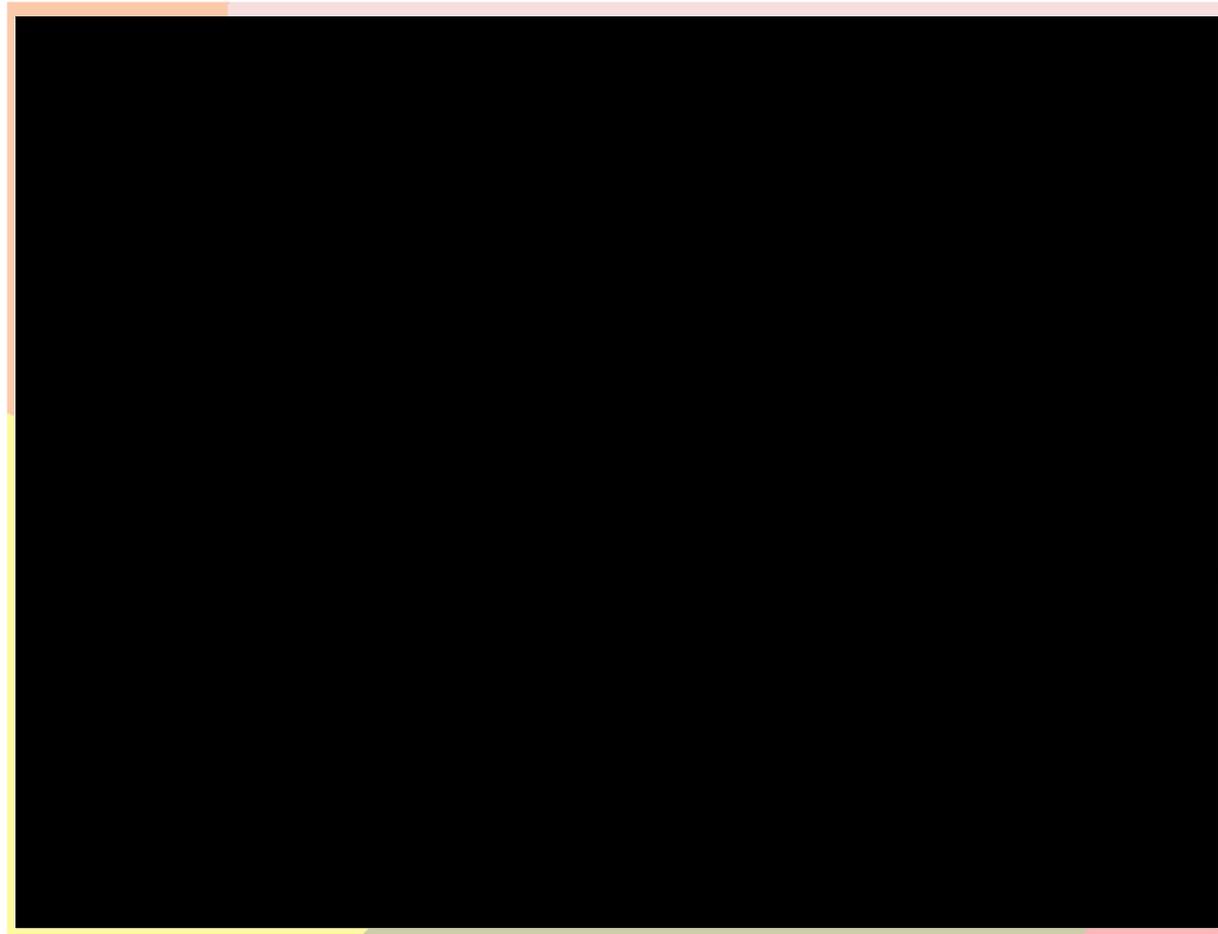
**Fig. 1 – Kurdish Inhabited Territory in the Regional States / Overview of “Greater Kurdistan”**



**Fig. 2– Composition of tribes, clans and confederacies in Kurdistan**



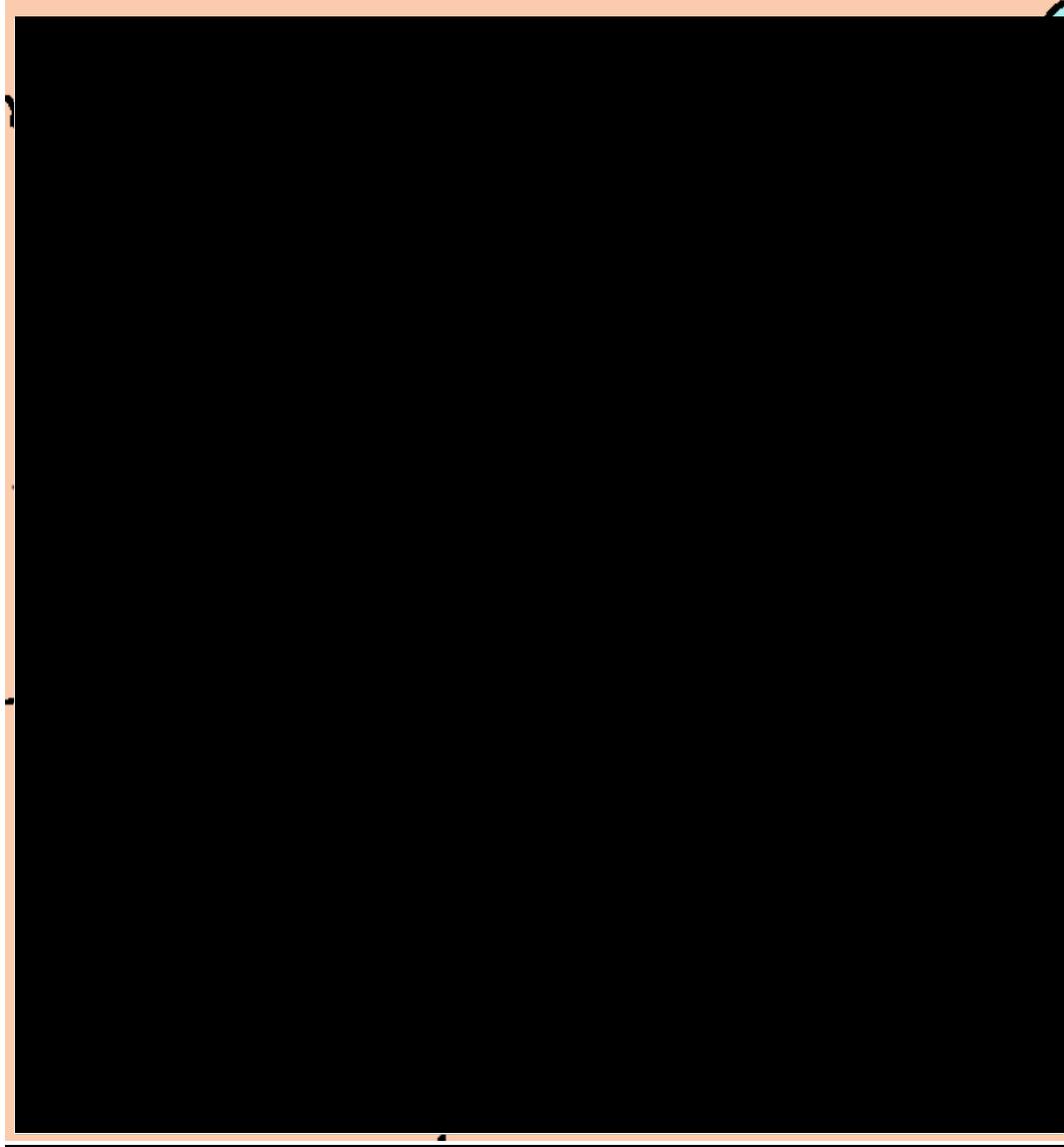
### **Fig. 3 – The Treaty of Sèvres (1920)**



Provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres for an Independent Kurdistan (in 1920):

- - Proposed boundaries of independent Kurdistan
- - Boundaries of Kurdish-inhabited areas to have been given the choice to join the independent Kurdistan after August 1922

**Fig. 4 – The Republic of Mahabad (1945-1946)**



**Fig. 5 - Iraq's Oil and the KRG**  
(Note that Kirkuk is currently under KRG control)

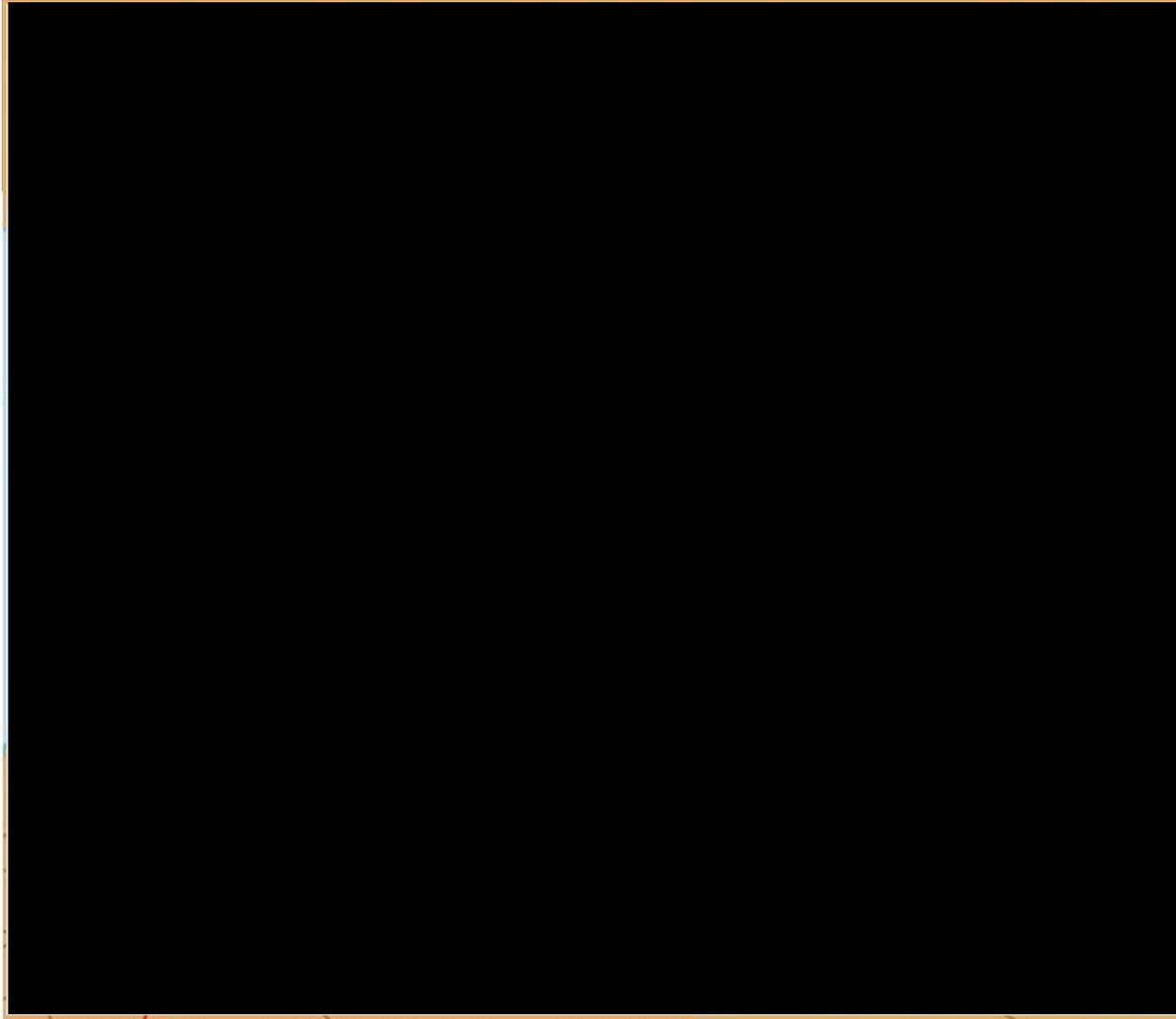


**Fig. 6 – Map of Syria as of April 2015 (Rojava cantons in Yellow)**



**Fig. 7 – Oil in Syria**

(Note the fields in the north-east, most of which lie within Roajva in Cizîre canton)



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