

THE CONTEMPORARY ROOTS OF KURDISH NATIONALISM IN IRAQ

Introduction

Contrary to popular opinion, nationalism is a contemporary phenomenon. Until recently most people primarily identified with and owed their ultimate allegiance to their religion or empire on the macro level or tribe, city, and local region on the micro level. This was all the more so in the Middle East, where the Islamic umma or community existed ⁽¹⁾and the Ottoman Empire prevailed until the end of World War I.⁽²⁾ Only then did Arab, Turkish, and Iranian nationalism begin to create modern nation-states.⁽³⁾ In reaction to these new Middle Eastern nationalisms, Kurdish nationalism developed even more recently. The purpose of this article is to analyze this situation.

Broadly speaking, there are two main schools of thought on the origins of the nation and nationalism. The primordialists or essentialists argue that the concepts have ancient roots and thus date back to some distant point in history. John Armstrong, for example, argues that nations or nationalities slowly emerged in the premodern period through such processes as symbols, communication, and myth, and thus predate nationalism. Although he admits that nations are created, he maintains that they existed before the rise of nationalism.⁽⁴⁾ Anthony D. Smith

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agrees with the primordialist school when he argues that the origins of the nation lie in the ethnies, which contains such attributes as a mythomoteur or constitutive political myth of descent, a shared history and culture, a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity.⁽⁵⁾

The constructionists, on the other hand, maintain that nationalism is a recent construction that in effect has invented nations.

Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, for example, have argued that states create nations. “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations

to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist”⁽⁶⁾-or as Anderson puts it, “imagines”⁽⁷⁾ them through such mechanisms as “print capitalism.” Massimo d’Azeglio, an Italian nationalist leader during the Risorgimento, reputedly exclaimed: “We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians.”⁽⁸⁾ Eugene Weber has documented the recent process of changing “peasants into Frenchmen,” that is how most rural and village inhabitants of France did not think of themselves as members of the French nation as late as 1870 or even up to the eve of World War I.⁽⁹⁾

Primordial Kurdish Nationalism

Most Kurdish nationalists would be considered primordialists because they would argue that the origins of their nation and nationalism reach back into time immemorial. Many see themselves as the descendants of the ancient Medes who overthrew the Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C.E. They also can recite interesting myths about their origins regarding

King Solomon, jinn, the blacksmith Kawa who defeated the ruthless ruler Zohhak who had been feeding the brains of young men to two giant serpents’ heads

growing from his shoulders, and their national holiday Newroz celebrating the beginning of spring or the new year. Some believe that the Kardouchoi, who gave Xenophon and his 10,000 such a mauling as they retreated from Persia in 401 B.C.E, were also the ancestors of the Kurds.

Mehrdad Izady observes that “reconstruction of the Kurdish history is a difficult task” because it “has all too often... been written by its hegemon... The Kurds have not been hegemon for over 800 year. The result is that Kurdish contributions to history have been ignored, or worse, appropriated by other

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peoples.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Nevertheless, Izady argues that the period from the 5th century BC through the 6th century AD “marks the homogenization and consolidation of the modern Kurdish national identity. The ethnic designator Kurd is established finally, and applied to all segments of the nation.”⁽¹¹⁾

In examining linguistic and historical data, Vladimir F. Minorsky is more circumspect. He finds that “the Muslim sources and Kurdish traditions do not help us to solve the problem of the origin of the Kurds,” but concludes that “we thus find that about the period of the Arab conquest [mid 7th century] a single ethnic term Kurd (plural, Akrad) was beginning to be applied to an amalgamation of Iranian or iranicised tribes.”⁽¹²⁾ Minorsky adds that “we have detailed notices of the Kurds from the time of the Arab conquest onwards. During the five first centuries of the Hidjra, the Kurds frequently played a considerable part in events and often took the initiative in them. Several Kurd dynasties arose at this time.”⁽¹³⁾ Edith and E. F. Penrose, simply observe that “the Kurdish consciousness of separate identity goes back far in history.”⁽¹⁴⁾

History does record that Saladin (1137-93) was arguably the greatest and most famous of the Kurds. In 1171, he overthrew the Shiite Fatimid caliphate in Egypt and established the

Sunni Ayyubid dynasty that ruled throughout Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.⁽¹⁵⁾ Saladin, of course, gained his greatest fame in the West as the chivalrous Muslim leader who defeated the Christian Crusaders led by the English king Richard the Lion Heart and regained the holy city of Jerusalem for Islam.

In 1597, the Kurdish mir (prince) Sharaf Khan Bitlisi (1543-1603) published the *Sharafnama*,⁽¹⁶⁾ an erudite history of the semi-independent Kurdish emirates, some of which continued to exist into the middle of the nineteenth century. The first part of this impressive history written in Persian dealt with five Kurdish dynasties that had enjoyed status as royalty or what might be interpreted as independence: the Marwanids of Diyarbakir and Jazire, the Hasanwayhids of Dinawar and Shahrizur, the Fadluyids of the Great Lur, the princes of Little Lur, and the Ayyubids established by Saladin. The second part of Sharaf Khan’s *Sharafnama* went on to list Kurdish dynasties that had had coins struck and the khutba recited in their names. These attributes also reflected the equivalent of independence. Many contemporary Kurdish nationalists, therefore, point to the *Sharafnama* as historical documentation of the antiquity of their nation and nationalism.

One hundred years later, Ahmadi Khan

composed Mem u Zin, a tragic love poem universally hailed as the Kurdish national epic because of its obvious references to Kurdish nationalist beliefs: “If only there were harmony among us, if we were to obey a single one of us, he would reduce to vassalage Turks, Arabs and Persians, all of them. We would perfect our religion, our state, and would educate ourselves in learning and wisdom.”⁽¹⁷⁾ In referring to the divisions among the Kurds, Ahmadi Khan, of course, was also identifying the recurring and most important factor stymying Kurdish nationalism today. Thus, elsewhere in his epic, Ahmadi Khan bemoans the results of this Kurdish division: “Look, from the Arabs to the Georgians, the Kurds have become like towers. The Turks and Persians are surrounded by them. The Kurds are on all four corners. Both sides have made the Kurdish people targets for the arrows of fate. They are said to be keys to the borders, each tribe forming a formidable bulwark. Whenever the Ottoman Sea [Ottomans] and Tajik Sea [Persians] flow out and agitate, the Kurds get soaked in blood separating them [the Turks and Persians] like an isthmus.”⁽¹⁸⁾ In

analyzing Kurdish nationalism in Mem u Zin, Ferhad Shakely concludes that Ahmadi Khan “was proud of being a Kurd and thought that the Kurds were a nation like other neighbouring peoples and not inferior.”⁽¹⁹⁾

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Amir Hassanpour argues that the Sharafnama and Mem u Zin mark the historical origin of Kurdish nationalism: “Sharaf Khan’s work demonstrates a conscious effort to assert Kurdish statehood.”⁽²⁰⁾ Interestingly, Hassanpour views the development of Kurdish nationalism through Marxist lens of social classes progressing through what he terms feudal and bourgeois nationalism. He also emphasizes the importance of the Kurdish emirates, some of which existed up to the middle of the 19th century as autonomous political entities. In addition, he refers to the 19th century Kurdish patriotic poet Haji Qadir Koyi as “next to [Ahmadi] Khani... the second apostle of Kurdayeti [Kurdish nationalism].”⁽²¹⁾

In Kurdish history and heroic folklore, Dimdim (in Persian Dumdum) has become a sort of Kurdish Masada. It was at this mountain fortress near the western shore of

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Lake Urmia that Hatem Beg, the grand vizier of the Safavid Persian shah Abbas the Great, besieged the Baradust mir Khan Yakdas from November 1609 to the summer of 1610. When the Persians finally took Dimdim, they found that all its defenders had committed suicide rather than be captured. Bayti Dimdim treats the siege of Dimdim as a Kurdish struggle against foreign domination and is considered by many as a national epic, second only to Ahmadi Khan's Mem u Zin.

Although no records exist of pre-Islamic Kurdish literature and much undoubtedly has been lost because of the ceaseless conflicts that have ravished Kurdistan, it is possible to mention a few other important works and authors. In the first place, however, one should note that there have long been Kurdish authors who wrote in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, while in modern times many Kurds used Western languages. Usage of these other languages obscures the Kurdish origins of this literature. The 13th-century Kurdish historian and biographer Ibn al-Athir wrote in Arabic, while at the beginning of the 16th century Idris Bitlisi's *Hasht Behesht* (The Eight Paradises) traced the early history

of the Ottoman sultans in Persian. Melaye Cizri was a famous Sufi poet in the early part of the 17th century who declared, "I am the rose of Eden of Botan; I am the torch of the knights of Kurdistan." His poems remain popular today. Other early Kurdish authors include the famous 14th-century Islamic historian and geographer, Abu al-Fida; the great poet of the Turkish language, Fuduli (died 1556); Eli Heriri; Mele Ahmed of Bate; and Mir Mihemed of Mukis, surnamed Feqiye Teyran.

Under the patronage of the Ardalán court, a number of excellent Kurdish poets also wrote in the Gurani Kurdish language. This list covers the period from Mulla Muhammad Pareshan in the 15th century to Mulla Abdal Rahim Mawlawi in the 19th century, and also includes Ahmede Texti, Sheikh Mistefa Besarani, Khanay Qubadi, and Mahzuni. Gurani only ceased as a court literary language with the downfall of the Ardalán emirate in the mid-19th century. Its former literary ascendancy is possibly still reflected by the fact that the term gorani is the

common word for song in the modern Kurdish Sorani language.

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is impossible to list all of them. A partial roll would include the aforementioned Haji Qadir Koyi; the much-adored patriotic journalist, Haji (Piremerd) Tewfiq; the incomparable Kurdish-Syrian scholar, Muhammad Farid Kurd Ali; the vibrant patriotic poet, Sexmus Hesên Cegerxwin; Faiq Abdallah Bakes; Abdallah Mihemed Ziwer; Ahmad Shawki, the Kurdish-Egyptian who was known as the prince of poets; the Kurdish-Egyptian brothers, Muhammad and Mahmud Taymur; and Mihemed Shheikh Abdul Kerim Qani; among many others. In 1898, Kurdistan, a journal published in Cairo by a group of Kurdish exiles, proved seminal in the development of Kurdish literature and modern Kurdish nationalism.

In 1880, Sheikh Ubeydullah of Nehri led a famous but ultimately unsuccessful revolt that is sometimes said to have been the prototype for subsequent Kurdish nationalist revolts. In a famous letter to the British consul-general in Tabriz, Ubeydullah seemingly made obvious references to some kind of pre-existing Kurdish nationalism when he declared that: “the Kurdish nation... is a people apart. Their

religion is different and their laws and customs are distinct... We also are a nation apart. We want our affairs to be in our own hands.”⁽²²⁾

Constructionist Kurdish Nationalism

Despite these primordial or essentialist arguments for the antiquity of Kurdish nationalism, such interpretations can be challenged for a number of very solid reasons. In the first place, of course, the very concept of the nation and nationalism being the focus of one’s supreme loyalty is relatively new even

in the West, where many would argue that it only began to develop in the latter part of the 18th century and specifically during the French Revolution which began in 1789.⁽²³⁾ The concept is even newer in the Middle East. Turkish, Iranian, and even Arab nationalism largely emerged only after World War I following the demise of the multi-national Ottoman Empire and its emphasis on Islam as the supreme focus of one’s loyalty. Martin van Bruinessen, for example, disputes the oft-made claim that Ahmadi Khani’s 17th century

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epic Mem u Zin was a precursor of modern Kurdish nationalism. He argues that neither the political nor socio-economic prerequisites existed in 17th century Kurdistan for any notion of the nation to exist because tribes were the main collectivity with which the Kurds identified. "In general, people did not identify themselves as ethnic groups or nations in the way that people nowadays do."⁽²⁴⁾

Hugh Seton-Watson analyzes the rise of what he calls "official nationalism" in such multi-national states as Russia and Hungary during the second half of the 19th century: "The leaders of the most powerful nations... impose[d] their nationality on all their subjects- of whatever religion, language or culture... As they saw it... they were strengthening their state by creating within it a single homogeneous nation."⁽²⁵⁾ Russification in the Russian Empire under Alexander III and Nicholas II imagined a nation without diversity, and subsequently became the model for many of the new states in the Middle East like Iraq, Turkey, and Iran.

Denise Natali illustrates how "in both the Ottoman and Qajar [Persian] Empires the absence of an exclusive official nationalist project based on ethnicity prevented Kurdayeti

[Kurdish nationalism] from becoming salient or highly ethnicized."⁽²⁶⁾ Following World War I, however, "different forms of Kurdayeti have evolved in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran as a function of the political space in each state."⁽²⁷⁾ Hakan Ozoglu aptly demonstrates how Kurdish nationalism only began to emerge in Turkey after the Ottoman Empire collapsed and the Kurdish notables had to seek a new identity. "Kurdish nationalism appeared to be the only viable choice for Kurds in the absence of a functioning ideology such as Ottomanism. It was a result of a desperate search for identity after Ottomanism failed."⁽²⁸⁾ Thus, Kurdish nationalism... was not a cause of [the Ottoman] Empire's disintegration, but rather the result of it."⁽²⁹⁾

M. Hakan Yavuz elaborates on the modern origins of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey when he declares: "The state's [Turkey's] policies are the determinant factors in the evolution and modulation of... Kurdish ethno-nationalism. The major reason for the politicization of Kurdish cultural identity is the shift from multi-ethnic, multi-cultural realities of the Ottoman Empire to the nation-state model."⁽³⁰⁾ The Kemalist reforms, which aimed to create

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a modern Turkish nation-state “resulted in the construction of Kurdish ethno-nationalism.”⁽³¹⁾ Throughout his analysis, Yavuz emphasizes that “the major difference between Turkish and Kurdish nationalism is the presence of the state... Since Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran evolved in response to modernizing nation-states, it constantly stresses its ethnic ‘difference,’ sometimes even evoking racism to historicize itself.”⁽³²⁾

Hamit Bozarslan basically agrees with Yavuz’s analysis when he argues that two significant factors preventing Kurdish nationalism from exerting significant influence from 1919-1921 were “the ideal of Islamic fraternity, and the fear of the establishment of an Armenian state.”⁽³³⁾ However, “the proclamation of the Kemalist Republic in 1923 meant the end of... the Ottoman tacit contract between centre and peripheries [and]... to a large extent explains the... traditional [Kurdish] dignitaries... participation in the subsequent revolts.”⁽³⁴⁾

Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq

Similarly in Iraq,⁽³⁵⁾ Kurdish nationalism only began to develop after World War I in response to the attempts to build a modern Arab state that would permit no more than a

minimal amount of Kurdish autonomy.⁽³⁶⁾ Thus, the revolts of Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji in the 1920s and Mulla Mustafa Barzani beginning in the 1930s were mainly tribal affairs at times opposed by more Kurdish josh (literally, little donkeys or Kurds who supported the Iraqi government in Baghdad) than supported. In discussing the revolts of Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji, for example, David McDowall argues that “he had little in common with today’s Kurdish leaders. Both the vocabulary and style are quite different. It is significant that Shaykh Mahmud did not waste his time appealing to nationalist sentiment. He was a sayyid [literally a reputed descendant of Muhammed], and the language his constituency understood was the language of Islam. In 1919 he appealed for a jihad, not a national liberation struggle. Furthermore, his style was to use kin and tribal allies and his aim was the establishment of a personal fiefdom.”⁽³⁷⁾

Barzani’s rise to prominence after his return to Iraq from exile in the Soviet Union in 1958 is not easy to fully explain unless one appreciates the contemporary roots of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq. As late as 1957, for example, no less an astute observer of affairs than C. J. Edmonds, who had been a British Political Officer in Iraq during the 1920s and also written a number of useful analyses of the Iraqi Kurds, mentioned

Barzani only in passing as a “fugitive rebel from Iraq,”⁽³⁸⁾ and concluded that “with every year that passes any concerted armed revolt becomes more improbable.”

How wrong could anybody be? Two years later, although now realizing that “the event which perhaps more than any other has caught the popular imagination is the return of Mulla Mustafa,”⁽³⁹⁾ Edmonds could only argue that “it is difficult to explain this rapid build-up into a national all-Iraqi figure... otherwise than as the work of a well-organized chain of communist propagandists long established throughout Iraq.” Again how wrong could any analyst be? Given subsequent developments, Edmonds’s lack of foresight, stemmed from his understandable failure to predict the contemporary rise of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq as a reaction to the excesses of Iraqi Arab nationalism.

Thus, only in the 1960s did the Kurdish movement in Iraq begin to take on the characteristics of a genuine nationalist movement. Following the destruction of the Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan in Iran in 1946, in which Barzani had been one of commanding

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generals, Barzani’s retreat to the Soviet Union subsequently became epic in the rise of modern Kurdish nationalism in Iraq: “We marched for fifty-two days. In the high

mountain passes the late spring snow was six to twelve feet deep. We fought nine encounters, lost four killed and had seven wounded.”⁽⁴⁰⁾ Even so, to his dying day, Barzani never fully exceeded the bounds of tribal chieftain. In part, this helps to explain his bitter disputes with Ibrahim Ahmad and Ahmad’s son-in-law, Jalal Talabani.

In time, however, Saddam Hussein’s genocidal attempts to reduce the Kurds in the 1970s and 1980s,⁽⁴¹⁾ had the opposite effect of fostering Kurdish nationalism in Iraq. Iraq’s defeat in the Gulf Wars of 1991 and 2003 spawned the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), a federal state in post-Saddam-Hussein Iraq in which an increasingly strong sense of Iraqi Kurdish nationalism began to grow within what was largely a Kurdish-ruled state.⁽⁴²⁾ Social and economic factors also played important roles in the development of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq. The oil industry, construction of major dams,

cement and tobacco factories, and agricultural mechanization all created greater wealth and helped move people out of their smaller traditional valleys into the larger urban world. In the first decade of the 21st century, Iraqi Kurdish nationalism has become the most highly developed form of Kurdish nationalism among the entire Kurdish people, but clearly its origins are mainly contemporary, dating only to the events described briefly above.

The Bedir Khan brothers' (Tureyya, Kamuran, and Celadet) attempt to develop or invent Kurdish nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s also aptly illustrates its contemporary roots. The three brothers were grandsons of the famous Bedir Khan of Botan whose powerful emirate was only destroyed by the Ottomans in 1847. The three brothers grappled with many problems, including the ambivalent nature of the Kurdish relationship with the Turks and the primitive state of affairs in Kurdistan. As Martin Strohmeier notes, "all Kurds were deeply if variously enmeshed in social, ideological, economic and personal relations with the Turks... These bonds hampered the development of a self-assertive, robust and

distinct Kurdish identity."⁽⁴³⁾ Although Bedir Khan's writings were propagandistic and contained simplistic, misleading, and distorted analyses of Kurdish history, they still maintain an important influence on the subsequent development of Kurdish nationalism and its analysis.

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Celadet Bedir Khan was elected the first president of Khoybun, a transnational Kurdish party created in 1927 by Kurdish intellectuals living in exile in Syria.

The party sought to establish a strong Kurdish national liberation movement with a trained fighting force that would not depend on the traditional tribal leaders and helped instigate the unsuccessful Ararat uprising of the Kurds in 1927-1930. Subsequently, Celadet Bedir Khan devoted himself to literary work and helped to develop a Kurdish alphabet in Latin characters. During his final years in the 1960s, he served as a spokesman for Mulla Mustafa Barzani, the famous Iraqi Kurdish leader discussed above.

In 1937, Kamuran Bedir Khan published *Der Adler [Eagle] von Kurdistan*, a formalistic and forgotten attempt to write an epic novel to promote the Kurdish cause on the magnitude

of Franz Werfel's classic, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* for the Armenians. Bedir Khan attempted to forge an imagined Kurdish nation that illustrated its heroism, patriotism, reverence for the land, identification with the mountains, pride in the language and heritage, beauty of the folk tales and songs, strong and patriotic women, and overall Kurdish solidarity. He even sought to assert that the Kurds' true religion was Zoroastrianism and that the Biblical Garden of Eden had a Kurdish counterpart in the legend of the Thousand Lakes (Bingol). Proverbs such as "Lion, put your faith in your paws," demonstrated how the Kurds relied on their own strength and did not merely await divine aid. Kamuran Bedir Khan's effort to produce a Kurdish national epic, however, proved unsuccessful and failed to stir Kurdish nationalism. The large majority of the Kurds had not yet imbued enough sense of Kurdish nationalism to part with other Muslims.

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The Current Situation in Iraq

At the present time the relationship between Baghdad and the KRG "is characterized by suspicion, animosity and brinkmanship"⁽⁴⁴⁾ that "threaten the stability of the [Iraqi] state at a far deeper political level."⁽⁴⁵⁾ As the Baghdad government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki grew in strength and confidence, it naturally began to seek to reimpose its authority over the northern Kurdish part of the state. The 2005 constitution that guaranteed real federalism and thus semi-independence for the KRG was now challenged as having been imposed at a moment of weakness. Many (but not all⁽⁴⁶⁾) Shiite and Sunni Arabs now seek to return to what they see as the rightful situation of a more centralized state.

For the past several years, Massoud Barzani, the president of the KRG and al-Maliki have been locked in a bitter verbal struggle over the situation. During a tense meeting in Baghdad in November 2008, for example, Barzani told al-Maliki "you smell like a dictator"⁽⁴⁷⁾ and also declared that the Iraqi prime minister was "playing with fire."⁽⁴⁸⁾ In August 2008, these semantic fireworks nearly resulted in open hostilities over the disputed city of Khanaqin situated in Diyala province some 90 miles north of Baghdad on their de facto internal border often referred to as the "trigger line." Here the Kurdish peshmerga

ignored an ultimatum by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to withdraw within 24 hours. After some very tense brinkmanship, the two sides each withdrew some 15 miles north and south of the city leaving security within Khanaqin to be handled by the police.

The two sides have come close to fighting on several subsequent occasions. Only the presence of U.S. troops stationed nearby seemed to prevent bloodshed.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Now that these troops are gone, the situation may become even more untenable. For example, in November 2012, tensions mounted over the formation of Baghdad's Dijla Operations Command, a new military formation that was to operate in the area over which both Baghdad and the KRG claimed jurisdiction. Troops from the two sides faced off in what one report declared was "a crisis that... could erupt into a full-blown war,"⁽⁵⁰⁾ before tensions were defused.

Oil-rich and strategically located Kirkuk, of course, represents the center of these Baghdad-KRG tensions. It "is a classic divided city... over which people are prepared to fight and die... The numbers of actors involved, resource dimensions, and international involvement-add... layers of complexity that

are matched by few other disputes over territorial 'ownership.'⁽⁵¹⁾ From a position of initial strength that appeared to be ready to hand Kirkuk to the KRG under the provisions of Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution, the contested city and province now seem the proverbial bridge too far for the Kurds to take. Kirkuk also represents the opposing constitutional positions with the Kurds maintaining that the Iraqi constitution (including Article 140) must be implemented, while Baghdad has become increasingly critical of the constitution in general and particularly Article 140 as being part of a constitution written for a now dated situation.

Ironically, however, many Arabs fall back on the constitution by pointing to Article 142, which implements the promise to the Sunnis to review the document by allowing amendments agreed to by a parliamentary majority to be passed together as one bloc.⁽⁵²⁾ Indeed an Iraqi Constitutional Review Committee has been at work since the adoption of the constitution in 2005. Maybe its most important work has been to try to define the constitutional definition of federalism as it would be implemented in a manner acceptable to all Iraqi parties.

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How then will ties between the KRG and Baghdad play out?⁽⁵³⁾ Clearly, their political future remains in doubt. Whether Iraq will remain truly federal as the KRG demands or federal in name only as the Arabs recentralize the state remains to be seen. However, KRG president Massoud Barzani has unequivocally warned: “We will not allow the Kurdish people’s achievements to be wrecked by the Iraqi parliament. Iraq will fall apart if the Iraqi constitution is violated.”⁽⁵⁴⁾ In addition, as Stansfield and Anderson concluded: “A government founded on Arab nationalism, devoid of Kurdish representation and dedicated to eliminating meaningful Kurdish autonomy in the north, would spell the beginning of the end for the territorial integrity of Iraq.”⁽⁵⁵⁾ Given its much greater resources, time seems to be on the side of Baghdad. Does this mean that the KRG might be tempted to strike before it is too late? So far, Baghdad and the KRG have shown a wisdom and maturity that argues against any such rash action. Violence and even civil war, if they come, are more likely to eventuate inadvertently. However, just how often can the two sides dodge the proverbial bullet?

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Conclusion

That the roots of Kurdish nationalism lie mainly (although not completely) in contemporary times in no way impugns either its current existence or legitimacy. Indeed its contemporary roots are not unique. Arab, Turkish, and Iranian nationalisms are only slightly older, while that of the European nations-where the concept of nationalism was born-are also relatively new.

It is true, of course, that Kurdish nationalism-compared to that of its immediate neighbors in Turkey, the Arab world, and Iran-has been stunted and divided. In addition, this article has shown that Kurdish nationalism largely developed in the 20th century as a stateless ethnic reaction against the repressive “official state nationalisms” of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Martin van Bruinessen has commented on how “the sort of ‘nation building’ policies that were so successfully implemented in the earlier period appear to have the reverse result in the present... Since the 1970s... repressive measures directed at the expression of Kurdish nationalist sentiment have had the effect of strengthening rather than eliminating it.”⁽⁵⁶⁾ Moreover, referring

specifically to the Kurds, Murat Somer recently noted how “people can have multiple and mixed conceptions of their identities, whereby ethnicity has to compete with other sources of belonging, such as national, supranational, and regional identities.”⁽⁵⁷⁾ These problems and differences in Kurdish nationalism, however, do not negate its existence, which continues to develop and mature.

Recently, for example, the development of transnational space has led “to externally based opportunity structures such as diasporic networks, international nongovernmental organizations, host-country democratic systems, and advanced telecommunication systems that provide new forms of support or constraint to Kurdish nationalist projects.”⁽⁵⁸⁾ In Iraq, “the creation of a protected, autonomous region encouraged the transfer of people, ideas, and resources to Iraqi Kurdistan, all of which helped advance the notion of Kurdish self-rule.”⁽⁵⁹⁾ In Turkey, “access to European Union institutions has reinforced ties to the international network of human-rights organizations and created a new legal political arena for Kurdish nationalist claims... a ‘juridicization’ of Kurdayeti at the international level”⁽⁶⁰⁾

not present even in Iraq.

Indeed, early in the 21st century, Kurdish nationalism bids fair to challenge the future of such states as Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria. In northern Iraq particularly, Kurdish nationalism has flourished since the creation of the KRG, a de facto Kurdish state created following the defeat of Iraq in the 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars. Under the protection of a no-fly zone enforced against the government of Saddam Hussein until his fall in 2003, an entire Kurdish generation was raised under a Kurdish-run administration and learned to speak only Kurdish, not Arabic. In addition, a Kurdish civil society began to emerge with dozens of newspapers, magazines, and television and radio stations using the Kurdish language and representing a broad spectrum of opinion. The Kurds enjoyed freedoms impossible to imagine in the rest of Iraq. Furthermore, an increasingly influential and, in part, highly educated diaspora of more than 500,000 Kurds in the West⁽⁶¹⁾ has provided a reservoir of

support for the Kurdish nationalism developing in this de facto state.

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nationalism in Iraq.⁽⁶²⁾ At the expense of its inveterate opponent Turkey, Iraqi Kurdish nationalism became an even closer U.S. ally than anyone could have possibly expected.

This ironic situation was brought about by Turkey refusing to allow the United States to use its territory as a base for a northern front to attack Iraq in March 2003. The Iraqi Kurds were suddenly thrust into the

role of U.S. ally, a novel position they eagerly and successfully assumed. During the post-war insurgency that turned many sections of Arab Iraq into a very dangerous place, the Kurdish area of Iraq served as a relatively peaceful haven and Kurdish nationalism as the staunchest supporter of the United States. In return, the U.S.- supported new constitution for Iraq has given the Kurds an enormous power over their future in Iraq.

As of the beginning of 2013, Iraqi Kurdish nationalism is in a uniquely powerful position given its virtual veto power over future developments in Iraq. If the Arabs will not agree to a democratic federal Iraq that satisfies the goals of Kurdish nationalism, the Kurds will simply continue administering themselves as they have since 1991. Indeed, two unofficial referenda held in 2004 and

2005 almost unanimously opted for Kurdish independence. Geopolitical realities, of course, currently prohibit independence, but who can accurately predict what the future will bring if

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a democratic federal Iraq proves impossible to create? Kurdish nationalism in Iraq may come to be seen as having the right-in the name of stability that also would benefit the United States, Turkey,

and other neighboring states-to move towards independence.

What is more, given the fact that greater Kurdistan contains a sizeable amount of the oil in the Middle East as well as the water, Kurdish nationalism clearly will impact the region's and, therefore, the world's future. To begin to come to grips with these consequences, therefore, other states and nations must grant the legitimacy of Kurdish nationalism. Once this legitimacy is admitted, then stable and just solutions to the problems it entails may be found. Kurdish national self-determination need not necessarily destroy the territorial integrity of the states the Kurds now inhabit. Various forms of autonomy, federalism, and even simple but genuine democracy may satisfy the just demands of Kurdish nationalism.⁽⁶³⁾

Notes

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- 1 On the concept of the umma, see William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 5th ed. (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2013), pp. 33, 110, and 117.
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 - 3 The continuing instability of most of these states is due in part to the continuing influence of Islam challenging their secular legitimacy. Western imperialism too has played no small role.
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 - 6 Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964), p. 168.
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 - 11 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
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 - 14 Edith and E. F. Penrose, *Iraq: International Relations and National Development* (London: Ernest Benn, 1970), p. 276.
 - 15 Saladin, however, identified himself first as a Muslim, not a Kurd. Malcolm Cameron Lyons and D.E.P. Jackson, *Saladin: The Politics of the Holy War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
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- 18 Cited in Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University, 1992), pp. 53, 55.
- 19 Ferhad Shakely, *Kurdish Nationalism in Mam u Zin of Ahmad-iKhani* (Brussels: Kurdish Institute of Brussels, 1992), p. 64.
- 20 Amir Hassanpour, "The Making of Kurdish Identity: Pre-20th Century Historical and Literary Discourses," in Abbas Vali, ed., *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2003), p. 112.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 22 Cited in David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996), p. 53.
- 23 John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Nationalism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University, 1994), pp. 5ff., mention such other specific events as the first partition of Poland in 1775, the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, and Johann Fichte's Address to the German Nation in 1807. They also argue that "nationalism, as an ideological movement, did not emerge without antecedents" such as the printing press, classical humanism of some northern Italian cities, the growth of free towns as centers of capitalism, and the "disentangling of 'England' from 'France' at the end of the Hundred Years War (1337-1453)," among numerous other events.
- 24 Martin van Bruinessen, "Ehmedi Xani's Mem u Zin and Its Role in the Emergence of Kurdish National Awareness," in Abbas Vali, ed., *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2003), p. 44.
- 25 Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (Boulder: Westview, 1977), p. 148.
- 26 Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), p. 24.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 160.
- 28 Hakan Ozoglu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2004), p. 117.
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- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 3. For further analyses, see M. Hakan Yavuz, "A Preamble to the Kurdish Question: The Politics of Kurdish Identity," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 18:1 (1998), pp. 9-18; and Robert Olson, "Five Stages of Kurdish Nationalism, 1880-1980," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 12:2 (1991), pp. 392-410.
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- 35 Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 3rd ed. (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2011); Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); and Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).
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- 39 This and the following citation were taken from C.J. Edmonds, "The Kurds and the Revolution in Iraq," *Middle East Journal* 13 (Winter 1959), pp. 4 and 8.
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- 41 For background, see Middle East Watch, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993); and Joost R. Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 42 Gareth R.V. Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Mahir A. Aziz, *The Kurds of Iraq: Ethnonationalism and National Identity in Iraqi Kurdistan* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011); and Mohammed M.A. Ahmed, *Iraqi Kurds and Nation-Building* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), among numerous others.
- 43 Martin Strohmeier, *Crucial Images in the Presentation of a Kurdish National Identity: Heroes and Patriots, Traitors and Foes* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), p. 54.
- 44 For a lucid analysis, see Gareth Stansfield and Liam Anderson, "Kurds in Iraq; The Struggle between Baghdad and Erbil," *Middle East Policy* 16 (Spring 2009), pp. 134-45. This penetrating article sums up very well the current dilemma.
- 45 Ibid., p. 135.
- 46 The Shiite Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) agrees with the Kurds about maintaining real federalism in Iraq. Although influential in Basra, the ISCI lost considerable electoral support in the local Iraqi elections held in January 2009. It came in a stronger third in the national elections held on March 7, 2010, winning 70 seats. Ayyad Allawi's Iraqiya Alliance (largely Sunni supported) came in first with

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- 91 seats and Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law (Shiite) List came in a very close second with 89 seats. The Kurdistan List (KDP-PUK alliance of the two main Kurdish parties) came in fourth with 43.
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- 57 Murat Somer, "Failures of the Discourse of Ethnicity: Turkey, Kurds, and the Emerging Iraq," *Security Dialogue* 36 (March 2005), p. 114.
- 58 Natali, *Kurds and the State*, p. 161.
- 59 *Ibid.*, pp. 164-65.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 61 For background, see Vera Eccarius-Kelly, *The Militant Kurds: A Dual Strategy for Freedom* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).
- 62 For two separate collections of articles on these events, see Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter, eds., *The Kurdish Question and the 2003 Iraqi War* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2005); and Brendan O'Leary, John McGarry, and Khaled Salih, eds., *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2005).
- 63 For further background concerning Iraq, see Reidar Visser and Gareth Stansfield, eds., *An Iraq of Its Regions: Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

