

THE POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF KURDISH NATIONALISM IN TURKEY

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DECLARATION

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANAP	Motherland Party
AK Party (AKP)	Justice and Development Party
BDP	Peace and Democracy Party
CHP	Republican People's Party
CUP	Committee of Union and Progress
DDKD	Revolutionary Democratic Cultural Association
DDKO	Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearths
Dev-Genç	Federation of Revolutionary Youth
DİSK	Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions
DHKP/C	Revolutionary People's Liberation Party–Front
EU	European Union
HDK	Peoples' Democratic Congress
HDP	Peoples' Democratic Party
KCK	Kurdistan Communities Union
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KDTP	Democratic Party of Turkish Kurdistan
KJB	Kurdistan Women's Supreme Council
KKK	Kurdistan Communities Council
KSPT	Kurdish Socialist Party of Turkey
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party
NUC	National Unity Committee
OFS	Ottoman Freedom Society
PAJK	Kurdistan Women's Freedom Party
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PJA	Women's Freedom Party
PJKK	Kurdistan Working Women's Party
TDS	Turkish State Discourse

TJA	Free Women's Movement
TWP (TİP)	Workers' Party of Turkey
YJAK	Free Women's Association of Kurdistan
YJA Star	Free Women's Units (Yekîneyên Jinên Azad Star)

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RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse analyse les causes, le développement et les conséquences du nationalisme kurde en Turquie à partir d'une recherche documentaire secondaire et d'un cadre théorique hybride intégrant l'ethno-symbolisme et les approches historico-sociologiques. Elle commence par examiner la formation historique du peuple kurde et de sa patrie, le Kurdistan, en retraçant l'évolution des structures sociales tribales façonnées par des conditions géographiques et environnementales. L'étude montre comment les unités tribales se sont transformées en entités politiques à la suite de l'essor de l'islam, puis se sont développées en émirats locaux. Elle explore en outre l'impact des conflits géopolitiques régionaux, en particulier entre les empires ottoman Sunnite et safavide chiite, et démontre comment les alliances kurdes avec les Ottomans ont contribué à la formation du Kurdistan ottoman après la bataille de Chaldiran en 1514. L'effondrement ultérieur des émirats kurdes au XIXe siècle, provoqué par la centralisation ottomane et les divisions internes, a créé une crise politique et sociale qui a renforcé le rôle du leadership religieux et conduit aux premières révoltes nationalistes, notamment celle du cheikh Ubaydallah en 1880.

La thèse examine ensuite les conséquences de l'effondrement de l'Empire ottoman, les promesses non tenues d'autodétermination kurde dans le traité de Sèvres (1920) et la division territoriale du Kurdistan en vertu du traité de Lausanne (1923). Elle analyse la répression des soulèvements kurdes et les politiques assimilationnistes de l'État kémaliste, notamment les interdictions visant la langue et la culture kurdes, qui ont profondément façonné la conscience nationale kurde. Une attention particulière est accordée à la « période de silence » (1938–1979), durant laquelle la répression et les transformations socio-économiques ont contribué à l'émergence d'une mobilisation politique kurde moderne.

Enfin, la thèse étudie l'ascension du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK) et sa transformation idéologique, passant d'un mouvement de libération nationale marxiste-léniniste à un mouvement socialiste libertaire prônant le confédéralisme démocratique. Elle examine le rôle du PKK dans la redéfinition de l'identité politique kurde, son insistance sur l'égalité des genres et sa critique du nationalisme fondé sur l'État-nation. L'étude conclut que le nationalisme kurde en Turquie constitue un phénomène social historiquement enraciné et évolutif, et souligne l'importance de modèles politiques alternatifs pour répondre aux mouvements nationaux sans État. Elle propose également des recommandations pour de futures recherches sur la sociologie politique du nationalisme kurde et des études comparatives des nations sans État.

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the causes, development, and consequences of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey using secondary documentary research and a hybrid theoretical framework integrating ethno-symbolism and historical-sociological approaches. It begins by examining the historical formation of the Kurdish people and their homeland, Kurdistan, tracing the evolution of tribal social structures shaped by geographical and environmental conditions. The study shows how tribal units transformed into political entities following the rise of Islam and later developed into local emirates. It further explores the impact of regional geopolitical conflicts, particularly between the Sunni Ottoman and Shiite Safavid empires, and demonstrates how Kurdish alliances with the Ottomans contributed to the formation of Ottoman Kurdistan after the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. The subsequent collapse of the Kurdish emirates in the nineteenth century, driven by Ottoman centralization and internal divisions, created a political and social crisis that elevated religious leadership and led to early nationalist rebellions, including that of Sheikh Ubaydallah in 1880.

The thesis then examines the consequences of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the unfulfilled promises of Kurdish self-determination in the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), and the territorial division of Kurdistan under the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). It analyzes the suppression of Kurdish uprisings and the assimilationist policies of the Kemalist state, including bans on Kurdish language and culture, which profoundly shaped Kurdish national consciousness. Particular attention is given to the “Silent Period” (1938–1979), during which repression and socio-economic transformations contributed to the emergence of modern Kurdish political mobilization.

Finally, the thesis investigates the rise of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and its ideological transformation from a Marxist-Leninist national liberation movement into a libertarian socialist movement advocating democratic confederalism. It examines the PKK’s role in reshaping Kurdish political identity, its emphasis on gender equality, and its critique of nation-state nationalism. The study concludes that Kurdish nationalism in Turkey reflects a historically rooted and evolving social phenomenon and highlights the significance of alternative political models in addressing stateless national movements. It also offers recommendations for future research on the political sociology of Kurdish nationalism and comparative studies of stateless nations.

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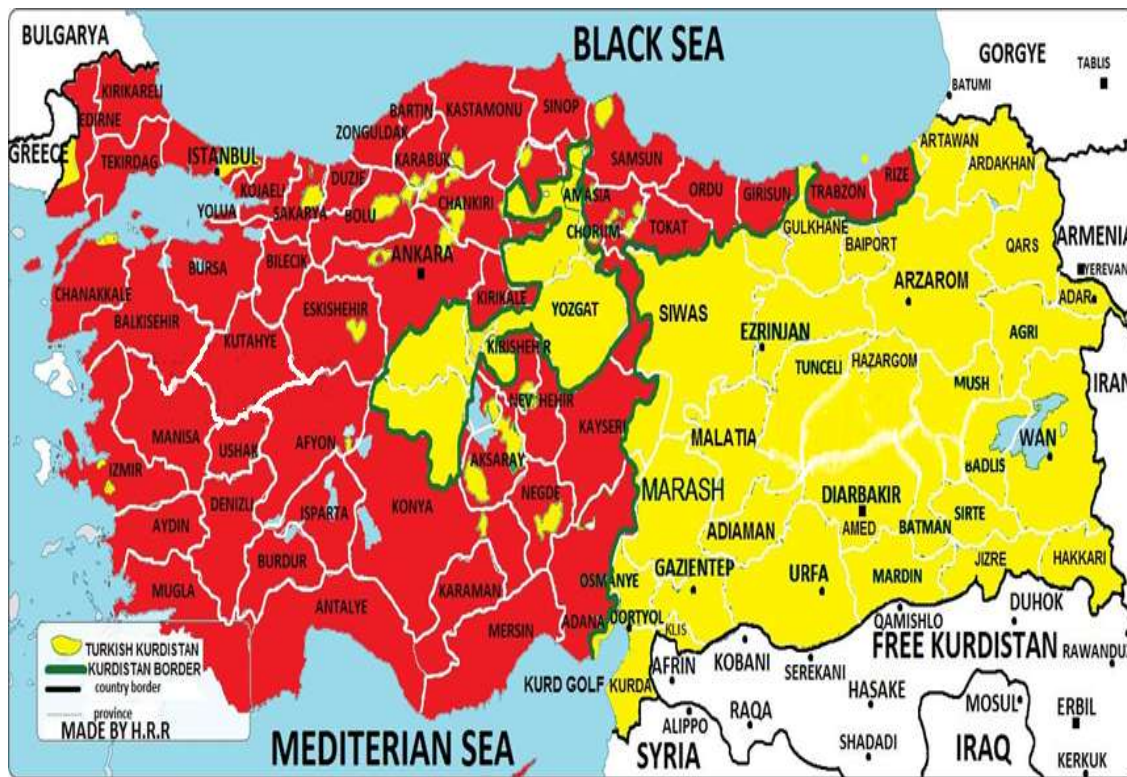
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction



Map 1: Shows Turkish Kurdistan and many other small Kurdish settlements throughout the country.¹

Introduction

It is widely recognized that the *Kurdish National Question* has garnered significant attention from the news media, political analysts, and academics in recent decades. The critical importance of this matter stems from the dedicated and persistent efforts of the Kurdish people to attain their cultural, political, and ethnic rights. As a result, finding a resolution to this issue has become not just essential, but urgently necessary. With unwavering commitment to this subject, this dissertation offers a comprehensive exploration of the *Political Sociology of*

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Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. It rigorously analyzes and argues for its critical importance in identifying the most effective solution among a range of possibilities.

The Kurds: A Brief Historical Assessment

The Kurds, along with other ancient ethnic groups such as Arabs, Persians, and Armenians, are among the earliest inhabitants of the Near East. This rich and historically significant region is known as Kurdistan. The original people of Kurdistan, who resided in the Zagros and Eastern Taurus Mountains, included three prominent tribal branches: the Guti, the Lullubi, and the Kashshu. These groups not only shared a common ancestry but also a deep cultural heritage, underscoring their enduring presence in this vital part of the world (Jwaideh, 2006). The Kurds embarked on a westward migration, establishing their presence in the Zagros and Taurus Mountain ranges in the third millennium BC, a movement driven by the incursions of various Indo-European tribes. This wave of migration likely persisted well into the middle of the second millennium, reflecting the dynamic nature of their historical journey (McDowall, 1997). The genealogy of Kurdish common ancestry reveals that, while the majority of Kurds trace their roots to diverse branches of the Indo-European family, a significant number of Arab and Turkmen tribes adopted Kurdish culture through conversion and integration over time. This dynamic blending of identities enriches the vibrant tapestry of Kurdish heritage (McDowall, 1997). By the close of the ninth century BC, the ancestral Kurds had firmly established their kingdom of Mannai, strategically positioned to the south and west of Lake Urumiyeh. This kingdom not only bordered Assyria to the north but also marked the south-eastern frontiers of the Persian Medes. Furthermore, in the seventh century, they boldly founded the Scythian

Kingdom, with its capital at the thriving city of Saqqiz, showcasing their influence and strength in the region (McDowall, 1997).

According to credible sources from the 2nd century BC, the roots of the Kurds can be traced to the ancient 'Cyrtii' or 'Kyrty' tribes, which united to form the formidable Parthian Empire, residing in the rugged Zagros Mountains. Furthermore, the term "Kurd" originally denoted the nomadic communities on the western edge of the Iranian plateau, who had a significant historical connection with the powerful Sassanians in Mesopotamia. This rich heritage underscores the enduring identity and resilience of the Kurdish people throughout history (Jwaideh, 2006). During the Sassanian period, the Kurds emerged as a formidable power, extending their influence into the rugged mountainous regions of western Persia. When the Arab Conquest commenced, they fiercely resisted and confronted the invading Arab armies in a determined effort to protect their homeland. At this critical juncture in history, the bond between the Kurds and Persians was primarily forged through strategic military alliances, united in their endeavour to repel the Arab onslaught. However, despite their valour and cooperation, these efforts ultimately led to their defeat at the hands of the conquerors. In the aftermath of the Arab Conquest, the Kurds encountered the Arabs at multiple junctures, ultimately acknowledging their authority by paying land taxes. However, rather than submit to external control, the Kurds engaged in a series of uprisings that demonstrated their unyielding spirit. Notable among these were the fierce war of Shahrizur in 643, the major rebellion led by Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Ashath in 703 during the Umayyad caliphate, and the Khazar invasion of Armenia in 764 during the Abbasid dynasty. This history underscores the Kurds' steadfast refusal to be subjugated by any ruling power, regardless of how that power claims jurisdiction over their territory (Jwaideh, 2006).

The rise of Kurdish dynasties between the 9th and 11th centuries represents a pivotal transition as Arab dominance waned and a formidable Turkish empire began to take shape. During this dynamic period, the Kurdish Shaddadid dynasty, founded by Muhammad ibn Shaddad ibn Qartaq in 951, established its reign over eastern Transcaucasia, exerting control over more than ten kingdoms until 1075. In parallel, the Marwanid dynasty, initiated by the daring warlord Badh ibn Dustak in 984, boasted five independent rulers by 1083 and successfully conquered vast territories that now encompass the Kurdish provinces of Turkey. This era not only underscores the resilience and power of the Kurdish people but also marks a significant transformation in the region's geopolitical landscape (Jwaideh, 2006). The Ayyubids stand out as the most formidable Kurdish dynasty, established by the legendary Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub ibn Shadi. Renowned as Saladin during the Crusades, he commanded both Egypt and Syria in the late twelfth century, embodying the role of a king and a brilliant military strategist, leading Muslim forces in their valiant struggle against the Crusaders. Following the death of Salah al-Din in 1193, the Ayyubid dynasty rapidly descended into disarray, driven by fierce family rivalries among his successors. From 1260 to 1300, the Kurdish dynasties confronted formidable challenges posed by the relentless Mongol invasions sweeping through the Middle East. In their struggle for survival, they were often compelled to seek refuge in far-off lands, such as Egypt and Algeria, in a desperate bid to escape the looming threat of the Mongols (Jwaideh, 2006).² Starting in the 16th century, the rise of powerful regional powers such as Turkey and Persia became a pivotal point of contention in the fierce struggle for regional sovereignty between the Ottoman and Safavid empires significantly undermined the once-mighty Kurdish dynasties (McDowall, 1997).

²It should be noted here that none of the dynasties founded by the Kurds have ever been recognized in history as Kurdish empires, and even Saladin Ayyubi is identified in historical texts as an Arab emperor (the emphasis added for clarification).

Following the decisive Battle of Chalدران in 1514, the Safavid Empire faced the harsh reality of surrendering vast territories in the Turkmen and Kurdish regions to the Ottomans. The active participation of Kurdish tribes played a pivotal role in this conflict, ultimately leading to the first official division of Kurdistan between these two powerful empires. This contentious territorial dispute was formally settled with the Treaty of Zuhab in 1639, which meticulously outlined the borders of Kurdistan. However, despite this agreement, both empires struggled to maintain a robust and stable presence in the Kurdish territories. This failure often resulted in a power vacuum that significantly undermined effective governance in the region, leaving the Kurdish people in a state of uncertainty and instability (McDowall, 1997). The situation endured until the modern era, when, in the aftermath of World War I, colonial powers made the fateful decision to divide Kurdistan among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, irrevocably altering the region's fate.

The Nature of Conceptualization and Argumentation

This research constitutes a critical comparative study of the Kurdish nation, tracing the historical evolution and contemporary forms of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. Grounded in political sociology, it seeks to develop a comprehensive analytical framework capable of explaining the typology, content, and political implications of Kurdish nationalism and the democratic mass movements it has generated.

Political sociology, as the title indicates, is a vital discipline concerned with the analysis of power and its relationship to broader social structures. It provides critical insights into how power shapes social relations, institutions, and collective behavior, offering a robust conceptual framework for understanding the social foundations of politics and their dynamic interactions. Approached in this way, political sociology serves as the guiding framework of this research,

enabling a deeper comprehension of the power relations that permeate societal life and structure political outcomes.

This dissertation examines Kurdish nationalism in Turkey through the lens of political sociology, emphasizing the significance of internal power dynamics within Kurdish society and its historical interactions with the Ottoman Empire and the modern Turkish nation-state. These dynamics are central to understanding the formation of Kurdish nationalism and the enduring processes that have shaped Kurdish identity and political aspirations. Adopting a conceptual approach in political sociology, the study foregrounds the importance of analyzing states, societies, and political processes through historically grounded social forces. It focuses on the evolution of political power, social group formation, and their relationship to state authority. Informed by this perspective, the research demonstrates how the origins and policies of the Turkish state have profoundly shaped Kurdish society over a century of political interaction. Political sociology provides the central conceptual lens for this dissertation, enabling an analysis of power relations, social structures, and state–society interactions that have shaped Kurdish political life from the late Ottoman period to the present. By situating Kurdish nationalism within broader historical and sociological processes, the research examines how Turkish state formation, authoritarian governance, and assimilationist policies have profoundly shaped Kurdish society over the past century.

Methodologically, the study relies on secondary documentary research drawn from historical and political sociology scholarship on nations and nationalism. This approach allows for a systematic examination of political processes, social transformations, and key actors in both pre-modern and

modern Turkey, highlighting how shifting power configurations influenced the Kurdish national question.

The thesis advances an ethno-symbolist perspective to challenge strictly modernist and state-centric theories of nationalism. It argues that Kurdish identity rests on durable ethnic, cultural, and symbolic foundations that predate modern nation-states, while contemporary states in the region remain largely artificial political constructs marked by authoritarianism and unequal citizenship. Kurdish nationalism thus emerges not as an elite-driven or purely modern invention, but as a grassroots cultural and political response to sustained repression and exclusion.

Through this lens, Kurdish nationalism is understood as a form of cultural nationalism that prioritizes language, historical memory, and communal solidarity over state-centered citizenship. This perspective highlights the capacity of non-state actors, vernacular culture, and grassroots organizations to challenge dominant national narratives and articulate alternative political visions. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how Kurdish nationalism represents a paradigmatic challenge to sovereign authoritarianism and underscores the continued relevance of ethno-symbolism for understanding nationalism beyond the nation-state.

In the Middle East, nationalism largely manifests as a collectivist, ethnic phenomenon, defining the nation cohesively and relying on ancestry and culture for membership. This form of nationalism fosters strong ethnic identity and produces political outcomes distinct from civic or individualistic nationalism, shaping political behavior and institutional representation.

In Turkey, state-building and the assertion of a cohesive national identity marginalized the Kurdish minority. Atatürk emerged as a dominant ideologue, leading an elite that imposed its

vision on the populace, establishing an enduring authoritarian framework that persists despite reforms. Understanding Turkish nationalism is crucial, as its nature directly impacts the emergence of alternative nationalisms.

The ethno-symbolist approach highlights a distinct Kurdish nationalism aligned with the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan's "non-state" paradigm, which advocates grassroots democratic structures transcending state boundaries. This framework has shown success in Syrian Kurdistan and demonstrates potential for broader adoption.

By integrating historical data and sociological theory, this thesis analyzes how diverse nationalisms shape political action. It demonstrates that the recent libertarian mass movement among Kurds represents a paradigm shift, offering new democratic avenues for resolving the Kurdish question in Turkey and providing a model for addressing ethno-national issues regionally and internationally.

The Nature of the Research Assessment

This thesis examines the historical formation of the Kurdish nation and the transformation of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, with particular attention to its distinctive typology and political consequences. The central research question asks: *how have the Kurds evolved historically, what forms of nationalism have emerged in Turkey, and how have these shaped political action?*

To address this question, the study focuses on three interrelated dimensions: (1) the emergence and evolution of nationhood, nationalism, and modern nation-building in Turkey; (2) the typology of dominant nationalisms; and (3) their implications for political action regarding the

Kurdish national question. This framework situates Kurdish nationalism within broader global and regional processes of modernity.

The thesis argues that nationalism became globally pervasive even in societies lacking Europe's historical conditions of nation-state formation. As Greenfeld observes:

“When nationalism started to spread in the eighteenth century, the emergence of new national identities was no longer a result of original creation, but rather to the importation of an already existing idea... The development of national identities thus was essentially an international process, whose sources in every case but the first lay outside the evolving nation”(Greenfeld, 1992:14).

While nationalism is adopted transnationally, Greenfeld emphasizes its indigenous reinterpretation. In Turkey, this process produced an authoritarian form of nationalism shaped by elite interests and Pan-Turkish ideology, imposed through imitation rather than organic cultural cohesion (Greenfeld, 1996; 1992).

Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the borders of successor states were determined by imperial strategy rather than social realities (Binder, 1999). As Binder explains:

“In practice, the entire region was to remain subordinate to Europe... No general principle of legitimacy was proffered as basis for legitimizing or rationalizing the region into political entities...”(Binder, 1999: 12).

These colonial arrangements ignored ethnic diversity and facilitated authoritarian rule by dominant elites, particularly disadvantaging the Kurds (Binder, 1999:13). In Turkey, nation-state formation was marked by chauvinism and Pan-Turkism, producing unresolved contradictions between territorial unity and socio-cultural diversity. The continued denial of Kurdish rights remains a defining feature of this legacy (Jwaideh, 2006).

This thesis argues that the rise of authoritarian regimes in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria after World War I catalyzed Kurdish nationalist movements seeking autonomy and self-determination (Koochi-Kamali, 2003). Such regimes, grounded in ethnic or religious nationalism, structurally reject democratic solutions to the Kurdish question. Greenfeld and Eastwood compellingly assert that perceiving a nation as having a unique and exceptional ethnic identity significantly contributes to the rise of authoritarian politics (2015:258). This entrenched belief in a singular national character undermines democratic ideals, paving the way for societies to gravitate toward oppressive governance.

The study confronts the sociological limits of autonomy within authoritarian nation-states and identifies ethnic nationalism as a key source of chauvinism and exclusion. It argues that Kurdish society cannot be understood solely through state structures, as Kurdish nationhood predates modern Middle Eastern states and transcends imposed borders (Binder, 1999).

While autonomy under authoritarian regimes is largely unrealistic, recent democratic mass movements have opened new possibilities. Inspired by Abdullah Öcalan (2011), Kurdish politics increasingly reject the nation-state paradigm in favor of non-state democratic confederalism. Öcalan observes, “it is often said that the nation-state is concerned with the fate of the common people... the nation-state is not with the common people – it is an enemy of the peoples” (Öcalan, 2011:12). As an alternative, he proposes democratic confederalism as “the contrasting paradigm of the people... the basic power to decision rests with the grass-root participation” (Öcalan, 2011:26). The thesis demonstrates that the rise of non-state solutions reflects a shift from party-centered politics to mass democratic movements, supported by grassroots organizations and political pluralism since the 1980s. The failure of authoritarian governments to

deliver meaningful reform has intensified demands for a democratic confederal system that guarantees equality, cultural rights, and self-governance.

Finally, the thesis argues that understanding this transformation requires a hybrid theoretical framework aligned with the historical and ideological context of the movement, supported by systematic secondary documentary research. This approach enables a rigorous sociological analysis of Kurdish nationalism, its evolving typology, and its implications for democratic political action.

Nation and Nationalism: A Critical Comparative Assessment

This thesis rigorously examines prominent sociological theories of nationhood and nationalism to pinpoint the most effective framework for understanding the formation of the Kurdish nation and the rise of Kurdish nationalism. Building on Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolist approach, nationalism is defined as a nuanced doctrine of the nation—separate from the state—that weaves together socio-cultural, historical, and political elements. This perspective not only enriches our comprehension of Kurdish identity but also challenges conventional notions of nationalism. (Smith, 2009:61).

The concept of "nation" has undergone a remarkable transformation throughout history. Initially, it denoted groups of outsiders within medieval universities, later expanding to include elite religious institutions. In the contemporary context, it powerfully embodies the collective identity of a sovereign state, underscoring the fluidity of identity and governance over the centuries (Greenfeld, 1992:8). The political redefinition of a nation as a "sovereign people" originated in

England and swiftly gained momentum across the globe, prompting a rich array of interpretations shaped by diverse cultural contexts and collective identities.

This dual interpretation—recognizing a nation as both a broad social construct and a distinct sovereign entity—powerfully emphasizes the contextual and constructed essence of national identity. As Greenfeld (1992) argues, nationalism is more than a mere amalgamation of shared territory, culture, or history; it is a potent political ideology that intricately weaves these elements together around the essential principle of popular sovereignty. While nationalism stands as a particularly compelling form of particularism, its expressions are not monolithic; they vary significantly across societies, shaped by their unique socio-cultural and political landscapes. This dynamic underscores that national identity is deeply intertwined with a sense of collective distinctiveness, highlighting the vital role of community in defining who we are. Nationalism sets itself apart from other identity forms by situating individual belonging within “the people,” recognized as the legitimate bearers of sovereignty and the foremost object of political allegiance.

Anthony Smith (2009) delineates several fundamental approaches to the origins of nations, notably primordialism, perennialism, and ethno-symbolism. Primordialist perspectives compellingly argue that nations are not mere social constructs but rather the natural or socio-biological extensions of kinship. This perspective posits that nations, akin to races, are inherent in the very fabric of human existence, making them both timeless and intrinsic. While influential in the nineteenth century, these perspectives were later discredited because of their links to racism and fascism (Smith, 2001). Neo-perennial approaches instead trace national origins to antiquity, emphasizing historical continuity through law, language, religion, territory, and

collective memory. Cases such as Jewish, Armenian, and Ethiopian identities illustrate how ancient ethnic communities may later take on nationalist form (Smith, 2001). However, this approach often conflates ethnicity with nationhood, creating conceptual ambiguity. This thesis therefore adopts Smith's ethno-symbolist framework, which bridges modernist and pre-modern perspectives by emphasizing myths, symbols, memories, and cultural continuity in nation formation, and is especially well suited to analyzing Kurdish nationalism while permitting comparison with modernist theories.

Ernest Renan's civic conception of the nation further informs this discussion. In *What Is a Nation?* (1882), Renan defines the nation as a "spiritual principle" rooted in shared memory and collective will rather than race, language, or religion. Modern nations, he argues, are inherently heterogeneous, as demonstrated by France, Germany, and Switzerland (Rundell, 1992). Linguistic or religious uniformity is neither necessary nor sufficient for national cohesion; instead, national belonging rests on civic solidarity and shared political commitment.

However, unlike Europe, Middle Eastern nation-states emerged through colonial intervention rather than organic social evolution. Their borders were imposed to serve imperial interests, often cutting across existing ethnic and cultural divisions (Soltan, 1997; Cole & Kandiyoti, 2002). The partition of Kurdistan after World War I exemplifies this process and its long-term consequences. As Soltan (1997) notes, identity crises in Middle Eastern countries are clear in significant political processes, where nation-building without a common identity has led to political instability, authoritarianism, and ongoing conflict between ethnic and national identities.

Benedict Anderson (1992) compellingly defines a nation as an "imagined political community," highlighting the vital role that cultural foundations play in this concept. Nations are termed

"imagined" not because they are fabrications, but because they unite individuals through shared symbols, language, and print culture, rather than through personal interactions (Anderson, 1992: 15–16). This underscores how collective identity and social bonds are intricately woven through the fabric of common experiences and cultural narratives (Anderson, 1992: 15–16). Although this framework is predominantly applied to Western contexts, it offers a powerful lens for understanding nationalism as a dynamic cultural process intricately connected to the formation of Western nations.

Ernest Gellner (1983) offers a modernist critique, defining nationalism as a political principle requiring congruence between nation and state. He locates its emergence in the transition from agrarian to industrial society, where mass education, cultural homogeneity, and social mobility become functional necessities. Although effective in explaining Western European nationalism, Gellner's framework is less applicable to the Middle East, where industrialization was limited and nation-states were imposed through colonial and authoritarian means (Cole & Kandiyoti, 2002).

In summary, modernist theories fall short in accounting for the profound and lasting influence of ancient symbols, myths, and ethnic narratives on today's national identities. By framing nations exclusively as products of modernity, these theories fail to recognize the crucial role of historical memory and cultural continuity. This significant oversight is effectively addressed by the ethno-symbolist approach presented in this thesis, which highlights the enduring power of the past in shaping national identity.

A Brief Outline of the Literature Review

The main components of the literature review on Kurdish nation and nationalism include: (1) a synopsis of studies on the formation of modern states in the Middle East and the emergence of ethnic minorities; (2) a comprehensive review of the history of the Kurdish people from ancient times to the present; and (3) an in-depth assessment of nationalism in general, with a particular focus on Kurdish nationalism. The primary objective was to draw on these diverse studies to elucidate and define Kurdish nationalism within Turkey.

Leonard Binder's 1999 collection of essays, *"Ethnic Conflict and International Politics in the Middle East,"* is a reliable academic resource for initially exploring the nexus of state-building, ethnicity, and national conflicts in the Middle East. The book combines an insightful and provocative collection on how nationalist and Islamic movements intersect with state policies, often turning ethnic and religious issues into sources of conflict. The selected essays underscore a shared perspective among scholars that the ethnic conflicts in the Middle East over the past century are rooted in the creation of modern nation-states. Western powers often established these states, dividing territories based on their interests rather than considering the region's social and historical context. This condition has led to significant instability and continual conflict in the region. In sum, this essay collection has shed light on the role of Western powers in state-building and ethnic conflicts in the Middle East.

Another study by Jamal Sultan (1997), *"State-building, Modernization, and Political Islam: Search for Political Society(s) in the Middle East,"* underscores the significance of understanding the formation of ethnic and religious identities in the processes of nation-building and state-building in the Middle East. Sultan identifies these identities as primordial, national, regional, or universal; each prioritized according to different state-building processes. However, these

identities, instead of fostering national unity or peaceful coexistence within each state, have been interacting within a remnant of the colonial era, where the territorial state only served to legitimize the self-centrism of a nation or religion whose moral and ideological grounds of existence are being legitimized under the transnational rhetoric of one nationality or one religion. Sultan advocates for a more thorough socio-political approach to fully comprehend the people of the region's quest for a political community that can meet the problems of democratization, economic growth, and establishing peace and stability in the area.

Roger Owen's 1992 study, "State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East," offers a comprehensive analysis of the development of distinct Middle Eastern states, the creation of their national institutions, and their interactions within the region. Reviewing the book's initial section is immensely helpful for grasping the evolution of modern state formation in the region, particularly the establishment of the state system following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Furthermore, this study expedites the growth of knowledge regarding the consequences of French and British colonialism, the notable amplification of centralized political and administrative power in the early stages of independence, and the distinct pattern of interstate relations that emerged in the area starting in the 1930s. Taken together, these studies have been instrumental in developing a comprehensive understanding of the region's process of modern state formation and the role and influence of colonial powers.

The second section of the literature review offers a thorough assessment of research concerning the history of the Kurdish people from ancient to modern times. The most significant and authoritative academic works in this field are "*Agha, Sheikh and State*," by Martin Van Bruinessen, published in 1992, and "*A Modern History of the Kurds*" by David McDowall, released in 2004. In his present historical analysis, Bruinessen examines the formation of

Kurdistan's social and political structures, focusing on tribal loyalties as a primary indicator of dispersed Kurdish communities' enduring presence and persistence. In this extensive research, Van Bruinessen seeks to understand how early tribal loyalties evolved into national loyalties over a lengthy historical period and the influence of economic and political factors in this transformation. This study provides a thorough analysis and description of Kurdistan's cultural and social structures, explaining the causes of its diversity with precision and conciseness. Van Bruinessen's book also explores the diverse manners in which Kurdish nationalism and national movements have arisen in modern times and how these phenomena have clashed with Kurdish social and political structures. The comprehensive historical and sociological study of Kurdish society conducted by Van Bruinessen has been employed as a principal academic source for this thesis.

David McDowall's *"Modern History of the Kurds"*(2004) is undoubtedly among the most comprehensive academic studies on the history of Kurdish society and its geopolitical role in the Middle East. The book provides a thorough history of Kurdistan and a meticulous analysis of the Kurdish people's historical challenges after Islam's arrival in the seventh century. This comprehensive historical study accurately integrates the primary causes of events with the objectivity of political and social frameworks, allowing readers to easily understand by following the narrative. These two significant and exceptional studies are regarded as the foremost sources for the narrative history of the Kurdish nation's origins and the development of Kurdish nationalism, as will be explored in this documentary research.

This section will briefly assess some studies on nationalism by reviewing theoretical approaches to nation and nationalism and contrasting them with the thesis's proposed hybrid ethno-symbolist and socio-historical approaches. The second part of this section provides a brief overview of

various academic studies on Kurdish nationalism, each contributing to the theoretical framework of the thesis on Kurdish nationalism.

In "*Nation and History*," Anthony D. Smith (2001) briefly examines the nature and significance of nations in history. The essay also evaluates the collective cultural identities in various historical periods within the context of discussions in historiography and sociology regarding nation and nationalism. This essay provides a succinct overview of the main theories regarding the nation and nationalism, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the main approaches. Engaging in rich and insightful debates and arguments, the essay illustrates diverse perspectives and approaches. The essay begins by explaining that, since at least the Second World War, the old nationalist-tinged paradigm of the nation has been increasingly dismissed as ideological and anachronistic. These critiques dismiss the nation as a primordial collectivity and denounce this approach as the one-dimensional ideology of a retrospective nationalism with all detrimental political consequences, including racism, fascism and anti-Semitism. According to Smith's general vision, debates on the existence of nations in pre-modern epochs may arise from different interpretations of historical evidence and competing definitions rather than from any specific ideological allegiances per se. Thus, the study has assessed multiple theories of nation and nationalism, scrutinizing the validity of each perspective through a critical comparative analysis. In sum, this study identifies three main perspectives on the formation of nations: (1) modernists view the nation as a modern phenomenon shaped by modernity; (2) neo-perennialists categorize nation formation into ancient, medieval, and modern stages, and (3) ethno-symbolists who perceive modern nation as the result of evolving cultural and symbolic elements of ethnicity. This study has been instrumental and crucial in formulating the theoretical framework of this thesis on Kurdish nationhood and nationalism.

In his renowned lecture "*What is a Nation?*" in 1882, Ernest Renan distinguished between the heterogeneous blood mixture of modern nations and the homogeneous blood-based tribal and communal groups of antiquity. Ernest Renan's speech was analyzed as the first modernist theorization of the nation by Ethan Rundel in 1992. Rundel's study demonstrates that Renan was well-versed in the significant structural challenges of his time and intellectually correlated social cohesion and organic solidarity in Western societies to the process of modern nation-building. This study was quite helpful for the thesis because it clearly shows that modern nation-building was possible only in Western societies, which underwent normative socio-cultural evolution.

This thesis compares two modernist approaches and contrasts them with the selected ethnic symbolist approach to establish a suitable theoretical framework for defining the Kurdish nation and nationalism.

In Benedict Anderson's "*Imagined Communities*" (1992), the nation is defined as an "imagined political community," while nationhood and nationalism are understood as enduring cultural constructs that are continually evolving. According to this theory, individuals with the same ethnic or national backgrounds are initially linked merely through their imagined belonging as a distinct political community. Anderson connects the emergence of a national political imagination to significant transformations in 16th-century Europe, including the Protestant Reformation and the rise of the printing industry. These significant changes spread to vast territories outside of Europe through the nobility and political elites, laying the material groundwork for the development of modern states. However, no significant socio-cultural and political changes affected Middle Eastern societies, including the Kurdish communities, as modern developments never reached the region's agrarian and feudal structures. What was found significant in this approach regarding the thesis focus on the Kurdish nation and nationalism is

that despite being divided into four parts, Kurdish people still imagine themselves as a unique political community despite the imposed partition.

In another critical study, "*Nation and Nationalism*," Ernest Gellner (1983) defines modern nations as industrial societies' only legitimate political structures. The concept of the nation is seen as a contemporary phenomenon rooted in the modern industrial order. For Gellner, the emergence of industrialization in Europe accelerated the preconditions for a new form of social mobility through a shared medium of 'high culture,' which is necessary for the effective operation of the modern nation-state. The emergence of modern nations and nationalism has evolved through three historical phases: pre-agrarian, agrarian, and industrial epochs, fundamentally transforming distinct modes of production. Gellner's modernist and Marxist theory provides a civic conception of nation and nationalism that aligns with Western Europe's sociocultural, economic, and political developments. However, this approach is unsuitable when applied to Middle Eastern agrarian societies with vastly different economic, political, and socio-cultural backgrounds. However, this approach has led to a deeper understanding of contemporary nations and nationalism from a positivist Marxist perspective.

The literature review will briefly evaluate three seminal studies on nation and nationalism that constitute the thesis' theoretical framework. The hybrid theoretical framework of the thesis draws upon Anthony D. Smith's "*Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism*" (2009), Liah Greenfeld's "*Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*" (1992), and "*Nationalism in Comparative Perspective*" (2015) by Liah Greenfeld and Jonathan Eastwood.

The ethno-symbolism approach helps to identify how ethnic myths, memories and attachments persist through a long history and shows how ethno-cultural foundations have played an essential

role in forming a nation (e.g. the Kurdish nation). As part of the theoretical framework, the ethno-symbolism approach was instrumental in guiding the documentary research into the emergence of the Kurdish nation and the roots of Kurdish nationalism, uncovering the Kurds' legitimacy as a historical nation. The positive instrumental role of this approach is seen in the set of analyses of this thesis from beginning to end.

Another component of the thesis theoretical framework is Liah Greenfeld's "*Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*" (1992), a pivotal study that delineates five distinct forms of nationalism in Europe. These distinct forms of nationalism signify the emergence of five different types of nationalism. This study helps the thesis comprehend the historical factors behind the rise of different nationalisms and their diverse development based on indigenous perspectives through global dissemination and imitation. The typology of various nationalisms significantly enhances the comprehension and categorization of Kurdish nationalism, which is the thesis's primary goal.

The theoretical framework of the thesis also incorporates "*Nationalism in Comparative Perspective*" by Liah Greenfeld and Jonathan Eastwood, which extends Greenfeld's earlier research. It argues that the export and emulation of modern nationalism to the Middle East have only facilitated the emergence of diverse collectivist-ethnic nationalisms. This significant study also shows how the rise of collectivistic-ethnic nationalism leads to authoritarian politics and the establishment of authoritarian states. In sum, these exemplary studies serve as the theoretical foundation of this thesis, and their significant contributions are evident throughout all major discussions and analyses.

Among the various significant studies on nation and nationalism, Eugene O'Brien's "*The Epistemology of Nationalism*" (1996) also makes an appealing and vital contribution to the

understanding of the origins of nationalism and its essential applications. According to O'Brien, if there are varieties of nationhood, there must be varieties of nationalism, too. Hence, sociological perspectives should avoid perceiving nationalism as a uniform and undifferentiated entity. However, if we are to get beyond the complex range of nationalist discourses, which are often contradictory and confusing, we must attempt, by analyzing these different discourses, to uncover an epistemology of nationalism. This critical study has been very influential in shaping the epistemology of Kurdish nationalism and was essential for understanding its core elements.

A brief assessment of studies on Kurdish nationalism involves a short overview of the various scholars who have contributed to the body of this research on Kurdish nation and nationalism.

A collection of "*Essays on the Origin of Kurdish Nationalism*" (2003), edited by Abbas Vali, combined essential studies to help understand different approaches through sociological studies on different subjects. In "*Introduction: Nationalism and the Question of Origin*," Abbas Vali presents various trends and approaches to the Kurdish issue within academic scholarship but also incorporates his interpretation and approach.

Hamit Bozarsalan's inaugural essay, "*Some Remarks on Kurdish Historiographical Discourse in Turkey (1919-1980)*," in this collection (2003), offers a comprehensive analysis of the emergence of Kurdish nationalist discourses in post-World War I. These discourses had been developed concurrently, yet in opposition to the state's official discourses and those of Pan-Turkish nationalists. This study contributed significant insights into understanding Kurdish nationalist discourses, initially developed in Turkey, simultaneously with other nationalist discourses in Turkey and throughout the region.

In his second essay in this collection (2003), "*Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey: From Tacit Contract to Rebellion (1919-1925)*," Hamit Bozarsalan's outstanding study indicates how an implicit contract for three centuries between the Kurds and the Ottoman Empire based on the Muslim Brotherhood was broken at the end of the First World War. The study also discusses how a shift toward Pan-Turkish politics led to the first Kurdish nationalist rebellion in 1925. This study was very instrumental in documentary investigations on Turkish post-war policies on Kurdish issues in Turkey.

Another significant study in this collection (2003) belongs to Martin van Bruinessen's essay "*EhmedîXanî's Mem û Zîn and Its Role in the Emergence of Kurdish National Awareness*." This essential study clearly shows that Kurdish intellectuals, including one of the prominent poets, EhmedîXanî, knew about global and regional changes from the middle of the 18th century. He knew the Kurds faced a dark future without achieving a collective national consciousness. Xanî's poems have thoroughly agitated the Kurds to give up tribal rivalries and feuds in exchange for unity and national solidarity. This study was instrumental in the thesis' investigation of the origin of Kurdish nationalism.

Robert Olson's book "*The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925*" (1989) provides a comprehensive examination of the origins of Kurdish nationalism and the significant events that have shaped the Kurdish experience in the modern era. This book provides authentic historical evidence of how Kurdish unsuccessful struggles for about half a century finally led to the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925. This thesis treats this book as an outstanding academic study of Kurdish national movements.

As a subsequent study on Kurdish national movements, Horace Rumbold and Robert Olson's essay "*THE KOÇGIRI KURDISH REBELLION IN 1921 AND THE DRAFT LAW FOR A PROPOSED AUTONOMY OF KURDISTAN*" is an essential investigation of the Koçgiri Rebellion of 1921. This research shows how a group of Kurdish intellectuals committed to the leadership of Nuri Dersimi to implement the Treaty of Severs and its obligations to form a Kurdish state or the right to self-determination started a nationalist rebellion. In addition to identifying the reasons for this rebellion, this research clearly shows the political conditions of Kurdistan and the interaction between Kurdish leaders, Kemal Atatürk, and the Kemalist government in Ankara during this period.

Boris James (2021) conducted a study titled "*The Rise and Fall of the Kurdish Emirates (Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)*." The study thoroughly examines the origins of Kurdish tribes and their historical development leading up to the rise and fall of the Kurdish Emirates. This study helps understand how different historical and political events led to the formation of the Kurdish tribes as permanent political units.

On the same subject, Michael Eppel's essay, "*The Demise of the Kurdish Emirates: The Impact of Ottoman Reforms and International Relations on Kurdistan during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*" (2008), provides a thorough examination of the reasons for the decline of the Kurdish Emirates. This investigation examines the major emirates and principalities and their essential roles in the region's geopolitics in the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. The thesis identifies this study as crucial academic research on contemporary Kurdish history.

This review has gathered four academic studies on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), providing valuable insights for the thesis investigating the organization's political and ideological stance.

Ali Kemal Özcan's book *"Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan"* (2006) is one of the critical studies on PKK and his imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan. The critical analysis of the organization's leadership and extensive knowledge of the party's history and practice made this book one of the primary resources of reference for the thesis.

Regarding the PKK organization and its evolution in recent decades, Paul White's *"The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains"* (2015) comprehensively studies its origins and unique ideological and political structures. This informative and rich study helps the thesis follow the party's significant ideological and political revisions from an orthodox Marxist-Leninist organization to an all-encompassing socio-cultural movement in recent decades.

One of the most noteworthy studies on the PKK was Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya's essay titled *"The Kurdistan Workers Party and a New Left in Turkey: Analysis of the Revolutionary Movement in Turkey through the PKK's Memorial Text on Haki Karer,"* published in 2012. This critical study indicates how the killing of Haki Karer, one of the close associates with the PKK's leader in 1977, led to the emergence of the organization in the following years with the fundamental distinction from the traditional leftists in Turkey. This investigation is considered a crucial academic work on the origins of the PKK and its significant role in democratizing Turkey's political sphere in recent decades.

Indeed, the most significant challenge in the PKK's ideological stance is its feminist transformation. Ina Merdjanova has partly investigated this critical challenge in an essay titled "*The Kurdish Women's Movement in Turkey and its Struggle for Gender Justice*" (2021). This significant study indicates how Kurdish women's struggle for gender justice intersects with the Kurdish national movement and the Turkish feminist movement, leading to a robust process of learning for both men and women in the Kurdish community and in the larger society. Moreover, the well-organized debates and discussions, as well as the informative knowledge about the PKK's feminist transformation, were positively used by the thesis on investigation on this subject.

The thesis acknowledges that the scope of the literature review is necessarily selective and limited to key contributions on the Kurdish nation and nationalism. Within this framework, it focuses in particular on two influential yet theoretically contrasting works: Amir Hassanpour's *The Making of Kurdish Identity: 20th Century Historical and Literary Sources* (2003), which represents a modernist approach to Kurdish national origins and identity, and Abbas Vali's *Genealogies of the Kurds: Constructions of Nation and National Identity in Kurdish Historical Writing* (2003), which exemplifies a post-modernist perspective. These approaches are examined and critically contrasted with the thesis's own theoretical position, grounded in an ethno-symbolist framework.

Amir Hassanpour's *The Making of Kurdish Identity: 20th Century Historical and Literary Sources* (2003) is widely regarded as one of the foundational works in Kurdish studies. It is particularly influential for its emphasis on language, literature, and modern forms of communication as the primary vehicles through which Kurdish nationalism emerged, rather than

through state-centered or purely political processes. Hassanpour's central argument is that Kurdish national identity in the twentieth century was neither primordial nor simply inherited, nor was it exclusively the product of elite political mobilization. Instead, Kurdish identity is conceptualized as a historically constructed and distinctly modern phenomenon, shaped by specific material, political, and communicative conditions.

One of Hassanpour's most significant contributions lies in his emphasis on language as the principal medium of Kurdish national formation. He demonstrates how Kurdish identity became increasingly self-conscious through the emergence and expansion of written Kurdish in newspapers, journals, and literary texts (Hassanpour, 2003). In this context, language is not treated merely as a cultural marker but as a contested political terrain, particularly under conditions of systematic repression in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Hassanpour argues that linguistic nationalism preceded mass political nationalism among the Kurds, thereby reversing the conventional state-first model of nationalism. In addition, he places strong emphasis on Kurdish literature and the role of intellectuals—writers, poets, and journalists—as key agents in the formation and dissemination of Kurdish national consciousness.

The work is explicitly grounded in a historical-materialist framework, which distinguishes it from culturalist or primordialist approaches to nationalism. Hassanpour's Marxist analysis links the emergence of modern national identity to modes of production, class relations, and imperialist politics. From this perspective, Kurdish nationalism is understood as a product of the expansion of the global capitalist system and the dynamics of colonial and semi-colonial domination in the Middle East. The division of Kurdistan is thus interpreted as a consequence of imperial power and capitalist state formation rather than as an outcome of ethnic or cultural

inevitability. At the same time, Hassanpour emphasizes that Kurdish culture is not merely epiphenomenal; it possesses a relative autonomy and plays an active role in articulating and sustaining Kurdish nationalism through cultural and literary production (Hassanpour, 2003). He further argues that the systematic linguistic and cultural repression imposed by the four states governing Kurdish regions sought to prevent the consolidation of Kurdish national consciousness, yet paradoxically often intensified national identification rather than eradicating it. In sum, Hassanpour provides strong empirical grounding for the existence of pre-state and non-state forms of Kurdish nationalism and supports the argument that Kurdish identity predates the formation of modern Middle Eastern nation-states. His analysis effectively bridges materialist explanations with ethno-symbolist insights, offering a compelling framework for understanding why non-state paradigms—such as the one articulated by Abdullah Öcalan—resonate deeply at both cultural and historical levels. *The Making of Kurdish Identity* demonstrates that Kurdish nationalism, in Hassanpour's formulation, is distinctly modern, historically constructed, transnational in scope, culturally grounded, and politically resilient—emerging through language, literature, and sustained struggle rather than through state institutions.

Moreover, Hassanpour's work poses a significant challenge to state-centric theories of nationalism by illustrating that nationalism does not require a state in order to emerge or endure. Cultural production, he argues, can precede and actively shape political mobilization, while language and communication may be as decisive as formal institutions or political elites in the formation of national consciousness. In this respect, Hassanpour's modernist Marxist approach occupies a critical position within the broader theoretical landscape of nationalism studies and

serves as an essential point of comparison for the thesis's ethno-symbolist approach to nation and nationalism, which will be developed and elaborated in the following chapter.

Abbas Vali's essay, *Genealogies of the Kurds: Constructions of Nation and National Identity in Kurdish Historical Writing* (2003), offers a rigorous post-structural and post-modern critique of Kurdish historiography. It examines how Kurdish national identity has been constructed, articulated, and legitimized through historical writing. Rather than treating the Kurdish nation as a fixed historical entity or a natural outcome of modern political developments, Vali critically interrogates the discursive practices through which Kurdish identity has been produced and continually reconfigured.

At the core of Vali's argument is the assertion that Kurdish national identity is neither timeless nor inherent, but a contingent and historically situated construct shaped by modern intellectual, political, and epistemological conditions. He challenges two dominant tendencies in nationalist thought: primordialist interpretations that portray the Kurds as an ancient and uninterrupted nation, and teleological nationalist narratives that retroactively project modern forms of national consciousness onto pre-modern Kurdish societies. By questioning these assumptions, Vali destabilizes essentialist understandings of nationhood and calls for a more reflexive engagement with the historical production of identity.

Vali closely analyzes Kurdish historical texts—particularly nationalist historiography—to demonstrate how modern Kurdish intellectuals selectively appropriate pre-modern sources such as medieval chronicles, tribal genealogies, and ethnographic accounts to construct a coherent national past. He argues that these narratives rely heavily on notions of genealogical continuity, ethnic descent, and territorial imagination in order to legitimize contemporary nationalist claims.

In doing so, Kurdish historiography reproduces many of the epistemological assumptions of European nationalist history-writing, even as it positions itself in opposition to dominant state narratives.

A central contribution of Vali's work is his critique of historicism within Kurdish nationalist thought. He contends that Kurdish historiography often presumes a linear and uninterrupted progression from ethnic community to modern nation, thereby obscuring the discontinuities, ruptures, and transformations that have shaped Kurdish social and political history. For Vali, the coherence attributed to the Kurdish past is not discovered but discursively produced, reflecting the political needs of the present rather than the complexities of historical reality.

Vali situates Kurdish nationalism firmly within the context of modernity, colonial knowledge production, and state-centered political struggles. He argues that Kurdish identity emerged as a national identity only within the modern political field shaped by the decline of empire, the rise of nation-states, and the global circulation of nationalist ideologies. Kurdish nationalism, therefore, cannot be understood outside the power relations, epistemologies, and representational practices that define modern political life.

While Vali acknowledges the existence of Kurdish culture, language, and collective memory, he cautions against treating these elements as direct evidence of a pre-existing nation. Cultural difference, he argues, becomes politically meaningful as national identity only when articulated within modern nationalist discourse. Kurdish identity thus acquires its political significance not through historical continuity alone, but through its inscription within contemporary struggles over recognition, sovereignty, and representation.

Overall, *Genealogies of the Kurds* constitutes a major post-modern intervention in Kurdish studies, exposing the narrative strategies and epistemological foundations of nationalist historiography. By emphasizing discontinuity, discursivity, and contingency, Vali's approach challenges essentialist, culturalist, and ethno-symbolist theories of nationalism. As such, his work serves as a crucial theoretical counterpoint to the thesis's ethno-symbolist and socio-historical framework, enabling a critical engagement with a competing interpretation in the following chapter.

Theoretical and Methodological Focus

This thesis integrates ethno-symbolist and socio-historical approaches to the study of nation and nationalism with an extensive body of secondary documentary sources drawn from political sociology, history, and Kurdish studies. Together, these perspectives constitute a robust theoretical framework for critically analyzing Kurdish nationalism and the democratic mass movement it has generated in Turkey. This framework enables a precise identification of the typology of Kurdish nationalism and elucidates its significant implications for political action.

The research employs secondary documentary analysis to examine how political processes and state policies over the past century have shaped the trajectory, form, and outcomes of the Kurdish national question in Turkey. Data collection has evolved into a selective and analytical process focused on key historical and political developments, relying on authoritative secondary sources to support explanatory and interpretive research guided by multiple theoretical hypotheses. This methodological flexibility enhances the study's capacity to engage rigorously with the complexity and multidimensionality of the Kurdish question.

The secondary documentary research is grounded in extensive empirical evidence derived from a wide range of studies in historical sociology, political sociology, and nationalism studies. Drawing on academic monographs, peer-reviewed articles, historical records, periodicals, and the writings of influential political actors and organizations, the research traces the origins of the Kurdish nation and the evolution of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. This approach provides critical insight into both structural forces and ideological transformations shaping Kurdish political agency.

The selection of sources and references has been systematically aligned with the central research question and organized chronologically across chapters. This structure allows for a historically grounded yet theoretically informed analysis of continuity and change in Kurdish nationalism. Methodologically, the research strategy combines documentary analysis with grounded theoretical interpretation, enabling the continuous refinement of analytical categories and the generation of new theoretical insights throughout the study. Accordingly, the thesis is structured into five chapters and an epilogue, organized as follows:

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The introductory chapter provides essential historical background on the Kurdish people and Kurdistan, situating the research within its broader socio-political and historical context. It outlines the nature of the thesis's argumentation and clarifies the scope and assessment of the research. In addition to presenting a selective literature review, the chapter critically evaluates prominent theoretical approaches to nation and nationalism, contrasting them with the thesis's proposed theoretical framework. The chapter concludes by briefly identifying the central

research questions, as well as the theoretical and methodological foundations that guide the study.

CHAPTER 2: Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This chapter develops the thesis's theoretical and methodological framework, proposing a sociological approach to analyzing the emergence of the Kurdish nation, Kurdish nationalism, and the contemporary democratic libertarian movement in Turkey. Drawing on ethno-symbolist and socio-historical perspectives, the chapter formulates an innovative hybrid theoretical hypothesis designed for comparative and critical analysis. This framework enables an examination of the typology of Kurdish nationalism and its implications for political action as crystallized in the current democratic mass movement. The chapter also outlines the methodological rationale for employing secondary documentary research and explains how theory and empirical analysis are integrated throughout the study.

CHAPTER 3: The Historical Foundations of the Kurdish Question in Turkey

This chapter focuses on the historical origins of the Kurdish question in Turkey. It examines the socio-political development of Kurdistan from the medieval period to the formation of the tribal confederacy of Ottoman Kurdistan in the sixteenth century. The chapter then turns to the emergence of the modern Turkish nation-state, analyzing the rise of the Young Turks in the early twentieth century and the ideological foundations of their political project. Particular attention is given to the compatibility of Young Turk ideology with elements of European fascism and to the ways in which this doctrine laid the groundwork for Pan-Turkism and shaped the political structure of the Kemalist state.

CHAPTER 4: Modern Turkey and Kurdish Nationalism (1923–1978)

This chapter provides a comprehensive historical analysis of the emergence of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey following the establishment of the republic. It examines the structural and political causes behind the rise of Kurdish nationalist movements from the early twentieth century through 1978, identifying their typology through critical engagement with historiography. The chapter analyzes major nationalist rebellions up to 1937 and situates them within the broader processes of state consolidation and Pan-Turkish nationalism. It also explores the emergence of modernist intellectual circles in Turkey, including Kurdish intellectuals and political leaders, and assesses the detrimental impact of international treaties on Kurdish political aspirations. The chapter concludes by synthesizing the principal historical factors that shaped Kurdish nationalist rebellions and defining the dominant form of Kurdish nationalism during this period.

CHAPTER 5: From Post-Rebellion to the Contemporary Ethno-National Mass Movement

The final chapter examines contemporary Kurdish nationalism in Turkey and the emergence of a broad ethno-national democratic mass movement. The first section analyzes the historical conditions underlying this transformation, focusing on two key phases: (1) the post-rebellion period from 1938 to 1960, often described as the “period of silence,” and (2) the revival of Kurdish ethnic consciousness between 1960 and 1974, which culminated in the formation of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The chapter then provides an overview of Turkey’s political landscape during the 1960s and 1970s, situating Kurdish mobilization within broader social and political changes.

The final sections focus on the PKK's distinctive ideological and theoretical framework, drawing on the philosophical and political thought of its imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Key themes examined include an ethno-symbolist interpretation of Kurdish history, feminist theory and women's liberation, democratic confederalism, and ecological politics. The chapter argues that the PKK's ideological evolution represents a paradigmatic shift from orthodox Marxism-Leninism to libertarian socialism, marking a fundamental transformation in Kurdish nationalist strategy and political imagination.

FINAL SUMMARY

The final summary unites the theoretical framework and the analyses from each chapter, leveraging the collected data to deliver a profound conclusion. It is meticulously organized into five interconnected discussions that together create a powerful, cohesive narrative, culminating in a compelling final summary. To conclude, the epilogue offers insightful recommendations for future research to further advance our understanding of the topic.

CHAPTER 2: Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Prologue

This chapter outlines and justifies the thesis's theoretical and methodological framework, emphasizing its conceptual coherence and semantic suitability for a sociological analysis of the Kurdish nation and Kurdish nationalism. The thesis acknowledges the analytical validity of existing approaches that explain the emergence of Kurdish political nationalism within the dominant nation-state paradigm. However, recent political developments have given rise to an alternative paradigm that explicitly rejects the nation-state solution. Instead, this emerging framework links the resolution of the Kurdish question in Turkey to a broader transformation of the state into a democratic republic grounded in the principles of democratic confederalism. Empirical evidence suggests that this paradigmatic shift originates in profound political and ideological transformations within the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Accordingly, this chapter identifies the sociological theories most appropriate for explaining both the origins of Kurdish nationalism and its contemporary reconfiguration. The analysis draws primarily on Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolist approach (2008), which foregrounds ethno-cultural elements in the formation of nations and conceptualizes nationalism as a doctrine that is simultaneously political and cultural. This framework enables the integration of internal symbolic dimensions—such as historical memory, affective attachment, and the idea of homeland—with external political conditions, particularly authoritarian state practices and exclusionary policies directed toward the Kurdish population. The analysis demonstrates that ethno-symbolism, when critically adapted to contemporary political developments, provides a robust explanatory framework for understanding Kurdish nationhood and the persistence of Kurdish nationalism.

While ethno-symbolism offers a compelling account of the origins and cultural foundations of Kurdish nationalism, the analysis of its typology and political consequences requires additional theoretical instruments. To this end, the chapter incorporates Liah Greenfeld's (1992) and Greenfeld and Eastwood's (2005) typology of nationalism, which distinguishes between individualistic-civic and collectivistic-ethnic forms. This comparative perspective reveals that the transplantation of the nation-state model into the Middle East, including Turkey, has predominantly generated collectivistic-ethnic nationalism, a form closely associated with authoritarian governance and exclusionary identity politics. By contrast, the PKK's recent ideological transformation reflects the emergence of a cosmopolitan and post-statist form of nationalism that departs fundamentally from both classical civic and ethnic nationalist models.

Taken together, this hybrid theoretical framework provides the foundation for a comprehensive phenomenology of Kurdish nationalism. It enables a nuanced assessment of its historical development, ideological transformation, and contemporary political implications, particularly in relation to alternative forms of democratic organization beyond the nation-state.

Introduction

This thesis does not treat the Kurdish nation and Kurdish nationalism in Turkey as pre-given analytical categories. Instead, it advances a narrative historical-sociological investigation that traces their symbolic, cultural, and political formation through a systematic analysis of secondary documentary sources. Kurdish nationhood and nationalism are examined as historically constituted processes rather than fixed entities, allowing their emergence, transformation, and internal differentiation to be analytically reconstructed.

Methodologically, the study investigates the evolving forms and contents of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey by conceptualizing it simultaneously as a political-cultural paradigm and as a mass

movement. It critically evaluates the extent to which these developments correspond to the ethno-symbolist framework established in the theoretical foundation of the thesis. To this end, the research employs a rigorous secondary documentary methodology, drawing on a broad corpus of academic literature, historical records, political texts, and Kurdish-authored sources. For analytical clarity, this approach is referred to as *secondary documentary research*.

This documentary research examines how political processes and state policies over the past century have shaped the trajectory, forms, and outcomes of the Kurdish national question in Turkey. It traces the origins and development of Kurdish nationalism, identifies its typological variations, and critically assesses their implications for contemporary political dynamics. Data collection is selective and analytically driven, interpreting historical and political events through multiple theoretical lenses. This methodological flexibility enables a nuanced engagement with the complexity and multidimensionality of the Kurdish issue. Grounded in extensive empirical scholarship in nationalism studies, political sociology, and historical sociology, the study situates Kurdish nationalism within Turkey's broader socio-political landscape. It examines the transformative dynamics of both pre-modern and modern periods, revealing how social structures, political movements, and key historical actors have shaped Kurdish political agency. Particular attention is paid to the interaction between individual agency and structural forces, demonstrating how political actors and collective mobilization have influenced historical trajectories. The analysis also critically interrogates Turkish political culture to illuminate the ideological and institutional responses to the Kurdish question. From a methodological standpoint, secondary sources are systematically categorized to address the historical and sociological dimensions of the research question across each chapter. This strategy ensures analytical balance while maintaining critical distance from any single ideological or theoretical

tradition. Documents are treated not merely as repositories of information but as socially and politically produced texts whose meanings are embedded in specific historical contexts. The research framework facilitates an active engagement between document production and sociological interpretation, enabling the systematic reconstruction of social and political processes underpinning Kurdish nationhood and nationalism. By adopting a hybrid theoretical framework, the study compares historical and sociological trajectories across temporal and spatial contexts, particularly focusing on transformations over the past century. Documents are interpreted both through the adopted theoretical lenses and within their original political, cultural, and historical milieus, ensuring contextual accuracy and comparative rigor. This methodological orientation is particularly concerned with uncovering the dynamic relationship between past and present. Documents are treated as evidentiary materials whose validity emerges through theoretical interpretation and contextual coherence. The findings reveal the coexistence of enduring traditions and evolving ideological currents that collectively shape Kurdish society, extending from ancient historical legacies to contemporary political formations.

This research is guided by a hybrid theoretical framework combining ethno-symbolism with a socio-historical approach. This framework enables a systematic examination of the origins of the Kurdish nation, the typology of Kurdish nationalism, and their historical evolution in Turkey. Rather than imposing a rigid theoretical model, the framework remains context-sensitive and chronologically grounded, allowing theory to be tested and refined through empirical analysis. The resulting theoretical hypothesis addresses key epistemological and ontological questions concerning nation formation in the Middle East. It conceptualizes modern state formation not as the origin of nations, but as a contingent outcome of imposed political structures. Within this framework, Kurdistan is understood as an organically formed social and cultural space shaped by

long-standing relations, collective memory, and symbolic continuity, later fragmented by modern state boundaries. Accordingly, the thesis posits that the Kurdish nation is fundamentally synonymous with the Kurdish people. Kurdish identity did not emerge as a product of modern nationhood; rather, modern nationalism developed in response to the fragmentation of an already existing ethno-cultural community. From an ethno-symbolist perspective, Kurdishness is rooted in shared historical experiences, myths, symbols, and memories that transcend imposed borders and state-centered narratives. Epistemologically, the framework affirms the historical continuity of the Kurdish people beyond the confines of modern state formation. Analytically, it distinguishes between individualistic–civic and collectivistic–ethnic forms of nationalism, demonstrating how these types have evolved differently across political and cultural contexts. This distinction provides the conceptual space to situate emerging Kurdish political paradigms that diverge from classical nationalist models.

Overall, this integrated theoretical and methodological framework offers a coherent and comprehensive interpretation of the origins of the Kurdish nation and the evolution of Kurdish nationalism. By combining ethno-symbolism with socio-historical analysis and engaging with contemporary political transformations, the thesis provides a robust foundation for understanding the Kurdish question in Turkey and its broader implications for political change.

Methodological Framework: Conceptualization and Configuration

Documents are treated in this study as forms of evidence whose meaning emerges only through their contextual embeddedness and internal logical coherence. Their analytical significance is not inherent but is produced through interpretation within historically specific contexts and established theoretical frameworks. Scientific validity, therefore, arises not from documents as

isolated data points but from their systematic integration into a coherent interpretive structure. This epistemological position underscores the central role of documentary sources in generating verifiable and theoretically grounded knowledge.

The research methodology is designed to sustain a coherent theoretical framework through the selective deployment of appropriate data collection and interpretive strategies. This approach enables a systematic investigation of both the origins of the Kurdish nation and the historical development of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. Methodologically, the study draws on a hybrid theoretical orientation that supplies the conceptual resources necessary for constructing a research design attentive to historical continuity, political transformation, and symbolic reproduction. Consequently, certain core sources cut across chapters and are deployed selectively as guiding references rather than as chronologically confined materials. This strategy ensures consistent alignment between the research question, theoretical framework, and empirical analysis. The distinction between major and complementary sources plays a crucial role in consolidating a robust theoretical structure and refining the overall research design.

Two foundational works—Martin van Bruinessen's *Agha, Shaikh and State* (1992) and David McDowall's *A Modern History of the Kurds* (1997)—serve as primary reference points for this study's engagement with Kurdish history and social structures. Bruinessen's socio-anthropological analysis offers a powerful account of the evolution of Kurdish society through tribal, religious, and political divisions, highlighting their enduring implications for the emergence of collective identity and national consciousness. McDowall's comprehensive historical narrative complements this perspective by providing an empirically rich account of Kurdish political movements and their interaction with regional and international forces.

Together, these works establish a strong epistemological foundation for situating Kurdish nationalism within its broader socio-historical context.

Leonard Binder's *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics in the Middle East* (1999) constitutes a key contribution to understanding post–World War I state-building in the Middle East, particularly in relation to colonial partition and imperial interests. Binder's analysis of modern state formation offers a conceptual framework for examining how competing nationalist projects were shaped, constrained, or suppressed within newly imposed political boundaries. This framework directly informs the thesis's typology of nationalism by elucidating the varied forms and political statuses nationalism assumes under authoritarian regimes across heterogeneous nation-state configurations. Binder's insights are reinforced by Roger Owen's *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (1992), which critically examines the artificial construction of Middle Eastern states and the institutionalization of authoritarian governance. Together, these works deepen the study's understanding of how imposed boundaries and state structures shaped the conditions under which Kurdish nationalism developed.

Robert Olson's *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880–1925* (1989), along with his collaborative work with Horace Rumbold on the Koçgiri Rebellion of 1921, provides a rigorous analysis of early Kurdish nationalist mobilization. These studies illuminate the complexities of Turkey's political transformation during the late Ottoman and early Republican periods and offer critical empirical evidence for Kurdish demands for autonomy and self-determination between 1921 and 1923—a formative phase in the consolidation of the Pan-Turkish state. Adopting a critical-historical perspective, Olson

demonstrates how Kurdish political elites gradually articulated national consciousness despite profound social, institutional, and structural constraints. Within this thesis, these works function as essential sources for analyzing the first phase of modern Kurdish nationalism and its broader political context.

Michael Eppel's *The Demise of the Kurdish Emirates* (2008) provides a longitudinal analysis of Kurdish political organization, tracing the rise and endurance of Kurdish emirates over nearly three centuries and examining the forces behind their eventual dissolution. This analysis is methodologically complemented by Boris James's *The Rise and Fall of the Kurdish Emirates (Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)* (2021) and his earlier study on Kurdish tribal territories in medieval Arabic historiography (2007). Collectively, these works enable a historically grounded examination of Kurdish political authority from early tribal formations to semi-autonomous emirates and their collapse in the early nineteenth century, thereby illuminating pre-modern foundations of Kurdish collective identity.

The discursive dimensions of Kurdish and Turkish nationalism are examined through the works of Ramazan Aras and Hamit Bozarslan. Aras's *The Formation of Kurdishness in Turkey: Political Violence, Fear and Pain* (2014) and Bozarslan's *Some Remarks on Kurdish Historiographical Discourse in Turkey (1919–1980)* (2003) offer critical insights into the ideological, intellectual, and political processes through which national identities have been constructed, contested, and institutionalized. These contributions are particularly valuable for understanding the production of nationalist narratives and their role in shaping political subjectivities.

Ali Kemal Özcan's *Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan* (2006), together with Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya's *The Kurdistan Workers' Party and a New Left in Turkey* (2012) and *The PKK in the 2000s: Continuity through Breaks* (2011), provide a comprehensive account of the PKK's ideological and organizational transformation. These works elucidate shifts in political strategy, ideological orientation, and conceptions of nationhood, offering critical insights into the movement's evolving responses to the Kurdish question. This analysis is further enriched by Ina Merdjanova's study of the Kurdish women's movement (2021), which foregrounds feminist transformations within the PKK and their implications for gender justice. Abdullah Öcalan's writings serve as a central analytical reference for examining the emergence of a new political paradigm and the movement's turn toward a non-state, democratic alternative.

Abbas Vali's edited volume, *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism* (2003), provides a critical point of engagement with secular and postmodernist interpretations of Kurdish nationhood. Vali's critique of modernist and ethno-symbolist approaches—particularly his polemical engagement with Amir Hassanpour—is examined systematically and situated in dialogue with the theoretical framework adopted in this thesis. This comparative engagement allows the study to position its own analytical stance within a field of competing interpretations and to clarify its epistemological and ontological commitments.

Finally, drawing on the accumulated documentary corpus, the theoretical framework adopts a hybrid approach combining Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolism (*Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism*, 2009) with Liah Greenfeld's comparative theory of nationalism (*Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, 1992; *Nationalism in Comparative Perspective*, 2005). This synthesis

enables a systematic explanation of the origins of the Kurdish nation, the dominant typologies of Kurdish nationalism, and their implications for political action. The resulting methodological and conceptual configuration ensures coherence between historical narratives and theoretical hypotheses, aligning the analytical framework closely with the research question and overall research design.

Theoretical Framework: A Critical Comparative Assessment

Most sociological and political analyses of the origins of the Kurdish nation and the development of Kurdish nationalism, following Abbas Vali's classification, can be broadly divided into three approaches: primordialist, constructivist, and ethnicist conceptions of nationalism and national identity. Primordialist perspectives emphasize the antiquity of the nation and conceptualize nationalism as a vehicle for realizing historically grounded claims to a national state. By contrast, constructivist approaches privilege nationalism as the *prima causa* of the nation and national identity, asserting that the modernity of the nation is the defining feature in explaining the origins of nationalism (Vali, 2003:2).

Within this classificatory framework, ethnicist approaches occupy an intermediate position between primordialist and constructivist perspectives. They reject both the modernist claim that nations originate exclusively in modernity and the primordialist naturalist conception of nations as fixed and immutable entities. Instead, ethnicists argue that nations possess ancient ethno-cultural roots that are subsequently reinterpreted and reconfigured under modern political and cultural conditions, thereby forming the basis for nationalist practices and processes of state formation. However, from the author's postmodernist perspective, ethnicist approaches embody a fundamental tension between the presumed ethnic origins of the nation and its modern

constructivist rearticulation. This unresolved tension ultimately undermines their logical and theoretical coherence (ibid.). Nevertheless, the polemical engagement between these competing approaches has contributed significantly to scholarly understanding of the divergent theoretical camps within Kurdish nationalism studies. At the same time, it clarifies their limitations in relation to this thesis's ethno-symbolist framework, which seeks to move beyond the primordialist–constructivist dichotomy by foregrounding the dynamic interaction between historical symbols, collective memories, and modern political imagination.

Abbas Vali (2003) argues that competing theoretical approaches employ periodization to explain the origins of the Kurdish nation in support of specific political agendas. These approaches advance divergent conceptions of nationhood, political authority, and legitimacy, portraying the Kurds either as an ancient historical collective or as a modern construct shaped by the emergence of nation-states in the Middle East. Vali further observes that Kurdish nationalist discourse in recent decades has been predominantly polarized between primordialist and ethnicist perspectives. Both viewpoints rely on essentialist and historicist interpretations that treat national origins as fixed, coherent, and fully intelligible through historical narratives. These narratives consistently attribute intentionality, continuity, and agency to the Kurdish nation, framing its identity and aspirations within a teleological conception of history (Vali, 2003:60). However, much of the scholarly debate has centered on the tension between modernist constructivist and ethnicist approaches—most notably represented by Amir Hassanpour—and Vali's postmodernist theoretical position.

Amir Hassanpour's (2003) periodization of Kurdish nationalism begins decisively with the emergence of Ahmed Khani's epic *Mem û Zîn* in the late seventeenth century. Abbas Vali

critiques this position as an essentialist conception of origins, arguing that it presupposes a uniform and continuous historical essence. In this view, history is treated as a latent force ready to manifest itself through the discourse and practices of historical agents—whether individual or collective—who are retrospectively defined as nationalists. According to Vali’s assessment, Hassanpour’s theoretical approach is grounded in a Marxist schema of universal historical development based on the succession of modes of production. Within this framework, Kurdish nationalism is conceptually divided into feudal and bourgeois forms, corresponding to successive stages in the evolution of the mode of production in Kurdistan.

Within the essentialist logic of ethnicist approaches, a common national “origin” is regarded as the foundation of a political community endowed with a uniform identity inscribed in history and oriented toward a political project of state formation (Vali, 2003:58). Nationalist discourse, while acknowledging the fragmentation of the nationalist political project following the partition of Kurdistan, nevertheless continues to presume a unified Kurdish community and identity aligned with political boundaries. In doing so, it overlooks the internal social, cultural, and structural diversity of Kurdish societies across the region (*ibid.*). This essentialist assumption is overly reductive and fails to capture the historical specificity of Kurdish nationalism or its political and ideological plurality. Moreover, it leaves little room for conceptualizing national identity as a strategic and contested locus of nationalist politics.

Vali emphasizes that Kurdish national identity was shaped through early encounters with Arab, Turkish, and Persian identities. This genesis does not signify a singular or uniform origin but rather marks a point of emergence—an identity that has been continuously divided and reconfigured through political and cultural processes both within and beyond Kurdistan (Vali,

2003:105). Kurdish identity is therefore inherently fluid and unstable, constituted through a complex relationship between self and other that is reproduced in every act of recognition, whether through denial, resistance, or suppression. It is continually inscribed and redefined within an evolving system of differences and meanings.

At the same time, Kurdish national identity is unmistakably a modern phenomenon, constructed through determinate discursive responses that have accompanied the structural processes of formation and consolidation of the modern nation-state in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran since the end of the First World War and the subsequent partition of Kurdistan (ibid.). Vali concludes that the systematic denial of Kurdish identity and the destruction of civil society in Kurdistan became necessary conditions for the emergence of fragmented national identities within these multi-ethnic nation-states. What fundamentally distinguishes Kurdish nationalism from classical European nationalism is that, whereas nationalism in Europe emerged alongside modernity and was accompanied by the development of democratic citizenship and civil society, Kurdish nationalism emerged as a response to denial, repression, and assimilation. It developed in contexts marked by the suppression of civil society, the absence of democratic citizenship, and the enforcement of ethnic and national homogenization in Kurdistan.

Within this framework, the past is neither fixed nor anchored in a singular origin. Rather, it functions as a contingent and contested narrative that continuously redefines national identity across different historical moments, without implying linear or deterministic causal effects on the present. Kurdish nationalism and national identity are thus shaped by a complex web of modern fragmentation, divergence, and structural constraint rather than by a unified historical

origin. This constellation of conditions plays a decisive role in shaping the multifaceted and evolving character of Kurdish national identity today.

In contrast, for Amir Hassanpour (2003:106), reference to distinct “origins,” real or constructed, posits and legitimates the existence of a Kurdish nation and the demand for its sovereign rule, something forcefully denied by dominant Turkish, Persian, and Arab origins who has served the project of integrating the Kurds and other non – dominant peoples into the “nation-state.” The author clearly demonstrates that appeals to origins underscore differences and conflicts with other nations, as articulated by various nationalist movements. In contrast, for the Kurds, the notion of 'origin' is a powerful tool for (re)producing differences under a regime of state violence (Hassanpour, 2003:107). Hassanpour situates Vali’s theoretical position within a liberal democratic framework that conceives the nation as a distinctly modern phenomenon and an expression of popular sovereignty. Within this perspective, Kurdish nationhood and nationalism are understood as products of modernity. Accordingly, Vali (2003:106) advances a teleological reading of Kurdish history, periodizing it into ‘patriotic’ and ‘nationalist’ phases that culminate in the formation of a distinct Kurdish national identity.

Hassanpour defines the nation as a historically constituted community unified by a shared language, culture, homeland, and economic life, and conceptualizes national development as the transformation of ethnic or tribal societies into modern nations (2003:143). While no definitive starting point can be fixed for Kurdish nationalism—particularly when its diverse movements are considered as a whole—Hassanpour employs periodization as an analytical tool to distinguish between pre-modern “feudal nationalism” and modern “middle-class nationalism” (2003:148). The initial phase, characterized by feudal politics, does not constitute nationalism per se but

rather reflects localized power struggles among Kurdish emirates and their intense conflicts with the governing imperial states in Kurdistan. The second phase represents a hybrid formation, as feudal relations and political practices persist and continue to shape Kurdish nationalist movements even in the modern period (ibid.). This typology also extends to the pre-1918 Ottoman and Iranian contexts, where centralization policies initiated in the sixteenth century reached their apex with the dissolution of Kurdish principalities in the nineteenth century, particularly in Turkey. However, this trajectory should not be interpreted as an essential or linear transitional stage. Instead, these socio-economic formations cannot be readily created or dismantled through legal or administrative reforms alone; rather, they operate as long-term evolutionary forces that differentiate Western state formation from the various forms of despotic rule in the region. In this sense, periodization serves not as a deterministic historical model but as an instrumental analytical device for examining the same phenomenon as it appears in different historical forms and ideological contents (Hassanpour, 2003:149).

In Hassanpour's assessment, Vali's post-structuralist or postmodernist perspective is marked by significant conceptual ambiguity, which he argues risks reducing the notion of the nation to little more than a mode of governance legitimized through the formal acquisition of "popular sovereignty." From this standpoint, political authority is narrowly conceptualized in juridico-political terms, privileging institutional arrangements over the broader socio-cultural and material foundations of national life. This approach, according to Hassanpour, promotes a rigid analytical separation between ethnicity and the exercise of socio-political and economic power, thereby obscuring the historically embedded and mutually constitutive relationship between cultural identity, political authority, and material structures. As a result, such a reductionist framing fails to adequately account for the complex processes through which national identity

and collective governance are formed, contested, and sustained. (Hassanpour, 2003:157). In contrast to this liberal position, Hassanpour's Marxist stance conceptualizes the nation as a social and historical formation that cannot be reduced to the process of state formation alone. Rather, it entails: (i) profound social and economic transformations, particularly the rise of a capitalist mode of production; (ii) processes of social differentiation, most notably the emergence of a bourgeoisie; (iii) the modernization and democratization of language, culture, and political life; and (iv) continued struggles for a sovereign and democratic political order (Hassanpour, 2003:158). While the "normal" operation of the modern capitalist state presupposes the institutionalization of these characteristics within a regime of rights and citizenship, such regimes have not displaced ethnic power. On the contrary, they have often reinforced and rearticulated ethnic hierarchies within the structures of citizenship and political inclusion. For Hassanpour, even in formally civic nations, structural inequalities within civil society translate into unequal legal and political treatment of citizens and reproduce asymmetries in the distribution of economic power (ibid.).

According to Hassanpour, it is clear that none of the Kurdish nationalist organizations are founded on a democratic principle of popular sovereignty. Kurdish nationalism, like other nationalist movements—whether Eastern or Western, political or cultural, rational or irrational—unmistakably remains rooted in an ethnic identity (Hassanpour, 2003:160). From the early nationalist founders and ideological pioneers like Ehmedê Xanî (1650-1707) and Haji Qadiri Koyi (1817-1897) to present-day Kurdish nationalists, there is a remarkable continuity without any significant ideological break. Kurdish political experience is deeply rooted in enduring pre-modern, patriarchal forms of authority that have withstood the test of time. These structures have consistently shaped Kurdish governance, from the autonomous leadership of Shaikh Mahmud in

the early 1920s to the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government in the 1990s. This persistence strongly underscores that Kurdish self-rule has maintained its essence over time, reflecting remarkable continuity rather than transformation (Hassanpour, 2003:161). Finally, the author finds the critique of “origin” valuable insofar as it alerts historians to the dangers of metaphysical historiography, particularly the deterministic assumption that the past mechanically governs the present. Yet this critique also risks moving to the opposite extreme, as illustrated by postmodernist genealogical approaches such as that of Abbas Vali, which tend to deny the objective existence of historical events or their material and symbolic efficacy in shaping contemporary social and political realities. These opposing metatheoretical positions ultimately arrive at a theoretical deadlock: while rejecting “origins” as sources of immutable, exact, or immobile essences, they paradoxically relapse into metaphysical abstractions—either through historical determinism or through radical discontinuity and negation of historical continuity (Hassanpour, 2003:161).

By contrast, the ethno-symbolist perspective adopted in this thesis offers a mediating analytical framework that avoids both essentialism and a historicism. Rather than treating origins as fixed substances or dismissing them as discursive illusions, ethno-symbolism conceptualizes them as historically sedimented symbolic resources—myths, memories, traditions, and cultural practices—that are continuously reinterpreted and mobilized within changing social and political contexts. In this sense, the past neither determines the present nor disappears from it; instead, it persists as a dynamic reservoir of meaning that shapes, constrains, and enables political imagination and collective action over time.

While debates between modernist and postmodernist approaches demonstrate a fundamental opposition in epistemological orientation, both ultimately converge on identifying the nation as a

predominantly modern phenomenon. In doing so, they translate nationalism into two closely related versions of political nationalism and directly anchor national identity to the institutional and ideological framework of the modern nation-state. Within this shared conceptual horizon, the Kurdish community is largely understood as an imagined political community whose emergence and modes of interaction are politically constructed and socially invented. As a consequence, the legitimacy of the Kurds as a historical nation is denied, and their collective destiny is reduced to questions of autonomy or self-determination within—or against—the structures of the modern state, rather than being recognized as the expression of a historically rooted ethno-cultural community.

The ethno-symbolist perspective positions the Kurdish people at the heart of defining Kurdishness, framing it as a vital source of ethnic identity that transcends artificial borders. This identity embodies a profound consciousness that surpasses the narrow confines of modern nationhood, highlighting the Kurds' status as a significant ethno-national group rather than mere minorities confined within imposed boundaries. The epistemological approach asserts that the Kurdish people have a rich history that predates the establishment of any state, and crucially, they will continue to thrive and evolve independently of any state formation in the region. Understanding these nuances reveals the intricate antagonism between the two entities and highlights the shifting definitions shaped by historical events, social movements, and cultural values (Smith, 2009).

Kurdish Nation and Nationalism: An Ethno-Symbolist Cultural Approach

This thesis firmly endorses the ethno-symbolist perspective, arguing that the pre-modern Kurdish nation can be understood as a distinct cultural *people* rooted in a specific ancestral territory or

“homeland” (Smith, 2001:19). In this sense, the pre-modern Kurdish nation corresponds closely to the concept of *ethnie*, defined as a population group sharing myths of common ancestry, collective historical memories, elements of a shared culture, attachment to a defined historical territory, and a degree of internal solidarity—particularly among elites (Smith, 2001:19). As Anthony D. Smith emphasizes, it is essential to distinguish analytically between an *ethnic community* and a *nation*. Many historically distinct peoples—such as the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Persians—existed long before the emergence of early modern Europe and the institutionalization of the nation-state, and therefore cannot be understood through modernist criteria alone (Smith, 2001:19). By this reasoning, the Kurds may be conceptualized as a pre-modern ethno-cultural community possessing the symbolic, cultural, and historical resources necessary for nationhood, independent of—and prior to—the political structures of modern state formation. This distinction allows the Kurdish case to be situated outside the rigid primordialist–modernist dichotomy, while avoiding the reduction of Kurdish identity to a purely modern political invention. Instead, it foregrounds the *longue durée* of Kurdish ethno-cultural continuity as the symbolic foundation upon which modern Kurdish nationalism later emerged. According to Smith (2001), the modern nation may be defined as a named human population possessing a historic territory, shared myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy, and common legal rights and duties for all its members. This conception differs in several fundamental respects from pre-modern collective cultural communities.

These distinctions suggest a broad periodization in which pre-modern societies are primarily structured around ethnicity, whereas the modern era is defined by nationhood and nationalism. However, such a generalization does not adequately capture the historical experience of Kurdish ethno-cultural societies. Unlike certain historical nations—most notably the Jews and

Armenians—whose early medieval formation involved relatively broad participation in collective socio-cultural practices and relied heavily on religious sectarianism as a unifying cultural framework, the early formation of Kurdish collective identity during the same period was structured predominantly around tribalism as its principal mode of social organization and cultural affiliation (Bruinessen, 1992; Smith, 2001). This distinctive historical trajectory means that Kurdish nation formation does not conform neatly to either pre-modern ethnic models or modern nation-state paradigms. Rather than representing a deviation or deficiency, this pattern points to a differentiated and hybrid process of collective identity formation. Recognizing this specificity enables a more nuanced reading of the Kurdish historical record—one that accommodates exceptional and overlapping forms of collective cultural identity instead of forcing them into rigid modernist or primordialist periodizations.

Anthony D. Smith's (2001) expansive definition of *ethnie*—emphasizing shared myths of ancestry, collective historical memories, cultural values, and symbolic codes—provides a particularly useful sociological framework for understanding how Kurdish national consciousness has been articulated over time. From this ethno-symbolist perspective, Kurdish nationalism is best understood as a process through which cultural resources are selectively mobilized and reinterpreted to construct a collective vision of the nation. Accordingly, Kurdish nationhood cannot be reduced to tangible cultural markers alone—such as language, rituals, artifacts, emblems, music, or dress—but must also be situated within the deeper symbolic foundations of shared memories, myths, values, traditions, and the institutionalized practices that give them social durability (Smith, 2001).

In a well-known historical inquiry by İhsan Nuri Pasha (1892–1976), *The History of the Ethnic Origin of the Kurd*, written in the Kurdish Sorani dialect, Kurdish ethno-history is traced back to antiquity. Drawing on ancient chronicles and inscriptions from the Sumerian and Assyrian periods, Pasha argues that Kurdish populations inhabited the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates in southern Mesopotamia from at least the Early Dynastic period (c. 2900–2334 BCE). He further maintains that Kurdish presence in southern Mesopotamia—identified in some sources as the land of *Kardy*—can be traced as early as 4100 BCE, coinciding with the emergence of early urban settlements under successive Sumerian dynasties. Although such claims remain contested within modern historiography, they situate Kurdish ethno-history, at least symbolically, within the earliest phases of Mesopotamian civilization.

A similar ethno-symbolic orientation appears in Mir Sharaf-Khan Bedlisi's classical historical chronicle, *Sharaf-Nameh: The History of the Dynasties of Kurdistan*, originally written in Persian and later translated into Kurdish Sorani by Hajhar Mokriani (2013:19). In this narrative, Kurdish collective identity is embedded within a shared memory of resistance, heroism, and autonomy. The recognition of the Kurds as a distinct people is symbolically linked to the legendary defeat of the tyrant King Zahhak by Kawa the Blacksmith—a foundational myth believed to have taken place in Kurdistan at an indeterminate historical moment. Transmitted through oral traditions, epic poetry, and collective memory, this narrative functions less as a factual origin account than as a symbolic articulation of shared ancestry, moral order, and political aspiration. Beyond mytho-historical representations, documented history also attests to the existence of Kurdish dynasties and principalities that played a significant role in preserving Kurdish territorial autonomy, social organization, and cultural traditions from at least the ninth century onward. More recently, Kurdish philosopher and political leader Abdullah Öcalan has

advanced a *longue durée* interpretation of Kurdish history, arguing that Kurdish presence in Upper Mesopotamia extends back to the Neolithic period. While such interpretations remain interpretive rather than empirically conclusive, they contribute to a broader narrative framework through which Kurdish historical continuity is imagined and articulated. Taken together, these historical, mythological, and interpretive accounts do not constitute definitive proof of an unbroken Kurdish nation in the modern sense. Rather, they reinforce an ethno-symbolist understanding of Kurdish nationhood by demonstrating how shared myths, memories, symbols, and territorial attachments have provided a durable cultural substrate from which modern Kurdish national consciousness has emerged. In this sense, Kurdish nationhood appears not as a sudden modern invention, but as a historically layered process in which pre-modern ethnic identities, symbolic repertoires, and collective memories have been continually reactivated and reinterpreted in response to changing political conditions.

“The term Neolithic revolution indicates that the transition to a subsistence based on food production and the concomitant establishment of fairly permanent settlements must have had far-reaching effects on human life. Sites at Cayonu in Diyarbakir, Hallan Cemi near Batman, and Nevali Cori in Urfa, showing traces of sedentary village life, sustained mainly through agriculture and animal husbandry, dating back 10,000 years. Many more of these early Neolithic settlements must be buried under the countless mounds that one passes on an ordinary through the terrains that have been called Kurdistan since the times of the Iranian Seljuks. Despite the regrettably limited scope of the actual excavations undertaken here, there can be no doubt that this region - the Fertile Crescent - constituted one of the main centers of this intriguing era of prehistoric cultural developments”. (Öcalan, 2007:5).

Over time, Kurdish communities have sustained collective identity through symbolic boundaries, distinctive cultural codes, and enduring myths surrounding land, ancestry, and destiny. These symbolic repertoires have not merely functioned as cultural residues but have also served as effective instruments for political elites in mobilizing Kurdish nationalist movements (Bruinessen, 1992). Accordingly, the adoption of an ethno-symbolist approach is neither a

deductive imposition nor a romanticization of the past, but a constructive analytical framework capable of capturing both long-term historical continuities and context-specific transformations in the formation of the Kurdish nation and the development of Kurdish nationalism. From an ethno-symbolist perspective, modern nationalism does not discard mythic structures; rather, it reconfigures and politicizes them to mobilize mass support—most notably through what Anthony D. Smith terms the “*myth of ethnic election*” (Smith, 2001:24). This belief, commonly articulated as a collective mission to preserve or fulfill a sacred historical destiny, has historically reinforced cohesion and resilience among national communities such as the Orthodox Greeks and Russians (ibid.). In the Kurdish context, the foundational legend of Kawa the Blacksmith functions as a symbolic covenant, ritually reaffirmed through the celebration of Newroz, and operates as a mythic narrative of liberation, renewal, and national emergence.

Central to the ethno-symbolist approach is the claim that historical continuity emerges from the dynamic interaction between land and people, with particular emphasis on the symbolic significance of the *ethnoscape*—a historically imagined landscape imbued with collective memories, myths, and meanings that anchor ethnic identity across generations (Smith, 2001:24). This approach further suggests that, despite centuries of repression and the progressive erosion of national integrity in the modern era, the Kurds have endured by continually reproducing distinctive cultural practices and sustaining a shared sense of collective identity (Smith, 2009; Bruinessen, 1992). Moreover, the persistent emphasis on historical origins—and the sustained interest in archaeological and historical inquiry as means of recovering an authentic Kurdish past—reflects a deep-seated commitment to national belonging. This commitment constitutes a defining feature of Kurdish nationalism; notwithstanding its internal ideological diversity and the plurality of political orientations it encompasses (Bruinessen, 1992). From epistemological and

ontological perspectives, the Kurdish nation can best be understood as a historical people whose presence in this region extends back to the Neolithic Age.

Map2: Illustrates the existence of significant independent kingdoms and autonomous principalities up to 1835. The semi-independent political structures had been capable of protecting local autonomy and Kurdish culture for centuries.³



Despite undergoing four distinct and territorially fragmented social, cultural, economic, and political transformations in the modern era, the Kurds continue to imagine themselves as a community grounded in a historically constituted culture tied to a specific ancestral homeland known as Kurdistan (Bruinessen, 1992).

The tribal confederations depicted in Map 3 illustrate the divisions imposed by imperial rule rather than organically evolved social boundaries. Although official frontiers were formally recognized, they failed to produce a natural or enduring separation among Kurdish communities, thereby underscoring their fundamentally artificial character. Prolonged military conflicts

³ The map was downloaded from a web community called r/Maps with permission of using it for academic purposes, Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/Maps/comments/4n7zz0/kurdish_kingdoms_and_principalities_in_1835_640/

between the Iranian Safavid and Ottoman Empires culminated in a settlement imposed by the Ottoman Sultan Murad IV on Shah Safi in 1639. This treaty designated Kurdistan as a frontier zone between the two empires, a geopolitical configuration that remained largely intact until the early nineteenth century. While Map 3 delineates tribal territories along these official imperial lines, such divisions never severed the dense social, cultural, and kinship ties linking Kurdish tribes across the frontier. Among the interconnected tribal confederations divided by these imperial boundaries were Mukriyan, Ardalan, Shikak, and Jelali in Persia, as well as Botan, Hakkari, Badinan, Soran, and Baban in Ottoman territory—three of which were later incorporated into Iraq following the First World War (Edmonds, 1971:88). Despite their administrative separation, these tribal groupings continued to share patterns of seasonal migration, economic exchange, and cultural affiliation, reinforcing a sense of collective belonging that transcended imperial jurisdiction.

The Kurdish pursuit of historical origins and sustained engagement in archaeological and historiographical inquiry reflects a deep ideological commitment to national identity and further exposes the inadequacy of externally imposed borders as explanatory frameworks for Kurdish social life (Edmonds, 1971:86). Recognition of the Kurds as a people possessing distinct historical traditions, shared cultural styles, and authentic social practices has fostered strong cultural bonds among intellectuals and emerging middle classes across disparate regions of Kurdistan. These bonds constitute what may be described as an invisible symbolic or spiritual network that transcends political boundaries and reinforces Kurdish national consciousness (ibid.).

The process of ethnogenesis can be traced through the historical development of the Kurdish *ethnie*, revealing how beliefs in shared ancestry and territorial belonging gradually emerged and were consolidated among the Kurds. Historical and intellectual sources consistently affirm that Kurdistan constitutes a territorial community whose population has long inhabited, imagined, and identified with this ethnoscape as its ancestral homeland. Kurdish practices of self-definition have repeatedly come into conflict with dominant state-centered narratives that deny Kurdish historicity, instead portraying the Kurds as fragmented, peripheral, or merely residual minorities within larger political entities (Edmonds, 1971; Smith, 2009). From an ethno-symbolist perspective, the Kurdish nation is therefore best understood as a self-defining society constituted through processes of *ethnogenesis*—articulated through naming practices, symbolic boundary formation, origin myths, and the reproduction of enduring cultural frameworks that sustain collective identity over time (Smith, 2009).

Through archetypal narratives and symbolic storytelling, literature forges an affective relationship between people and land, rendering territorial belonging a central pillar of nationalist ideology. To inhabit a shared homeland thus becomes not merely a material condition but an ideological marker of identity, binding communities through shared historical memories and cultural imaginaries. Consequently, appeals to Kurdish authenticity have consistently mobilized romantic nationalist sentiments of liberation through artistic and literary expression. In the Kurdish case, Edmonds decisively asserts that:

“In the intellectual sphere perhaps the most famous of its early apostles was Haji Qadir of Koi (1815-92). In vigorous lines he calls tribal chiefs 'from Botan to Baban' and 'from Marash and Van to Iraq' to compose their feuds and unite, berates the literate elite for neglecting their mother tongue to write in Persian or Turkish (he concludes the doxology prefixed to his Collected Verse by telling the Creator that henceforth nobody will be able to say that He has never been praised in the Kurdish tongue), castigates the religious Sheikhs and Mullahs for their sycophancy, and

urges all classes to rouse themselves from their torpor, to appreciate the value of education, and at the same time to observe strictly all the moral decencies”(Edmond, 1971:89).

From an ethno-symbolist perspective, romanticism functions as a powerful cultural instrument of nationalist mobilization, particularly in ethnically heterogeneous and politically fragmented regions (Smith, 2009:70). By cultivating a longing for the past, romanticism reinforces aspirations for national cohesion through appeals to ancient histories, collective myths, and epic narratives (ibid.). Despite Kurdistan’s division among four distinct political regimes, Kurdish unity has been sustained through enduring cultural resources. This cohesion has been repeatedly articulated through romantic and spiritual efforts to reaffirm Kurdish ethnic myths and to legitimize national aspirations across temporal and territorial ruptures (Bozarslan, 2003; Smith, 2009). In this sense, the concept of the “Kurdish nation” is best understood not merely as a political project but as an ethnic formation rooted in shared ethno-cultural elements, expressed through symbolic repertoires that define both its substance and its mobilizing appeal. Although the Kurdish nation was formally partitioned following the First World War, its symbolic and ethnic foundations have continued to sustain a shared sense of nationhood through a national imagination deeply anchored in historical memory and collective identity—an imagination that stands in sharp contrast to the artificial, authoritarian, and externally imposed structures of the states governing Kurdistan (Edmonds, 1971). Even if one accepts the modernist claim that the Kurdish nation crystallized only in the modern era, it remains essential to examine the pre-existing ethno-symbolic community that underpins it in order to account for its distinctive cultural characteristics and its particular ecological, historical, and cultural positioning among other nations.

In sum, enduring ethnic ties have consistently generated widespread solidarity and legitimacy in the formation of the Kurdish nation, despite the profound socio-cultural ruptures produced by territorial partition. These ties provide an objective foundation for the effectiveness of Kurdish nationalist mobilization in pursuit of diverse—and at times competing—political goals. From an ethno-symbolist perspective, nationhood emerges not as a fixed essence but as a constellation of historically contingent social and symbolic processes that evolve in form and meaning over time. As Smith observes, “by tracing the development of these variable processes, we can demonstrate how near to, or far from, the ideal type of the nation a particular concrete instance may be” (Smith, 2009:110). Although the process of Kurdish nation-state formation was obstructed by the partition of Kurdistan, the Kurdish nation itself persists as a living historical reality and has deviated only marginally from the ideal archetype of the nation (Smith, 2009; Edmonds, 1971). Consequently, the ethno-symbolist approach offers both the conceptual clarity and the heuristic tools necessary to explain the emergence of the Kurdish nation and the origins of Kurdish nationalism. More importantly, it reveals the deep and inseparable relationship between the socio-cultural identity of the Kurdish people and the political imagination that animates it. Within this framework, the Kurdish nation may be understood as a historically continuous and symbolically sustained community—one that exists independently of, and without the necessity of, a sovereign nation-state.

Theoretical Framework: A Socio-Historical Assessment

This thesis centers on a key question that prompted the use of a hybrid theoretical framework, blending ethno-symbolism with a socio-historical approach. This framework effectively examines the typology of Kurdish nationalism, delves into the origins of the Kurdish nation, and compellingly traces its evolution in Turkey.

This framework strategically addresses specific questions in a chronological order, rather than adhering to a rigid theoretical model. Its purpose is to uncover the evolution of the Kurdish nation and to clearly define the typology of Kurdish nationalism, alongside its significant implications for political action. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic forces that shape Kurdish identity and political activism. The primary method leverages a diverse range of historical data to implement a robust analytical approach, rigorously testing a combined theoretical framework across different time periods and contexts that have led to a profound shift in the political paradigm over the past few decades. The resultant theoretical hypothesis effectively accelerates an essential frame that decisively tackles epistemological and ontological questions at every developmental stage. This theorization, resulting from secondary data collection, views the emergence of the modern nation in the Middle East not as the *cause* but rather as the *effect* of the artificial creation of the modern state. It also seen Kurdistan as a natural formation social unit built organically from below upwards that gradually ossify and became rudimentary the purpose of its origin. This theoretical framework posits that the Kurdish nation is fundamentally synonymous with the Kurdish people. It argues that the concept of the modern nation did not arise as a cause but rather as a result of the arbitrary formation of states in the region.

The evolution of modern nationalism has given rise to two dominant variants of a shared phenomenon. In the Middle East, nationalism has primarily manifested as a collectivistic and ethnic force, adept at mobilizing populations for political objectives while simultaneously entrenching authoritarian regimes. This trajectory presents a formidable obstacle to achieving democratic solutions to complex ethnic and national issues, leading to a reliance on repression—military, political, or cultural—as the prevailing mode of governance. So far, none of the

authoritarian states with Kurdish populations, including the Kurdish regional administration in Iraq, has successfully navigated a democratic resolution to the Kurdish question. Greenfeld's typology of nationalism serves as a vital lens through which we can understand why nation-state projects in this region have followed such a troubling path over the last century. According to Greenfeld, the term *nation* initially referred specifically to England, where it denoted a sovereign people embedded within established political, territorial, and ethnic structures (1992: 8). When this cognitive meaning was later extended to other populations with distinct political and ethno-cultural characteristics, the concept evolved to signify a *unique sovereign people* (ibid.).

“The last transformation may be considered responsible for the conceptual confusion reigning in the theories of nationalism . . . The term “nation” applied to both conceals important differences. The emergence of the more recent concept signified a profound transformation in the nature of nationalism, and the two concepts under one name reflect two radically different forms of the phenomenon (which means both two radically different forms of national identity and consciousness, and two radically different types of national collectivities – nations)” (Greenfeld, 1992:8-9).

The emergence of two concepts of the nation points to distinct structural conditions and value systems, giving rise to two branches of nationalism with divergent socio-cultural patterns and political institutions (Greenfeld, 1992: 10). This distinction underpins the critical relationship between nationalism and democracy, which historically developed together within democratic nation-states and cannot be fully understood in isolation from one another (ibid.). Nationalism first arose where democratic conditions and socio-cultural homogeneity existed; however, as it spread to different contexts and shifted from sovereignty toward ethnic uniqueness, it gradually detached from democratic principles. This explains why democracy is not readily transferable across all settings (Greenfeld, 1992: 10). When structural transformations create material foundations for organic unity and equal national belonging, nationalism tends to be non-

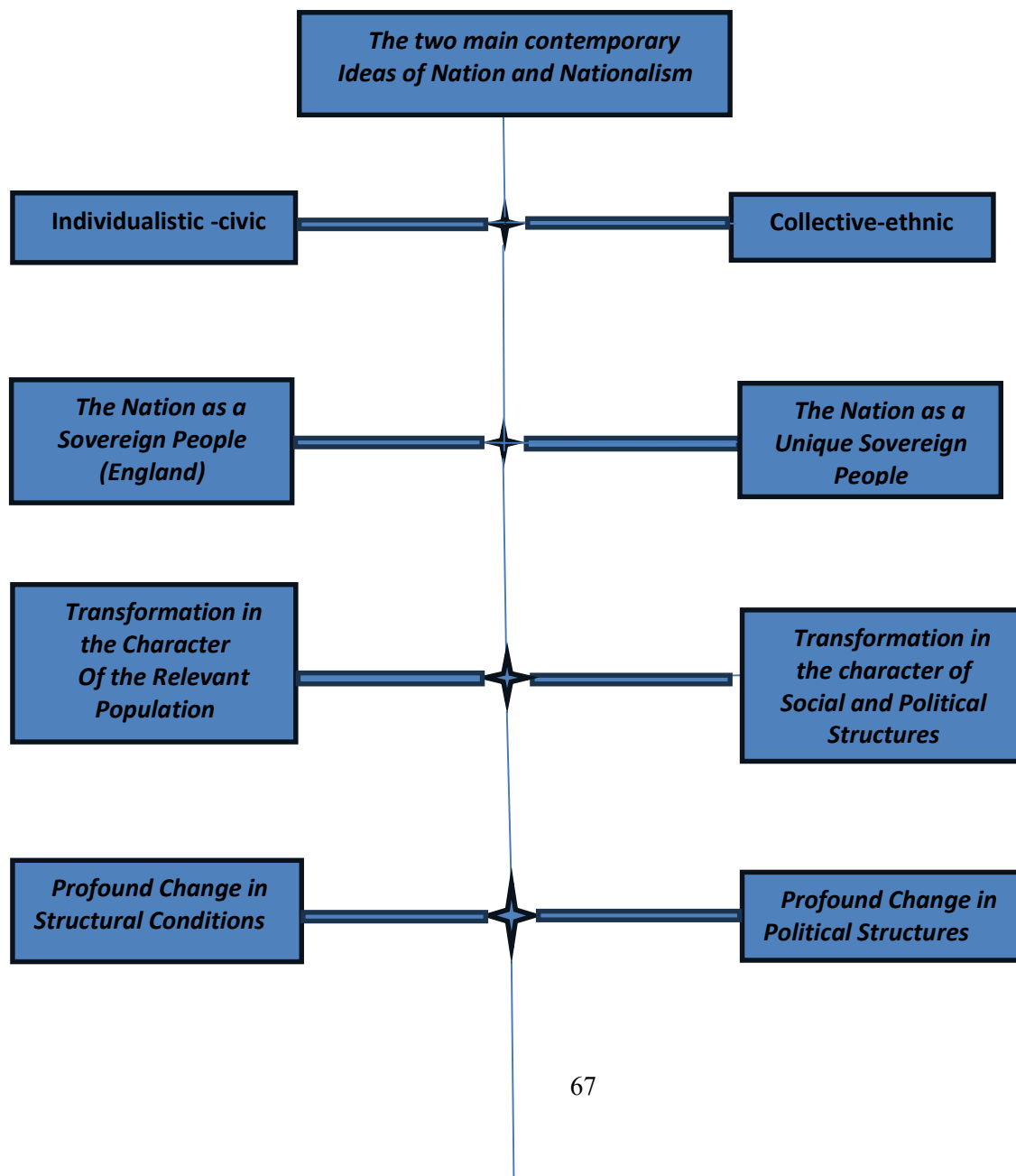
particularistic and inclusive, defining the nation as a sovereign people regardless of ethno-religious differences (Greenfeld, 1992: 11). Conversely, where such transformations are absent, the application of nationalist ideas inevitably produces particularistic forms of nationalism (ibid.). The two interpretations of popular sovereignty give rise to fundamentally different types of nationalism: *individualistic-civic* nationalism and *collectivistic-ethnic* nationalism. This critical distinction is at the heart of the present research, offering a powerful analytical framework for comprehending the diverse expressions of Kurdish nationalism and their significant implications for political action and mobilization (Greenfeld, 1992).

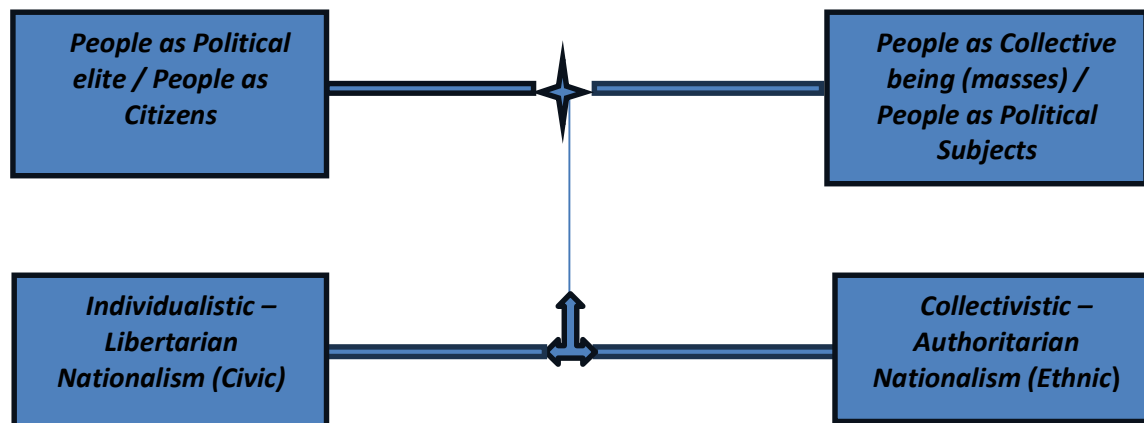
Defining the nation as a free association of individuals locates popular sovereignty in autonomous citizens, whereas the unitary conception views the nation as a mechanical collectivity grounded in ethnic criteria. Accordingly, nationalism as a political doctrine fuses this unitary definition with ethnic membership (Greenfeld & Eastwood, 2005:257). While the composite definition emphasizes interdependent yet self-governing individuals, the unitary definition conceives members as collectivized, sectarian actors whose wills and interests are defined through ethnic differentiation (Greenfeld & Eastwood, 2005). Accordingly, the modern nation-states in Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria are formed based on a unitary definition of the nation. This definition is attributed to the dominant nationalities of Arabs, Turks, and Persians. However, these states openly deny the ethnic rights of Kurds and other nationalities, treating them as secondary citizens (Ismael & Ismael, 2015). ⁴The artificial mixing of different nationalities and ethno-religious groups is based on collective-ethnic nationalism, where the

⁴ Although recent political transformation in Iraq has resulted in the recognition of the national and ethnic rights of the Kurds and other minorities, still ethno-religious definition of the nation, classified Iraqis according to ethnic and religious affiliations, and in the new Iraqi state, sovereignty has divided and aggregated of separate sovereignties of each ethnic and religious groups, in which members viewed not as equal citizens but dependent subjects, see, Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael (2015). *IRAQ in the Twenty-First Century: Regime change and the making of a failed state*. New York: Routledge.

ruling classes interpret nationality based on their ethnic or religious background, which is imposed on others forcefully. Therefore, there is no socio-cultural and political foundation for establishing and carrying out popular sovereignty, as the fundamental essence of the nation, which should be founded on the collective freedom of all members being equal, does not exist. Instead, each group defines and characterizes the nation according to its understanding and self-interest.

The typological classification of nationalism is summarized in Figure 1.





Defining the nation as a free association of individuals locates popular sovereignty in autonomous citizens, whereas the unitary conception views the nation as a mechanical collectivity grounded in ethnic criteria. While the composite definition emphasizes interdependent yet self-governing individuals, the unitary definition conceives members as collectivized, sectarian actors whose wills and interests are defined through ethnic and/or religious differentiation (Greenfeld & Eastwood, 2005). Hence, it is reasonable to argue that in the absence of a foundation for popular sovereignty in the aforementioned countries, nationality can only be understood through the prism of the dominant group's collective-ethnic nationalism. Political transformation under such conditions merely entails a transition from one authoritarian state form to another. Without shared popular sovereignty, the concept of the nation-state itself lacks a substantive foundation, as it artificially amalgamates diverse ethno-national and religious groups within a single political framework, resulting in anomic and authoritarian domination. Although Kurdish cultural resources play a crucial role in regenerating the national community and sustaining Kurdish nationhood, nation-state ideologies have, in recent decades, significantly undermined the coherence of Kurdish identity by fragmenting Kurdish loyalties across artificially imposed political boundaries (Smith, 2009; Öcalan, 2011). While Kurdish political

elites and modernist intellectuals formally espouse civic and republican ideals, the absence of the economic foundations of a modern nation—combined with the persistence of tribal and traditional socio-cultural structures—has instead facilitated the emergence of various forms of collectivistic-ethnic nationalism (Greenfeld, 1992; Smith, 2009; Öcalan, 2011). Kurdish political elites and traditional nationalist movements employ political ideas to challenge imperial hegemony and dominant authoritarian regimes; however, these ideas are often borrowed from imported ideologies that poorly align with the socio-cultural and political structures of Middle Eastern societies (Khoury & Kostiner, 1990). Although secular modernist nationalism has, in recent decades, shifted toward religious nationalism under the pretext of resisting Westernization, both forms retain fundamentally chauvinistic and authoritarian political structures despite their ideological differences (Khoury & Kostiner, 1990). While secular nationalism emphasizes autonomy, self-determination, and human sovereignty, the region's historical and cultural conditions have enabled its rapid displacement by religious nationalism. Neo-traditionalist intellectuals and clerical elites—most notably in cases such as Iran—have successfully revived religious symbols and traditions to challenge secular conceptions of the nation, yet in practice have reproduced religious forms of authoritarian politics rather than democratic alternatives (Smith, 2009; Öcalan, 2011). Furthermore, nation-states in the Middle East have historically been constructed around a single dominant ethnic or religious group, primarily serving the interests of ruling elites and global superpowers. This structural norm has entrenched internal contradictions, enforced antagonistic coexistence among diverse communities, and sustained enduring patterns of political authoritarianism (Le Vine, 2005).

Building on this socio-historical perspective, the thesis examines how the policy of total assimilation and the systematic denial of Kurdish ethnic identity by successive pan-Turkish

political regimes for over a century paradoxically contributed to the emergence of a libertarian democratic Kurdish movement in recent decades. It investigates the historical conditions and political ruptures through which prolonged authoritarian nation-state practices generated new forms of resistance that departed fundamentally from earlier traditional nationalist movements. In this context, the study analyzes the distinctive political and ideological characteristics of the contemporary Kurdish movement, particularly its rejection of the nation-state model in favour of a non-state, democratic, and pluralistic paradigm. This paradigmatic shift marks a decisive break from statist and collectivistic-ethnic nationalism, redefining concepts of sovereignty, identity, and political agency. Finally, the thesis critically evaluates competing paradigms—nation-state versus non-state approaches—to determine which framework offers a more viable and sustainable solution to the Kurdish national question in Turkey.

Theoretical and Methodological Focus

This thesis integrates ethno-symbolist and socio-historical approaches to the study of nation and nationalism, drawing upon an extensive body of secondary documentary sources from political sociology, history, and Kurdish studies. Together, these perspectives constitute a robust theoretical framework for critically analyzing Kurdish nationalism and the democratic mass movement it has generated in Turkey. This framework enables the precise identification of the typology of Kurdish nationalism and elucidates its broader implications for political agency and collective action.

The research employs secondary documentary analysis to examine how political processes and state policies over the past century have shaped the trajectory, form, and outcomes of the Kurdish national question in Turkey. Data collection has evolved into a selective and analytical

process focused on key historical moments and political developments, relying on authoritative secondary sources to support explanatory and interpretive research guided by multiple theoretical hypotheses. This methodological flexibility enhances the study's capacity to engage rigorously with the complexity and multidimensionality of the Kurdish question. The documentary research is grounded in extensive empirical evidence derived from a wide range of studies in historical sociology, political sociology, and nationalism studies. Drawing on academic monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, historical records, periodicals, and the writings of influential political actors and organizations, the thesis traces both the ethnogenesis of the Kurdish nation and the evolution of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. This approach facilitates critical insight into the interaction between structural constraints, ideological transformations, and the emergence of Kurdish political agency.

Finally, the selection of sources and references has been systematically aligned with the central research questions and organized chronologically across chapters. This structure allows for a historically grounded yet theoretically informed analysis of continuity and change in Kurdish nationalism. Methodologically, the research strategy combines documentary analysis with grounded theoretical interpretation, enabling the continuous refinement of analytical categories and the generation of new theoretical insights throughout the study. Accordingly, the thesis is structured into five chapters and a final summary, as outlined below.

Chapter Outline:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter provides essential background on the history of the Kurdish people and Kurdistan. It outlines the central arguments, scope, and objectives of the thesis, and situates the research within the existing literature on nation and nationalism. In addition to reviewing key debates, the chapter critically evaluates prominent theoretical approaches to nationalism and contrasts them with the thesis's ethno-symbolist and socio-historical framework. It concludes by briefly presenting the theoretical assumptions and methodological design of the study.

Chapter 2: Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This chapter elaborates the theoretical and methodological foundations of the thesis. It proposes a sociological framework for analyzing the emergence of the Kurdish nation, the evolution of Kurdish nationalism, and the contemporary democratic libertarian movement in Turkey. Drawing on ethno-symbolist and socio-historical approaches, the chapter develops an innovative theoretical hypothesis for a comparative and critical analysis of Kurdish nationalism, its typology, and its implications for political action as crystallized in the current movement.

Chapter 3: Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey

This chapter examines the historical origins of the Kurdish Question in Turkey. It explores the socio-political development of Kurdistan from the medieval period to the formation of the tribal confederations of Ottoman Kurdistan in the sixteenth century. The final section analyzes the emergence of the modern Turkish nation-state, focusing on the rise of the Young Turks in the early twentieth century and the foundations of their political and ideological thought. It

demonstrates how this ideological formation intersected with elements of European fascism, contributed to the rise of Pan-Turkism, and shaped the political doctrine of the subsequent Kemalist regime.

Chapter 4: Modern Turkey and Kurdish Nationalism (1923–1978)

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the emergence of Kurdish nationalism in modern Turkey. It examines the historical causes of its development from the early twentieth century through the consolidation of the Turkish nation-state. By determining the typology of Kurdish nationalism in this period and drawing on substantiated historiography, the chapter critically analyzes the causes and dynamics of Kurdish nationalist rebellions up to 1937. It also explores the emergence of modernist intellectual currents in Turkey, including among Kurdish intellectuals and political leaders, and assesses the detrimental effects of international treaties on Kurdish political status. The chapter concludes by synthesizing the principal historical factors that generated nationalist rebellions and shaped the dominant form of Kurdish nationalism during this period.

Chapter 5: From Post-Rebellion to the Contemporary Ethno-National Mass Movement

The final chapter focuses on the contemporary phase of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. The first section investigates the structural and historical conditions that led to the formation of a new ethno-national mass movement, focusing on two critical periods: (1) the post-rebellion era from 1938 to 1960, commonly referred to as the “period of silence,” and (2) the revival of ethnic consciousness between 1960 and 1974, culminating in the establishment of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The chapter then situates these developments within Turkey’s broader

political context during the 1960s and 1970s. Particular attention is given to the PKK's distinctive ideological evolution, drawing on the political and philosophical writings of its imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan. These include an ethno-symbolist interpretation of Kurdish history, a feminist theory of women's liberation, democratic confederalism, and an ecological vision of society. The analysis demonstrates how these ideological transformations constitute a paradigmatic shift from orthodox Marxism toward a libertarian socialist framework.

Summary

The final summary presents a comprehensive conclusion grounded in the theoretical framework and empirical analysis developed throughout the thesis. Structured around five interrelated analytical discussions, it synthesizes findings from each chapter into an integrated interpretive whole. The summary concludes by reflecting on the broader theoretical implications of the study and offering recommendations for future research on Kurdish nationalism and stateless nations more generally.

In contrast, the recent paradigm shift within Kurdish politics advances an ethno-symbolist cultural approach that challenges the failures of nation-state nationalism. By mobilizing political action through the recovery of ethno-history and the politicization of vernacular culture, this paradigm reinforces identity-based solidarity rooted in local communities. These communities have preserved their cultural continuity despite sustained pressures from imposed ethnic nationalisms and authoritarian state structures aligned with regional geopolitical interests that continue to deny Kurdish historical nationhood.

From thesis's historical-sociological perspective, the influence of the past on the present is mediated through context, memory, and lived experience rather than linear causality. Time and space interact dynamically, shaping collective identity across generations. This study therefore examines the persistence of Kurdish cultural elements in line with the ethno-symbolist emphasis on myths, symbols, memories, and traditions as constitutive of nationhood. Kurdish nationalism is thus situated within long-term social and cultural processes rather than confined to nineteenth-century modernity.

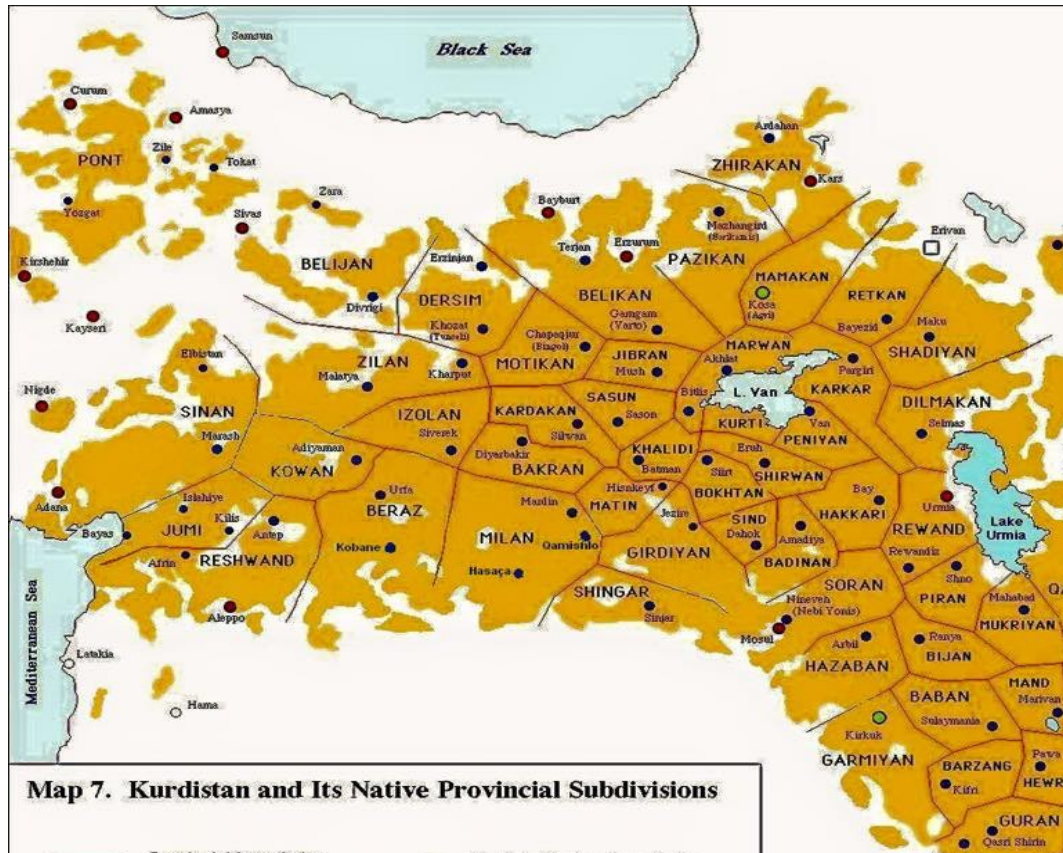
Within this framework, culture emerges as a dynamic and generative force, continuously producing new forms of expression and coexistence. For the Kurds, the tension between remembered past and present conditions of oppression intensifies sensitivity to injustice and reinforces indigenous traditions. However, experiences in the region—most notably the post-2003 consolidation of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq—demonstrate that political elites often instrumentalize nationalism through external alliances to serve narrow political interests rather than collective emancipation.

Nation-state nationalism in the Middle East has fragmented pre-existing social and cultural continuities, generating competing ideologues and artificial forms of unity imposed through the state. Both political and cultural nationalisms operating within the nation-state paradigm rely on ethnicity and constructed historical narratives, yet neither offers a sustainable solution to national questions. Instead, they represent parallel strategies in the pursuit of power.

By defining nationalism through an ethno-symbolist lens—as a doctrine of the nation rather than an extension of the state—this research distinguishes between competing paradigms of nationalism. This distinction is essential for understanding Kurdish nationhood as a historically

rooted, culturally sustained, and politically diverse phenomenon. Ultimately, political nationalism within the nation-state follows a uniform trajectory: it emerges, consolidates authority, and naturalizes the status quo as the only permissible reality. Society, by contrast, remains fundamentally shaped by historical processes rather than by the artificial logic of state-centered evolution.

CHAPTER 3: The Origins of the Kurdish National Question in Turkey: The Collapse of Kurdish Emirates and the Rise of Young Turk Modernity



Map 3: This map illustrates all Kurdish tribes in the whole territory of Kurdistan, regardless of state boundaries.⁵

⁵ This map was taken from Kurdish pictures and a gallery of tribal territories divided into four regional states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, with official authorization for academic usage. <https://www.saradistribution.com/kurdishmaps.htm>

Prologue

This chapter examines the origins of the Kurdish Question in Turkey through a historical–sociological perspective. It provides a concise overview of the socio-political development of Kurdistan from the medieval period to the formation of the tribal confederacy of Ottoman Kurdistan in the sixteenth century. Drawing on secondary documentary sources, the chapter traces the early historical interactions of the Kurds with Arab invaders beginning in the eighth century and explores how the gradual conversion to Islam transformed the pre-existing tribal socio-political structures of Kurdish society. The analysis demonstrates that these transformations were not merely religious but institutional in nature, contributing to the reconfiguration of tribal organization and authority. Over time, Kurdish tribes evolved into relatively autonomous socio-political entities, capable of negotiating power both internally and with expanding imperial formations. A brief examination of the medieval socio-political structure of Kurdish society and its geopolitical position within the Middle East illustrates how Kurdish communities initially interacted with Arab powers and later with Turkish invaders from the eleventh century onward. These encounters played a decisive role in shaping the institutional foundations of Kurdish tribal organization. The chapter further investigates the rise and decline of Kurdish tribal confederations during the tenth and eleventh centuries and assesses their impact on the emergence of Kurdish dynasties and the development of courtly political culture. This period marks a significant transition from loosely organized tribal confederations to the formation of powerful, quasi-state polities. Particular attention is given to the emergence of the Ayyubid dynasty in the first half of the thirteenth century, which ruled over Syria and Egypt for nearly five decades. This development is examined as a product of long-term institutional consolidation within Kurdish tribal society. Following the collapse of the Ayyubid dynasty in

1250 and the establishment of Mamluk rule in Egypt, the chapter shows that Kurdish political autonomy did not disappear. On the contrary, Kurdish groups retained a significant degree of local independence and functioned as reliable military and administrative allies of imperial powers for extended periods. These historical continuities underscore the persistence of Kurdish socio-political agency prior to the emergence of modern nation-states. The final section analyzes the position of the Kurds following the emergence of the Young Turk movement in 1909, with particular attention to their extensive political and military involvement during the First World War and the subsequent collapse of the Young Turk government in 1918. It examines how successive political developments during this period profoundly shaped the Kurdish national question, tracing their effects through the final decade of the Ottoman Empire. This section also offers a concise examination of the origins of the modern Turkish nation-state. It begins by identifying the socio-political and structural conditions that gave rise to Ottoman opposition movements in the late nineteenth century. It then traces the ascent of the Young Turks to power in the early twentieth century, outlining the ideological foundations of their political thought. Particular emphasis is placed on the compatibility of this ideology with elements of contemporary European fascist doctrines and on how these intellectual currents contributed to the formation of Pan-Turkism. The section concludes by demonstrating how this political and ideological framework laid the groundwork for the Kemalist project, shaping the institutional and ideological contours of the modern Turkish state.

Guided by the thesis's theoretical framework, this chapter offers a focused yet analytically grounded account of the historical foundations of the Kurdish national question in Turkey. Rather than projecting modern nationalist categories onto the past, it situates Kurdish collective

existence within evolving socio-political structures that predate modern state formation and later became entangled with it.

Introduction

Since the seventh century, Kurdish-inhabited regions have been incorporated into successive Islamic empires. While Arab, Mongol, Safavid, and Ottoman conquests brought destruction and periodic displacement, Kurdish elites were not merely passive subjects of imperial domination. Rather, they maneuvered within shifting imperial rivalries to preserve varying degrees of local autonomy, particularly through semi-autonomous emirates embedded in the mountainous geography of Kurdistan. Geography, tribal organization, and negotiated sovereignty thus functioned not only as mechanisms of survival but as historically contingent strategies within broader imperial power structures (Olson, 1989).

Kurdistan's position at the intersection of Arab, Persian, and Turkish spheres made it a strategic frontier zone. Imperial authorities alternately suppressed, co-opted, and instrumentalized Kurdish tribal structures to secure borderlands. Paradoxically, this intermediary geopolitical status both constrained Kurdish political development and enabled the long-term reproduction of distinct socio-cultural institutions. Autonomy was therefore neither absolute nor continuous; it was conditional, negotiated, and dependent on shifting balances of power.

This chapter examines the historical transformation of Kurdish tribal formations into political entities and situates them within the structural conditions that later shaped Kurdish nationalism. It first outlines the historical evolution of Kurdish tribes as ethno-political communities, critically assessing claims of pre-modern national continuity. It then analyzes the emergence and dissolution of the Ottoman Kurdish emirates, highlighting how Ottoman centralization, regional

geopolitics, and intra-tribal divisions reshaped Kurdish political authority in the nineteenth century.

Subsequent sections investigate the rebellion of Sheikh Ubaydullah Nehri as a transitional moment between tribal autonomy and modern nationalist articulation, evaluating both its ambitions and its structural limitations. The formation of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry is examined as a case of imperial co-optation, illustrating how Kurdish participation in Ottoman centralization simultaneously deepened internal fragmentation and contributed to the emergence of new political elites. Finally, the chapter analyzes the rise of pan-Turkish nationalism and the consolidation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, arguing that Kurdish nationalism developed not in isolation but in direct response to the homogenizing and exclusionary logic of the modern Turkish nation-state.

Overall, the chapter situates the origins of Kurdish nationalism within a *longue durée* of imperial frontier politics, conditional autonomy, and modern state formation, rather than treating it as an inevitable or primordial development.

The Origins of Kurdish Tribes: A Historical Overview

Historically, this territory extended from the northern borders of Georgia to the Syrian Jazira in the west, while its eastern limits connected with Fars and its southern frontier reached the Arab regions of Khuzestan (James, 2021). Although the Kurds inhabited a wide range of ecological environments—from hot, steppe-like lowlands to snow-capped mountain ranges—an overview of historical sources synthesized by Boris James (2021) demonstrates that between the eighth

and fourteenth centuries the majority of the Kurdish population, engaged primarily in agriculture and animal husbandry, resided in mountainous regions.

Furthermore, two key primary sources—*Ibn Hawqal's Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Ard* (The Book of the Surface of the Earth) and *al-Idrīsī's Great Atlas (1154)*—as reviewed by James (2021), provide detailed evidence of the specific patterns of Kurdish transhumance between the eighth and eleventh centuries. In his cartographic depiction and accompanying chapter on the Syrian Jazira—adjacent to the western parts of Kurdistan and neighboring Arab territories—Ibn Hawqal notes that the region served as summer pasturelands for the Hadhbāniyya Kurds and winter pastures for the Arab Banū Shaybān tribes (James, 2021). Most Kurdish tribes practiced seasonal transhumance, migrating to mountainous zones during the summer months and returning to the plains in winter. However, this millennia-old socio-economic routine underwent a profound transformation with the arrival of the Turks in the eleventh century, an event that initiated sustained warfare, territorial competition, and enduring regional conflicts that would fundamentally reshape Kurdish socio-political structures.

“For several centuries the Kurdish transhumant population had been grazing their livestock in Djezireh and Shahrazûr during the wintertime. During the summer the Kurds made way for Arab tribes, while themselves moving further northward and eastward into Zûzan, the region north of Mosul near lake Van. It is most likely that the stability of this organization was broken by the arrival of the Turks in the region around the eleventh century, with some conflicts erupting between Kurds and Turkmen at that time and on” (James, 2021:27).⁶

⁶ While the Jazira is located in the northwestern part of Kurdistan, Shahrazûr—corresponding to the present-day Sulaimaniyah region—lies in the south. By identifying pastoral sites in both the northern and southern zones of Kurdistan, the author demonstrates that animal husbandry constituted the dominant mode of subsistence for the Kurdish transhumant population as a whole. Moreover, *zûzan*, a Kurdish term meaning summer pasture, further attests to the centrality of seasonal migration in Kurdish socio-economic life. All emphases are added for informational purposes.

Due to their highly organized herding practices, the Kurds were able to sustain a transhumant economy even during the instability of Mongol rule. Consequently, each Kurdish tribe functioned as a relatively stable socio-political unit anchored in a defined territorial space, which enabled effective resistance to external incursions and ensured survival throughout the Middle Ages (James, 2021). As Morton Fried argues, the tribe as a social entity—and tribalism as a socio-political doctrine—should be understood not as a primitive or preliminary stage of political development, but rather as a rational response to the pressures of complex political environments (1966: 537).

Accordingly, during both the Ayyubid period (twelfth–thirteenth centuries), often associated with Kurdish dynastic rule, and the subsequent Mamluk period (from the early fourteenth century onward), the recognition of the Kurds as an independent and relatively cohesive population in the northern and northeastern regions of the empire constituted a crucial factor in the formation and consolidation of Kurdish tribes as autonomous political units (James, 2021). Although Kurdish society was characterized by semi-nomadism and transhumance, tribal territories and settlement patterns were clearly delineated. These shared structural and cultural features enabled Kurdish tribes to function as cohesive and autonomous socio-political communities rooted in specific territorial domains (Fried, 1966).

Indeed, in the early phases of regional geopolitics, “the Kurds as an ethnic and territorial category appeared to occupy an intermediary position between two major nomadic populations: the Arab Bedouins on the one hand and the Turco-Mongol peoples on the other” (James, 2021: 28). Furthermore, alongside the maintenance of tribal territoriality, it should be emphasized that significant numbers of Kurdish individuals and tribes migrated to major urban centers in the

Middle East—such as Baghdad, Mosul, Aleppo, Damascus, and Cairo—as early as the eleventh century (ibid.). In addition, the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century triggered large-scale Kurdish migration toward western Syria and Palestine (ibid.).

In the early fourteenth century, the formation and consolidation of Kurdish tribes were significantly shaped by Mamluk regional policies. The official appointment of tribal chiefs and the provision of military assistance contributed to the institutionalization of Kurdish socio-political structures and underscored the Kurds' role as natural allies of a powerful imperial state. By contrast, while suppressing Kurdish tribes and local authorities, the Mongol administration sought to incorporate selected Kurdish leaders into its political system on an individual basis (James, 2021: 32). This strategy was most likely intended to weaken tribal cohesion and prevent the Kurds from aligning collectively with the Mamluks (ibid.). Moreover, between the mid-thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the Ilkhanid Mongol dynasty, which ruled over Iran, granted high-ranking official positions within the state apparatus to the rulers of both the Kurdish Mâzanjâniyya–Humaydiyya and Jûlmarkiyya–Hakkâriyya principalities (ibid.). These developments should be understood as early strategic efforts to instrumentalize Kurdish political actors within broader imperial rivalries. For example, after abandoning their attempt to overthrow Mubârîz al-Dîn Kak, the paramount chief of the Mâzanjâni–Humaydî confederation, the Mongols issued him a *pâ'iza* (investiture decree). This document recognized his authority over the Irbil and Aqr (Akre) regions and authorized him to collect taxes on behalf of the Ilkhanids during the latter half of the thirteenth century. Simultaneously, the Mongols granted a separate *pâ'iza* to one of his subordinate chiefs, Asad ibn Metakin, appointing him to oversee tax collection in the region's principal urban centers. Through this dual investiture, the Mongols deliberately pursued a “divide-and-rule” strategy by fostering internal rivalries among Kurdish

tribal elites (ibid.). Based on this historical evidence, the formation of Kurdish tribes cannot be explained primarily by intrinsic natural diversity—such as linguistic or cultural variation—but rather by objective external conditions beyond Kurdish control, including sustained warfare and the occupation of Kurdish territories by foreign powers. These pressures compelled Kurdish communities to organize locally into relatively permanent tribal units (Fried, 1966). Confrontation with external political forces fundamentally altered earlier communal arrangements, giving rise to tribal structures grounded in shared political status and incorporated into unified administrative bodies under recognized tribal leadership (Fried, 1966).

In the second stage of Kurdish tribal formation, two distinct political trajectories emerged. The first involved Mongol strategies of individual co-optation, whereby tribal chiefs were incorporated as representatives and agents of the imperial state without recognition of their collective local authority. The second reflected the Mamluk policy of collective incorporation, which treated Kurdish tribes as distinct socio-political entities capable of integration into the state through strategic alliances against the Mongols, without disrupting their internal socio-cultural and political structures (James, 2021: 33). Furthermore, the Mamluks’ so-called “Kurdish policy” explicitly sought to mobilize the Kurds’ strong—though structurally fragmented—*‘asabiyyah* (esprit de corps) as a means of territorial expansion and military consolidation against Mongol power (ibid.).

During the so-called “Iranian intermezzo” (tenth to twelfth centuries), Kurdish tribal territories crystallized into semi-independent principalities, while the prolonged Mamluk–Mongol conflicts created the initial conditions of political in-betweenness and the emergence of a borderland culture in Kurdistan (James, 2021: 33). As two expanding imperial formations, both the

Mamluks and the Mongols clearly grasped the logic of divide-and-rule strategies. Despite differences in their political practices, each empire applied these principles in its relations with the dispersed Kurdish nomadic and semi-nomadic communities. Crucially, both powers also recognized the strategic value of preserving the internal cohesion and structural integrity of these fragmented yet resilient societies for use in their broader regional rivalries (James, 2021; Fried, 1966).

The confirmation and institutional endurance of Kurdish tribal structures during this period became a decisive foundation for the later establishment of autonomous Kurdish emirates in the early sixteenth century, as well as for the formalization of the geopolitical entity historically recognized as Kurdistan (James, 2021: 35). With the exception of a brief period of Timurid domination from the late fourteenth to the early fifteenth century, none of the minor Turkmen polities in the region succeeded in subjugating the Kurdish tribes. This relative autonomy shifted with the rise of two powerful Turkic tribal confederations—the Qarâ Qoyunlu and the Aq Qoyunlu—each of which imposed its authority over different parts of Kurdistan throughout the fifteenth century (*ibid.*). The Qarâ Qoyunlu initially controlled much of Azerbaijan, the regions surrounding Lake Urmia, and the eastern parts of Kurdistan, maintaining dominance until 1469. By contrast, the Aq Qoyunlu expanded westward during the second half of the fifteenth century and emerged as the dominant power in western Kurdistan. Following their decisive victory over the Qarâ Qoyunlu in 1470, they ruled most Kurdish territories until the end of the century (*ibid.*). Despite their success in conquering large portions of the Iranian plateau in pursuit of regional hegemony over Iran and Anatolia, the Aq Qoyunlu soon encountered two formidable challenges: external pressure from the west in the form of the rising Ottoman Empire and internal disruption caused by the emergence of the Safavid movement.

The rise of the Safavid dynasty marked the transformation of Shi'a Islam into a state-sponsored political doctrine, profoundly altering the region's ideological and geopolitical landscape. This development played a decisive role in reorienting the political allegiances of the majority of Kurdish tribes toward the Sunni Ottoman Empire, thereby setting the stage for Kurdistan's incorporation into the Ottoman–Safavid frontier zone and reinforcing its enduring character as a contested borderland.

“This political entity emerged from a classical Muslim brotherhood, a *tarîqa*, very popular among the Turkmen tribes. The *tarîqa* that revered the family of an illustrious and charismatic shaykh, Safi al-Dîn (1232-1334), flourished at first in Azerbaijan and Upper Mesopotamia under the AqQoyunlu umbrella. As soon as it transpired that the brotherhood was an overtly political and military organization dangerously able to compete, the relations between the shaykhs and the Turkmen dynasty started to go downhill. The conversion of the *tarîqa* to Shiite Islam was equally detrimental to the former alliance. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the brotherhood had the upper hand. Under the guidance of Shah Ismâîl, it finally gathered a huge territory stretching from the Hindu Kush to the Euphrates” (James, 2021:37).

In the context of a temporary political vacuum, Kurdish tribal chiefs once again emerged as dominant local authorities. However, by mobilizing Turkmen and Shiite military forces, the Safavids not only consolidated firm control over large parts of Kurdistan but also pursued a deliberate policy aimed at marginalizing and eliminating Kurdish tribal leadership. This strategy involved the systematic replacement of influential Kurdish families with Safavid-appointed Shiite governors, thereby undermining existing local power structures (James, 2021).

Given that the majority of Kurdish tribes adhered to Sunni branches of Islam, these policies generated widespread resistance and prompted many Kurdish groups to align themselves politically and militarily with the Ottoman Empire in response to Safavid persecution. These developments ultimately facilitated the formation of Ottoman Kurdistan in the sixteenth century (James, 2021). The politicization of religious affiliation, intertwined with strategies of ethnic

domination, marked a decisive shift in the region's geopolitical balance and paved the way for the first formal partition of Kurdistan between rival imperial powers in the sixteenth century.

“Until the beginning of the sixteenth century, the two emerging big powers (Ottomans and Safavids) did not enter into massive confrontations for various reasons, nevertheless, Ottoman incursions from Trabzond in Safavid territory were numerous, as well as Shiite revolts remotely backed by the Shah Ismâîl could rise in Ottoman Anatolia. This restrained tension resulted in overt warfare that was instrumental in reshaping the Kurdish lands. Conversely, the centrality of Kurdistan in the confrontation of both empires had a strong impact in defining their ideological and political construction. The Ottoman – Safavid conflict seemed to revive the binary scheme that governed the peripheral policies of the Mongol and Mamluk empires towards the Kurdish emirs two centuries before. The unanimous political trend was to be applied by the Safavids, and the ethnic engineering regarding the Kurds and leading to more liberal policies was to be implemented by the Ottomans. The former was resetting the Mongol *modus operandi*, the latter, the Mamluk one” (James, 2021:37).

In summary, following a series of military confrontations, the Ottoman army—supported decisively by several Kurdish tribal forces—defeated the Safavid army in 1514 at the Battle of Chaldiran, located northeast of Lake Van in what was then part of historical Armenia. This pivotal victory would not have been possible without Kurdish military assistance and collaboration (James, 2021). The battle marks the beginning of the formation of Ottoman Kurdistan and the first formal partition of Kurdish territories between rival imperial powers.

By 1515, most Kurdish regions had been incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, where semi-autonomous Kurdish emirates retained a significant degree of political autonomy with minimal institutional restructuring for more than three centuries (James, 2021). The distinctive nature of this annexation, the conditions that enabled its longevity, and the factors leading to its eventual collapse in the early nineteenth century constitute critical issues that require separate and detailed investigation.

Ottoman Kurdish Emirates: From Emergence to Dissolution

Following prolonged religious conflict and struggles for regional dominance between the Ottoman and Safavid empires, the Safavids were compelled to relinquish control over most Kurdish and Turkmen territories after their defeat at the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. Subsequent negotiations over contested borders culminated initially in the Treaty of Zuhab (Qasr-e Shirin) in 1639 and were later reaffirmed and finalized through the Treaty of Erzurum in 1823. These agreements formalized the long-term partition of Kurdistan between the Ottoman and Persian states (McDowall, 2004: 23).

Although the formal delineation of borders between the Ottoman Empire and Persia was concluded with the Treaty of Erzurum in 1823, the effective division of Kurdish lands had already taken shape much earlier. In practice, it was the Ottoman victory at Chaldiran in 1514—followed by the peace arrangements of 1515—that established the geographical boundaries of the semi-autonomous Kurdish principalities and divided them between the two empires. These arrangements institutionalized a system of indirect Ottoman rule over Kurdish emirates that would persist, with limited structural modification, for more than three centuries.



Map 4: Illustrates Kurdish independent Kingdoms and Autonomous Principalities that existed until 1838.⁷

Map 3 illustrates the final division of Kurdistan between the Ottoman Empire and Persia following the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. Approximately seventy percent of Kurdish territory—including nine major principalities encompassing nearly twenty local emirates—was formally annexed and incorporated into the Ottoman imperial system. The Ottoman selection and

⁷ The extra **yellow** line in the map illustrates the divided principalities between the Persian and Ottoman empires were all enjoyed the regional self-rule up to the mid-nineteenth century; see the original source at: <http://www.kurdistanica.com/?q=taxonomy/term/3>

incorporation of Kurdish emirs and tribes rested on two principal considerations: first, religious solidarity grounded in Sunni Muslim fraternity against Shiite Persia; and second, a policy of collaboration that allowed Kurdish emirs and tribal authorities to retain a substantial degree of local autonomy (Eppel, 2008).

This policy, initially predicated on the unconditional acceptance of Ottoman political sovereignty, enabled the empire to secure decisive military advantages over Safavid forces while simultaneously preventing the expansion of Shiite influence in regions inhabited by Alevi Kızılbaş communities (Eppel, 2008).⁸ In this context, the Kurdish emirates and tribes—predominantly Sunni—emerged as the Ottomans’ principal allies in confronting both military and ideological challenges along the imperial frontier. The scope and practical significance of the autonomy granted to Kurdish emirates, however, varied considerably and depended directly on the prevailing balance of power between the Ottoman central authority and Kurdish local elites, as well as on the strategic importance of their geographical locations (Eppel, 2008: 239). Ottoman policy toward the Kurdish emirates was further shaped by the diplomatic interventions of Mawlānā Idrīs Bitlisī, a prominent Kurdish intellectual and political advisor to Sultan Selim I (r. 1512–1520), who played a crucial role in persuading Kurdish emirs and tribal leaders to align themselves with the Ottoman state (ibid.). Nevertheless, the alliance between Ottoman authorities and Kurdish elites was ultimately underpinned by a broader strategy of divide and rule. This arrangement remained effective for several centuries but gradually lost its strategic

⁸ The Kızılbaş also known as the Alawite (the venerated of Ali) represented the trend which combined strong Sufi and Shi’ite influences, although it did not accept Shi’ite doctrine in its entirety. Their increased influence among the population of Central and Eastern Anatolia during the sixteenth century, especially among the Turkmen tribes, represented a threat and a nuisance from the standpoint of the Ottoman Empire, see: M. Eppel, *The demise of the Kurdish Emirates: the impact of Ottoman Reforms and International Relations on Kurdistan during the first half of the nineteenth century*, Middle Eastern Studies, March 2008 Vol.44 NO. 2, pp. 237-258.

utility as a mechanism for safeguarding imperial interests, particularly from the late nineteenth century onward.

“The Ottoman valis exploited the dissension and struggles between the emirates and the protracted conflicts over succession among the families of the ruling emirs in order to drag them into controversy, thus weakening them, exploiting them for the purpose of the Ottoman manoeuvres between the various forces and eroding their autonomy. Notwithstanding its weaknesses and the wars in which it was embroiled, both in Europe and against Persia, the Ottoman Empire retained the advantage of power, relative to Kurdish emirates” (Eppel, 2008: 239-240).

In sum, the Kurdish emirates played a crucial role in maintaining a political balance between the Ottoman Empire and competing regional and foreign powers over the course of their approximately three-hundred-year existence. While some emirates sought to expand their autonomy or even achieve full political independence, such ambitions were frequently undermined by internal rivalries as well as shifting regional and geopolitical arrangements. A closer examination of the political roles of specific emirates, together with an analysis of their unsuccessful confrontations with the Ottoman state and other regional powers, illuminates both the scope of their political influence and the structural limitations that constrained their long-term viability.

The Emirate of Baban

The Emirate of Baban, with its capital established in Sulaymaniyah from 1768 onward, was an active participant in the regional power struggles between the Ottoman and Persian empires during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Eppel, 2008: 240). In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a combination of factors—including tensions between the Ottoman and Persian states, strained relations between the central government in Istanbul and the provincial

administration in Baghdad, and internal rivalries among Mamluk forces—created favourable conditions for the emirs of the House of Baban to exercise considerable political flexibility and manoeuvring power (*ibid.*). The rise of the House of Baban can be attributed primarily to two interrelated factors. First, its strategic geographical location positioned the emirate as a buffer zone in the recurrent conflicts between the Ottoman and Persian empires. Second, the Baban emirs cultivated strong political and military connections with influential elites in Baghdad. This dual advantage enabled them to intervene effectively in political and administrative disputes within the city and province of Baghdad, particularly among Mamluk-Ottoman elites and local officials appointed by the Ottoman central authorities (*ibid.*).

The direct subordination of the Baban Emirate to the central administration in Istanbul further enhanced its mediating role. Acting as a balancing force, the emirate was able to counter the influence of Mamluk governors and troops in Baghdad, thereby securing both a degree of local autonomy and a relatively equitable position within the broader imperial power structure. This role allowed the Baban emirate to maintain a stable and carefully calibrated relationship with Ottoman governors as well as with regional forces in Kurdistan and Baghdad (*ibid.*). In addition, the Baban emirs skilfully engaged in diplomatic manoeuvring vis-à-vis Persia, which increased the emirate's credibility and reinforced its autonomous position. These strategies also facilitated the expansion of Baban influence within Baghdad. This political equilibrium endured as long as imperial rivalry between the Ottomans and Persians persisted and as long as factional competition among Mamluk-Ottoman elites—and their opposition to central Ottoman authority—remained unresolved (*ibid.*). However, intense internal power struggles within the House of Baban significantly weakened the emirate. These rivalries created opportunities for external actors—including the Ottoman authorities, Mamluk elites, and Persian forces—to

intervene in internal disputes, each seeking to advance its own strategic interests (ibid.). Indeed, the central Ottoman government, Shah Fath 'Ali of Iran, the tribal chief of the Kurdish Emirate of Kermanshah, and even Claudius Rich, an agent of the British East India Company, all exploited divisions within the Baban leadership to enhance their political and economic influence in the region (Eppel, 2008: 243). Moreover, once the Persian threat had receded, the Ottoman state no longer required the Baban emirate as a frontier buffer or as an intermediary force balancing the distribution of power between the Mamluk authorities and Ottoman governors in Baghdad, whose political influence had grown considerably. As a result, the autonomy of the Baban emirs was progressively curtailed, although they retained a limited degree of independence until their final defeat by Ottoman forces in 1847 (Eppel, 2008).

Despite the dismantling of the emirate, the Ottomans initially opted for a strategy of administrative continuity by appointing a member of the Baban family as *kaymakam* (district deputy) of Sulaymaniyah. This arrangement persisted until 1851, when the position was reassigned to an Ottoman official outside the Baban lineage, marking the definitive end of Baban political authority in the region (Eppel, 2008).

Finally, the internal conflicts of the House of Baban were not solely political but also carried a significant religious dimension. These tensions contributed to shifts in religious authority and leadership within the emirate, ultimately culminating in the collapse of the Baban Emirate in the early nineteenth century and the reconfiguration of both political and religious power structures in the region.

During the 1820s and 1830s, the broader political landscape initially allowed the Baban emirs to sustain a degree of autonomy and local governance by skillfully maneuvering among the

Ottoman and Persian empires, as well as competing power centers in Baghdad (Eppel, 2008). However, this strategic flexibility came to an abrupt end with the conclusion of the Ottoman–Persian wars following the Treaty of Erzurum in 1823. The cessation of Persian intervention in Sulaymaniyah deprived the Baban emirate of its capacity to maneuver both locally and regionally, thereby accelerating its political decline.

The Emirate of Hakkari

While the House of Baban played a significant role in maintaining political stability in the Arab provinces of the empire, the Emirate of Hakkari held particular strategic importance for the Ottoman central government due to its location at the intersection of the borders of the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and, increasingly, Russia. These distinctive regional conditions not only underscored the role of the Hakkari emirs as intermediaries in Ottoman–Iranian relations but also indirectly shaped the triangular interactions among Persia, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire (Eppel, 2008).

The Emirate of Hakkari was predominantly tribal in structure but marked by considerable ethnic and religious diversity. Its population comprised Kurdish, Nestorian (Assyrian), and Armenian communities, with most Christian inhabitants living as sedentary peasants (Eppel, 2008: 244). This internal diversity while socially characteristic of the region facilitated intervention by both the Ottoman and Iranian states in the emirate’s internal affairs and consequently constrained its political power and degree of autonomy (ibid.). Prior to the nineteenth century, control over Hakkari was largely contested between the Ottoman and Iranian empires, each seeking to place the emirate under its protection or direct influence. During this period, Western powers—most notably Russia—had not yet emerged as decisive actors in the region’s geopolitical landscape

(ibid.). However, the early nineteenth century marked a turning point. Shifts in Ottoman–Iranian relations, combined with the growing involvement of external powers such as Russia, Britain, and, to a lesser extent, France, fundamentally altered regional geopolitics.

As subsequent analysis will demonstrate, these geopolitical transformations directly affected the strategic utility of the Kurdish emirates and played a central role in their gradual dismantling. The collapse of the Hakkari Emirate was among the earliest and most consequential outcomes of this reconfigured political environment, illustrating how changing imperial rivalries undermined the viability of Kurdish autonomous rule.

The Emirate of Soran

Beyond the strategic use of Kurdish emirates in maintaining a balance among regional powers, Ottoman authorities recognized that the mountainous geography of Kurdistan provided conditions under which a strong Kurdish polity could rapidly emerge as a regional power capable of challenging imperial political legitimacy and military authority.

The Emirate of Soran, centered in Rawanduz, reached its zenith under the rule of Emir Muhammad ‘Kor’ (“the Blind,” so called because he was blind in his left eye), who assumed power in 1813 (Eppel, 2008:250). Muhammad Kor quickly established Rawanduz as his capital and constructed a citadel there. He consolidated power by defeating rival claimants and influential tribal leaders and initiated an aggressive expansionist policy toward neighbouring emirates and tribes (ibid.). The emir asserted control over the Barados, Sorchi, Mamesh, and Shirvan tribes, recruiting their members into a formidable military force composed of infantry, cavalry, and even artillery units (ibid.). Exploiting the weaknesses of neighboring emirates and

Ottoman provincial governors during the 1820s, he captured territories belonging to the emirates of Hakkari, Baban, and Behdinan, imposing his authority through harsh and centralized rule (ibid.). By the early 1830s, Muhammad Kor had brought most of southern Kurdistan within the Ottoman Empire under his control, with the notable exception of the Emirate of Botan. At the same time, Amir Badr Khan of Botan pursued similar ambitions of territorial expansion and political consolidation (ibid.). Consequently, during the 1820s and early 1830s, the Emirate of Soran emerged as the most powerful political and military force in southern Kurdistan.

Developments beyond Kurdistan further heightened Ottoman concerns. In 1831–1832, the Egyptian army under Muhammad Ali conquered Syria. Ibrahim Pasha, Muhammad Ali's son and commander of Egyptian forces in the region, dispatched emissaries to establish contacts with Kurdish leaders, including Muhammad Kor. This development alarmed the Ottoman government, which feared the loss of control over much of its southern and south-eastern territories (Eppel, 2008:251). In response to the growing power and autonomy of the Emirate of Soran—and the perceived risk of collaboration with Muhammad Ali—the Ottomans launched a military campaign against Muhammad Kor in 1834. The campaign failed, and Kurdish forces successfully repelled the Ottoman army (ibid.). Following this victory, Muhammad Kor assumed that the immediate Ottoman threat had passed. In the summer of 1835, he extended his campaigns into Iranian territory and rapidly imposed his authority over several Kurdish tribes there (ibid.).

Muhammad Kor's successes demonstrated that a Kurdish emirate could amass military power sufficient to overpower local authorities and resist imperial intervention. However, the role assigned to Kurdish emirates by regional and imperial powers was limited to maintaining a

balance between rival states; expansion beyond this function was unacceptable. Consequently, Muhammad Kor's incursions into Iranian Kurdistan raised serious concerns not only for the Ottoman and Persian governments but also for foreign powers, particularly Russia. Russian representatives in Tabriz and Tehran feared that a weakened Iran would advance British strategic interests in the region (ibid.). Thus, while Muhammad Kor's actions transformed him into a threat to both the Ottoman Empire and Persia, they also conflicted with the broader geopolitical calculations of Britain and Russia, neither of which sought to destabilize Persia (ibid.). Moreover, Russian pressure on the Ottoman government under the 1833 Treaty of Hünkâr İskelesi, combined with Muhammad Ali's challenge to Ottoman authority in the Arab provinces, led Britain to fear that further Ottoman decline could facilitate the emergence of an anti-British regional alliance involving Russia, France, and Muhammad Ali. Such an outcome was deemed incompatible with British interests (ibid.). Accordingly, in 1838, Britain and the Ottoman Empire concluded the Balta Liman Convention. The agreement granted Britain extensive economic privileges while reinforcing the Ottoman Empire's role as a strategic barrier against Russian expansion (ibid.).

“Within the framework of this policy, Britain gave its backing to the Ottoman regime against the autonomous local forces which constituted a threat to the Ottoman Empire, and primarily against Muhammad Ali, who also threatened the British economic interests embodied in the Balta Liman Convention, and against small autonomous forces such as Muhammad ‘Kor’. The Ottoman offensive provided the background for intervention by a young British diplomat (dragoman) named Richard Wood, whose letters provided an interesting source with regard to the removal of Muhammad ‘Kor’ and the elimination of the Soran emirate. Wood feared two possibilities: the defeat of the Ottoman forces by the Kurds or, alternatively, the vacuum which would be created in the area and exploited by Persia and Russia following the disappearance of the strong local force from the area. His concerns were shared by Colonel Taylor, the representative of the East India Company in Baghdad” (Eppel, 2008:252).⁹

⁹ The original source used by author, has taken from, A.B. Cunningham (ed.), *The Early Correspondence of Richard Wood, 1831-1841* (London, Royal Historical Society, 1996). P.14.

Finally, following negotiations between representatives of the Persian authorities and the Ottoman governor of Baghdad, an agreement was reached to cooperate in suppressing Muhammad Kor's rebellion. Given the broad consensus among regional powers, the absence of foreign support necessary to sustain the uprising, and the logistical and military superiority of the Ottoman army, Muhammad Kor was compelled to surrender. He accepted a compromise under which he agreed to go to Istanbul. As Eppel notes, "After about half a year in Istanbul, Muhammad 'Kor' was allowed to return to his emirate following an agreement with the Ottomans, who promised to preserve his status, providing that he would accept their full sovereignty. On his way home, via the Black Sea, he disappeared; in all probability, he was murdered" (Eppel, 2008:253).

In summary, the rebellion of Muhammad Kor demonstrates that Kurdish local power was tolerated only insofar as it served the interests of regional and foreign powers in preserving a delicate geopolitical balance. Once this balance was threatened, such power had to be swiftly neutralized. Although Muhammad Kor's uprising was fundamentally a feudal-tribal revolt, lacking any nationalist ideology or national consciousness, the destruction of the Soran Emirate as an autonomous political entity marked a critical moment. It signaled the emergence of a new political logic in which the elimination of any potential foundations for Kurdish statehood became a shared necessity for both regional and imperial powers (Eppel, 2008).

The Emirate of Botan

Following the elimination of the Emirate of Soran, Emir Badr Khan of the Emirate of Botan, centered in Jazira (Cizre), emerged as the most powerful Kurdish ruler. A formidable political

leader and capable military commander, Badr Khan governed the emirate with strict discipline. His severe punishments for even minor offenses transformed Botan into a relatively secure domain, where robbery and banditry—previously widespread—were significantly curtailed (Bruinessen, 1992:178).

In addition to his coercive authority, Badr Khan demonstrated considerable political skill. He sought to establish a stable alliance among tribal chiefs by consulting them on major decisions, a practice that gradually enhanced his reputation as a powerful and legitimate leader (*ibid.*). His charismatic leadership also facilitated the creation of a more centralized and organized military force. Unlike earlier arrangements, in which armed men served under their respective tribal chiefs, Badr Khan recruited the most capable warriors from each tribe to serve directly under his command within a structured army (*ibid.*).

To advance his ambition of establishing an independent principality, Badr Khan forged alliances with two prominent Kurdish leaders: Noorullah Bey of Hakkari and Khan Mahmud of Muks. He also secured the loyalty of several minor chiefs across a broad territory stretching from Mush to Kars (*ibid.*). Alarmed by the growing prospect of another independence-oriented Kurdish rebellion, the Ottoman government launched a series of military campaigns and, in 1838, succeeded in capturing Cizre, Badr Khan's capital. Ottoman forces under Rashid Pasha temporarily compelled Badr Khan to retreat to his mountainous strongholds (*ibid.*). However, the Ottomans' defeat by Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt in 1839 further reinforced Kurdish perceptions of imperial weakness and decline (Bruinessen, 1992:180).

Interpreting these developments as a favourable opportunity, Badr Khan intensified his efforts to establish an independent Kurdish polity. He rapidly expanded his control over neighboring

territories and, by 1845, had established military garrisons and asserted authority across northern regions extending from Diyarbakir to Mosul, as well as along the frontier with Persia (ibid.). Although Badr Khan publicly claimed continued loyalty to the Ottoman sultan, his actions reflected de facto separatist ambitions that contradicted this assertion. Subsequent developments, however, severely undermined his political project (ibid.).

One decisive factor was the growing presence of American and British missionaries in the region from the 1830s onward. Competing efforts to promote Protestantism and Catholicism generated internal divisions among the Nestorian Christian population (Eppel, 2008:254). Approximately half of the Nestorians were organized into autonomous tribes, while the remainder lived as peasants subject to Kurdish feudal lords. Despite these differences, they shared aspirations for relief from religious discrimination and Muslim political dominance enforced by Kurdish and Ottoman authorities alike (Bruinessen, 1992:180). Russian military successes against the Ottoman Empire appeared to many Nestorians as a harbinger of emancipation, encouraging them to welcome missionaries in the hope of securing European political support for self-determination (ibid.).

Simultaneously, the weakening of Ottoman authority created a political vacuum that enabled Mar Shimun, the Nestorian patriarch, to assume an unprecedented degree of temporal power. This shift exacerbated internal divisions among the Nestorians and intensified Kurdish resentment (ibid.). Kurdish leaders increasingly perceived the rise of an empowered Christian authority as an existential threat, while missionary activity did little to alleviate their anxieties. Consequently, tensions between Kurdish Muslims and Christian communities escalated steadily (ibid.).

The conflict reached a critical point when the Tiyari Nestorians—among whom Mar Shimun resided—refused to pay their annual tribute to the Mir of Hakkari. Noorullah Bey subsequently requested Badr Khan’s military assistance to discipline them. In response, large tribal forces were deployed against the Tiyari in 1843. The ensuing unequal confrontation culminated in a massacre that quickly attracted international attention and triggered Badr Khan’s political downfall. Britain and France exerted strong pressure on the Ottoman government to punish Badr Khan and prevent further violence against Christian populations. As a result, a substantial Ottoman force was dispatched, and Badr Khan surrendered in 1847 (ibid.).

The collapse of the multiethnic Emirate of Botan marked a decisive transformation in the political order of Kurdistan. This shift unfolded amid intensified missionary activity and rising Muslim–Christian tensions, reflecting broader dynamics across the Ottoman Empire in which longstanding social and political conflicts were increasingly reframed in religious terms. As subsequent analysis will demonstrate, following the elimination of the Emirate of Botan, the Ottoman authorities deliberately exploited and deepened tensions between Kurds and Armenians. This strategy aimed both to reinforce Kurdish allegiance to the Muslim Ottoman state and to further fragment Christian communities within the empire.

The Demise of the Kurdish Emirates: A Critical Summary

From the early eighteenth century onward, the increasing presence and influence of Western powers in the Middle East, alongside their conflicting interests with the Ottoman and Iranian empires, marked the emergence of a new geopolitical order in the region. This transformation introduced novel forms of conflict and complex political relationships, driven largely by the expansion of capitalist modernity into the Ottoman–Persian world. Western powers

progressively influenced ideological currents, political arrangements, and social developments across various regions of the Ottoman and Persian empires (Eppel, 2008). These changes were shaped primarily through interactions between imperial centers and Western actors, as well as through evolving local economic and social conditions.

Kurdish society, however, remained largely peripheral to these transformations due to its fragmented tribal structure and limited integration into imperial administrative and economic networks. As Eppel observes, unlike Egypt, the Levantine coastal cities, Palestine, or Istanbul—regions that experienced sustained Western commercial, diplomatic, and military engagement—Kurdistan was only marginally exposed to Western activity. Its geographical isolation, lack of access to the sea, absence of major urban centers, and limited exploitable resources rendered it a low priority for Western powers. Consequently, Western influence in Kurdistan was predominantly indirect, mediated through imperial capitals such as Istanbul, Damascus, Tehran, and Tabriz (Eppel, 2008:245).

Despite these objective limitations, Kurdistan was nevertheless deeply affected by regional and international developments. Following the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768–1774 and the rising strategic significance of the Caucasus, contacts between Kurdish tribes and Russia gradually increased (Eppel, 2008). Kurdish leaders, particularly those resisting Qajar efforts to reassert control over territories that had become autonomous after the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, viewed Russia as a potential counterweight to Iranian expansionism. This pragmatic orientation reflected a political calculus focused on preserving local autonomy, maintaining a favourable balance of power against regional rivals, and navigating imperial competition (*ibid.*).

During the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828–1829, many Kurdish emirs and tribal leaders either remained neutral or actively supported Russian forces. This stance stemmed from their perception of Russian military superiority and growing resentment toward Ottoman centralizing reforms.¹⁰ Subsequent Ottoman defeats further eroded imperial legitimacy among Kurdish elites. The 1833 Treaty of Hünkâr İskelesi, which significantly enhanced Russian influence in Istanbul, and Muhammad Ali of Egypt's conquest of Syria in 1831 reinforced the image of an empire in decline and raised the spectre of its potential disintegration (Eppel, 2008). Simultaneously, military setbacks and the reformist aspirations of Ottoman political elites accelerated processes of modernization and administrative centralization. These reforms included the formal recognition of Christian communities as legally protected minorities, fundamentally reshaping relations between Muslim majorities and Christian populations throughout the empire (ibid.). In Kurdistan, these transformations had profound consequences for relations between predominantly pastoral Kurdish tribes and Armenian and Nestorian (Assyrian) Christians, who were largely sedentary peasants and artisans. As Eppel notes, Kurdistan also included settled Muslim peasants who were often not considered Kurds and were referred to as *ra'ya* (subjects), Gurani, or Kurmanji, depending on the region (Eppel, 2008:248).¹¹

¹⁰ Based on the aim of creating a powerful centralized state and a modern army, imitated from Western states, the reforms of Sultan Mahmud and the Ottoman efforts to impose more effective centralistic administration aroused hostility toward the Ottoman state among the Kurdish emirs, magnates and tribes, who perceived it as a threat to their tribal-feudal privileges and autonomy; see, M. Eppel, *The demise of the Kurdish Emirates: the impact of Ottoman Reforms and International Relations on Kurdistan during the first half of the nineteenth century*, Middle Eastern Studies, March 2008 Vol.44 NO. 2, pp. 247.

¹¹ It should be noted here that Eppel's reference to the existence of rural strata in Kurdish areas as rural Muslims who are non-Kurdish is overall misleading because generally, *ra'ya* means landless agricultural subjects, and *Gurani* and *kurmanji* are two Kurdish ethnolinguistic communities, each belonging to a geographical part of Kurdistan; for more detailed authentic information, see: Martin van Bruinessen, *AGHA, SHAIKH and STATE: The Social and Political Structure of Kurdistan*, London: Zed Books Ltd, pp. 50- 98.

Because Armenian and Nestorian communities were generally subordinate to Kurdish tribal authorities, the expanding activities of Western missionaries in northern Kurdistan contributed to the growth of religious nationalism among these Christian populations. This development intensified aspirations for self-determination and independence. Broader geopolitical shifts—including Russia’s rising influence, Russo-Iranian and Russo-Ottoman wars, closer ties between Russia and the Armenian Church, and expanding British missionary and diplomatic activity—further destabilized existing social and political relations and directly affected the Kurdish emirates (Eppel, 2008).

The Russo-Ottoman War of 1828–1829 marked a particularly critical transitional phase, dividing Kurdish emirates between supporters of the Ottoman Empire and sympathizers of Russia. Northern Kurdistan was transformed from a peripheral frontier zone into a focal point of competing interests among four imperial powers: the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Russia, and Britain (*ibid.*). In the aftermath of the war, the Ottoman state intensified efforts to centralize authority. The elimination of Kurdish emirates became a central component of this strategy, as these semi-autonomous polities were increasingly viewed as obstacles to administrative reform and territorial consolidation (Eppel, 2008:249). Ottoman centralization, compounded by Great Power rivalry, military defeat, and escalating Muslim–Christian tensions among Kurds, Armenians, and Nestorians, collectively facilitated the dismantling of Kurdish autonomous rule (*ibid.*). The destruction of the Kurdish emirates in the first half of the nineteenth century had severe and lasting consequences for Ottoman Kurdistan. Internal security deteriorated sharply, marked by widespread banditry, honour-based violence, and general lawlessness. Cities that had flourished in the seventeenth century as political and cultural centers of the emirates entered a period of decline (Bruinessen, 1992). This urban decay hindered the emergence of a local

commercial bourgeoisie—an essential social foundation for modern nationalism. Ironically, Kurdish bourgeois elements instead emerged in western Anatolian cities, far removed from Kurdistan, as a result of insecurity and forced migration (Eppel, 2008:256). As a result, the Tanzimat reforms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries integrated segments of this bourgeoisie into the Ottoman state, language, and political discourse, while failing to foster a distinct Kurdish national consciousness (ibid.). The elimination of the emirates extinguished realistic prospects for Kurdish independence and undermined the institutional development of Kurdish as an official administrative language (ibid.). Moreover, the collapse of secular Kurdish political authority discredited tribal leadership and created a power vacuum increasingly filled by religious figures. Under these new conditions, religious leaders—particularly Naqshbandi sheikhs—rose to prominence, culminating in the first major pre-modern Kurdish national rebellion led by Sheikh Ubaydullah of Nehri, which will be examined in the following section.

The Rebellion of Sheikh Ubaydullah of Nehri (1879–1880)

Following the decline and elimination of the Kurdish emirates, this section examines the political and social transformations that unfolded in Kurdistan and analyzes the conditions that contributed to the emergence of a pre-modern form of Kurdish nationalism in the late nineteenth century.

From the early nineteenth century onward, the military power of the Ottoman Empire declined markedly in comparison to the increasingly professionalized armies and advanced weaponry of European states. This imbalance enabled Kurdish emirates to preserve varying degrees of local autonomy for extended periods (Olson, 1989). The limitations of Ottoman military capacity became evident in the defeat of the Emirate of Soran under Muhammad Pasha of Rawanduz,

which was achieved not through direct military superiority but through a coordinated regional effort that allowed the Ottoman state to impose decisive control. Similarly, the Kurdish hereditary principality of Botan lost its autonomy gradually between 1821 and 1847, largely as a result of internal rivalries and conflicts with neighbouring rulers rather than direct Ottoman military intervention (Olson, 1989).

The final destruction of the Kurdish emirates in the mid-nineteenth century marked a critical turning point. Political authority, which had traditionally been exercised by tribal leaders and hereditary rulers, increasingly shifted toward influential religious figures. This new leadership stratum was dominated by sheikhs affiliated primarily with the Naqshbandi and Qadiri Sufi orders, which had acquired substantial economic resources, social prestige, and political influence by the second half of the nineteenth century (Olson, 1989).

During this period, the Ottoman government was preoccupied with military conflicts and diplomatic crises in Europe and the Balkans, resulting in heavy financial burdens and a diminished administrative presence in Kurdistan. Consequently, the state proved unable to fill the political vacuum created by the abolition of the Kurdish emirates (Olson, 1989). The collapse of centralized local authority led to widespread insecurity, banditry, and intertribal conflict, as petty chiefs sought to advance their interests through violence and feuds (Olson, 1989:5). In this unstable environment, religious sheikhs emerged as the most effective agents of social order. Their spiritual authority and charismatic legitimacy enabled them to mediate disputes, restrain tribal violence, and restore a limited degree of stability (*ibid.*).

Despite this stabilizing role, the replacement of secular emirate rule with religious leadership represented not an advance but a regression in terms of social and political development. As

noted by Bruinessen (1992) and Olson (1989), sheikhly authority, while effective in maintaining order, lacked the institutional capacity to foster the social integration and political centralization necessary for the development of modern Kurdish nationhood. At the same time, while the Ottoman Empire increasingly adopted secularizing and modernizing reforms under the influence of European nation-state models, Kurdish society remained fragmented by tribal divisions, which obstructed the emergence of a unified national consciousness grounded in shared ethnic identity (Olson, 1989).



Figure 2: The first pre-modern nationalist leader, Sheikh Ubeydullah Nehri (1830- 1883)¹²

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 further exacerbated these conditions. Beyond intensifying political instability and economic devastation in the eastern provinces, the war was accompanied

¹²This image has been taken from website of Kurdish artist, Rebwar Kalid, authorized for the academic purposes; see the web address at: <https://www.pinterest.ca/rebwarkalid/saved/>

by epidemics, mass displacement, banditry, and heightened violence (Olson, 1989). The Treaty of Berlin, signed on 13 July 1878, concluded the conflict and imposed obligations on the Ottoman government to protect Armenian populations from abuses by Circassians and Kurds. These provisions intensified ethnic and religious tensions in Kurdistan and generated widespread anxiety among Kurdish communities, who feared the possible creation of a Christian state in their historical territories (Olson, 1989:6). Within this volatile context, Kurdish religious leaders—most prominently Sheikh Ubaydullah of Nehri—articulated a new political vision that transcended tribal loyalties.

By mobilizing personal charisma, material resources, and strategic marital alliances, Sheikh Ubaydullah publicly proclaimed the establishment of an independent Kurdistan in the territories under his direct influence, encompassing parts of present-day southeastern Turkey and northeastern Iraq (Olson, 1989:3).¹³ As an initial response to the reforms imposed by the Ottoman state, he founded the Kurdish League, an umbrella organization that brought together many of the region's tribal chiefs and religious leaders. At this stage, Sheikh Ubaydullah also enjoyed limited and tactical support from the Ottoman authorities, who feared that the full implementation of the post-Berlin reforms might accelerate the fragmentation of imperial territory and strengthen Armenian political claims (Olson, 1989:4). In his efforts to consolidate

¹³ In a letter wrote to British Vice-Consul in Başkale in July 1880, Sheikh Ubaydallah clearly mentioned his reasons and his desire for creating an independent Kurdistan as:

"The Kurdish nation is a people apart. Their religion is different (to that of others), and their laws and customs are distinct. They are known among all nations as mischievous and corrupt. ... The chiefs and rulers of Kurdistan, whether Turkish or Persian subjects, and the inhabitants of Kurdistan (the Christians) one and all are united and agreed that matters cannot be carried on this way with the two governments, and necessarily something must be done so that the European governments having understood the matter shall enquire into our state. ... We want our affairs to be in our hands. ... Otherwise, the whole of Kurdistan will take the matter into their own hands, as they are unable to put up with these continued evil deeds, and the oppression which they suffer at the hands of the two governments of impure intentions"; see the original source quoted by Robert Olson from, Arshak Safrastian, *Kurds and Kurdistan*, pp. 62-63, who quotes from Vice-Consul Clayton's report dated 11 July 1880.

and expand Kurdish political authority, Sheikh Ubaydullah launched a military campaign into Kurdish-inhabited regions of Iran in 1880. This campaign, however, ended in defeat at the hands of Iranian forces. Upon his return, Ubaydullah's troops were attacked by the Ottoman army, which had reassessed the threat posed by his growing influence. The Ottoman leadership now perceived the strengthening of Sheikh Ubaydullah's position as a direct challenge to imperial sovereignty and a potential step toward the establishment of an independent Kurdish state (Olson, 1989:4). The rebellion effectively came to an end with Sheikh Ubaydullah's arrest by Ottoman forces in July 1881 and his transfer to Istanbul. Although he briefly escaped and returned to Nehri, European diplomatic pressure led to his re-arrest, exile to the Hijaz, and eventual death in Mecca in 1883 (*ibid.*).

Although the rebellion of Sheikh Ubaydullah represents the first explicit political articulation of Kurdish independence, its failure cannot be understood solely in terms of internal weaknesses. Olson's analysis (1989) demonstrates that the movement was constrained—and ultimately defeated—by the convergence of regional and international interests. First, following the Treaty of Berlin, Russia had annexed territories in eastern Anatolia with significant Kurdish populations and therefore strongly opposed the emergence of an independent Kurdish polity near its Caucasian frontier. Second, Britain viewed any such development as a destabilizing factor that could alter the regional balance of power, draw Iran closer to Russia, and undermine British strategic interests in Central and Southwest Asia. Third, while the Ottoman Empire initially tolerated and even partially supported Sheikh Ubaydullah's movement, this support was strictly instrumental. The Ottoman state sought to use the Kurdish League as a counterweight to reform pressures and to suppress Armenian political mobilization, not to advance Kurdish self-rule.

As subsequent developments confirm, the Ottoman authorities never accepted Kurdish self-determination—whether framed in ethnic, historical, or political terms. From the early eighteenth century through the suppression of Sheikh Ubaydullah’s rebellion, the denial of Kurdish political rights was not the product of a single state’s policy but rather the outcome of overlapping regional calculations and international power arrangements. Kurdish tribal forces were repeatedly mobilized by the Ottomans—and later by the Young Turks—not as political partners, but as instrumental actors in managing imperial crises, suppressing rival movements, and navigating regional rivalries. The failure of Sheikh Ubaydullah’s rebellion thus marked a decisive moment in the consolidation of a geopolitical order that systematically marginalized Kurdish political aspirations in the modern era.

The Hamidiye Light Cavalry Regiments and the Kurds

Following the suppression of Sheikh Ubaydullah’s rebellion, the Ottoman government established a Kurdish-majority paramilitary force known as the Hamidiye Light Cavalry Regiments (*Hamidiye Hafif Süvari Alayları*). The formation of this force served multiple objectives: consolidating and extending central authority, mobilizing Sunni Muslim solidarity under a pan-Islamic framework, stabilizing relations between the imperial center and peripheral regions, and enforcing political subordination under the rhetoric of religious coexistence. In practice, however, the establishment of the Hamidiye regiments resulted in widespread violence, social dislocation, and severe losses among Kurds and other minority populations in eastern Anatolia (Olson, 1989:7–8).

After 1878, growing Russian influence and Armenian political activism heightened Ottoman fears of territorial loss in the empire’s eastern and south-eastern provinces. Sultan Abdülhamid II

responded by instrumentalizing Kurdish tribal forces through a dual strategy. First, he sought to enhance Ottoman military capacity by deploying Kurdish fighters along vulnerable frontiers. Second, he aimed to consolidate central authority by using these forces against local power holders and political elites perceived as threats to imperial control (Olson, 1989:8). Beginning in 1884, Abdülhamid II personally supervised the appointment of provincial governors (*valis*) and strengthened his grip over the region by arming tribal chiefs and placing them on the state payroll. Between 1885 and 1890, these measures enabled the Ottoman state to extend its authority over much of southern and south-eastern Anatolia (ibid.). From this period onward, Kurdish tribes increasingly functioned as proxy forces, deployed both to suppress internal dissent and to confront regional and global rivals.

Following the deposition of Abdülhamid II, the Hamidiye regiments were formally retained by the Young Turk regime, reorganized as Tribal Regiments, and placed under the command of the Ottoman Third Army (Olson, 1989:10–11). In the early years, some of these units were employed to suppress the counterrevolutionary uprising of April 13, 1909, while others were dispatched to the Balkan frontiers, including regiments drawn from Urfa and Viranşehir (ibid.).

¹⁴During World War I, Kurdish regiments played a significant role on the eastern fronts, fighting as integral components of the Ottoman military apparatus. Kurds constituted the majority of

¹⁴ According to Olson's investigation, the regiments were to be under the command of Kurdish tribal chieftain, Müşir Zeki Paşa, who was married to a sister of Abdulhamid, and were to consist of not less than four companies and not more than six. Moreover, depending on the magnitude of each tribe's population, the regiment was to have at least 512 men and not more than 1,152, and they were forbidden to unify except in times of war and only at the order of the commanding general. The tribes were to submit population figures to the Interior Ministry on all men between the ages of seventeen and forty, and the officers of the regiments were sent to a special school (HamidiyeSüvariMektebi) in Istanbul. The Hamidiye consisted of 57 regiments, and at an average of 832 men in each regiment, the total figure would be some 47,000 men. As Young Turks also considered using the Kurdish cavalry regiments, this arm force expanding to 64 in August 1910 and over 53000 men were officially enlisted, and numerous Kurds were also serving as regular soldier and gendarme before and throughout the WWI; See the original source, Robert Olson 1989 *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism 1880-1925*, United States: University of Texas Press, Austin.

personnel in the 9th, 11th, and 12th Cavalry Divisions and contributed approximately 135 reserve cavalry squadrons, along with border guard units and gendarmerie forces (ibid.).

According to Olson's estimates, more than 500,000 Kurds were likely killed within the territories of the Ottoman Empire during World War I. When combined with Kurdish casualties in Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Russia, total Kurdish losses may have approached one million individuals (Olson, 1989:21). These figures underscore the profound demographic and social impact of Ottoman militarization policies on Kurdish society.

Drawing on the research of Bruinessen (1992), Jwaideh (1960), and Olson (1989), the establishment of the Hamidiye regiments and the broader incorporation of Kurds into the Ottoman military between 1891 and 1918 produced two notable—albeit limited—contributions to the development of Kurdish nationalism. First, the recruitment of Kurdish officers from prominent tribal families facilitated the emergence of new political elite. These officers directly observed the rise of Turkish ethno-nationalism during the Young Turk period (1908–1918) and later applied their military training and organizational experience to early Kurdish nationalist activities. Second, the concentration of tribal elites at institutions such as the Hamidiye Cavalry School (*Hamidiye Süvari Mektebi*) in Istanbul fostered sustained interaction between Kurdish military personnel and urban Kurdish intellectuals. This collaboration proved critical in shaping the leadership and organizational networks that later underpinned the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925 (Bruinessen, 1992).

At the same time, the Hamidiye system generated significant negative consequences. Preference was given to large Sunni tribes, enabling them to dominate smaller tribal groups through intimidation and violence. Moreover, eligibility for participation was conditioned on Sunni

affiliation, reinforcing the regime's pan-Islamic ideology and intensifying Sunni–Shiite (Alevi) tensions. This policy severely weakened Alevi tribes and exacerbated conflicts between major tribal groupings, particularly between the Alevi Hormek and Sunni Cibran tribes, resulting in prolonged violence that persisted until the Sheikh Said uprising (Olson, 1989:9–11).

In conclusion, the gradual emergence of urban Kurdish intellectuals and the participation of Kurdish officers in the Hamidiye regiments contributed to the formation of a limited and elite-based national consciousness. However, the intensification of tribal rivalries and sectarian divisions—driven by state policies that privileged certain tribes and religious identities—constituted a major obstacle to the development of a unified Kurdish national movement. While Turkish intellectuals and political elites were able to articulate a coherent nationalist ideology prior to the establishment of the modern Turkish nation-state—particularly following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908—the Kurds remained divided by competing loyalties to tribe, sect, and empire. As subsequent analysis will demonstrate, the consolidation of modern Kurdish nationalism became inseparable from the emergence of the modern Turkish state itself. Without a careful examination of state formation in Turkey, the trajectory of Kurdish nationalism cannot be fully understood.

Turkish State: From the Young Turks to the Kemalist Republic

Turkish national consciousness, influenced by political and economic developments in Western Europe, gradually evolved during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In its earliest stages—prior to the emergence of Pan-Turkish collective ethnic nationalism—ideological and political discourse primarily reflected the ambitions of Turkish political elites to reform and modernize the state apparatus in the final decades of the Ottoman Empire (Miley & Yildiz,

2018). By the nineteenth century, the decline of the Ottoman Empire had become increasingly evident, as the traditional feudal system proved weak and ineffective in the face of Western Europe's rapid modernization and industrialization (McDowall, 1997). A younger, urban-based generation, inspired by emerging ideas of modern nationalism, came to believe that the monarchy and existing political structures were incapable of implementing meaningful reform. Consequently, these groups intensified their efforts to establish modern political and economic institutions and to restructure the political system along Western lines (McDowall, 1997). These reformist ideas gradually gained support within the army, among urban bureaucrats, and among pro-Western secular elites collectively known as the *Young Turks*. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this movement culminated in the formation of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). Following the military coup of 1908, the Young Turks seized power and formally abolished the monarchy in 1909, a process that ultimately contributed to the empire's complete collapse by the end of the First World War (McDowall, 1997).

Initially, the Young Turks enjoyed widespread popular support by advocating the restoration of constitutional government. However, once in power, they concluded that the survival of the state required its transformation into a modern nation-state, which in turn necessitated the construction of a nationalist mass base (Miley & Yildiz, 2008:21). Within this framework, the CUP leadership believed that mass mobilization could only be achieved through direct appeals to Turkish national identity, institutionalized through a new, centralized education system (ibid.). As political ideologues, the Young Turks became ardent proponents of a violent, aggressive, and exclusionary form of Turkish ethnic nationalism. Their political platform increasingly reflected doctrines that paralleled contemporary European fascist movements (Adanır, 2001). Although the rise of fascism elsewhere was typically associated with the emergence of a distinct class-

based social structure—something largely absent in Ottoman society at the time—a close examination of key documents from the Young Turk period reveals striking similarities to an imitative, if not fully structural, form of fascism (Adanır, 2001). Historically, the ascent of the Young Turks and the consolidation of a Pan-Turkish regime followed a trajectory marked by an early turn toward totalitarian governance and an ideological framework heavily influenced by the triumph of fascism in Europe.

In the late nineteenth century, the Ottoman state remained an autocracy rooted in centuries of monarchical rule. The Sultanate had long maintained social control and sovereign authority through pragmatic bargaining with diverse social classes, ethnic groups, and religious communities, including non-Turkish populations and recognized minorities under the millet system (Adanır, 2001:316). However, as the empire's international position deteriorated during the first half of the nineteenth century, certain factions within the ruling elite came to view the division of society along religious and communal lines as the principal obstacle to progress. For these elites, modernization became synonymous with “saving the state” (ibid.).¹⁵

Events such as the Greek War of Independence in 1821 and subsequent European interventions on behalf of Christian populations were perceived as existential threats to Ottoman territorial integrity (Adanır, 2001). As Greenfeld (1992) has argued, Britain's dominance in eighteenth-century Europe and the subsequent global expansion of Western power rendered nationality and

¹⁵ As defined in Encyclopaedia Britannica, the word, *millet* applied to certain non-Muslim minorities of the Empire (1300-1923), mainly Christians and Jews, recognized by law as autonomous self-governing religious communities under their own laws and headed by a religious leader, who was responsible to the central government for the fulfillment of duties, particularly those of paying taxes and maintain internal security. In addition, each *millet* assumed responsibility for social and administrative functions not provided by the state, conducting affairs through a communal council without intervention from outside. However, from 1856 on, a series of imperial reform edicts introduced secular law codes for all citizens and much of the *millet's* administrative autonomy was lost. see: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/millet-religious-group>

the nation-state a universal political model. Consequently, reformist pressures among Ottoman elites became closely linked to the adoption of modern nationalism—not as an original invention, but as the internalization of an already established global canon (Greenfeld, 1992:14). Within this context, influential elites increasingly regarded the millet system as a flawed state policy that needed to be dismantled. Their aim was to construct a unified political community in which all Ottoman subjects would be defined as equal citizens (Adanır, 2001:317). To counter European political and military superiority, these elites also demanded constitutional reforms, including legal equality irrespective of religious affiliation (*ibid.*). However, large segments of the Muslim population perceived the adoption of a modern national identity as contrary to their interests, associating Westernization with cultural, religious, and social alienation (*ibid.*).

The demand for a redefined national identity during this period emerged from a profound identity crisis, driven by structural social mobility, the blurring of established social roles, and the emergence of new roles incompatible with traditional categories (Greenfeld, 1992). As Adanır notes, westernizing reforms remained fragmented and insufficient to realize Ottomanist objectives. Simultaneously, increased economic integration with Europe intensified ethnic divisions of labour, as non-Muslim commercial groups were better positioned to serve as intermediaries for foreign capital, while Muslim populations increasingly feared socio-economic marginalization (Adanır, 2001:317). From the perspective of the Ottoman bureaucracy, the predominance of non-Muslims within the emerging middle classes posed a serious challenge to the future cohesion of the state. At the same time, the abolition of the millet system for non-Muslim communities signalled the end of their collective autonomy and the loss of long-standing privileges. European powers, for their part, were reluctant to relinquish the capitulation system,

which secured commercial advantages and extraterritorial rights for European nationals in the Near East (ibid.).¹⁶

Theoretically, this identity crisis manifested structurally as a condition of *anomie*, producing widespread insecurity and anxiety across multiple social strata (Greenfeld, 1992:15). The survival of the empire increasingly depended on constitutional reform and the continued loyalty of economically active groups—groups that were largely composed of non-Muslim communities (Adanır, 2001:318). When separatist nationalism among these communities intensified in the mid-nineteenth century, and state policies failed to support indigenous Muslim entrepreneurs against foreign economic interests, traditional Ottoman political solidarity lost its legitimacy within the empire's multi-ethnic framework (ibid.).

Finally, although the declaration of constitutional monarchy in 1876 represented the apex of reform efforts, the empire's financial bankruptcy in 1875 and its catastrophic military defeat in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78 effectively brought the Tanzimat era (1839–1876) to an end. The subsequent reign of Abdülhamid II marked a period of deepening domestic crisis and international vulnerability. The defeat of 1878 not only resulted in immense human, territorial, and financial losses, but also intensified European intervention in the affairs of the empire's non-Muslim subjects (Adanır, 2001:318). As the following section demonstrates, these exceptional and destabilizing conditions profoundly undermined Westernization policies and delayed the consolidation of modern nationhood for more than three decades.

¹⁶ According to formal terminologies, Capitulation, in the history of international law, is any treaty whereby one state permits another to exercise extraterritorial jurisdiction over its own nationals within the host state's boundaries. The capitulation system arose out of the notion that only Ottoman subjects were worthy of the sultan's law. As such, any foreigner whose state had not been granted a capitulation had no legal protection when traveling through or residing in the Ottoman Empire; see the source: www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/capitulations-middle-east

“European interference, too, had assumed in the meanwhile more concrete forms; Art. 23 of the Treaty of Berlin (1978) stipulated regional autonomy under European supervision for certain parts of the empire. Not only Crete, Eastern Rumelia and Macedonia were soon to become scenes of fierce nationality struggles, but also an Armenian national movement pursuing the goal of an autonomous or independent Armenian state in Asia Minor began to menace Ottoman imperial unity seriously. Ottomanism as the official ideology of a secularized multi-ethnic empire seemed thoroughly discredited” (Adanır, 2001:318).

While military defeat and the loss of most European territories severely undermined the foundations of the Ottoman Empire, the beginning of Abdülhamid II’s reign marked a decisive abandonment of liberal reformist ideas. Instead, the regime prioritized the construction of a strong alliance between the state and non-Turkish Muslim communities—most notably Albanians, Arabs, and Kurds—which became the central pillar of imperial policy (Adanır, 2001:318). This strategy initially produced a broad convergence between the Sultan and Muslim public opinion, while simultaneously marginalizing Westernized intellectuals and liberal political elites (*ibid.*). This new policy of Islamic solidarity temporarily stabilized the empire and delayed its collapse. However, it also generated a profound sense of insecurity and anxiety among intellectuals and reformist elites, who increasingly argued that imperial survival was impossible without a highly centralized state apparatus and a modern, disciplined army. As Adanır’s (2001) research demonstrates, the emergence of organized Young Turk opposition after the 1890s reflected the accumulated frustration and resentment of Ottoman intellectuals who felt politically excluded under Abdülhamid’s autocratic rule.

From a theoretical perspective, the impact of such exceptional and destabilizing conditions on political elites—often interacting with specific psychological dispositions—necessitates a reassessment of imported ideological models and the ways in which they are reinterpreted within local contexts (Greenfeld, 1992:15). In response to the deepening social and political crisis,

Westernized intellectuals and liberal elites sought to forestall the anticipated dissolution of the state, a prospect widely recognized decades before the empire's actual collapse. As an immediate solution, they combined modern nationalism with the demand for constitutional monarchy. This synthesis provided the ideological foundation for the emergence of the first ultra-nationalist organizations and the articulation of a Pan-Turkish political movement.

Following the suspension of the constitution in 1876—signaling the definitive end of the liberal reform era—a new generation of political activists began to organize in opposition to the regime. This group, composed largely of medical students and young army officers influenced by European revolutionary movements such as *Young Italy*, sought to restore the Ottoman parliament and revive the 1876 constitution (Hanioglu, 1995).¹⁷

The first Ottoman opposition congress was held in France in February 1902, with Armenian representatives among the participants (Hanioglu, 1995:188). The Second Congress of the Ottoman Opposition took place in Paris in 1907, aiming to unify disparate opposition groups and initiate a revolution to reinstate the constitution and establish a liberal government (ibid.). Following this congress, a new political organization—the Young Turks, formally known as the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP)—emerged as a fully organized movement. The CUP successfully consolidated most opposition factions, including the influential Ottoman Freedom Society (OFS), founded in 1906, under its leadership (Hanioglu, 1995).

¹⁷ The Young Italy movement, (Italian: La Giovine Italia), was an Italian political movement founded in 1831 by Giuseppe Mazzini. The movement's goal was to create a united Italian republic by promoting a general insurrection in the Italian reactionary states and in the lands occupied by the Austrian Empire. Perhaps, the main inspiration taken by the Turkish elites came from the Italian spirit of a *Risorgimento* (resurgence) as a national movement of reunification of the nineteenth century which at the time led Italian to awaken and sought to arise and affirm themselves as a unified nation. The significance of Giuseppe Mazzini's motto: thought and action that which fulfilled itself in the Italian *Risorgimento*, had a profound political and ideological effect on the formation of secret societies in Turkey; see şükrüM. Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 188.

From 1897 onward, the Ottoman Empire's decline, marked by military failures and severe financial difficulties, became increasingly apparent. Concurrently, political developments and the rise of the Young Turks in the early 20th century created the necessary conditions to revive the constitutional monarchy (Hanioglu, 1995). With its growing organizational power, the CUP leadership warned Sultan Abdulhamid II of the imminent danger to the monarchy if the Ottoman constitution—suspended since 1878—was not reinstated. These efforts ultimately led to the restoration of the constitution on July 24, 1908, initiating the Second Constitutional Period of the Ottoman Empire, which lasted until 1922.¹⁸

Although the Second Constitutional Period coincided with the emergence of modern national identities—a process influenced by international trends—its roots were initially external to the Ottoman system (Greenfeld, 1992:14; Hanioglu, 1995). Nonetheless, like other imported nationalisms, the development of these identities in the Ottoman context represented an indigenous adaptation and evolution within the empire. As Greenfeld precisely asserts:

“The availability of the concept alone could not have motivated anyone to adopt a foreign model, however successful, and be the reason for the change of identity and the transformation which such fundamental change implied. For such a transformation to occur, influential actors must have been willing or forced, to undergo it. The adoption of national identity must have been, in one way or another, in the interest of the groups which imported it. Specifically, it must have been preceded by the dissatisfaction of these groups with the identity they had previously. A change of identity presupposed a crisis of identity. . . . The dissatisfaction with the traditional

¹⁸ The second constitutional period was the period between 1908, known as the Young Turk Revolution, which led to the revival of the liberal constitution of 1876 and parliamentary rule until the dissolution of the General Assembly in 1920. Besides that the empire was in a perpetual state of crisis as it suffered continual territorial losses, this period also was marked by political instability as opposition groups attempted to challenge the CUP's dominance and its increasingly repressive tendencies. Chronologically, the Italian invasion of Ottoman Tripoli in 1911, the loss of the vast majority of the remaining European territory of the empire when the Balkan League overran Rumelia in 1912, and also the empire's entering World War I and its subsequent surrendering in 1918, is objectively showing the depth of the political crisis in this period. Following the Ottoman surrender in 1918 and the occupation of Constantinople by the Allied forces in the same duration, while CUP leadership fled into exile, eventually the dissolution of the Assembly and Ottoman parliament has brought the Second Constitutional Era to the end in 1920; see the source: Caroline Finkel (2005). *Osman's Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1923* New York: Basic Books.

identity reflected a fundamental inconsistency between the definition of social order it expressed and the experience of the involved actors. ... Whatever the cause of the identity crisis, its structural manifestation was in every case the same – “anomie”. ... Since the agents were different in different cases, the anomie was expressed and experienced differently. Very often it took the form of status-inconsistency, which, depending on its nature, could be accompanied by a profound sense of insecurity and anxiety” (Greenfeld, 1992:14-15).

As the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire gradually became a reality, the emergence of Ottoman opposition after the 1890s reflected the deep frustration and bitterness of intellectuals confronting this decline (Adanır, 2001:318). Dissatisfaction with the traditional identity led to urgent attempts to prevent the empire’s collapse by reconciling nationalist efforts with a bureaucratically controlled constitutional framework. However, the severe loss of life and territory had inflicted profound social and economic damage, creating a fundamental mismatch between the established social order and the political expectations of the emerging elite (ibid.). These conditions accelerated the erosion of previously prevailing norms and values, producing a form of situational inconsistency, psychologically linked to deep insecurity and anxiety. Theoretically, as Greenfeld (1992:15) observes:

“The specific nature of the change and its effects on the agents in each case profoundly influenced the character of nationalism in it. The underlying ideas of nationality were shaped and modified in accordance with the situational constraints of the actors, and with the aspirations, frustrations, and interests which these constraints generated. ... The effects of these structural and cultural influences frequently combined with that of a certain psychological factor which both necessitated a reinterpretation of the imported ideas and determined the direction of such reinterpretation” (Greenfeld, 1992:15).

Following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, optimism grew for the revival of liberal policies and the establishment of a pluralistic parliamentary democracy. Both Muslim and non-Muslim populations initially viewed these developments positively. However, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), pursuing unilateral power consolidation, increasingly resorted to

authoritarian measures. These included the suppression of civil liberties, manipulation of elections, and the imposition of martial law (Adanır, 2001). Leveraging their dominant position, the Young Turks enacted a series of restrictive policies in rapid succession, such as disarming Christians, prohibiting them from acquiring property, promoting Muslim settlements on Christian lands, and enforcing the complete Ottomanization of all subjects, either through persuasion or coercion (The Times, 1911-10-03).

The empire's ongoing decline, exacerbated by the humiliating defeat and territorial losses in the Balkan Wars of 1912, prompted the CUP to ban all other political parties in 1913 and pursue the establishment of an authoritarian one-party state (Hanioğlu, 1995). In terms of nation-building, while European liberal parliamentary models were available as potential frameworks, the CUP deliberately emulated pan-nationalist movements popular in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which emphasized the divinity and primacy of ethnic origin (Adanır, 2001). Attempts to adopt a liberal parliamentary system were not only viewed as incompatible with the existing political structure but also engendered *ressentiment*, which attributed perceived failures to European powers and a sense of inferiority.¹⁹

“The creative power of *ressentiment* – and its sociological importance – consists in that it may eventually lead to the “transvaluation of values” that is, to the transformation of the value scale in a way which denigrates the originally supreme values, replacing them with notions which are unimportant, external, or indeed bear in the original scale the negative sign. . . . However, since the creative process resulting from *ressentiment* is by definition a reaction to the values of others and not to one's own condition regardless of others, the new system of values that

¹⁹ According to Greenfeld, *ressentiment* refers to a psychological state resulting from suppressed feelings of envy and hatred (existential envy) and the impossibility of satisfying these feelings. Moreover, the effect produced by *ressentiment* is similar to that of “anomie”, in which in all cases the creative impulse comes from the psychologically unbearable inconsistency between several aspects of reality; see Liah Greenfeld, *NATIONALISM: Five Roads to Modernity*, Harvard University Press 1992: pp.14-15.

emerges is necessarily influenced by the one to which it is a reaction. *Ressentiment* felt by the groups that imported the idea of the nation and articulated the national consciousness of their respective societies usually resulted in the selection out of their own indigenous traditions of elements hostile to the original national principle and in their deliberate cultivation” (Greenfeld, 1992:16).

Accordingly, in an empire characterized by a highly complex social structure composed of multiple nations, religions, and languages, *ressentiment* emerges as a central psychological mechanism shaping—and revealing—the dominant national identity during periods of imperial collapse. This phenomenon is rooted in the absence of shared structural institutions and the lack of a strong indigenous cultural framework capable of integrating diverse social groups (Greenfeld, 1992; Adanır, 2001). Moreover, the persistence of feudal social relations, pronounced ethnic and religious heterogeneity, the absence of a shared historical experience among rural communities, and the lack of a standardized national language further impeded the formation of a unified national identity. As a result, nationalist ideology remained largely confined to Ottoman intellectuals and political elites and functioned more as an individual or sectarian orientation than as a mass political movement (Arendt, 1994; Adanır, 2001).²⁰

In this context, the *ressentiment* experienced by intellectuals and political elites under conditions of humiliation and decline fostered a peculiar mixture of pride and xenophobia. This emotional disposition accelerated affective attachment to emerging national sentiments and sustained them during moments of ideological instability (Greenfeld, 1992; Adanır, 2001). While the adoption of a new national identity was necessitated by deep structural contradictions, it simultaneously

²⁰ Since, regardless of the variety, all pan-movements bear the shared ideological and political origin, to arrive at a related theoretical hypothesis; by referring to Arendt's approach to the origins of pan-European movements and contrast it with the version that had adapted by the Ottoman elites, it would be helping to a better sociological understanding of the roots of the Pan-Turkism movement, (emphasis -added).

generated an identity crisis described as *anomie*. Importantly, this crisis does not explain why the newly adopted identity was national in form, but rather why there existed a compelling tendency to seek an alternative identity altogether (Greenfeld, 1992:16–17). As Greenfeld (1992:17) argues:

“The fact that the identity is national is explained, first of all, by the availability at the time of a certain type of ideas... The adjustment of the idea of the nation to the situational constraints of the relevant agents involves its conceptualization in terms of indigenous traditions... Finally, where the emergence of national identity is accompanied by resentment, the latter leads to the emphasis on elements of indigenous traditions—or the construction of a new system of values—hostile to the principles of the original nationalism... The matrix of national identity and consciousness in such cases evolves out of this transvaluation of values.”

Within this ideological and psychological environment, Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924) emerged as the most influential ideologue of the transitional period between 1906 and 1923. An idealist positivist deeply influenced by Durkheimian solidarism and corporatist thought, Gökalp rejected liberal market economics and representative parliamentary democracy as obsolete institutions. Instead, he advocated a populist and corporatist reorganization of society based on occupational representation and promoted a “national economy” oriented toward the protection of small producers (Adanır, 2001:320).²¹ Gökalp’s paradigmatic framework synthesized European corporatism, Islamic tradition, and emerging cultural Turkism to produce a disciplined “new citizenry” shaped through social scientific principles (Adanır, 2001:321).

²¹ What would be perceived from Gökalp’s adherence to the solidaristic corporatist school, is the idea that how could transcend a backward society that is comparatively primitive to become modified by an ideal society in which it tries to work together as a cohesive unit. Indeed, Gökalp’s corporatist thinking has provided the paradigmatic worldview for the several dominant political ideologies and public philosophies in Turkey, more specifically, Unionism (1908-1918) and Kemalism (1923-1950) as singular official ideologies, as well as contemporary Kemalism (s) (1960-1980); the sources used by Adanır (2001): Zafer Toprak, “Türkiye’de Korporatizm Doğuşu” (The Emergence of Corporatism in Turkey), *Toplum ve Bilim*, no. 12, Winter 1980, pp. 41-49; also, Parla, *The Social and Political Thought of Ziya Gökalp*, p. 7.

According to Gökalp, Ottoman Islamic society could cultivate a new cultural identity by selectively incorporating elements of Western civilization while preserving its traditional cultural foundations. He distinguished civilization—understood as the cumulative advancement of science and technology—from culture, which he defined as the unique constellation of rituals, customs, moral norms, and collective values specific to a nation (Adanır, 2001:321). In this formulation, civilization was not inherently tied to either Islam or Christianity, while culture remained particularistic and nationally bounded. The nation, conceived as the bearer of the highest cultural form, could only exist through a shared language. Although race and religion were considered secondary, Islam and Turkish national identity were not viewed as contradictory, since religion was understood as an integral component of national culture. As Adanır (2001:321) notes, “the origins of this culture were to be sought in the everyday life of the common people as well as in the pre-Islamic history of the Turks,” which Gökalp identified as the central task of Turkism.

For Gökalp, the construction of a modern nation depended primarily on an effective educational system that clearly distinguished between *instruction (talim)* and *education (terbiye)* (Adanır, 2001:321). Instruction was intended to transmit scientific and technological knowledge, whereas education was tasked with cultivating national cultural values. Gökalp’s radical critique of the Ottoman educational system held that mere exposure to modern science and technology resulted in mechanical imitation of the West, while the empire’s fundamental crisis was moral rather than technical (ibid.). Consequently, the solution lay not in pedagogical reform alone, but in reorienting education toward a new ethical framework derived from national culture. However, this conception of national culture relied on an over-homogenized understanding of Turkish

identity that failed to reflect the multi-ethnic composition of Ottoman society and carried significant tribal and pan-Turkist implications within the political sphere (Adanır, 2001).

Conceptually, the defining characteristic of any pan-movement is that it does not seek national liberation in the conventional sense. Rather, it aspires to transcend the boundaries of a single nation by envisioning an expansive community grounded in exclusivity and selectivity. Its imagined political horizon extends beyond the limits of a national polity and proclaims a *folk community* premised on claims of absolute chosenness (Arendt, 1994). Unlike classical national liberation movements, pan-movements are not concerned with historical continuity or collective memory; instead, they project the foundation of their society into a teleological future toward which the movement itself is presumed to advance (Arendt, 1994).

Historically, Pan-Turkism originated in Tsarist Russia, where a Muslim (primarily Tatar) middle class had established a modern educational system using Turkish as the language of instruction as early as the 1880s (Adanır, 2001:322). Tatar bourgeois modernism (*Jadidism*), initially articulated in cultural and educational terms, gradually evolved into a pan-Turkish ideological project emphasizing the unification of all Turko-Muslim peoples under Ottoman leadership (ibid.). However, the objective realities of imperial decline in the early twentieth century—combined with growing skepticism among Ottoman intellectuals and political elites regarding the feasibility of comprehensive reform—led to the gradual abandonment of the ideal of a Turko-Muslim empire in favor of a more narrowly defined pan-Turkish nationalism (ibid.).

As Hannah Arendt argues, pan-movements are distinguished by their belief in the divine origin of a people, in contrast to the Judeo-Christian notion of the divine origin of humankind (Arendt, 1985:233). Within this framework, the individual derives value only indirectly through

membership in a divinely chosen people; divine worth is contingent upon collective belonging.

Arendt explains the political utility of this conception as follows:

“The political advantage of this concept was twofold. It made nationality a permanent quality which no longer could be touched by history... Of even more immediate impact... was that in the absolute contrast between the divine origin of one’s own people and all other non divine peoples all differences between the individual members of the people disappeared... Divine origin changed the people into a uniform ‘chosen’ mass of arrogant robots” (Arendt, 1985:234).

Accordingly, positivism and progressivism played a critical role in shaping pan-movement ideology in the nineteenth century. These intellectual currents asserted the inherent equality of human beings while attributing differences solely to historical and circumstantial factors. Equality, therefore, was not conceived in terms of universal rights but rather as a function of social organization and education (Arendt, 1985). Pan-nationalism’s claim to a “national mission” thus transformed the idea of humanity as a family of nations into a hierarchical worldview in which differences among peoples were reinterpreted as rooted in natural or quasi-biological origins (Arendt, 1985:235). Pan-movement racism consequently denied the common origin and shared destiny of humanity by invoking the pseudo-mystical eternity and divinity of a race or people in opposition to other “non-divine” human collectivities (ibid.).²² As Arendt further observes:

“Politically, it is not important whether God or nature is thought to be the origin of a people... peoples are transformed into animal species so that a Russian appears as different from a German as a wolf is from a fox... Only the rules of the animal kingdom can possibly apply to its political destinies” (Arendt, 1985:234–35).

²² In contrast to the notion of the divine origin of one people, by reference to Judeo-Christian tradition, Hannah Arendt argues that: “God created neither men – whose origin clearly is procreation – nor peoples – who came into being as the result of human organization. Men are unequal according to their natural origin, their different organization, and fate in history. Their equality is an equality of rights only, that is, an equality of human purpose; yet behind this equality of human purpose lies, according to Jewish-Christian tradition, another equality, expressed in the concept of one common origin beyond human history, human nature, and human purpose – the common origin in the mythical, unidentifiable Man who alone is God’s creation. This divine origin is the metaphysical concept on which the political equality of purpose may be based, the purpose of establishing mankind on earth”; see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1985, pp. 234.

Adanır's (2001) research confirms that the positivism of Auguste Comte and the social Darwinist ideas prevalent at the turn of the century exerted significant influence over leading figures within the Young Turk movement. Adopting a mechanistic and organicist conception of society, Young Turk ideologues viewed social elements as functionally differentiated components of an integrated whole, each possessing defined rights and duties (Adanır, 2001:319). The perceived solution to Ottoman inefficiency and structural backwardness lay in the creation of a scientifically governed state, although the religious conservatism of the masses was seen as a substantial obstacle to this project (ibid.). The crowd psychology of Gustave Le Bon—particularly his theory of “collective illusions”—further shaped Young Turk thinking by offering an elitist framework for managing mass politics (ibid.).²³ Yusuf Akçura's Darwinian conception of society exemplifies the ideological convergence between pan-Turkish nationalism and Young Turk political thought.²⁴ As Akçura argued:

“Every society in the expectation of securing its own interests, is in a process of continuous change In the course of this continuous change, the interest which is brought to fulfilment is survival. Since life is strongly continuing, its existence necessitates the existence of power. This means that every society finds its own interest in survival that is in acquiring and increasing its power. Hence, as among all living species struggling for survival, we witness a ceaseless conflict among societies. We are obliged to accept this condition. The interest of each society is in its existence, consequently in being powerful” (quoted by Adanır, 2001:323).

²³ The philosophical and political approaches of Gustave Le Bon have taken from the original source, A. James Gregor, *The Ideology of Fascism* (New York, 1969), p. 51.

²⁴ Yusuf Akçura (1878-1935) was one of the permanent political activists of the time that was having a close link with the Young Turk movement inside and outside the Ottoman Empire, and after 1908 he pursued his Turkist political goals in the Ottoman capital. Among his major activities, the foundation of *TürkDerneği* (Turkish Society, 1908) was followed by that of *TürkOcağı* (Turkish Hearth, 1912), the foremost Turkish association until the 1930s; the original source quoted by Adanır (2001:323) has taken form: François Georgeon, *Aux origines du nationalisme turc: Yusuf Akçura (1876-1935)*, Paris, 1980. Inside the Ottoman Empire and after 1908 he pursued his Turkist political goals in the Ottoman capital. Among his major activities, the foundation of *TürkDerneği* (Turkish Society, 1908) was followed by that of *TürkOcağı* (Turkish Hearth, 1912), the foremost Turkish association until the 1930s; the original source quoted by Adanır (2001:323) has taken form: François Georgeon, *Aux origines du nationalisme turc: Yusuf Akçura (1876-1935)*, Paris, 1980.

For Akçura, national survival and power could only be achieved through intellectual and political commitment to improving the socio-economic conditions of rural peasants and urban artisanal classes, thereby transforming the Turkish nation into a strong and independent state (Adanır, 2001). This vision entailed the deliberate creation of a national bourgeoisie by displacing foreign capital and non-Turkish indigenous merchant groups in favor of a Turkish Muslim entrepreneurial class—a project that was actively pursued following the outbreak of the First World War (ibid.). After the unilateral abolition of the capitulations in 1914, the CUP explicitly addressed socio-economic inequalities rooted in ethnic hierarchies of access to resources and privilege. The marginalization of non-Muslim Ottoman merchants and industrial elites facilitated the emergence of a Turkish national bourgeoisie (Adanır, 2001). Policies such as the enforced use of Turkish in commercial transactions, the establishment of cooperatives favoring Muslim producers and consumers, and extensive state intervention in foreign trade directly advanced the CUP's pan-Turkist objectives (Adanır, 2001:324).

Within Akçura's framework, only Muslim business groups possessed the legitimacy required to constitute the Turkish bourgeoisie, as minority communities were excluded on the grounds that they lacked national authenticity. As he stated:

“Just as the Jews constituted the bourgeoisie in Poland, in Turkey it was the native Jews, Greeks, and Armenians who were the agents and middlemen of European capitalism... If the Turks fail to produce among themselves a bourgeois class... the chances of survival of a Turkish society composed only of peasants and officials will be very slim.”²⁵

In this context, the deportation of Armenians in 1915—amounting to ethnic cleansing—assumed particular economic and ideological significance. The socio-economic vacuum created by their

²⁵ These statements have taken from one of the Akçura's article in 1916, which quoted by Adanır (2001) from the iginal source: Yusuf Akçura, *TürkYurdu*, no. 140, Aug. 12, 1333/Aug.25, 1916, p. 252.

removal was intended to be filled exclusively by Muslim business elements, leading to the proliferation of joint-stock companies restricted to “Turkish nationals” (Adanır, 2001:325). The promotion of the German model of *Nationalökonomie* was presented as the most appropriate developmental strategy for Turkey, although the definition of “national” was explicitly confined to Turkish Muslim economic actors. Non-Turkish groups were excluded not on the basis of proven political disloyalty, but solely because they fell outside the boundaries of the imagined national community (ibid.).

In sum, the rapid emergence of an anti-minority agenda as the central pillar of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) government’s vision and practice was rooted less in immediate political exigencies or rational calculations than in the ideological logic of pan-Turkish tribalism. This anti-minority orientation reflected a deeply internalized hostility toward non-Turkic groups and entailed a deliberate disregard for the empire’s long history of coexistence with its minority populations. Such attitudes were not contingent responses to wartime conditions but were embedded in the conceptual framework of pan-Turkish ideology itself (Adanır, 2001).

Following the Ottoman defeat in 1918, most leading figures of the CUP went into exile, and the liberal opposition that temporarily assumed power placed responsibility for the collapse squarely on the Young Turks. However, once it became evident that the victorious Allied powers intended to partition Anatolia, broad social forces—including the recently formed Turkish national bourgeoisie—mobilized in resistance (Adanır, 2001). In particular, widespread fear that Armenians and Greeks might reassert political and economic dominance in Anatolia, combined with the Ottoman government’s acquiescence to partition plans, compelled Muslim resistance movements to seek alternative political leadership.

Consequently, political and economic elites, religious sheikhs, local notables, and lower-ranking CUP bureaucrats re-emerged as key actors. From late 1918 onward, so-called “defence of rights” (*müdafaa-i hukuk*) organizations proliferated across Anatolia and Thrace, aiming to mobilize Muslim populations against the territorial claims of Christian minorities (Adanır, 2001). This environment of deep uncertainty and anomie, coupled with growing anxieties about the future, ultimately facilitated Mustafa Kemal’s appointment as inspector of the Anatolian army in May 1919. A sequence of political and military developments followed, culminating in the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and imparting renewed coherence and direction to the pan-Turkish movement (Adanır, 2001).

Although the principal ideologues of the Kemalist movement—figures such as Ziya Gökalp, Yusuf Akçura, and other pan-Turkish intellectuals—were intellectual heirs of the CUP era, Kemalist political strategy initially prioritized mass mobilization of the Muslim population. Central to this strategy was the dissemination of the belief that the collective interests of Muslims would be irreparably threatened by further territorial dismemberment of the former Ottoman lands. During this phase, Kemalist leaders and military commanders tactically allied with non-Turkic Muslim groups, most notably Kurdish tribes, to expedite the broader project of expelling and eliminating non-Muslim populations through forced migration and exclusion (Adanır, 2001).

At this juncture, Kurdish demands were neither violently suppressed nor substantively accommodated; rather, they were strategically deferred. This temporary accommodation facilitated the consolidation of power while laying the groundwork for a longer-term project aimed at erasing non-Turkish ethnic and religious identities. While Kurdish tribes continued to

be classified within the broader Muslim social hierarchy and were considered militarily indispensable during the war of independence, Armenians became the first systematic victims of the policy of exclusion and cleansing directed against non-Turkish minorities.

As the subsequent chapter will demonstrate, following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the ideological legacy of the Young Turks hardened into an institutionalized authoritarian nationalism. In this phase, Kurds emerged as the primary targets of the state's pan-Turkish and fascist policies, which were characterized by the categorical denial of Kurdish national identity and the enforcement of comprehensive assimilation. These policies, rooted in earlier CUP ideology, have continued to shape state-Kurdish relations in enduring ways.

Summary

This chapter critically examines the historical foundations of the Kurdish national question in Turkey through documentary analysis, tracing how Kurdish society was transformed from relatively autonomous communal formations into fragmented political and ethnic minorities under imperial and state-centered systems. Rather than viewing Kurdish underdevelopment as an internal deficiency, the chapter situates it within long-term structural constraints imposed by regional geopolitics, imperial strategies, and internal fragmentation.

Historically, Kurdish communities evolved from flexible nomadic and semi-nomadic social formations into institutionalized tribal and political units largely as a response to external domination, environmental pressures, and survival needs. The Islamization of the region and the subsequent institutionalization of religion and tribal authority fundamentally altered Kurdish social organization, embedding it within broader imperial orders. This transformation accelerated

following the Turkic incursions from the 11th century onward, which destabilized earlier patterns of coexistence and intensified competition over land and power.

From the medieval period, Kurdish emirates emerged as semi-autonomous political entities, demonstrating a capacity for governance and territorial control. However, their autonomy was structurally conditional: Kurdish political power was tolerated only insofar as it served the strategic interests of dominant empires, particularly as buffer zones and proxy forces. The Ayyubid period represented the apex of Kurdish political influence and state experience, yet its collapse marked a decisive retreat from state-building toward localized autonomy and instrumentalization by regional powers such as the Mamluks, Mongols, Safavids, and Ottomans.

Under Ottoman rule, Kurdish emirates survived for several centuries, but their autonomy was contingent upon loyalty to the empire and participation in its military and geopolitical conflicts. Any attempt by Kurdish rulers to exceed these limits—by asserting broader political ambitions—was systematically suppressed. The destruction of the emirates in the early nineteenth century was therefore not accidental but part of a deliberate centralization project aimed at eliminating semi-autonomous structures that threatened imperial territorial integrity.

The abolition of Kurdish political institutions had profound consequences: it dismantled the structural foundations necessary for the emergence of a shared national consciousness. Internal tribal rivalries, sectarian divisions, declining urbanization, and the absence of a bourgeois class or national intelligentsia further obstructed Kurdish nation-building. Rather than facilitating modernization, Ottoman policies reinforced tribalism and elevated religious authority, deepening social fragmentation at a time when neighboring societies were transitioning toward modern nation-states.

Late Ottoman attempts to mobilize Kurdish loyalty through Islamic solidarity—most notably under Abdul Hamid II and later during the Hamidiye regiments—temporarily integrated Kurdish tribes into imperial structures but ultimately intensified internal divisions and delayed political maturation. Although these experiences contributed marginally to Kurdish political awareness, they failed to prepare Kurdish elites for the ideological and structural realities of the emerging Turkish nation-state.

Consequently, when the Republic of Turkey was established in 1923, Kurdish society lacked the institutional cohesion, political leadership, and national consciousness necessary to resist systematic denial and assimilation. The chapter concludes that the Kurdish national question in Turkey is rooted not only in modern state policies but in a much longer historical process of conditional autonomy, strategic suppression, and missed opportunities for nation-building shaped by both external domination and internal fragmentation.

The next chapter will examine the Kurdish position during the post–World War I political vacuum (1919–1923), the emergence and failure of early Kurdish nationalist movements (1925–1937), and the conditions that led to the rise of a new Kurdish political movement culminating in the formation of the PKK.

CHAPTER 4: Modern Turkey and Kurdish Nationalism: 1923-1978

Prologue

This chapter critically examines the relationship between the consolidation of the Turkish Republic (1923) and the emergence of modern Kurdish nationalism up to 1978. It situates Kurdish nationalist movements within the broader transformation from empire to nation-state, analyzing how state-building, ideological homogenization, and international diplomacy shaped Kurdish political mobilization.

The study first outlines the late Ottoman background, including the rise of reformist and pro-modernist intellectual circles—among them Kurdish elites—and their complex engagement with the Young Turk movement. It briefly assesses how the empire's military defeat in the First World War and the loss of its European territories facilitated the ascendancy of pan-Turkish nationalism. Particular attention is given to the impact of international treaties: while the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) provisionally recognized the possibility of Kurdish autonomy, the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) definitively excluded the Kurdish question from international guarantees, embedding it within the sovereign framework of the new Turkish state.

The chapter then analyzes how the early republican regime gradually shifted from inclusive rhetoric to policies of denial and assimilation, transforming the “Kurdish question” into a matter of security and territorial integrity. By comparing early Kurdish political discourse with the official ideology of the Kemalist state, it identifies the structural roots of Kurdish collective-ethnic nationalism.

Subsequent sections examine major Kurdish uprisings in chronological sequence: the Koçgiri rebellion (1921) as an attempt to invoke the provisions of Sèvres; the formation of Azadi and the Sheikh Said rebellion (1925) as the first large-scale nationalist challenge to the republic; the

establishment of Khoybun in exile and the Ararat rebellion (1928–1930); and finally the Dersim uprising (1934–1938), analyzed as the last major armed confrontation of the early republican period and a turning point marked by mass violence and forced assimilation.

The chapter concludes by identifying the structural causes and ideological typology of Kurdish nationalism during this formative period, arguing that it emerged not as a spontaneous or primordial movement but as a reactive and historically conditioned response to the centralizing, homogenizing, and exclusionary logic of the modern Turkish nation-state.

Introduction

As the previous chapter demonstrated, the rapid political transformations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fostered national consciousness and modern nation-building projects across the Ottoman Empire. The Kurds, however, were constrained by internal rivalries, sectarian divisions, and regional power struggles, which limited their capacity for unified political mobilization. Nonetheless, the initial formation of Kurdish national consciousness began among urban intellectuals during the final decades of the empire, shaped by pivotal developments such as the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the subsequent consolidation of the Kemalist regime in 1923.

This brief historiographical review outlines the key processes that contributed to the emergence of early Kurdish national awareness and situates it within the broader ideological conflict between liberal reformism and pan-Turkish nationalism. While global capitalist transformations since the mid-nineteenth century had strengthened demands for constitutionalism and modernization, successive military defeats and territorial losses intensified political fragmentation within the Ottoman elite. The resulting crisis polarized political actors into pro-

Western reformists and conservative defenders of imperial-Islamic unity. These divisions, initially concentrated in urban centers such as Istanbul, reverberated throughout provincial society.

The broader political crisis also generated a profound identity vacuum across both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Unlike several non-Muslim groups—such as Armenians and Nestorian Christians—whose ethno-religious institutions facilitated relatively coherent national mobilization, the Kurds largely perceived themselves as part of the empire's Muslim majority. This positionality complicated the transition from imperial-Islamic affiliation to ethnically defined nationalism (McDowall, 2004).

By the early twentieth century, Kurdish political consciousness had crystallized into three broad orientations. First were Ottomanist elites, primarily urban and educated, who prioritized imperial citizenship and treated ethnic identity as secondary. Second were traditionalist actors, rooted in tribal and religious structures in Kurdistan, who responded to rapid political change by emphasizing Muslim solidarity and established authority rather than ethnic nationalism. Third was a more radical intelligentsia that conceptualized Kurdish identity as a distinct collective-national category (McDowall, 2004: 87). Within this final current, one tendency sought cultural and administrative autonomy within a reformed state framework, while another advocated full political separation and independence. Notably, this tripartite structure of Kurdish political orientations has demonstrated significant continuity and remains analytically relevant in understanding subsequent developments.

During the final two decades of the Ottoman Empire, reformist politics dominated the imperial center, and Kurds were significantly represented within the Young Turk movement. Of the four

founders of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) in 1889, two—Abdallah Cevdet and Ishaq Sukuti—were Kurds (McDowall, 2004).²⁶ As McDowall notes, these figures initially identified less as Kurdish nationalists than as Ottoman reformers committed to rescuing the empire through modernization. Yet their intellectual trajectory illustrates a broader shift among educated Kurds from imperial reformism toward concern for specifically Kurdish political redemption (McDowall, 2004: 89). At the same time, Kurdish political consciousness was shaped by two influential elite networks: the *Sayyids of Nihri* (Shamdinan), who embodied a religiously grounded leadership, and the *Badr Khan* family, who promoted more secular and modernist ideas. These two lineages broadly represented autonomist and separatist tendencies within emerging Kurdish nationalism (McDowall, 2004: 89). Although both initially sought solutions within the Ottoman constitutional framework, their rivalry foreshadowed the factionalism that would later characterize Kurdish politics (McDowall, 2004).

Many Kurdish elites initially placed their hopes in the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the restoration of constitutional rule. Sheikh Abd al-Qadir of the Nihri family became active in the CUP, advocating liberal reform as the only viable remedy for imperial decline (McDowall, 2004: 90). Among the Badr Khans, Midhat published the bilingual journal *Kurdistan* in Cairo in 1898, encouraging Kurdish tribal and religious leaders to support constitutional reform. His brother Abd al-Rahman and Hikmat Baban also participated in the 1902 Paris Congress of the Ottoman

²⁶ Jawdat and Sukuti were both studying at the Military Medical School in Istanbul in 1889 when they were once picked up by the secret police in 1892 but soon let off with a warning. In 1895 they were rounded up again and this time exiled to Tripoli, north Africa, but both escaped to Europe via the French protectorate of Tunisia in 1897. They were actively involved with the political activities of the exiled reformists in Europe, supporting Armenian demands and pleading that Armenians and Kurds must unite to achieve their local autonomy through participation in the Young Turk Decentralization Party. Ultimately, when Sukuti died in France in 1902, Jawdat remained in exile, but finally returned to Istanbul in 1911, and although he joined a Kurdish political association called, *Kurdish Club* at the end of WWI, he had remained an Ottoman decentralist and he died at the age of 63 in November 1932 in Istanbul. See the original source: DjeneBajalan, 2021, *The Cambridge History of the Kurds: The Kurdish Movement and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1880–1923*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 104–137; also see: David McDowall, 2004, *A modern history of the Kurds*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. pp.88-89.

opposition (ibid.). For many Kurdish intellectuals, constitutionalism and liberal reform appeared to offer a framework for pluralism, equal citizenship, and the possibility of local autonomy. However, the worsening military and territorial crises of the empire accelerated the ideological transformation of the CUP. By 1912, pan-Turkish nationalism had eclipsed liberal Ottomanism as the dominant orientation within the ruling elite. The new ideological direction entailed a retreat from pluralist commitments, the denial of meaningful ethnic equality, and increasingly repressive policies toward minorities, most dramatically in the case of the Armenians (McDowall, 2004). Kurdish elites consequently faced a narrowing political space, forced to align either with liberal decentralism or with the increasingly centralist and nationalist CUP (McDowall, 2004).

Although early reformers such as Sukuti and Cevdet advocated secular modernization along European lines, the CUP leadership after 1912 avoided direct confrontation with Islamic institutions and traditional socio-political structures. Maintaining religious legitimacy and mobilizing Muslim solidarity remained essential for imperial survival, particularly during wartime (McDowall, 2004). In Kurdistan, the state continued to rely on existing tribal and religious hierarchies to secure Kurdish cooperation in regional conflicts. Thus, the late Ottoman period produced a paradox: while imperial crisis and competing nationalist movements stimulated the growth of Kurdish intellectual activism, the simultaneous shift toward pan-Turkish centralism constrained the realization of Kurdish national aspirations.

This chapter examines the emergence of Kurdish political nationalism as a reactive development shaped by the ascendancy of pan-Turkish nationalism in the early Turkish Republic. It analyzes the efforts of Kurdish intellectuals and political elites to articulate Kurdish nationalism as a

distinct political doctrine within the new state framework. This political transition reveals the parallel development of Kurdish nationalism during this period and highlights shared structural characteristics in both its form and ideological content.

The first section focuses on the Koçgiri Rebellion (1921), initiated in the Dersim region shortly after the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres, as the earliest organized attempt to assert Kurdish political claims under international guarantees. Although short-lived, the rebellion marked a critical transition from imperial-era activism to republican-era confrontation. The chapter then examines the formation of the Azadi organization and its role in preparing the ground for the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925, widely regarded as the first large-scale nationalist uprising against the Turkish Republic.

Subsequent sections analyze the evolution of Kurdish nationalism in exile through the establishment of the first modern political party, The Independence or Khoybun (1927); the Ararat Rebellion (1928–1930), and finally the Dersim uprising under Seyid Riza (1934–1938), interpreted as the last major armed challenge of the early republican period. The chapter concludes by evaluating the structural causes behind both the rise and suppression of these movements, arguing that this cycle of mobilization and repression defined the formative phase—and temporary eclipse—of Kurdish nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century.

Kurdish Political Nationalism: The Initial Formation

The Ottoman Empire's defeat in the First World War precipitated its political disintegration under military pressure from Russia in the east and Britain and its Arab allies in the south (McDowall, 1997). In its European territories, new nation-states rapidly emerged, while in the

Arab provinces Britain and France established mandate regimes that later became Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine (Halliday, 2005). In Anatolia, a Turkish national movement led by Mustafa Kemal consolidated control over the remaining imperial core. Although the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) provisionally recognized the possibility of a separate Kurdish state in eastern Anatolia, this arrangement was nullified by Kemalist military victories and replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which internationally recognized the sovereignty of the new Turkish Republic without reference to Kurdish autonomy (Halliday, 2005: 81). The Kurdish question was thereby subsumed within the territorial integrity of the Turkish nation-state, marking a decisive turning point in its political trajectory.

At the time of the republic's formal establishment, Kurdish society remained internally fragmented along tribal, regional, and religious lines. Nevertheless, evidence indicates that a modern form of Kurdish national consciousness had begun to emerge among sections of the educated elite in the early twentieth century (Bozarslan, 2003). This development was particularly visible among intellectuals educated in Western institutions or in modern Ottoman schools in urban centers such as Istanbul. Influenced by contemporary European political thought—including positivism and social Darwinism—these elites adopted the conceptual vocabulary of nationhood, progress, and state-building that also informed Turkish and Arab nationalist movements of the period (Bozarslan, 2003: 21–22).

Organizationally, Kurdish intellectuals formed associations such as the Kurdistan Teali Cemiyeti (Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan) and other smaller political circles. Between 1919 and 1923 they published the journal *Jin* (Life), which served as a platform for articulating Kurdish cultural revival and political claims. Although still limited to a narrow elite, these

activities marked the initial institutionalization of Kurdish nationalism as a modern political project rather than a purely tribal or religious form of collective identity.

“The emergent Kurdish nationalism, like Turkish and Arab nationalisms before it, is thus Janus-faced, in line with contradictory aspects of the nation-building programme. On the one hand, it aims to become universal, give meaning to Kurdishness, and preserve it; on the other hand, it aims to remain Kurdish to access the “universal.” As Jean Leca ²⁷emphasizes, “universalism constructs the nation,” legitimizing the “particularist” action which in its turn becomes the paradoxical *sine qua non* of “universality, “is thus not only the *lingua franca* which will allow it to be admitted by the modern world; for the Kurdish nationalist as for the Turkish one, it is not even an end in itself; it is a precondition of survival as a nation.” The link between these two aims is to a large extent determinant of the Kurdish intelligentsia’s historical vision and becomes a key element of future nationalist historiography” (Bozarslan,2003:22).

During this pivotal period, Kurdish intellectuals voiced pressing concerns about the far-reaching effects of modern civilization on their society. Hamit Bozarslan's (2003) study delves deeply into this critical examination, highlighting the vital issues discussed in the Kurdish periodical, *Jin*. ²⁸ They argued that survival in the new international order required both the preservation of Kurdish identity and the conscious adoption of modern political and cultural norms. As articulated in these writings, “old political doctrines are in decline,” and ignorance—even “one single hour”—could mean “death for a nation.” Europe and America were no longer perceived as existential threats but as sources of intellectual and institutional vitality: the “wind” from these regions was described not as “poisoned,” but as “a breath of life.” For these intellectuals, modernization was not antithetical to Kurdish identity; rather, it was a necessary condition for its preservation. Modern civilization is a catastrophe for those who refuse to adapt; however, it

²⁷ For the original source quoted by the author, see: J. Leca, “Nationalisme et Universalisme”, *Pouvoirs* no, 57 1991, pp.3242.

²⁸ These quotations selected by Dr, Hamit Bozarslan from various issue of *Jin* , ed. M. E. Bozarslan, Uppsala: Deng 1978-89

offers a powerful solution for nations willing to reform and strengthen themselves. In this discourse, resistance to change was often attributed to entrenched religious and tribal elites—described as *müteğallibe* (usurpers or self-serving notables)—who feared losing their authority in the face of popular awakening. Small nations, it was argued, had to align their intellectual horizons and political aspirations with the demands of the epoch. Simultaneously, Kurdish history was reinterpreted in a glorifying and mytho-symbolic manner to provide a collective past capable of sustaining national consciousness. The legend of Kawa the Blacksmith, for example, was invoked as a foundational narrative of liberation and resistance. National commemorations were portrayed as moments when “a lost history lives again,” binding past heroism to future aspirations. This synthesis of romanticized history and modern political thought constituted a central symbolic pillar of early Kurdish nationalism (Bozarslan, 2003).

The intensification of Kurdish national sentiment during the period of the Turkish National Liberation War was closely linked to the political vacuum created by the Ottoman collapse. Yet, despite the growing articulation of Kurdish distinctiveness, official discourse in Ankara continued to frame Kurds as an integral component of the broader Muslim-Turkish polity (Özcan, 2006). This tension between emerging Kurdish self-definition and state-imposed incorporation would soon become a defining feature of the Kurdish question in the republican era.

In a speech delivered in May 1920, Mustafa Kemal explicitly acknowledged the empire’s ethnic plurality, emphasizing the composite character of the emerging political community:

“The individuals which constitute our Assembly are not only Turk, or Kurd, or Laz, or Cerkez, but the components of the *Nation of Islam* composed of all. It is a sincere community.

Consequently, the nation that we strive to defend and protect does not consist of a single element. It is composed of various Muslim nations” (Ozcan, 2006:77).²⁹

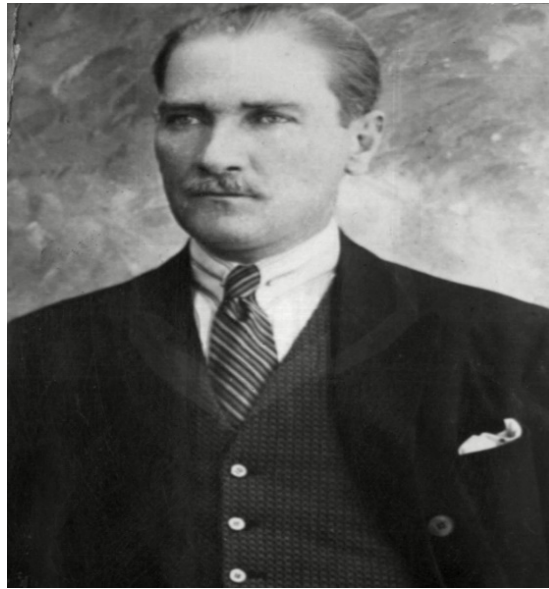


Figure 3: Mustafa Kemal Ataturk 1881 – 1938³⁰

Furthermore, during the Lausanne Conference session of 23 January 1923, İsmet İnönü—representing the Ankara government—articulated the official position that the Grand National Assembly and the new Turkish state were composed of both Turks and Kurds. He emphasized that the Assembly included representatives from both groups, presenting them as equal constituent elements of the political community (Özcan, 2006: 77).

“The Government of the Grand National Assembly is also the government of the Kurds as much as of the Turks. This is because the bonafide and legitimate representatives of the Kurds have taken part in the National Assembly and have been enjoying the right to participate in the government and to rule the country” (Ozcan, 2006:78).³¹

²⁹ For the original source; see; Kemal Ataturk (1952) *Ataturk ÜnSövwDemçleri*, Vol. 1, Ankara.

³⁰ This image is taken from the archive belonging to the official Britannica website, whose resources are allowed to be used for academic purposes; see the original source at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kemal-Ataturk>

³¹ This part of İnönü’s speech re-quoted by Ozcan from: İsmail Beşikçi (1969), *DoğuAnadolu’nunDüzeni; Sosyo-ekonomikveetniktemeller*, Vol.2, Yurt, Ankara.

However, these inclusive official discourses persisted only until the formal proclamation of the Republic in 1923. They functioned largely as strategic rhetoric during a critical struggle for survival—one that could not have succeeded without Kurdish military and political support (Özcan, 2006: 72). With the consolidation of the Kemalist regime, this language gradually shifted. The transformation of official discourse—articulated by government authorities and military commanders—played a decisive role in shaping what later became known as the “Turkish approach to the Kurdish issue” (ibid.).

This ideological reorientation is particularly evident in Mustafa Kemal’s famous six-day speech (*Nutuk*) delivered in 1927. In recounting the revolutionary struggle, Kemal articulated a vision of national liberation centered on the construction of a homogeneous Turkish nation-state. The earlier emphasis on a multi-ethnic Muslim partnership was replaced by a more centralized and explicitly Turkish nationalist framework (Özcan, 2006: 66).

“The Ottoman State, its independence, padishah, caliph, government, all these were without meaning and consisted of senseless words . . . Gentlemen, in the face of this situation there existed only one possible decision. That was to establish a new Turkish State, unconditionally independence, based on national sovereignty³²” (Ataturk 1938:9).

Martin van Bruinessen (1997: 2) identifies a decisive shift in the Kemalist conception of national identity through a statement attributed to Mustafa Kemal and published in a Diyarbakir newspaper in 1932: “The people of Diyarbakir, Van, Erzurum, Trabzon, Istanbul, Thrace and Macedonia are all children of the same race, veins of the same precious mineral.”³³ At first glance, this declaration appears to acknowledge the shared historical and cultural bonds among the diverse Muslim populations of Anatolia and former Ottoman territories. However, van

³²The original source was taken from M.K. Ataturk (1938) *Nutuk* (The Speech), Devlet Basimevi, Istanbul.

³³ The original source was taken from the Turkish Newspaper Archive, daily paper *Diyarbakir*, 6 September 1932.

Bruinessen notes that the statement ultimately subsumes this diversity under a singular ethno-genetic narrative, asserting that even the inhabitants of Diyarbakir—widely recognized as a central Kurdish city—were descendants of the Oghuz Turks (van Bruinessen, 1997: 4). Such claims reflected a broader effort to reframe ethnic plurality within a homogenizing Turkish national identity.

The ideological shift toward explicit pan-Turkish nationalism was already evident in official rhetoric prior to this statement. In 1930, Mahmut Esat (Bozkurt), then a high-ranking official, declared: “The lords of this country are Turks. Those who are not real Turks (öz Türk) have only one right in the Turkish fatherland, and that is the right to be servants and slaves” (van Bruinessen, 1997: 4).³⁴ This stark formulation underscored the increasingly exclusionary character of republican nationalism.

Institutionally, this transformation was codified in Article 88 of the 1924 Constitution, adopted shortly after the Treaty of Lausanne and the proclamation of the Republic. The article stipulated that “everyone who is a citizen of the Republic is a Turk,” defining Turkishness as a civic category while effectively erasing public recognition of ethnic plurality (Özcan, 2006: 78).³⁵ Although framed in Universalist terms, this provision facilitated the assimilationist imposition of Turkish identity upon non-Turkish populations, particularly the Kurds. The earlier wartime

³⁴ This statement has been taken by Bruinessen from the original Turkish source collected by Taha Parla, *Kemalist tek-parti ideolojisi ve CHP'nin Altı Ok'u, Istanbul: İletisim, 1992. p. 208.*

³⁵ The above-mentioned constitutional Article quoted by Ali Kemal Özcan has been taken from J.H. Barkey and G.E. Fuller's investigation (1998:10) demonstrating that: In the 1924 constitution, the terms “citizenship” and “citizen” had been equated with Turkishness. Accordingly, the document stated that one had to be a Turk to become a member of parliament and the like. Certainly the Kurds could qualify as “Turks,” but only at the expense of denying their own ethnic identity. Here then the seeds for eventual Kurdish dissatisfaction were planted: In a state now officially defined as “Turkish” the Kurds were not Turks, and only by giving up their ethnicity could they be treated as Turks. See the original source, J.H. Barkey and G.E. Fuller's (1998) *Turkey's Kurdish Question, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham/Boulder/New York/Oxford.*

discourse that had described Kurds as “brothers” and “partners” in the national struggle was thus replaced by a state-centered nationalism that denied the legitimacy of Kurdish collective identity (Özcan, 2006: 81).

From a broader theoretical perspective, this development resonates with Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the “minority question.” Arendt (1979: 270) argues that the post–World War I peace settlements created nation-states in contexts where the social and demographic conditions for homogeneous nationhood did not exist. While these treaties formally unified diverse populations within single states, they effectively designated certain groups as the “state people,” leaving others—minorities, nationalities, and ethnic communities—without genuine political representation. The promise of equal partnership remained largely rhetorical. In practice, governance and privilege were concentrated in the hands of the dominant national group, while others experienced marginalization and subordination. Applied to the Turkish case, this framework illuminates the structural contradiction between the republican ideal of equal citizenship and the exclusionary realities of nationalist state-building.

Simultaneously, dramatic changes in official ideology unsettled the religious foundations of earlier Kurdish–Turkish cooperation. The abolition of the caliphate in 1924 symbolized the dissolution of the supra-ethnic Islamic bond that had previously enabled Kurdish identity to coexist within a broader Muslim political community. For many Kurdish religious and tribal leaders, this rupture marked the end of a shared Islamic framework that had served as a guarantee of partnership (Bozarslan, 2003: 180). Such concerns are evident in Sheikh Said’s correspondence with Kurdish ulema and tribal chiefs, where the defense of religion and the preservation of Kurdish identity were articulated as inseparable causes.

Previously, we had a common Caliphate, and this gave our religious people a deep feeling of being a part of the same community as the Turks. Since the abolition of the Caliphate, the only thing left to us is the sense of Turkish repression.³⁶

The consolidation of republican ideology in Turkey decisively politicized ethnicity and nationality. Official discourse constructed “the Turk” not merely as a civic category but as a historical, institutional, and symbolic nation endowed with a uniquely legitimate claim to state power. In this framework, Turks were positioned as the rightful *state people* of the new republic, while other ethnic identities were denied parallel recognition (Entessar, 1989: 84). Such a hierarchy of belonging produced structural ethnic stratification. For the Kurds, this reality intensified both the imperative to preserve their distinct identity and the demand for equitable participation in political power—or, alternatively, for national self-determination (ibid.). Resistance to these exclusionary doctrines marked the initial crystallization of Kurdish collective-ethnic nationalism.

The years 1921–1925 illustrate that the establishment of the republic inaugurated a new historical moment in which the nation-state became the dominant political model. Communities unable to institutionalize themselves as nations risked assimilation into a larger polity (Bozarslan, 2003: 181). As the pan-Turkish character of the Kemalist regime became increasingly evident, diverse Kurdish actors—including traditional tribal elites, urban intellectuals, and educated military officers—began converging around a shared perception of political marginalization (Olson, 1989). This convergence fostered an unprecedented, though fragile, unity. Within this context, Sheikh Said’s 1925 fatwa declared resistance against the Ankara government a religious duty, framing opposition to the regime as both an Islamic and

³⁶ See the original source; H. Bozarslan, “Tribus, confréries et intellectuels: Convergence des réponses Kurdes au régime kemaliste”, in S. Vaner, *Modernisation autoritaire en Turquie et en Iran*, Paris: L’Harmattan 1991, p. 66.

national cause. While the rebellion has often been interpreted primarily through a religious lens, it simultaneously reflected the emerging synthesis between anti-Kemalist sentiment and Kurdish nationalist aspirations. The alliance between Sheikh Said and segments of the urban intelligentsia represented the first coordinated attempt to translate Kurdish national consciousness into organized political mobilization (Olson, 1989).

External geopolitical developments further intensified this process. The partition of Kurdistan between the Turkish Republic and the British Mandate in Iraq—particularly the detachment of Mosul—was widely perceived by Kurdish leaders as the loss of a vital part of their homeland to foreign powers (Bozarslan, 2003: 178). This territorial fragmentation deepened the sense of collective grievance and reinforced nationalist sentiment.

Bozarslan argues that the growth of Kurdish national consciousness must be understood in direct relation to the institutionalization of pan-Turkish nationalism along two principal axes: the state and language (Bozarslan, 2003). The Kemalist regime replaced the supra-ethnic Islamic framework of the Ottoman era with a state-centered identity defined as “Turkey,” in which linguistic homogeneity became the primary marker of nationhood. Turkish was elevated as the defining attribute of political belonging, while non-Turkish speakers were increasingly viewed as culturally backward or even politically suspect—potentially vulnerable to foreign manipulation (ibid.).³⁷

³⁷ Quoted by Bozarslan (2003:178), e.g. Based on this perception, M. Kemal’s speech in Adana, though targeting Arabic-speaking citizens, clearly identified the assimilation of non-Turks as one of the main goals of the Turkish Republic: “the language is one of the essential feature of a nation. A person who says that he is a part of the Turkish nation should before every thing else, and absolutely, speak Turkish. More than 20,000 citizens in Adana however, do not speak Turkish. This situation which has lasted 100 years. Will still continue for centuries if the Turkish Hearth, the Turkish youth and the the political institutions do not cure it. What will be the result? Those people who speak another language might collaborate with other people speaking other languages and act against us in times of trouble.” From original source: *Cumhuriyet*, 14.2.1931 re-published in *Ataturk’un Yurt Gezileri*, Ankara: Türkiye İls BankasıYayınları 1973, p.19.

Thus, the emergence of Kurdish nationalism was not merely a spontaneous awakening but a reactive and dialectical process. The ideological consolidation of pan-Turkism provided both the structural conditions and the intellectual stimulus for the formation of the first modern Kurdish nationalist movements.

Koçgiri Rebellion: A Struggle for the Implementation of the Treaty of Sèvres (1920)

The Koçgiri Rebellion constituted the first significant organized attempt by Kurdish nationalists to translate emerging national consciousness into concrete political action. The uprising began in November 1920 in the Dersim region, only three months after the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres on 10 August 1920. It derived its name from the Koçgiri tribe, which played a leading role in the mobilization (Olson, 1989). The rebellion was closely linked to Kurdish intellectual circles associated with the *Kürt Teali Cemiyeti* (Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan), who sought the implementation of Articles 62 and 64 of the Treaty of Sèvres. These provisions envisaged local autonomy for predominantly Kurdish regions, with the possibility of eventual independence under certain conditions. For its proponents, the treaty represented an international legal basis for Kurdish political claims (Olson, 1989).

A detailed contemporary account of the rebellion was provided by Nûrî Dersimî, a native of the region who had been sent from Istanbul as a representative of the Kurdish nationalist organization (Olson, 1989: 41). His testimony underscores the coordination—albeit limited—between urban nationalist elites and local tribal leadership. Historically, the Koçgiri uprising is significant because it framed Kurdish demands in terms of internationally recognized rights rather than solely tribal or religious grievances. It thus marked an early attempt to ground Kurdish aspirations in the emerging post–World War I international order. At the same time, the

suppression of the rebellion revealed the widening gap between earlier wartime rhetoric of Kurdish–Turkish partnership and the political priorities of the Ankara government. While Mustafa Kemal’s movement had previously relied on Kurdish cooperation during the War of Independence, the new leadership rejected the application of the Sèvres provisions concerning Kurdish autonomy. The rapid and forceful suppression of Koçgiri signalled that the consolidation of the Turkish national state would not accommodate autonomous Kurdish political arrangements (Olson, 1989). In this sense, the Koçgiri Rebellion represents a critical transitional moment: it was both the first organized Kurdish nationalist challenge to the Ankara government and an early indication of the uncompromising territorial and ideological framework of the emerging Kemalist state.



Figure 4: M. Nûrî Dêrsimî 1893-1973 ³⁸

³⁸This picture has been taken from one of the largest Kurdish picture archives with the right permission for academic purposes; see the original source at: <https://kurdistanboards.com/kurdish-leaders-past-current-t256-s352.html>

Certain provisions of the post–First World War settlement—particularly those inspired by President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points—appeared to affirm the principle of self-determination for non-Turkish peoples of the former Ottoman Empire. The Treaty of Sèvres (1920), especially Articles 62 and 64, provided a legal framework for Kurdish autonomy and the possibility of independence. To some extent, this prospect was implicitly acknowledged by the last Ottoman government in Istanbul. Encouraged by this international recognition, Kurdish intellectuals and political activists—among them Nûrî Dersimî—sought urgently to secure the implementation of the treaty (Olson, 1989).

The Ankara government, however, categorically rejected the treaty. Mustafa Kemal and the emerging pan-Turkish nationalist leadership regarded Sèvres as a British-sponsored instrument designed to partition Anatolia and dismantle Turkish sovereignty (Olson, 1989). Kemal not only opposed its provisions but also urged Kurdish youth to distance themselves from urban nationalist intellectuals in Istanbul, portraying the struggle instead as a common resistance against Western imperialism. While some Kurdish notables were drawn into cooperation with Ankara through promises of official positions and material incentives, nationalist activists continued mobilizing tribal networks in pursuit of either independence or at minimum local autonomy (Olson, 1989).

In coordination with Kurdish political circles in Istanbul, rebellion leaders in the Koçgiri region organized what became the first armed attempt to enforce the Sèvres provisions. They proclaimed a “provisional Kurdish government” and called upon the “noble Kurdish nation” to rise against pan-Turkist domination and the Kemalist administration (Bozarslan, 2003).

³⁹According to Nûrî Dersimî, by the summer of 1920 Kurdish forces in eastern Dersim had mobilized tens of thousands of tribesmen, conducted raids on military supply lines, and temporarily disrupted state authority in several localities (Olson, 1989).

Despite the treaty's international recognition of Kurdish claims, the Kemalist vision left no room for even limited autonomy. The Kurds were valued primarily as auxiliary tribal forces in the broader struggle against the Allied powers, not as a constituent nation entitled to political self-government (Olson, 1989). In response to Kurdish demands, Ankara adopted a dual strategy: delaying negotiations while preparing militarily and simultaneously pursuing a divide-and-rule policy by co-opting select tribal leaders with administrative appointments.

On 15 November 1920, following consultations among the rebellion's leadership, the Kurds formally presented a set of demands to Ankara, requesting clarification on whether the government recognized Kurdish autonomy, calling for the release of Kurdish prisoners, the withdrawal of Turkish officials and military forces from Kurdish-majority areas, and a response within a specified deadline. Rather than providing a substantive answer, Ankara dispatched a representative under the guise of negotiation—an initiative that proved inconclusive and, according to Olson, functioned primarily to gain time and push the conflict into the winter months (Olson, 1989). On 25 November, Kurdish leaders telegraphed Ankara, warning that armed rebellion would commence if the provisions concerning Kurdish autonomy and independence were not implemented (Olson, 1989: 43).

³⁹ The statement has been taken from the original text by Bozarslan (2003): B. öz, *BelgelerleKoçgiriOlayı*, İstanbul: Can Yayınları , 1999, pp. 271-5.

Open hostilities began in December 1920. Initially, the rebels achieved limited tactical successes. However, martial law was declared in early 1921, and the Turkish army—equipped with superior weaponry and organizational capacity—launched a decisive campaign. Reports attributed to Dersimî describe widespread destruction of villages, killings, forced evacuations, and scorched-earth tactics (Elise, 2009).⁴⁰ The rebellion was ultimately suppressed.

Several structural weaknesses contributed to its failure. The movement's core support base lay among Alevi Kurdish tribes in the Dersim region, limiting its appeal among the predominantly Sunni Kurdish population (Olson, 1989: 10). Sectarian divisions—exacerbated by late Ottoman policies—undermined broader Kurdish unity at a critical moment. Although state repression generated resentment among both Sunni and Alevi communities, the lack of cohesive inter-tribal and cross-sectarian coordination, combined with limited logistical capacity, prevented the uprising from achieving sustained national mobilization.

In retrospect, the Koçgiri Rebellion was militarily short-lived and politically unsuccessful. Nevertheless, its historical significance lies in its explicit invocation of international law and its framing of Kurdish claims in terms of modern nationalist self-determination. It marked the first organized confrontation between Kurdish nationalism and the Kemalist state, foreshadowing the more extensive rebellions that would follow in the republican era.

⁴⁰ In this report quoted by Massicard Elise (2009), according to Sivas's governor report, from May 31, 1921, 132 villages were burned and devastated, hundreds of people killed, their goods and livestock plundered, and that many villagers, frightened by the repression took refuge in the mountains, where they died of starvation and misery. Original sources: Dêsimî, Nuri, 1997[1952], *Kürdistan Tarihinde Dersim*, İstanbul: Doz. Also: Typeyran, Ebubekir Hazim, 1982, *Belgelerle Kürtuluş Savaş Anıları*, İstanbul: çağdaş.

Azadi Organization: A Path toward the First Coordinated Nationalist Movement

Following the suppression of the Koçgiri Rebellion and the steady consolidation of the Kemalist regime, Kurdish nationalist activity in Istanbul declined sharply. Many leading activists were arrested, forced into exile, or compelled to operate underground. Nevertheless, a number of prominent Kurdish officers and political figures reorganized within Turkey and, in 1923, established a clandestine organization known as *Azadi* (Freedom) (van Bruinessen, 1992: 270). Unlike earlier, largely urban intellectual associations, Azadi was rooted primarily in networks of former Ottoman and republican military officers, tribal notables, and regional elites.

Some of these activists later sought refuge in Syria, where—building upon earlier organizational experience—they contributed to the formation of *Khoybun* (Independence) in 1927. That organization would go on to play a leading role in the Ararat Rebellion (1928–1930), illustrating the continuity between early republican underground movements and later exile-based Kurdish nationalism (van Bruinessen, 1992).

The initial groundwork for Azadi began in late 1922, when Kurdish officers convened in Erzurum. They drafted a memorandum outlining “Kurdish demands” and reportedly attempted to secure Soviet support against the Ankara government. These overtures, however, went unanswered (van Bruinessen, 1992: 280). In 1923, a more structured initiative emerged under the leadership of Khalid Beg—son of a prominent Jibran tribal chief—and Yusuf Ziya Beg, a descendant of the former ruling family (mirs) of Bitlis. With the cooperation of several military officers, they established the central committee of Azadî. The organization’s primary objective was explicit: the achievement of Kurdish independence (ibid.).

Azadi's inaugural congress, held in 1924, marked a decisive moment in the evolution of Kurdish nationalist coordination. Sheikh Said—a respected Naqshbandi religious leader with substantial influence among Zaza-speaking tribes in northeastern Diyarbakir—was invited as a special guest due to his authority and mobilizing capacity. His participation symbolized a strategic convergence between secular-nationalist officers and religious leadership. The congress adopted two principal resolutions: (I) a general uprising would be organized, culminating in a declaration of Kurdish independence, and (II) The revolt would be carefully planned, with clear chains of command and thorough preparation to ensure coordinated action.

May 1925 was tentatively designated as the date for launching the uprising, as organizers anticipated that the necessary logistical and political preparations would require considerable time (van Bruinessen, 1992).

These discussions reveal an important transformation in Kurdish political organization. Unlike Koçgiri—which was regionally confined and partly reactive—Azadî represented a more systematic, centrally coordinated attempt to organize a nationwide insurrection. It sought to bridge tribal, military, and religious networks under a unified nationalist program. Although secrecy limited its capacity for broad mobilization, the organization laid the structural and ideological groundwork for what would soon become the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925—the first large-scale nationalist uprising in the early Turkish Republic. The brief political discussions and decisions below clearly outline a crucial component of the plan leading up to the uprising.

“It was generally felt that foreign assistance was necessary. These three possibilities: France (in Syria), the British (in Iraq), and the Russians. Many of the militia commanders, who had always seen Russia as their chief enemy and felt, for religious reasons, much closer to the Turks than to the anti-religious Bolsheviks, refused even to consider the latter possibility. It is said that it was again Shaikh Said who turned the tide and convinced the others that it was better to receive aid

from the unbelievers than to suffer the same fate as the Armenians. A courier was sent to Georgia. The Soviets allegedly answered that they were fully aware of the oppression of the Kurds but were not in a position to help them. They promised, however, not to assist the Turks in suppressing any Kurdish uprising. The British, too, were contacted but seem to have remained noncommittal as usual” (Bruinessen, 1992:280-81).

The first concrete manifestation of Azadi’s plans occurred in August 1924, when a military garrison in Beytüşşebap mutinied against the Turkish government. The uprising created momentary panic, and several Turkish officers reportedly withdrew in anticipation of a broader revolt. However, the rebellion was poorly coordinated and failed to expand beyond its immediate locality. It was quickly suppressed, marking a premature and unsuccessful attempt to initiate the planned insurrection (van Bruinessen, 1992).

In the aftermath, the Azadi Organization rapidly unraveled. Despite having developed an organizational framework and established connections between Kurdish military officers and influential tribal leaders, the network proved vulnerable to state surveillance and repression. Prominent leaders, including Khalid Beg Cibrani and Yusuf Ziya, were arrested and subsequently executed, dealing a decisive blow to the organization’s leadership (Bozarslan, 2003: 176).

Although the 1924 Azadi uprising was short-lived and strategically unsuccessful, it should be understood as the preparatory phase of a broader nationalist resistance. The organizational experience, networks, and grievances that emerged during this period directly fed into the Sheikh Said Rebellion of February 1925, which represented the first large-scale and coordinated Kurdish uprising against the Kemalist regime.

Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925: The First Modern Kurdish Nationalist Movement

The final years of the Ottoman Empire—and particularly the Kurdish participation in the suppression and mass violence against Armenians—triggered not only moral and political reassessments but also a deeper reflection among Kurdish elites about their own collective future. For some Kurdish intellectuals and political leaders, these events revealed the precarious position of non-Turkish Muslim communities within a political order increasingly shaped by pan-Turkist ideology (Bozarslan, 2003: 176). The realization that the emerging Republic of Turkey would prioritize a homogenizing Turkish national identity contributed to a growing sense of urgency among Kurdish actors. Within this context, the Sheikh Said Rebellion of February 1925 emerged as the first large-scale and coordinated Kurdish nationalist movement in the republican era. Unlike earlier localized uprisings, it was grounded in a broader convergence between traditional tribal and religious authorities and segments of the modern Kurdish intelligentsia. This convergence reflected an emerging collective consensus: the Kemalist state was consolidating itself along explicitly pan-Turkish lines, leaving little room for Kurdish political or cultural autonomy (ibid.).

Sheikh Said, a prominent Naqshbandi religious leader with considerable influence among Kurdish tribes—particularly Zaza-speaking communities—became the symbolic and practical focal point of this mobilization. Although the rebellion was articulated in religious language and framed partly as a defense of Islam against the secularizing reforms of Ankara, it simultaneously embodied Kurdish national aspirations. The abolition of the caliphate, the imposition of Turkish as the sole language of public life, and the broader project of centralization were perceived not merely as religious affronts but as existential threats to Kurdish identity.

The crystallization of this emerging national consciousness is reflected in manuscripts attributed to Sheikh Said, where religious legitimacy and national grievance intersect. In these writings, resistance to the Kemalist regime is presented both as a defense of faith and as a response to the denial of Kurdish collective rights. Thus, the rebellion cannot be reduced to a purely religious reaction; rather, it represents the fusion of religious authority, tribal structures, and modern nationalist sentiment into a coordinated political movement.

“Under the pretext of religion and the Caliphate, the Turks and the Ottomans have for over 400 years been pushing us gradually towards slavery, darkness, ignorance, and destruction . . . They came among us as migrants. By trickery and intrigues, they occupied our country and reduced it to ruins. Never in its history has Kurdistan been in a state of such devastation. The Turanis and Grey Wolves built their hearths like the cuckoo. May your hands do not tremble in battle. Do not fear death; to accept a life full of injustice, fear, sadness, sorrow, and cruelty is a shame for everyone. It is better to die for liberty than to live in slavery. The Turks are oppressive and vile towards the Kurds. They do not honour their promises. We must give them such a lesson that the entire world understands their hypocrisy, their bloodshed, and their barbarism. A shared death in the name of justice and liberation is preferable to life among these brutes”.⁴¹



⁴¹ See the original source at M. van Bruinessen, *Mulla, Sufis and Heretics: The Role of Religion in Kurdish Society. Collected Articles*, Istanbul: The Isis Press 2000, especially pp. 143-198.

Figure 5: Sheikh Said of Piran (1865-1925)⁴²

The Kemalist government, emboldened by its victory over the Greeks three years earlier, had come to regard widespread popular support and the decline of radical opposition as established facts (Bozarslan, 2003: 177). Consequently, despite warnings from local Kemalist officials who recognized the growing appeal of Kurdish nationalism, Ankara dismissed the issue as insignificant. This underestimation of the explosive potential of the Kurdish question persisted until the outbreak of the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925 (ibid.).

The government's political and military response to the rebellion was shaped by the Kemalists' interpretive framework, deeply influenced by contemporary social Darwinist thought (Bozarslan, 2003). Within this framework, Kurdish identity was constructed as a form of negative revivalism associated with "barbarism," "backwardness," and "reaction," in contrast to the positive revivalism attributed to Turkish identity, grounded in modernity, civilization, and progress. Guided by this ideological outlook, the Republic initiated, immediately after the brutal suppression of the rebellion, a long-term strategy of Turkification in the regions west of the Euphrates. With the abolition of the caliphate in March 1924, a central symbol of Turkish–Kurdish brotherhood disappeared. The erosion of this shared religious-political bond, combined with the new policies of pan-Turkism, contributed to the spread of Kurdish nationalist sentiment across diverse segments of Kurdish society.

"If Kurdish accusations are correct, the fear of Kurdish nationalism led the Ankara government to take measures that could only make Kurdish nationalist sentiments more general. In the name

⁴²The picture was chosen from the Washington Kurdish Institute's archive. See the original source at:

<https://dckurd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Sheikh-Said-Piran.jpg>

of populism, the Kurdish language was forbidden in public places (1924); in the name of the abolition of feudalism, Kurdish aghas, but also intellectuals, were sent into exile to western Turkey. A new law (Nr.1505) made it possible to expropriate the land of Kurdish big landlords and give it to Turkish speakers who were to be settled in Kurdistan”(Bruinessen,1992:281).

Consequently, despite lacking a coherent strategic blueprint, the political elites directed most of their efforts toward securing the support of influential figures across Kurdistan in order to stage a general uprising and ultimately proclaim an independent Kurdistan. Members of the Azadi Organization recognized the considerable social and religious authority exercised by Sheikh Said and other sheikhs in mobilizing and organizing the population. For this reason, they agreed that the sheikhs should serve as the visible leaders of the rebellion. This decision was based on several considerations: first, the sheikhs commanded large personal followings and possessed substantial financial resources—Sheikh Said, in particular, was exceptionally wealthy; second, their participation would lend the rebellion a religious character, thereby attracting broader support beyond their immediate followers; and third, in order to secure unity and cooperation among the tribes, the sheikhs could perform their traditional roles as mediators and arbiters of conflict (Bruinessen, 1992: 282). Indeed, during the rebellion, the sheikhs’ mediating authority and cross-tribal prestige likely contributed to four of the five rebel fronts being placed under their command, with Sheikh Said appointed overall commander of operations (ibid.).

The evolving political stance of the influential sheikhs toward the Kemalist state was rooted primarily in a religious worldview. By contrast, for the Azadi officers, opposition to Ankara stemmed mainly from the state’s structural transformation and its explicit denial of Kurdish national and cultural identity. The plausibility of these claims is reinforced by a detailed list of grievances presented to British intelligence interrogators by Azadi members who fled to Iraq. Among their complaints were:

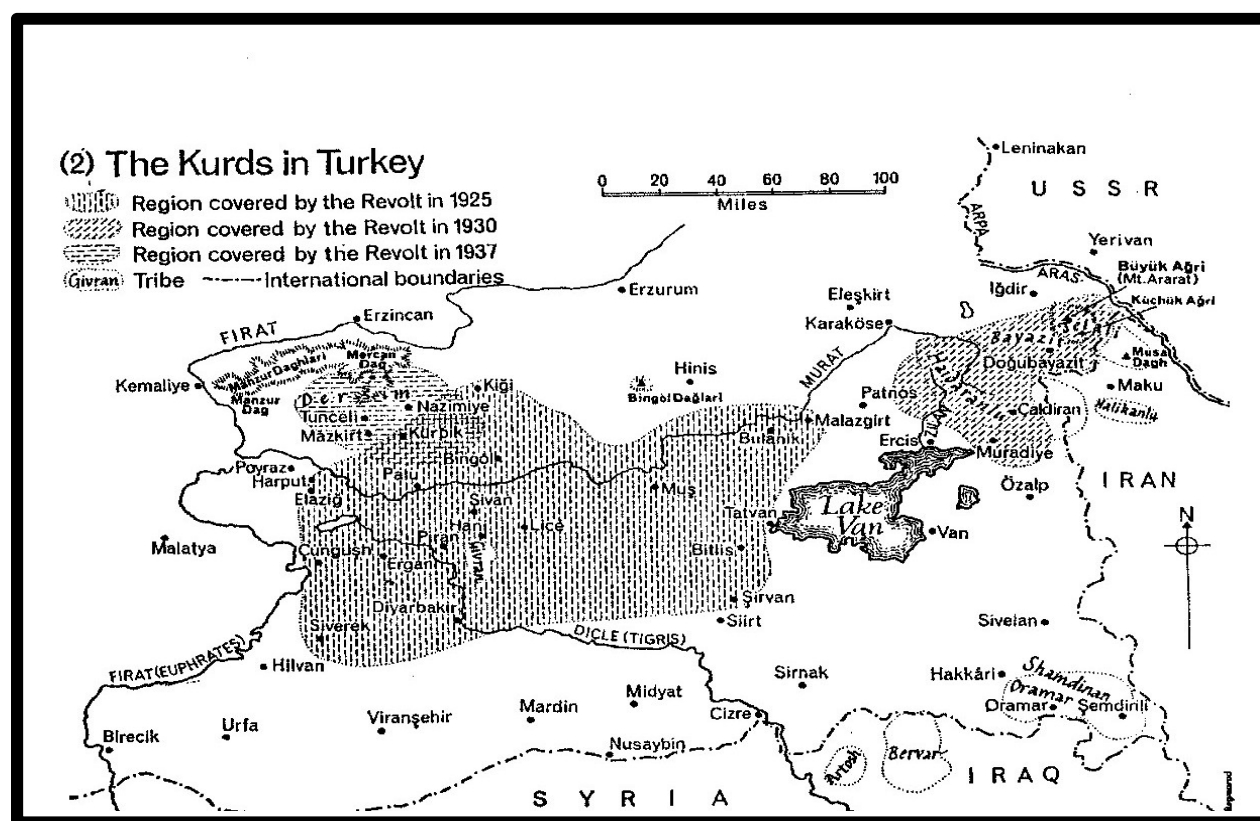
1. A new law on minorities that aroused suspicion that the government intended to disperse the Kurds to western Anatolia and resettle Turks in the east.
2. The abolition of the caliphate, one of the last symbolic ties binding Kurds and Turks.
3. Restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language in schools and courts; Kurdish education was effectively prohibited.
4. The removal of the term “Kurdistan” from geography textbooks.
5. The appointment of Turks to all senior administrative posts in Kurdistan, with only carefully selected Kurds allowed to occupy lower-level positions.
6. A lack of proportional state benefits relative to the taxes collected in Kurdish regions.
7. Government interference in the 1923 elections for the Grand National Assembly in the eastern provinces.
8. A policy of deliberately setting tribes against one another.
9. Frequent raids by Turkish soldiers on Kurdish villages, including the confiscation of livestock and inadequate compensation for requisitioned supplies; discrimination against Kurdish rank-and-file soldiers in the army, who were assigned the harshest duties.
10. Attempts to exploit Kurdish mineral resources with the assistance of German capital (Bruinessen, 1992: 283).⁴³

These grievances were widely shared among the Kurdish population, who experienced the impact of pan-Turkist policies in their daily lives. The cumulative effect of these policies generated significant potential for nationalist mobilization. Although by the end of 1924 most of the Azadi Organization had disintegrated, some remaining members still hoped to implement

⁴³ See the original source, ‘*Kurdish nationalist society in East Anatolia*’ report enclosed in FO 371, 1924: E110993/11093/65. See as a quotation also in M. Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and the State*, pp. 282-83.

their plans for a mass uprising in the spring of 1925 by forging alliances with religious leaders and their followers (ibid.).

The uprising led by Sheikh Said of Piran began in late 1924 and was intended to escalate further in March 1925. However, from the outset, tribal rivalries and religious divisions posed serious obstacles to national cohesion, contributing to the rebellion's rapid defeat (MacDowall, 2004).



Map 5: Indicates the northern part of Kurdistan, where the Kurds have historically formed a prominent majority population located in the southeast of Turkey. The map also clearly illustrates the areas where the first Kurdish rebellions took place between 1925 and 1937.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The original source has taken from Kurdish book: "حکومتی کوردستان، ریه ندانی ۱۳۲۴ - سه رماهه زی ۱۳۲۵: کورد له گه مهی سوفیتی دا"

(۲۰۰۷) نه و شیروان مسه فایه مین،

Noshirwan Emin 2007 "THE GOVERNMENT OF KURDISTAN, 22Jan- 17 Dec 1946, *The Kurds in the Soviet Game*", Iraq: Center for Kurdish Strategic Studies; the permission has given by the author to the educational usage.

Evidently, during this period, ethnic and national consciousness was spread in Kurdistan by two different dynasties, the Seyyids of Nihari were tEvidently, during this period, ethnic and national consciousness was spread in Kurdistan by two different dynasties, the Seyyids of Nihari were

As the uncontested spiritual leader of much of the Zaza-speaking community, Sheikh Said was able to mobilize his *murids* (followers) in Palu, Lice, Hani, Çapakçur, Jibran, and even among segments of the population in the provincial capital of Diyarbakir (ibid.). However, long-standing religious and tribal antagonisms—exacerbated by the Ottoman Empire’s divisive policies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly under Abdülhamid II—prevented the rebellion from gaining the support of several influential tribes, including the Alevi Khurmak and Lawlan (ibid.).

The insurgent leadership resolved that by the second half of March the participating tribes, under their respective chiefs, would first secure control over their home territories by expelling government forces. Thereafter, they would converge on five predestinated fronts for a coordinated final offensive (MacDowall, 2004: 190). Yet events unfolded differently. An unexpected clash on 8 February between Sheikh Said’s bodyguards and Turkish gendarmes—who were attempting to arrest some of his supporters—forced the rebels to initiate the uprising prematurely (ibid.). Although early successes were recorded in the northeast, where the Hasanani and Jibran tribes captured Malazgirt and Bulanık, the rebellion encountered strong resistance from Alevi tribes such as the Khurmak and Lawlan, who had little incentive to support a movement led predominantly by Sunni actors. Efforts to seize Diyarbakir—envisioned as the principal stronghold of the uprising—failed due to the reluctance of segments of the urban population and opposition from rival tribal groups (ibid.). Similarly, although Varto fell to the

the representatives of the religious movement, and the Badr Khans were the leaders of the secular current. He representatives of the religious movement and the Badr Khans were the leaders of the secular current.

Jibran forces on 11 March, it was soon abandoned amid fears of a large-scale counteroffensive by Turkish gendarmes and mobilized Alevi tribal forces. As rebel units advanced from Muş toward Bitlis, they encountered resistance and indifference from local tribes (ibid.). While the occupation of Elazığ on 24 March initially appeared to signal momentum, disorder and looting of government property alienated local Kurdish residents, who soon demanded the rebels' withdrawal. By the end of March, the uprising in this region had effectively collapsed without achieving its strategic objectives (ibid.).

In addition to these internal setbacks, the rapid concentration of government forces decisively halted the rebellion's advance. By 26 March, numerous rebel units found themselves encircled. Although a few groups managed to escape, many were captured or killed in scattered engagements (MacDowall, 2004: 196).⁴⁵ In mid-April, in what proved to be the final episode of the uprising, Sheikh Said and several followers were ambushed by government forces while attempting to cross the Murad River between Genç and Palu. Their capture was reportedly facilitated by the betrayal of a Gibran tribal chief. With this, the rebellion effectively came to an end (ibid.). On 13 August, Sheikh Said and forty-six associates were executed in Diyarbakir. Approximately 7,500 individuals were arrested and tried before Independence Tribunals, of whom 660 were executed (MacDowall, 2004).⁴⁶ Under the pretext of eliminating "remnants of feudalism," numerous sheikhs, mirs, aghas, and their families—many not directly implicated in the uprising—were exiled to western Anatolia. The army's subsequent operations across the

⁴⁵ According to McDowall's investigations, in late February Turkish army, had mobilized 35,000 men in eight infantry divisions, and on 1 March by having France consent to use the railway running in its Syrian territory to move more forces to the scene of revolt Turkish forces in the region numbered about 52,000 which was equivalent with half of the Turkish army that had built up by the new pan-Turkish Republic; see the source: David McDowall, 2004, *A Modern History of The Kurds*, pp. 195-196.

⁴⁶ As had been justified under a *Law for the Restoration of Order*, on 4 March the newly appointed prime minister, İsmet İnönü, announced draconian measures in which, two "Tribunals of Independence" were to be established, one in the east and the other in Ankara. The eastern tribunal was empowered to apply capital punishment without reference to Ankara, this freedom of action made the government's retaliatory actions extremely brutal; see the source: David McDowall, 2004, *A Modern History of The Kurds*, pp. 195.

countryside were marked by severe reprisals: hundreds of villages were destroyed and thousands of civilians were killed (Bruinessen, 1992: 290). The suppression of the rebellion thus not only crushed the immediate insurgency but also furnished the Kemalist regime with a legal and political framework to eliminate broader opposition.

“Yusuf Zia Beg and Khalid Beg Jibran, already in prison, were executed in April. In Diyarbakir and other Kurdish towns known nationalists were arrested and some subsequently executed. In Istanbul Shaykh Abd al Qadir was framed and charged with dealing with the British. Many others were rounded up, for example Khoja Salih Effendi, the former deputy for Erzerum who had spoken up for the Kurds in the Assembly in 1922 Likewise the government began to harry journalists who wrote unwelcome commentaries on political events” (McDowall, 2004:196-197).

Although the rebellion was swiftly suppressed, it's tragic outcome revealed how geographical fragmentation, linguistic diversity, socio-economic disparities, and religious divisions constituted significant obstacles to the formation of a unified Kurdish national movement. While Kurdish resistance to the pan-Turkist state persisted throughout the interwar period (1918–1939), these structural constraints continued to impede the consolidation of a cohesive national identity within Kurdish society.

Continued Resistance: From Khoybun to the Ararat (Ağrı Dağı) Rebellion

Despite the failure of Sheikh Said's uprising, Kurdish resistance to state repression persisted for more than a decade. In response to the violent suppression and mass deportations of various tribes to central Anatolia, sporadic uprisings and widespread disorder occurred throughout 1925 and much of 1926. Tribes in the affected regions, as well as elsewhere, took up arms against the state's genocidal policies and the brutal tactics of its security forces (McDowall, 2004: 198). The military cordoned off the region and imposed strict censorship on the press. Although exact numbers are difficult to determine, the British ambassador George Clerk estimated that

approximately 20,000 people were forcibly displaced—a campaign reminiscent, in scale and method, of the mass deportations of Armenians in 1915 (ibid.).

“The agha and shaykhly class were singled out. According to *The Times* at least 150 such notable families, which imply perhaps five or six thousand men, women and children, were deported to western Anatolia. Many died on the way and some of the better-looking women are said to have disappeared. No wonder observers thought of the Armenians” (McDowall, 2004:200).

Furthermore, according to two influential Kurdish propaganda documents published in 1928 and 1930, during the winter of 1926–27, approximately 200 villages, with a population of 13,000, were destroyed. Over the entire period from 1925 to 1928, around 10,000 houses were demolished, more than 15,000 people were massacred, and over half a million were exiled, of whom roughly 200,000 perished (McDowall, 2004).⁴⁷

Although the brutal repression of the Kurds between 1925 and 1927 appeared to signal the end of the Kurdish national struggle, many nationalists who had fled the country immediately sought to organize a new movement. In October 1927, a political congress held in Lebanon by members of various Kurdish organizations—including the Kurdistan Superiority Association (*Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti*), the Kurdish Social Affairs Organization (*Kürt Teşkilat-İçtimaiye Cemiyeti*), and the Kurdish National Party (*Kürt Millet Fırkası*)—led to the founding of a new political party, Khoybun (Independence). Unlike previous movements, Khoybun explicitly sought to base its struggle on a clear separation from tribal and religious affiliations (McDowall, 2004). Learning

⁴⁷ One of these documents was a report (F#371/12255) sent by a British officer, Hough to the British ambassador, Chamberlain in Ankara from Aleppo on 15 November 1927, and the second document taken from two different sources, Sureya Bedr Khan, *The Case of Kurdistan against Turkey* (Philadelphia, 1929), p. 63 and Bletch Chirguh, *La Question Kurde* (Cairo, 1930), p. 33.

from the bitter experiences of 1924–1925, the newly established party emphasized the importance of creating an effective military force capable of organizing and leading popular uprisings within Kurdistan. As a first concrete step toward realizing this goal, the party sought to establish a central office in Aleppo to coordinate internal logistics and communication (McDowall, 2004).



Figure 6: Participants of the congress of the Kurdish independence movement Khoybun in 1927⁴⁸

Learning from the bitter experiences of 1924–1925, the newly established Khoybun party emphasized the necessity of forming an effective military force capable of organizing and leading popular uprisings within Kurdistan. As a first concrete step, the party sought to establish

⁴⁸This picture has been taken from an Internet source permitted for academic purposes, see, <http://www.saradistribution.com/thecaseofkurdistan.htm>

a central office in Aleppo to coordinate internal logistics and communications (McDowall, 2004). The primary objective was to unite the tribes—regardless of religious affiliation—and to build a liberation movement grounded in modern nationalist principles (Aras, 2014: 49).

Subsequently, the party planned to organize a group of revolutionaries to operate in the mountains of northern Kurdistan, with the goal of declaring an interim government and gradually liberating various areas through sustained military operations (ibid.). Drawing lessons from British and French policies, which had often undermined Kurdish aspirations—especially after the establishment of the Kemalist regime in 1923—the party sought alliances beyond traditional networks. These efforts included:

1. Bilateral cooperation with the Caliphal Monarchist Party to leverage contacts among experienced expatriates.
2. Acceptance of financial assistance from a branch of the International Minority Movement in Odessa, despite a general mistrust of Bolsheviks based on prior experiences.
3. A practical alliance with the Armenian Dashnak Party for military collaboration against Turkey (McDowall, 2004).⁴⁹

Despite assurances to Britain and France that it would not incite Kurdish populations in Iraq and Syria to disobey law and order, and following strong Turkish protests, France ultimately banned Khoybun's activities in Aleppo in the summer of 1928 (McDowall, 2004). Nevertheless, the party pressed forward, taking practical and organized steps to establish a renewed nationalist movement. In the same year, a new uprising began in the mountainous region of Ararat (Ağrı

⁴⁹ The International Minority Movement originated as a part of the Red International of Trade Unions of Britain in the 1920s which made a significant contribution to the education of the workers and minorities in the spirit of proletarian internationalism. From early 1930, this organization ceased to exist as a mass movement; see the source at: <https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Minority+Movement>.

Dağı), led by a small group of experienced fighters under the command of Ehsan Nouri Pasha, a capable and charismatic officer formerly associated with the Azadi movement.

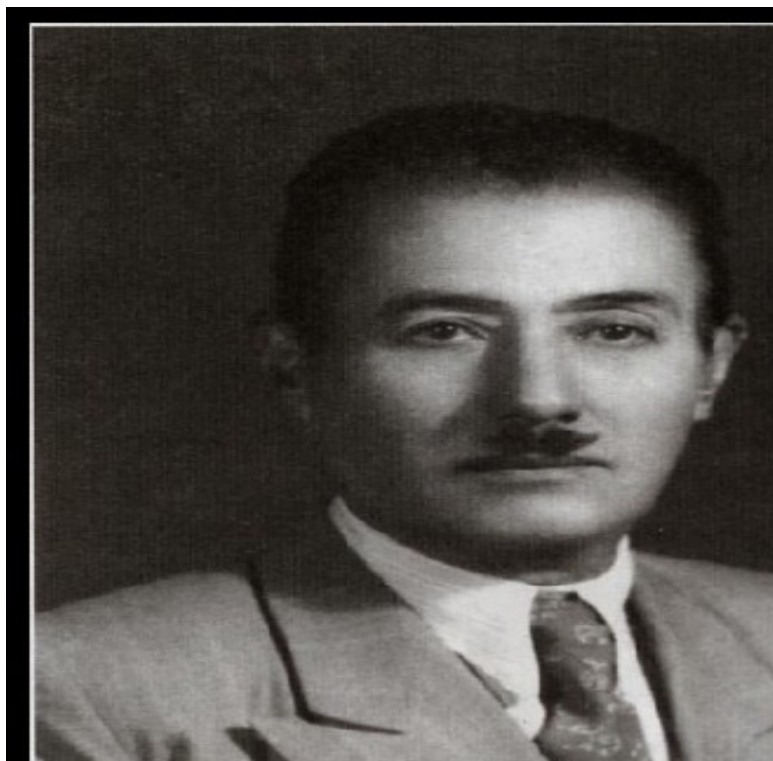


Figure 7: Ihsan Nuri Pasha - The Leader of the Kurdish Ararat Revolt 1927-1930
As a legendary leader, he was known as the Eagle of Ararat
1892-March 25th 1976⁵⁰

The Ararat region was chosen primarily because it had already become a center of resistance, led by local chieftains who strongly opposed the state's policy of deporting Kurdish tribes to central Anatolia. When these leaders joined forces under the command of Ehsan Nouri Pasha, the uprising at Ararat quickly gained momentum (McDowall, 2004). The rebels succeeded in mobilizing over 5,000 armed men, destroyed a Turkish military unit early in the campaign, and subsequently took control of several areas to the north and east of Ararat.

⁵⁰This picture was selected from a free authorized Internet archive; see source, at <http://www.saradistribution.com/ihsannuripasa.htm>



Map 6: Shows Mount Ararat (circled) and neighbouring countries, as well as indicates its geopolitical importance as the border crossing point between Iran, Turkey and Armenia.⁵¹

In the spring of 1930, the rebels sought to expand their control over the foothills of Ararat. Facing difficulty in suppressing the uprising, the Turkish army devised a regional strategy against the Kurds. Ankara not only promised the Soviets to secure the Araxes border but also negotiated access to Soviet railway facilities to enable faster military mobilization.⁵² Additionally, because Kurdish and Armenian forces were providing support to the rebels from

⁵¹The original copy is belonged to Map data ©2019 Google;officially used for academic purposes by a-maverick Grope at: <https://www.a-maverick.com/blog/climbing-mount-ararat-borders-bears-and-rockets>

⁵² At the present time, Mount Ararat forms a near-quadrilateral point between Turkey, Armenia, Iran, and the Nakhichevan exclave of Azerbaijan, however, in Soviet-era Armenian border with Turkey including Araxes was controlled by the Soviet army; see the maps at: <https://www.thegutsgourmet.net/cradle.html>

Iran, the Kemalist government recognized the need to concentrate on the Iranian border east of Ararat to prevent further military setbacks. On 12 July, a major battle involving 15,000 troops, artillery, and several aircraft took place, resulting in heavy casualties on both sides. Turkey subsequently warned Tehran that if Iranian authorities failed to prevent rebel crossings, Ankara would exercise “freedom of action” and pursue insurgents within Iranian territory (McDowall, 2004: 205). Despite these setbacks, Kurdish forces launched a significant counteroffensive in July and August to encircle Turkish troops around Ararat and advance toward Diyarbakir. Fierce clashes on the Zilan Plain ultimately forced the rebels eastward, compelling them to retreat into Iran (ibid.). Eventually, with over 50,000 troops mobilized and coordination with Iranian authorities in Tabriz, the Turkish military pursued the rebels across the border. By August, 3,000 Kurds were compelled to surrender. In September, the army captured the strategic saddle between lesser and Greater Ararat, killing many rebels and forcing the remainder to retreat southeast of Ararat (McDowall, 2004: 206). By June, due to coordinated Turkish and Iranian operations, the Ararat uprising was decisively defeated. The Turkish government again resorted to widespread massacres and punitive measures. According to the British Embassy in Turkey, security forces executed 1,500 Kurds following mass arrests in Erzurum and surrounding areas. During the operation known as *nettoyage* (cleansing) at the end of August, 3,000 civilians—including men, women, and children—were killed around the Arijish and Zilan plains. Villages were destroyed, and 1,500 families from Julamark (Hakkari), Siirt, Lice, and Diyarbakır were forced to flee to the Iraqi border.⁵³ Simultaneously, in coordination with Turkey, Iran deported

⁵³ McDowall extracted a description of the events and statistics of the Kurdish massacre after the defeat of the Ararat uprising from two archives of correspondence between the British ambassador and staff in Turkey; for reference to the main sources see FO 371/14580 O’Leary to Clerk, Istanbul, 16 July 1930; and FO371/16981 Matthews to Morgan, 20 December 1932.

405 families from Khoy and the border tribes into Turkish territory, where they were resettled in Western Anatolia (McDowall, 2004: 206).

In sum, the Ararat rebellion represented an attempt to establish a Kurdish national state and achieve the liberation of Kurdistan on the basis of modern nationalism. However, at the time, this idea was primarily embraced by intellectuals and political elites, as strong tribal loyalties impeded the development of a shared national consciousness. Consequently, the rebellion remained confined to a limited area and, after a series of uneven confrontations, ended in total failure. Nevertheless, resistance to state repression continued. Under the leadership of the Alevi cleric Sayyid Riza, the people of Dersim and its surroundings launched another rebellion in 1934, which persisted until 1938 before being violently suppressed, resulting in further massacres (Aras, 2014: 78).

The Rebellion of Sayyid Riza in Dersim: 1934–1938

The history of Kurdish resistance in Dersim against central government repression stretches back to the beginning of Sultan Abdülhamid II's reign in 1876. Since that time, the region's inhabitants—primarily the Zaza-speaking Alevi Shiite minority—were consistently marginalized by state policies. Local authority, officially vested in the Sunni majority, systematically undermined the ethnic and religious identity of the Alevis, placing their cultural heritage at risk. However, with the emergence of the modern Turkish state and the replacement of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood's influence with Pan-Turkish nationalism, the state's policy of eradicating minority identities increasingly targeted the Alevis. Following the failure of the Ararat uprising, the total suppression of the Dersim movement became a central priority for the Kemalist government (Aras, 2014: 78–79). Due to long-standing religious segregation and historical

oppression by the Sunni majority prior to the establishment of the Kemalist regime, the people of Dersim not only refused to cooperate with the uprisings of Sheikh Said and Ararat but also viewed these movements as fundamentally incompatible with their ethnic and religious identity (Aras, 2014). Beyond religious differences and internal tensions between the Alevi Shiites of Dersim and the Sunni majority, the brutal suppression of the Dersim movement must also be understood as part of the Kemalist social engineering project. This project sought to construct an idealized, Westernized society by dismantling so-called “traditional” and “backward” structures, a justification used to enforce the total subjugation of Turkish society during the early Republican period.

Since the onset of Kemalist rule, the people of Dersim engaged in a persistent struggle for religious rights and local autonomy. Tensions escalated in 1927 when 4,000 soldiers were dispatched to suppress the defiance of the Koch-Ushaq tribe. In 1930, the regime continued to repress popular demands through deportations, disarmament, forced migrations, and the resettlement of tribes in central Anatolia. Over the following years, the Kemalist government intensified its efforts to assert control over Dersim and its surrounding regions (Aras, 2014). According to an official British embassy report, by late 1935, the government had formulated a plan to subjugate and restructure Dersim through a combination of administrative reorganization and military repression. Yet, as the state prepared for another crackdown, the people of Dersim, under the leadership of Seyyed Reza, were likewise mobilizing to defend their existence and identity, preparing for another unequal conflict in early 1934 (Aras, 2014).

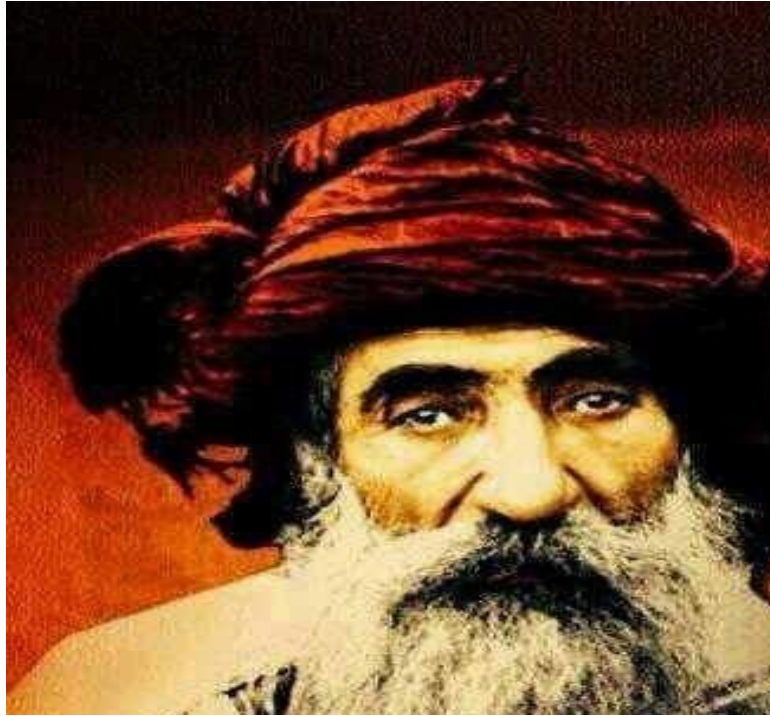


Figure 8: Sayyid Riza of Dersim (1863 – 1937) ⁵⁴

In its initial attempt to assert control over Dersim, the Kemalist government altered the region's administrative status, establishing it as a *vilayet* (province) renamed Tunceli and appointing a military governor to oversee the area. By 1936, the government had begun constructing military roads and preparing logistical infrastructure in anticipation of a final military campaign the following year (McDowall, 2004: 206).

While more than 1,500 Dersim Kurds were preparing for a potential crackdown, the movement's leaders sent a delegation to the military governor, General Alpdoğan, in Elazığ, requesting recognition of local rights. In response, the governor ordered the execution of all the envoys (ibid.). In retaliation, Kurdish forces ambushed a military unit in early May, killing ten officers

⁵⁴ This picture has been taken from the website Pinterest with permission for academic purposes; see, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/pin-en-kurdistan4all--375487687691967691/>

and fifty soldiers, providing the army with a pretext for large-scale repression and massacres (ibid.).

The next phase of conflict, beginning in early 1937, saw 600 rebels surrender between May and July. In August, the forced evacuation of villages and the destruction of homes by military forces not only provoked further clashes but also escalated unrest and disorder across the region (McDowall, 2004: 206). During this period, Seyyed Reza submitted a complaint to Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Minister, detailing the crimes of the Kemalist regime against the Kurdish population. He explained the causes of the Dersim uprising and requested international mediation to prevent further bloodshed.

“The government had tried to assimilate the Kurdish people for years, oppressing them, banning publications in Kurdish, persecuting those who spoke Kurdish and forcibly deporting people from fertile parts of Kurdistan for uncultivated areas of Anatolia where many had perished. The prisons were full of non-combatants; intellectuals were shot, hanged or exiled to remote places. ‘Three million Kurds’ he concluded, demand to live in freedom and peace in their own country”.⁵⁵

Finally, in the winter of 1937, facing a military siege and severe shortages of food and equipment, Seyyed Reza and several other leaders of the rebellion were compelled to surrender and were immediately executed (McDowall, 2004: 207). Despite the capture of its leadership, the mass suppression and massacre of the Dersim population continued into the spring of 1938, with extensive aerial bombardment, the use of chemical gases, and the deployment of some 50,000 troops—including army, police, and gendarmerie forces (ibid.).

⁵⁵These statements are directly quoted from McDowall’s investigation (2004) that has been taken from the original source: FO 371/20864 Sayyid Riza to the British Foreign Secretary, Dersim, 30 July 1937.

According to documents from the British Embassy archives, the operation involved methods reminiscent of those used against the Armenians during the Great War: thousands of Kurds, including women and children, were killed; others, mostly children, were thrown into the Euphrates; and thousands in less resistant areas, stripped of their livestock and property, were deported to provinces in central Anatolia. A separate French report estimated that nearly 40,000 Kurds lost their lives during the suppression of the Dersim uprising. Additionally, 3,000 local leaders were sentenced to exile, and the remaining population remained under strict military rule until 1948.

With the end of these operations in 1938, the massacres and ethnic cleansing in Dersim concluded, ushering in a period of nearly three decades of enforced silence. This prolonged period reflects the government's broader strategy of ethnic cleansing and cultural assimilation, which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

Summary

A brief sociological overview in this chapter demonstrates that, after centuries of occupation and subjugation by foreign powers, the Kurds entered the 20th century with a constrained awareness of their ethnic and national identity. While the tribal structure of Kurdish society arose naturally from environmental conditions and the communal way of life of its people, the emergence of nation-states in the early 20th century posed a profound challenge to this social order. Under the Ottoman Empire, Kurds were able to maintain territorial and ethnic cohesion through religious brotherhood; however, the rise of the Young Turks and the subsequent consolidation of the Pan-Turkish regime soon resulted in the total denial of Kurdish ethnic and national identity.

The resistance and tribal uprisings of the Kurds—from the early 20th century through the complete suppression of the Dersim rebellion in 1938—can be understood as a natural reaction to policies of ethnic cleansing and forced assimilation. Yet, the failure of these uprisings also underscores that Kurdish national consciousness remained largely confined to intimate loyalty to tribal and religious affiliations. Based on the theoretical framework of this research, Kurdish society at the time can be described as a mosaic of distinct political entities connected through shared language, culture, ancestral myths, and historical memories of a land known as Kurdistan. However, in an era defined by the emergence of modern nation-states, this structural particularity became a major obstacle to the development of collective national solidarity. Although Kurdish leaders such as Sheikh Said and Seyyed Reza possessed significant knowledge of Kurdish history and culture, prevailing tribal and religious structures limited the reach of their uprisings to local areas. This reality also applied to the Ararat rebellion: although it was politically and organizationally stronger than previous movements, it remained confined to Mount Ararat and its surrounding foothills.

From a socio-historical perspective, the Kurdish nation during this period was historically a product of Kurdish culture. Recognition of the Kurds as an “imagined political community,” however, was largely restricted to the religious and educated elite, mainly drawn from the families of tribal chiefs and influential clerics (Anderson, 1983). The majority of Kurdish society was composed of illiterate, nomadic communities whose collective national consciousness was rudimentary, limited to various interpretations promoted by the elite. The rapid imposition of modern nation-building, grounded in Pan-Turkish ideology and the systematic rejection of non-Turkic identities, hindered the early development of Kurdish nationalism and the formation of a modern national identity. The implications of tribal nationalism for political action varied across

groups, reflecting each tribe's distinct collective characteristics, political culture, and historical experience (Greenfeld & Eastwood, 2005). Kurdish nationalism at this time was collectivistic-ethnic: membership in the nation was defined by ethnicity or religion, combining a unitary conception of the nation with hereditary criteria for inclusion (Greenfeld & Eastwood, 2005). Understanding Kurdish nationalism at this historical juncture requires a sociological perspective to trace its evolution in later stages.

Despite the failure of the Dersim rebellion and the subsequent decades of silence imposed by policies of forced assimilation, these early experiences provided critical lessons that laid the foundation for a broader Kurdish mass movement in recent decades. The following chapter will analyze the political and social conditions of Kurds in Turkey after these defeats, the impact of Pan-Turkic assimilation policies, and the emergence of a new mass movement, highlighting its basic features under the leadership of the PKK.

CHAPTER 5: Kurdish Nationalism: New Paradigm and the Current Ethno-national Mass Movement



Figure 9: Newroz (New Year) celebration in Diyarbakir (Amed), Turkey ⁵⁶

Introduction

The ruthless suppression and ultimate defeat of the Kurdish rebellions between 1925 and 1938 had a profound psychological impact on Kurdish society. The scale of violence and devastation ushered in a period of political paralysis and enforced pacifism commonly referred to as the “period of silence” (Aras, 2014). Yet, despite this apparent immobility, the collective memory of these tragic defeats and massacres endured across generations, providing a powerful psychological and symbolic foundation for future mobilization. As Ramazan Aras observes:

⁵⁶The Kurds' New Year celebration (Nowruz) in Diyarbakir (Amed), which is held yearly with a population of approximately one million, clearly demonstrates the power of organization and mass mobilization of the new ethnonational movement; see the source permitted for academic purposes at: <https://www.dreamstime.com/photos-images/newroz-diyarbakir.html>

“The memories and stories of rebellions and rebels created a sense of belonging to that history and encouraged new generations to participate in a historically continuous resistance, which has become a way of life. While the state authorities were trying to invent new forms of ruling and assimilation in this period, the Kurds were developing a foundation for new forms of resistance and struggle” (Aras, 2014: 63).

What appeared to be silence on the surface was, in reality, a dynamic process of memory transmission and identity reconstruction. The act of recalling rebellion emerged as a powerful cultural resource, energizing a historically continuous narrative of resistance.

The “period of silence” was also marked by systematic state policies aimed at the assimilation and homogenization of the Kurdish population, particularly through educational institutions specifically designed to advance this objective (Aras, 2014). These educational policies were implemented in the name of modernization and Westernization but operated as instruments of forced cultural integration. Kurdish language, identity, and historical consciousness were marginalized or denied, and compliance with the state’s vision of a unified Turkish nation was enforced through disciplinary measures and coercive practices. The broader Turkification project targeted non-Turkish and non-Muslim populations alike, seeking to construct a culturally homogeneous national identity. According to Aras (2014), compulsory education policies in the post-revolt era—from the late 1930s through the 1940s and 1950s—left a lasting imprint not only on Kurdish communities but also in the recollections of state officials, including teachers and administrators who served in these institutions. Their testimonies reveal how educational mechanisms functioned as central tools in the state’s assimilation strategy during this period. Further analysis, indicates that the government’s attempt to instrumentalize education as a mechanism of complete assimilation initially framed Kurdish children as analogous to “prisoners of war” and later as subjects of a broader project of ethnic elimination. Education was not conceived merely as a modernizing institution but as a strategic apparatus for social engineering.

The underlying assumption was that a centralized educational system—structured around the promotion of Turkish ethnic identity, language, culture, and historical narrative, and implemented at an early age—would yield optimal results in constructing a culturally homogeneous and fully Turkified society (Aras, 2014).

In official discourse, the logic of total discipline and surveillance extended beyond policies of assimilation. According to Aras (2014), certain strands of state rhetoric reflected an exclusionary and radicalized nationalist vision in which Kurds were portrayed not simply as populations to be integrated but as elements whose very existence posed a threat to national unity. Such narratives, at times, moved toward dehumanizing representations that framed repression and destruction as legitimate instruments of state-building.

Shortly after the complete suppression of the rebellion led by Sheikh Said, Turkish Foreign Minister Tevfik Rüştü Aras publicly articulated the prevailing cabinet position regarding the Kurdish population, stating:

“In their [Kurdish] case, their cultural level is so low, their mentality so backward, that they cannot be simply in the general Turkish body politic...they will die out, economically unfitted for the struggle for life in competition with the more advanced and cultured Turks... as many as will emigrate into Persia and Iraq, while the rest will simply undergo the elimination of the unfit.”⁵⁷

Over a decade before the ultimate suppression of the rebellions, the Türk Ocakları (Turkish Hearth Association), often called the Ocaks (“hearths”), was revitalized in 1924 with a clear and forceful mission: to promote Turkish nationalism in the predominantly Kurdish regions. The organization was determined to accelerate the “Turkification” of the population by implementing

⁵⁷ This statement is quoted from David McDowall’s book, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (2004), New York: I.B. TAURIS, pp. 200. The original source has been taken from the official document: FO 371/12255 Clerk to Chamberlain, Ankara, 4 January 1927.

cultural, linguistic, and ideological programs meticulously designed to forge a cohesive, homogeneous national identity (McDowall, 2004).

After the military coup in 1960, the ruling National Unity Committee (NUC) implemented Law No. 1587, which required the systematic replacement of Kurdish place names with Turkish ones. The rationale for this decision was that Kurdish toponyms were deemed incompatible with Turkish national culture, moral values, traditions, and customs and therefore harmful to public sentiment (McDowall, 2004). This policy reflected a broader strategy of symbolic homogenization, targeting not only language and education but also geography and collective memory.

In January 1961, another law established regional boarding schools in the Kurdish provinces, explicitly designed to accelerate the assimilation of Kurdish youth. These institutions functioned as instruments of cultural integration, reinforcing Turkish language and identity while marginalizing Kurdish linguistic and historical expression. Simultaneously, official discourse continued to deny the existence of Kurds as a distinct nation, instead portraying them as “mountain Turks”—a backward population in need of civilization and integration into the national mainstream (McDowall, 2004). When this persistent denial and repression triggered widespread protests on May 8 in cities such as Mardin, Diyarbakir, Siverek, Bitlis, and Van, state forces responded with severe violence: 315 demonstrators were reportedly killed and 754 others wounded. In major urban centers with large populations of migrants and exiled Kurds, repression took on an even more overtly coercive character, reflecting deeper patterns of institutional exclusion and systemic discrimination.

“While the state denied that Kurds were anything but Turks, many Turks denied even this fiction by repudiating them. To be Kurdish was, as being Turkish had been a century earlier, to be a primitive rustic or, worse, a Caliban. ‘Where is your tail?’ Kutahya school children teased Mehmet Altunakar [a Kurdish student] at secondary school in the 1930s, such taunts were commonplace for every exiled Kurd. By the 1960s racism was still overt and undiminished, those living east of Malatya ‘being regarded in all but official circles as ‘foreigners’. One journal, *Otügen*, stated ‘Kurds do not have the faces of human beings’ and advocated their migration to Africa to join the half-human half-animals who lived there. It went on to warn ‘They can learn by asking their racial fellows, the Armenians, that the Turks are very patient, but when angry no one can stand in their way.’ Others made their hints at genocide more forthright, ‘We need a solution [to the Kurdish question] as sharp as a sword. Bring the Cossacks or Kirghiz immigrants with their weapons. This will solve the problem once and for all’” (McDowall, 2004:409).⁵⁸

Due to the government’s systematic efforts to restrict the circulation of reliable information regarding conditions in the Kurdish regions from the 1930s through the late 1950s, documented evidence concerning everyday life, as well as political and social mobilization during this period, remains limited. Archival restrictions, censorship, and the securitization of the region significantly constrained both domestic and international scrutiny (McDowall, 2004). Nevertheless, the available evidence indicates that state policies grounded in the denial of Kurdish national distinctiveness fostered the structural foundations of institutionalized discrimination. By rejecting the Kurds’ recognition as a separate ethno-national community and framing them instead within an exclusionary national narrative, the state normalized practices that marginalized Kurdish language, culture, and political expression. These policies extended beyond cultural assimilation and contributed to the consolidation of systemic inequalities embedded in administrative, educational, and legal structures (McDowall, 2004).

⁵⁸ The sources used in McDowall’s investigation have been taken from (I) FO 371/16361 Burrows to Home, Ankara, 14

December 1962, and (II) *Otügen*, no. 40, April 1967, and (III) *Millî Yol*, no. 14, 20 April 1967.

Further analysis demonstrates how the aforementioned political transformations, unfolding within less than three decades, provided the structural and ideological foundations for the emergence of a new wave of Kurdish national consciousness and a reconfigured form of nationalism. These shifts created the conditions for a movement that would move beyond tribal and localized resistance toward a more systematic and ideologically articulated political project.

The following section presents a historical overview of the early formation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and traces its ideological and political trajectory from orthodox Marxism to libertarian socialism. Particular attention is given to the movement's paradigmatic transformation from a nation-state-oriented liberation strategy to the model of democratic confederalism. This transformation is analyzed through several interrelated dimensions: its feminist revolutionary framework, its organizational evolution from a conventional national liberation movement into a broad ethno-national mass movement, its ideological shift toward libertarian socialist principles, and the typological characteristics of this form of nationalism and their implications for political action.

The chapter concludes by synthesizing the principal findings of the research and offering suggestions for future scholarly inquiry into the evolving dynamics of Kurdish nationalism and its contemporary political manifestations.

Contemporary Kurdish Nationalism: Exploring the Origins and Causes of Formation

The objective reality of the Kurdish population's demographic weight and political presence gradually compelled the Turkish state, from 1945 onward, to reconsider certain aspects of its rigid pan-Turkic policies. This shift did not signify the abandonment of denial and assimilation;

rather, it reflected a pragmatic adjustment in response to structural transformations in domestic and international politics. Parallel to the continuation of policies aimed at denying Kurdish identity, the instrumental use of the Kurdish population as a source of electoral support became an increasingly necessary component of party politics (McDowall, 2004).

Prior to 1945, Turkey's one-party system, dominated by the Republican People's Party (RPP), relied on indirect electoral mechanisms. In this system, selected intermediaries, known as secondary electors, chose representatives for the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. However, the persistence of authoritarian political structures increasingly conflicted with emerging internal and external pressures, contributing to a legitimacy crisis and intensifying internal divisions within the ruling party (McDowall, 2004). These tensions ultimately led to the emergence of an opposition movement from within the RPP itself and culminated in the formation of the Democratic Party, which came to power in 1950.

The Democratic Party leadership believed that expanding civil freedoms and consolidating political legitimacy depended heavily on broadening its electoral base. Consequently, in the Kurdish regions, their primary focus was on rural areas, where the majority of the population lived and where political representation remained largely monopolized by tribal landlords (aghas) and influential religious sheikhs (McDowall, 2004). The party's political strategy reflected a realistic assessment of Kurdish society, which, despite mass displacement, repression, and the broader modernization efforts underway in Turkey, continued to maintain its tribal and religious social structures.

Although the abolition of the caliphate and the suppression of religious orders (tariqas) had weakened official Islamic institutions, popular and informal religious networks remained deeply

rooted, particularly in Kurdish regions. Various underground religious movements, including organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, continued to exercise social influence, especially through informal religious authority (McDowall, 2004:398). This sociological reality encouraged both the Democratic Party and the RPP to cultivate electoral support through clientelist networks rooted in tribal and religious hierarchies.

These hierarchical tribal relations formed complex patron–client networks linking tribal leaders and religious authorities with their followers. While these relationships provided political leverage for tribal elites in negotiations with the central government, they often offered limited tangible benefits to ordinary followers. Instead, they functioned primarily as mechanisms of political mediation and control. The patron—typically a sheikh or agha—exercised extensive authority over village affairs, representing the community in dealings with state officials and controlling the distribution of local resources. Both major political parties quickly recognized the strategic importance of these intermediaries and actively incorporated them into their electoral strategies (McDowall, 2004).

Most aghas were closely connected to religious authorities, either as sheikh-landlords themselves or through kinship ties established by marriage or religious discipleship (McDowall, 2004). The economic foundation of this patronage system rested on the mutual exchange of political loyalty and material interests: tribal sheikhs and prominent landlords delivered electoral support and public votes to political parties, while the state protected their economic privileges and social authority. Accordingly, from 1945 onward, land reform and its implications for the relationship between the central government and large landowners in Kurdistan emerged as a crucial political issue for both major parties in Turkey.

In 1950, the ruling Republican People's Party proposed a land reform bill that emphasized redistributing state-owned and waqf lands to landless peasants. However, the reform was ultimately postponed due to the realities of competitive multi-party politics, as neither the ruling party nor its opposition wished to alienate powerful landlords who controlled rural voting blocs (McDowall, 2004). In contrast, the Democratic Party positioned itself as the defender of private property, arguing that large estates were more efficient and economically productive. By securing a fatwa from influential Kurdish sheikhs affirming the sanctity of private property in Islam, the party successfully mobilized religious legitimacy to support its political platform. As a result, in the 1954 elections, the Democratic Party captured 34 out of 40 parliamentary seats in the Kurdish regions (McDowall, 2004). This outcome illustrates how clientelism functioned as a rational survival strategy for both patrons and clients within an unstable political and economic environment. For tribal and religious elites, it ensured the preservation of their economic dominance and political influence. For political parties, it provided an effective mechanism to secure electoral support and maintain political control over the Kurdish provinces.

Shortly after the introduction of multi-party politics in the early 1950s, political elites increasingly recognized that clientelist relationships between landowners and their followers, on the one hand, and political parties, on the other, could serve not only as an electoral tool but also as a broader system of social and political control. This system reinforced the authority of the central state while simultaneously legitimizing the continued dominance of traditional elites in Kurdish society (McDowall, 2004). However, this political arrangement also had long-term consequences. By excluding the broader Kurdish population from meaningful political participation and reducing politics to elite-level bargaining, it contributed to the gradual marginalization and political alienation of the masses. Over time, this exclusion fostered growing

disillusionment and weakened popular support for conservative and right-wing political parties. Although Turkey had begun its transition from a predominantly feudal economy toward capitalist modernization in the early 1940s, this transformation proceeded far more slowly in Kurdish regions. State policies and local power structures delayed structural change, preserving traditional agrarian relations for at least two more decades (McDowall, 2004). While agricultural mechanization expanded rapidly after the early 1950s, particularly through the introduction of tractors, its benefits were largely concentrated in the hands of large landowners. Wealthy landlords used mechanization to increase productivity, strengthen their bargaining power, and expand their holdings.

In contrast, small farmers and sharecroppers, who made up the majority of the rural population, often lacked the financial means to purchase agricultural machinery. As a result, they had to rent tractors from large landowners in exchange for a portion of their harvest, which only deepened their economic dependence. Many smallholders, unable to compete in these circumstances, ultimately sold their land to large estate owners. This led them to join the growing ranks of the landless and unemployed in rural areas, or to migrate to big cities, becoming part of the lower working class (McDowall, 2004). The process of economic dispossession and social marginalization within urban areas has been pivotal in reshaping Kurdish society, particularly among the many immigrant Kurds in major cities. This upheaval undermined the traditional reciprocal obligations between landlords and peasants, while simultaneously giving rise to a new class of economically disenfranchised and politically alienated Kurds in urban centers. In the long run, these structural changes were instrumental in the emergence of modern Kurdish nationalism. They laid the groundwork for the rise of radical political movements in both rural

and urban settings, movements that boldly challenged the established tribal order and the authority of the Turkish state.

“However, the aghas held back from maximizing the use of agricultural machinery and tended to maintain a larger entourage of share-croppers than strictly necessary. In many cases the recently landless were provided with small plots, just large enough to dissuade them from migrating to the employment uncertainties of urban life. The reason was simple. The aghas still needed voting power in order to remain attractive to the political parties that arranged easy credits, technology, fertilizers, improved seed strains, agricultural access roads and so forth” (McDowall, 2004:401).

Although this system of clientelism was grounded primarily in economic exchange rather than unquestioning personal loyalty, its material benefits were distributed highly unequally. Peasants received only the minimum necessary for subsistence, while landowners rapidly accumulated both financial wealth and political influence (McDowall, 2004). This unequal relationship reinforced the structural dependency of the peasantry and consolidated the dominant position of tribal landlords within both local society and the broader political system.

The military regime that emerged following the 1960 coup initially appeared to challenge this entrenched order. The National Unity Committee (NUC), which assumed control of state affairs, expressed concern over the concentration of land in the hands of large Kurdish landowners. In response, it expelled fifty-five prominent aghas from the Kurdish regions and announced plans to redistribute their land to the peasantry. However, this reform effort proved short-lived. Shortly after the NUC transferred power to a civilian coalition government in 1961, the expelled aghas were allowed to return, and their estates were restored largely intact (McDowall, 2004:402).

This reversal clearly demonstrated that the axis of mutual dependence operated primarily between the state and the landlord class. While political parties and state authorities relied on landlords to maintain social control and secure electoral support, the landlords used their

privileged access to political power to protect and expand their economic interests. In contrast, the peasantry remained entirely excluded from meaningful political participation. This system allowed large landowners not only to exploit rural populations economically but also to integrate themselves fully into the Turkish ruling establishment as reliable intermediaries between the state and Kurdish society. As a result, the political and social conditions imposed by tribal landlords and religious sheikhs remained largely unchanged for nearly two decades after the 1960 coup (McDowall, 2004). However, this balance of power would eventually face serious challenges. Beginning in the late 1970s and intensifying in the early 1980s, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) directly targeted the authority of tribal elites, while the state simultaneously introduced limited reforms aimed at restructuring its control over the region. These developments gradually undermined the traditional foundations of landlord dominance (Aras, 2014). In addition to these political and economic dynamics, profound demographic changes were reshaping Kurdish society. Extensive agricultural mechanization during the 1950s displaced hundreds of thousands of Kurdish peasants from rural areas. Many joined earlier waves of internally displaced persons who had been forcibly resettled following the rebellions of the 1920s and 1930s. Unable to sustain themselves in the countryside, these migrants moved to major urban centers across Turkey, where they formed a growing industrial labor force and urban underclass.

This mass rural-to-urban migration led to the emergence of informal settlements known as *gecekondu*, particularly in major cities such as Istanbul and Ankara (Wedel, 2000). These marginalized urban communities became important social spaces in which Kurdish migrants confronted new forms of economic exploitation and social discrimination. At the same time, the

concentration of Kurdish populations in urban areas transformed the Kurdish question from a remote regional issue into a visible national political reality (Romano, 2002).

Over time, these urban Kurdish communities underwent significant social differentiation. While many remained part of the urban working class, others entered skilled trades, professional occupations, and educational institutions. This process of social mobility and urban integration had a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, Kurds became increasingly integrated into the economic and institutional structures of Turkish society. On the other hand, exposure to modern education, political ideas, and urban social networks fostered a new and more politicized awareness of Kurdish ethnic identity (Romano, 2002). This emerging urban Kurdish intelligentsia and working class would ultimately play a decisive role in the revival of Kurdish nationalism. Unlike earlier tribal-based rebellions, which had been geographically isolated and socially fragmented, this new generation possessed the social networks, ideological frameworks, and organizational capacity necessary to develop a modern mass nationalist movement. These structural transformations created the social and political foundations for the emergence of radical Kurdish political organizations in the 1970s, most notably the PKK.

“The more crucial factor may have been the migration from the Kurdish provinces to the cities of western Turkey. This reached enormous proportions in the 1960s and continued unabated during the 1970s. Such a large number of migrants could no longer be gradually urbanized and assimilated as earlier generations had been. Rather, they lived together in their own closed communities, to some extent maintaining their traditional lifestyle. They were more aware than they had been before of the great gap in development and ways of life between western and eastern Turkey. Occasional discrimination were strengthened their awareness of being different” (Bruinessen, 1984:9-10).

Thus, the emergence of a new generation of Kurds in both small towns and major urban centers from the early 1970s onward played a decisive role in the revival of Kurdish ethnic

consciousness. This generation, increasingly equipped with higher education and professional skills—including mechanics, painters, electricians, lawyers, doctors, and journalists—contributed directly to the articulation and spread of Kurdish identity as a distinct ethnic and political category (Romano, 2002). Unlike their rural predecessors, whose political horizons had been largely confined within tribal and religious structures, these urbanized and educated Kurds possessed the intellectual tools and social networks necessary to reinterpret their collective condition in national terms.

At the same time, decades of state-led assimilation policies had come close to eradicating the Kurdish language, particularly among Kurdish populations who had migrated to western urban centers of Turkey. Over successive generations, linguistic assimilation accelerated as Kurdish migrants were integrated into Turkish-speaking educational institutions, labor markets, and public life. However, beginning in the early 1960s, a gradual resurgence of ethnic consciousness emerged among segments of the Kurdish population. This revival placed renewed emphasis on reclaiming and preserving the Kurdish language, history, and cultural identity as central components of a broader national awakening (Aras, 2014).

This process of cultural and political reawakening deeply alarmed state authorities. In response, official discourse continued to deny the existence of a distinct Kurdish nation altogether. Instead, state ideology maintained that Kurds were merely of Turkic origin who had forgotten their authentic identity, and that neither a Kurdish nation nor a Kurdish language existed as separate historical realities (Bruinessen, 1984). According to official Turkish state discourse:

“This language peculiarity is yet another indication of the area’s backwardness. In the official Turkish view, the Kurds are of Turkish origin, but now speak gibberish comprised of Persian, Arabic and Turkish and incapable of expressing sophisticated thought. Teaching these

“primitive” and “backward” people the Turkish language would be a first step in uplifting them to a more human level” (Bruinessen, 1984:6).

Over three decades, discriminatory assimilation policies, the systematic denial of Kurdish language and ethnic identity, and the political subordination of tribal lords to ruling parties and the state not only deepened political and class divisions but also alienated the broader Kurdish population from both the ruling establishment and traditional elites. In response to these conditions, Kurdish intellectuals and political activists began to formulate alternative political frameworks, drawing on both traditional ethnic nationalism and Marxist–Leninist ideology (McDowall, 2004).

Inspired in part by the emergence of an armed nationalist movement in Iraqi Kurdistan under the leadership of Mullah Mustafa Barzani and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, Kurdish nationalists in Turkey founded the Democratic Party of Turkish Kurdistan (KDPT) in 1965. The party emerged within a predominantly conservative social environment. Shortly after its formation, its founder, Faik Bucak—himself a member of a prominent agha family from Siverek—was assassinated in July 1966. A few years later, his close associate and successor, Said Elçi, was executed by a radical leftist group in 1971 (McDowall, 2004). Beyond these severe leadership losses, the KDPT failed to establish a strong organizational base between 1965 and 1971, operating largely through clandestine cells. As McDowall (2004:408) argues, the primary reason for this failure lay in the party’s conservative ideological orientation. Both leaders were closely aligned with right-wing currents in mainstream Turkish politics and belonged to the landlord class, whose primary objective was to safeguard their economic and political interests through continued dependence on the central government in Ankara. Consequently, the KDPT was

unable to offer a compelling political program capable of mobilizing the broader Kurdish population.

Following the military coup of 1960, however, new constitutional reforms created a more permissive political environment, allowing for the establishment of the Turkish Workers' Party (TWP) in 1961. Kurdish intellectuals and political activists influenced by socialist and Marxist–Leninist thought viewed participation in this party as a potential avenue for addressing the Kurdish question within a broader class-based political framework (McDowall, 2004). The party played a significant role in mobilizing workers and intellectuals through its organizational structures and affiliated trade unions. Although the TWP initially avoided openly addressing the Kurdish issue, many Kurds joined its ranks because, unlike right-wing parties, it demonstrated a greater willingness to acknowledge their social and political grievances.

Nevertheless, the party's continued reluctance to directly confront the Kurdish question led a group of Kurdish members within its central committee to form an internal faction in 1968 dedicated to raising the issue. This internal pressure eventually culminated at the Fourth Party Congress in 1970, when the party formally adopted a resolution declaring:

“There are a Kurdish people in the East of Turkey.... The fascist authorities representing the ruling classes have subjected the Kurdish people to a policy of assimilation and intimidation, which has often become a bloody repression.”⁵⁹

Although the party was dissolved and declared illegal following the military intervention of 1971, its brief period of legal political activity played a crucial role in raising ethnic consciousness among young Kurdish students, particularly in Ankara and Istanbul. This process

⁵⁹ The resolution's statement quoted from McDowall's investigation (2004), has been taken from the source; Kendal Nezan 1980, Kurdistan in Turkey, in *People Without Country: The Kurd and Kurdistan*. Ed. By Gerard Chaliand, London: Zed Press.

significantly contributed to the emergence of a new generation of political leaders who would later shape the ethno-national movement (McDowall, 2004). Between 1966 and 1971, many Kurdish workers joined the Confederation of Revolutionary Workers' Unions (DISK), founded in 1967. At the same time, numerous Kurdish university students and political activists became actively involved in leftist student associations, including those affiliated with the Federation of Revolutionary Youth (Dev Genç), established in 1969 (McDowall, 2004).

In 1967, Kurdish members of DISK, Dev-Genç, and the Turkish Workers' Party organized major political demonstrations that attracted approximately 10,000 participants in Silvan and 25,000 in Diyarbakir, protesting in defense of Kurdish democratic rights. These demonstrations represented a historic turning point, marking the first large-scale political mobilization in Kurdish regions since 1938 and the first mass urban Kurdish challenge to the authority of the republic (McDowall, 2004). More importantly, they reflected a fundamental transformation in the social basis of Kurdish political mobilization—from traditional tribal authorities such as aghas and rural peasants to a new leadership composed of educated urban intellectuals, students, and skilled workers. Alongside their engagement with socialist and leftist ideologies, these emerging actors sought to revive and redefine Kurdish ethno-national identity within a modern political framework.

This process of cultural and political revival was further institutionalized in 1969 with the establishment of the Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearths (DDKO). Through a network of cultural associations established across Kurdish regions and in major urban centers such as Ankara and Istanbul, the organization aimed to promote Kurdish national consciousness. Its

activities included educational initiatives targeting villagers and women, as well as advocacy for civil liberties and economic development in eastern Turkey (McDowall, 2004).

However, the state's response to these developments was swift and repressive. Under the pretext of restoring law and order, the government deployed military commandos to Kurdish regions in January 1969 to conduct searches for alleged separatists. In practice, these operations functioned as instruments of intimidation and coercion, reinforcing state authority through widespread repression. Contemporary reports prepared by military personnel themselves reveal the harsh and often inhumane treatment inflicted upon the local population during these operations.

“Since the end of January special military units have undertaken a land war in the regions of Diyarbakir, Mardin, Siirt and Hakkari under the guise of hunting bandits. Every village is surrounded at a certain hour, its inhabitants rounded up. Troops assemble men and women separately and demand the men to surrender their weapons. They beat those who deny possessing any or make other villagers jump on them. They strip men and women naked and violate the latter. Many have died in these operations; some have committed suicide. Naked men and women have cold water thrown over them, and they are whipped. Sometimes are forced to tie a rope around the penis of their husband and then to lead him around the village. Women are likewise made to parade naked around the village. Troops demand villagers to provide women for their pleasure and the entire village is beaten if the request is met with refusal”⁶⁰

Simultaneously, in October 1970, the leaders of the Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearths (DDKO) were arrested, and the organization was subsequently banned. Following the military intervention of March 12, 1971, and the imposition of military rule, thousands of people in Kurdish regions were arrested and detained in prisons in Diyarbakir and elsewhere. As McDowall observes, “what was interesting was that 75 percent of those arrested came from the countryside, an indication of how far the rural population now seemed politicized, thanks presumably to the effectiveness of DDKO and local branches of the TWP” (2004:412). This

⁶⁰This shocking report quoted from a part of McDowall's research (2004), which has been taken from the main source; leftist periodical, *Devrim*, no.36, 23 June 1970, quoted in *SosyalizmveToplumasal*, p. 2131.

development highlighted a significant shift, demonstrating that political consciousness had expanded beyond urban intellectual circles into the rural Kurdish population. However, following the general amnesty of 1974, which was declared after the end of military rule, thousands of imprisoned youth were released, allowing leftist organizations to resume their political activities. Their rapid expansion reflected growing dissatisfaction among Kurdish youth with their political, economic, and social marginalization (ibid.).

In addition to these political transformations, worsening economic conditions further contributed to radicalization. Economic stagnation and rising unemployment—affecting approximately 600,000 people in 1967 and increasing to 1.5 million by 1977—created widespread social discontent. Under these conditions, many young people were drawn not only to leftist organizations but also to far-right nationalist groups such as the Grey Wolves, the paramilitary wing associated with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) led by Alparslan Türkeş.⁶¹ This organization viewed Kurds and leftists as “internal enemies” and considered their elimination a patriotic duty (McDowall, 2004). From a historical perspective, the emergence of the Right Front coalition in the 1970s represented a decisive moment in Turkish political history, as it institutionalized an alliance between secular Kemalist nationalists and religious right-wing forces. This alliance would continue, in various forms, to shape the political landscape of Turkey in subsequent decades.

⁶¹ This party was formed in 1969 by former Turkish Army colonel Alparslan Türkeş, who had become leader of the Republican Villagers Nation Party (CKMP) in 1965. Since its establishment, this party mainly follows a Pan-Turkism political agenda. The party’s youth wing is the Grey Wolves which played one of the biggest roles in the assassination and murdering of Kurds and leftists during the political violence in the 1970s. See the source; https://irp.fas.org/world/para/grey_wolves.htm

The first right-wing coalition, initiated by the Justice Party, formed the National Front in late 1974 in partnership with the National Salvation Party and the National Action Party. This coalition openly advocated a strategy of Turkification in the Kurdish regions of Turkey (McDowall, 2004). Meanwhile, Kurdish underground organizations emerged, and the activities of the left wing of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey (KDPT) intensified. In addition, several members of the Turkish Workers' Party (TWP) founded the Kurdistan Socialist Party of Turkey (KSPT) in 1974. The escalation of leftist activities in Kurdistan since the mid-1970s, in both urban and rural areas, and the resulting clashes with traditional tribal and religious structures led to widespread violence, resulting in the deaths of thousands of people until the military coup of 1980 (McDowall, 2004).

Unlike the previous two coups, whose post-coup administrations acknowledged at least some degree of civil liberties and social diversity, the 1982 constitution focused more heavily on controlling society by strengthening presidential authority, including granting the president the power to dissolve the Assembly and rule by decree (McDowall, 2004). Despite the army's reservations, the Motherland Party (ANAP), led by the economist and technocrat Turgut Özal, came to power in November 1983. This political development marked the beginning of the gradual entry of political Islam into the Turkish political sphere and its subsequent fusion with pan-Turkish nationalism.⁶²

⁶² The Motherland Part (Anavatan Partisi, ANAP) was founded in 1983 by Turgut Özal. The party supported restrictions on the role that government in the economy and also supported private capital and enterprise and some public expressions of religion. The source has been utilized only for general information: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Motherland-Party>

In summary, during the four decades following the suppression of the national rebellions in the late 1930s, the Kurdish population experienced harsh authoritarian rule and an alliance between the central state and regional power holders. As a result, many Kurds shifted their political orientation away from right-wing politics in Turkey and increasingly aligned themselves with left-leaning and democratic movements in pursuit of their political and social aspirations.

The period following the 1980 coup marked a significant divergence between Kurdish revolutionaries and intellectuals and the Turkish left. While the Turkish left acknowledged the existence of the Kurdish issue, it generally argued that its resolution should be postponed until after a nationwide socialist revolution (McDowall, 2004). In contrast to this perspective, a group of Kurdish revolutionaries led by Abdullah Öcalan founded a new organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), in 1979. After several years of underground activity, the PKK officially launched an armed political struggle in 1984, aiming to achieve a democratic solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey. After briefly outlining the party's formation, the following chapter will examine the PKK's ideological and political foundations and analyze their implications for political action within the research's theoretical framework. This brief historical overview primarily provides a sequential narrative of events, intended more for explanatory than analytical purposes.

The PKK: An Overview of Its Early Formation

The political and social developments following the late 1940s demonstrate that right-wing hostility toward Kurdish political demands, combined with the absence of a coherent and effective strategy among the Turkish left to address the Kurdish national question, were key factors contributing to the emergence and rapid growth of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)

in the early 1980s. According to available evidence, Kurdish political movements in the 1960s and 1970s—whether Marxist–Leninist or nationalist—were primarily initiated and supported by university students (Aras, 2014). Furthermore, political developments beginning in the early 1970s led to increasing distrust among Kurdish members of legal political parties and leftist organizations that claimed to support a democratic resolution to the Kurdish national issue. This process contributed to the transformation of Kurdish student activism from relatively moderate positions to more radical forms of political engagement.

Nationalist sentiments, collective memories of past rebellions, and the socio-economic hardships experienced by the Kurdish population further fueled the radicalization of both leftist and nationalist movements in the late 1970s. These transformations were reflected in increasingly anti-state and militant discourses, ultimately contributing to the emergence of new political movements such as the PKK (Aras, 2014).

The PKK was founded by a group of Marxist students associated with the Ankara Democratic Higher Education Association (ADYÖD) between 1974 and 1978. In November 1973, the association elected Abdullah Öcalan, the future leader of the PKK, as its chairman, a position he held until December 1974 (White, 2015). According to White (2015), the organizational structure and political traditions of the Popular Liberation Party Front of Turkey (THKP-C) played an important role in shaping the party's early development.⁶³ In addition, the ideological

⁶³ The Popular Liberation Party-Front of Turkey was a Marxist-Leninist organization founded illegally in Turkey in December 1970. The organization had adopted an urban guerrilla warfare strategy based on a theoretical framework derived from party leader Mahir Kayan's theses on Uninterrupted Revolution, Colonial Type Fascism, Artificial Balance, and Politicized Military War Strategy. This party was formed based on opposition to the pacifism and revisionism of the Turkish Workers' Party, whose existence was evaluated as a major obstacle to the workers' revolution in Turkey. The brief information was added only to evaluate White's claim, from the translated source: Turkish People's Liberation Party-Front, People's Revolutionary Pioneers, THKP-C/HDÖ and 15 YEARS Struggle (Second ed.); Eris Publications:1995 (*Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi HalkınDevrimciÖncüleri THKP-C/HDÖ ve 15 YIL (İkinci bas.). ErişYayınları. 1995.*

perspectives of Hikmet Kıvılcımlı, a prominent figure associated with the early Turkish Communist Party, influenced many of its founding members.⁶⁴

Prior to adopting the name PKK, the group was known as the Kurdistan Revolutionaries (Kurdistan Devrimcileri). From its inception, the organization presented itself as both an ideological and political movement. In addition to addressing the Kurdish national question, one of its primary objectives was to promote unity among revolutionary leftist movements in Turkey (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012). However, while much of the Turkish left characterized Turkey as a semi-colonial state subordinated to Western capitalist imperialism, the PKK developed a distinct analysis that emphasized the role of the Turkish state as an internal colonial power in Kurdistan.

“This contradiction had produced divergent left-wing nationalisms, one Turkish the other Kurdish, instead of a revolutionary left in Turkey. The challenge the PKK envisaged for itself, was to develop a program in which revolutionary politics in Turkey/Kurdistan could be re-established, beyond nationalist lines, while recognizing the ‘national question’ in Turkey/Kurdistan”(Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012:1).

Therefore, Turkey required the emergence of a new left capable of progressing toward genuine social democracy by confronting what the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) termed the “blind

⁶⁴ Hikmet Ali Kıvılcımlı (1902–1971) was a prominent Turkish communist intellectual, theorist, and political activist whose “History Thesis” (*Tarih Tezi*) sought to explain the distinctive historical development of Turkey through an analysis of pre-capitalist societies. His theory focused on the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations, which he conceptualized as “historical revolutions” resulting from struggles between egalitarian “barbarian nomads,” whom he described as practicing a form of “primitive socialism,” and stratified class civilizations that had lost their capacity for collective action. According to Kıvılcımlı, these nomadic groups periodically overthrew decaying civilizations and revitalized social organization. Applying this framework, he interpreted the rise of Islam as a form of historical revolution, arguing that early Islamic society initially reflected egalitarian and communal characteristics. However, he maintained that this revolutionary character declined after the Rashidun period, as political and economic power became concentrated in the hands of Arab tribal elites, transforming Islamic society into a hierarchical order similar to earlier civilizations. In contrast to the official position of the Turkish Communist Party (TKP), which characterized the Kurdish rebellions—particularly the Ararat Rebellion—as reactionary and driven by feudalism and foreign imperialism, Kıvılcımlı argued that the Kurdish issue was fundamentally a national question. He asserted that the Kurds constituted a nation based on shared territory, language, and culture, and he strongly criticized the assimilation and Turkification policies of the Turkish Republic. Furthermore, he condemned the TKP’s failure to recognize the Kurdish question as an essential component of the democratic revolution in Turkey. Kıvılcımlı’s analysis was highly innovative for its time and anticipated later theoretical approaches within both the Turkish left and Kurdish political movements, including those developed by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) (Yeğen, 2016). *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* No.18 (2): 161–2.

spot” of social chauvinism and by abandoning the prevailing Turko-centric framework in addressing the Kurdish national question.⁶⁵ In this context, the Kurdistan Revolutionaries distinguished themselves from the traditional Turkish left through their explicit prioritization of the Kurdish national issue and their rejection of its subordination to a broader Turkish socialist revolution. This ideological and political divergence culminated in the formal establishment of a political party, the PKK, in November 1978. In its most concise formulation, the organization can be characterized by the following defining features:

“The Kurdistan Workers Party or PKK is one of the most important secular insurgent political movements in Kurdistan and the Middle East. Unlike most Kurdish political parties, which have adopted a rather conservative outlook and been organized around tribal leaders and structures, the PKK originated from the left in Turkey and drew its leaders, members and militants from the disenfranchised and marginalized. The core group members of the Kurdistan Revolutionaries and later the PKK were university students from low and lower-middle-class backgrounds The transformation from ideology/group formation to a political party took place in the period 1977-1978. . . . The PKK is commonly known as a guerrilla/armed organization. However, it would be wrong to characterize it in military (or similar) terms. The PKK is and has always been primarily a political organization, prompted to use violence in circumstances in which there was no alternative (legally permitted) avenue of genuine political expression. Reading PKK documents, one may distinguish between two objectives the movement had from its inception. The first was a progressive realization of the right to self-determination. A second objective of the PKK, however, was a reunification, or better, re-establishment of the left, a re-establishment envisaged in both organizational and ideological terms” (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012:4).

One of the most significant distinctions between the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the traditional revolutionary left in Turkey lies in its critique of premature organizational formation.

⁶⁵ As inferred from the research done by Hamid Akkaya and Joost Jongerden (2012), from the PKK’s point of view, left means radical left and socialist parties and organizations that have followed Marxist political thought and are distinctively different from social democrats. Also, the term “new left” refers to a reconstituted revolutionary left, which understands and acts on the necessity of unity among Marxist parties and overtly addresses the Kurdish national issue in Turkey. See the source; Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamid Akkaya (2012). “The Kurdistan Workers Party and a New Left in Turkey: Analysis of the revolutionary movement in Turkey through the PKK’s memorial text on Haki Karer”. *European Journal of Turkish Studies* No. 14: 1-2.

While many leftist organizations rushed into political or militant action without sufficient preparation or ideological coherence, the PKK, under the leadership of Abdullah Ocalan, took a markedly methodical approach. From 1973 to 1978, the group spent five years establishing the foundational structures of the party, followed by an additional year in 1979 formally announcing its existence, and another five years of preparation until the launch of armed struggle in 1984. In total, the PKK required approximately eleven years to move from conceptualization to the initiation of guerrilla warfare (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012).

The PKK's critique of the left also emphasized the dangers of insufficient ideological and political separation from Turkish nationalism. According to PKK analysis, the prevalence of social chauvinism within the broader left prevented the development of an effective opposition capable of addressing both capitalist and nationalist structures in Turkish society (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012). Whereas many leftists argued that the Kurdish issue could only be resolved within the framework of a unified Turkish-Kurdish struggle against capitalism, the Kurdish revolutionaries from the mid-1970s until 1984 approached Kurdistan as an internal colony, advocating for an autonomous organizational strategy to end this colonial domination (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012:9).

Strategically, the PKK identified both the Turkish state and local power structures—including large Kurdish landowners and tribal elites—as obstacles to liberation. Accordingly, its approach combined guerrilla warfare with popular mobilization, framing its struggle as a people's war against colonialism and internal feudal oppression (Bruinessen, 1998). On August 15, 1984, the PKK officially commenced this campaign, declaring the start of armed resistance against the Turkish state and its local collaborators. This strategy, oriented toward achieving a unified

Kurdistan through both armed struggle and alliances with leftist movements in Turkey, remained the guiding framework until the arrest of Öcalan in 1999 (Bruinessen, 1998).

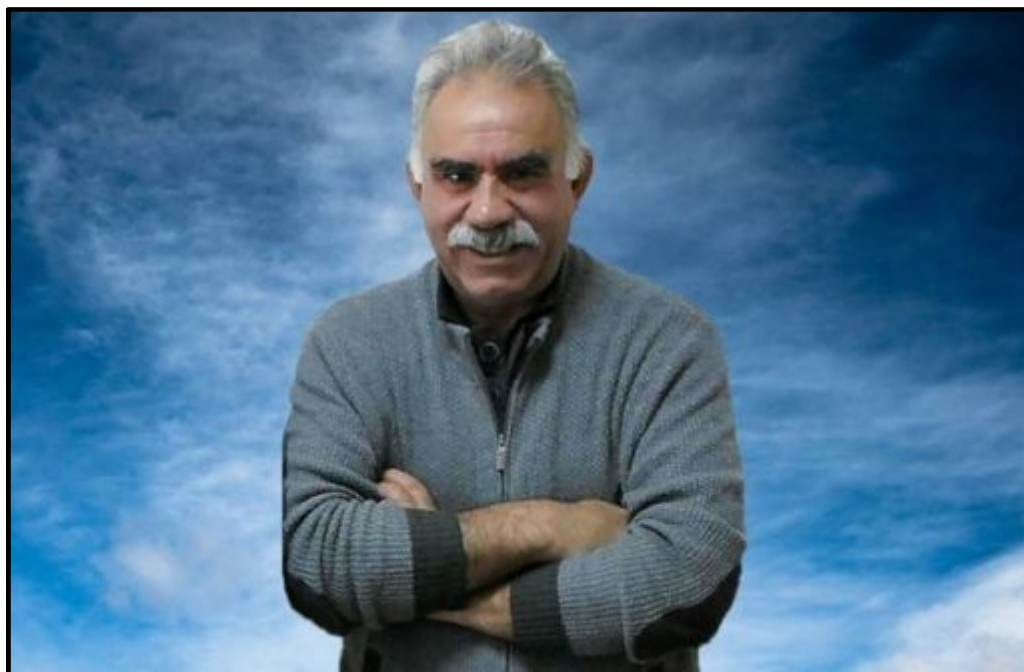


Figure 10: PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan has been held in the Imrali Prison since February 1999⁶⁶

Following Öcalan's imprisonment, the PKK underwent a significant ideological and strategic transformation. Abandoning the goal of a unified Kurdistan achieved through radical revolutionary change, the organization adopted a new paradigm emphasizing inclusive ethno-cultural mobilization and democratic confederalism.⁶⁷ This shift seeks to achieve a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish national question within a confederate, democratic framework in

⁶⁶This image is taken from the website, Media Cause, a non-profit digital agency with a cultural education initiative to raise awareness of the Kurdish people in the West. The use of content and images on the website is allowed for scientific and educational purposes. Source: <https://thekurdishproject.org/history-and-culture/famous-kurds-old/abdullah-ocalan/>

⁶⁷ The PKK initially included the idea of a *unified Kurdistan* in its political program, aiming to establish a socialist Kurdistan encompassing all parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria; see more details in Martin von Bruinessen (2000) *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism versus Nation-Building states*, Istanbul: ISIS Press.

Turkey. By revising its strategic objectives, the PKK has evolved from a strictly national liberation movement into a major socio-political actor, exerting substantial influence on both Turkish domestic politics and the broader regional context (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011).

Building on the historical overview of the PKK's formation, its early armed struggle, and the subsequent ideological transformations, the following sections focus on the party's paradigm shift from a Marxist-Leninist national liberation movement toward a broader, inclusive ethno-cultural and socio-political movement. This transformation encompasses changes in organizational structure, strategic objectives, and ideological frameworks, including the adoption of democratic confederalism and a feminist revolutionary perspective. Exploring this paradigm shift, analyzing its essential components, determining its typology, and examining its implications for political action constitute the primary focus of this chapter, providing the analytical foundation to understand the PKK's contemporary role in Kurdish nationalism and regional politics.

Ocalan's writings frame the Kurds not merely as a political or ethnic group but as a historical and ethno-cultural nation, emphasizing their deep-rooted connection to the lands of Kurdistan and the continuity of their cultural traditions over millennia (Ocalan, 2011). This ethno-symbolist approach situates Kurdish identity within a historical narrative that predates modern state boundaries, reinforcing the legitimacy of Kurdish cultural and political claims. By contextualizing the Kurdish issue within both historical and contemporary geopolitical frameworks, Ocalan's paradigm offers a scientific and systematic foundation for understanding the Kurdish struggle beyond conventional nationalist or Marxist interpretations.

Through this lens, the PKK's ideological transformation can be understood as an evolution from a rigid, class-based revolutionary framework toward a flexible, culturally grounded, and socially inclusive strategy. The shift to libertarian socialism incorporates principles of democratic governance, gender equality, ecological sustainability, and local self-determination, reflecting an adaptive strategy aimed at addressing the Kurdish national question within a pluralistic and democratic Turkey rather than through traditional state-centered revolutionary methods.

Öcalan's concise yet comprehensive account of Kurdish history represents a deliberate epistemological stance, situating Kurdish identity within a broader analysis of Middle Eastern civilization (Sauermann, 2019). By emphasizing the historical, cultural, and social experiences of the Kurdish people, his approach aligns with the ethno-symbolist perspective, tracing Kurdish ethnicity back to pre-ancient state-temple societies and following its evolution through successive historical epochs into a distinct ethnic-racial group by the Middle Ages. Moreover, Öcalan's framework interprets the predominantly agrarian and tribal structures of Middle Eastern societies as enduring "ethnic structures," reflecting the coexistence and interrelations of multiple ethnic groups over millennia. This perspective recognizes that Kurdish social organization—tribal, religious, and communal—was not an anomaly but a historically conditioned social reality that shaped patterns of political, economic, and cultural life. By situating Kurdish history in this *longue durée* framework, Öcalan establishes a scholarly foundation for the PKK's ideological transformation, legitimizing a vision of Kurdish nationalism that transcends modern state boundaries and rigid revolutionary dogmas. This historical and epistemological grounding directly informed the PKK's shift from orthodox Marxist-Leninist strategies to a more inclusive libertarian socialist approach, emphasizing local autonomy, cultural preservation, and the reconciliation of social and ecological concerns within a

pluralistic society. This paradigm shift fundamentally undermines the traditional nation-state's ideological and political framework, paving the way for a powerful and well-organized mass movement to emerge both within Turkey and across its borders.

The origins of the Kurdish nation and nationalism

This approach not only defines and traces the historical formation of the Kurdish nation but also situates Kurdish nationalism within a broader ethno-symbolic framework, emphasizing the continuity of cultural, linguistic, and social markers over millennia. By grounding the analysis in precise historiography and well-reasoned evidence, Öcalan provides a nuanced understanding of Middle Eastern societies' complex social structures, highlighting how ethnic identity, tribal affiliations, and local governance shaped patterns of political authority, economic organization, and cultural continuity (Sauermann, 2019). This perspective allows for a deeper comprehension of Kurdish nationalism as a historically rooted and culturally coherent phenomenon, rather than a modern political invention, thereby informing the PKK's ideological shift toward inclusive, decentralized, and libertarian forms of social organization. In Öcalan's perception:

“[N]either in antiquity nor in the Middle Ages have the Kurds been confronted with an ideological discourse equipping them to adequately interpret their reality. Most of the time they have been a people under occupation and their rulers have changed over the centuries. With them the ideologies implanted in the occupied areas to overlay native culture and to justify oppression and exploitation changed. The only constants handed down to modern times are religious or mythological narratives, which affirm the Kurds' role as a humiliated people, who are always rightfully under foreign rule. Consequently, thinking about themselves and their identity as Kurdish would have appeared blasphemous” (Öcalan, 2011:11).

Accordingly, the Kurdish nation is not seen as a modern construct but as a historically continuous and evolving ethno-cultural entity. Its scattered tribal structures, shaped by centuries of external domination and state interventions, have preserved the internal cohesion of Kurdish

identity through shared language, customs, myths, and collective memories (Öcalan, 2011). This perspective emphasizes that Kurdish nationalism is deeply rooted in these historical experiences, where the interplay of tribal organization, local governance, and cultural continuity allowed the Kurds to maintain a sense of nationhood despite the absence of a formal state. In this context, nationalism emerges as a response to both external pressures and the internal aspiration for social cohesion, demonstrating that Kurdish identity has been simultaneously resilient, adaptive, and capable of forming the foundation for modern political mobilization.

This approach underscores the centrality of genealogical and historical consciousness in the formation of Kurdish nationalism. By drawing on their ethnic lineage, shared ancestry, and collective experiences, the Kurds have been able to reconstruct and reaffirm their national identity across generations. Folk memories, oral traditions, and written literature serve as vital repositories of this identity, transmitting historical narratives, cultural values, and symbols of resistance that provide both legitimacy and inspiration for political mobilization. In essence, these cultural and historical resources have enabled the Kurds to transform scattered tribal and regional affiliations into a coherent sense of nationhood, forming the intellectual and emotional foundation for modern Kurdish political nationalism.

“The Kurds and their predecessors have been able to preserve much of their cultural and linguistic homogeneity. This suggests that they have been living in the same area since prehistoric times. The fact that epic works and songs, thousands of years old, are still known and sung today hints at the robustness of this culture and language. Evidence of such works, among others the epic of Gilgamesh⁶⁸ and Giro (a song about an unknown girl), dates back to about 2000 BCE. Significantly, the form of today’s epic works in Kurdish is strikingly similar to these ancient works. . . . Many characteristics and traits of Kurdish society bear resemblance to

⁶⁸The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is an [epic poem](#) from ancient [Mesopotamia](#) that is often regarded as the earliest surviving great work of literature. The literary history of [Gilgamesh](#) begins with five [Sumerian](#) poems about Gilgamesh (Sumerian for "Gilgamesh"), king of [Uruk](#), dating from the [Third Dynasty of Ur](#) (c. 2100 BC). These independent stories were later used as source material for a combined epic. See more details in the source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Epic-of-Gilgamesh>.

communities from the Neolithic; the mind-set and material basis of Kurdish village communities appear like remnant of Neolithic. On the other hand, the Kurds have contributed enormously to the cultural developments of the Neolithic and the birth of the first civilization in Mesopotamia – the present and the past are both part of their psyche” (Öcalan, 2001:22).

Thus, Öcalan asserts that the Kurdish sense of nationhood and collective identity has historically depended on shared symbols, memories, and a recognized ethnonym that unites disparate tribes and communities. He emphasizes that the Kurds’ ethnic consciousness was preserved through folk literature, oral traditions, genealogical awareness, and historical narratives, all of which functioned as repositories of collective memory. These cultural resources enabled Kurds to maintain a cohesive sense of identity despite political fragmentation, external domination, and the absence of a centralized state. In Öcalan’s framework, it is precisely this ethno-symbolic continuity that provides the foundation for the revival of Kurdish nationalism and the formation of a modern political movement capable of pursuing collective rights and self-determination (Öcalan, 2011).

Building on this, Öcalan emphasizes that the Kurdish nation is not merely a collection of tribes or a geographic population but a historically continuous ethno-cultural community shaped by shared symbols and narratives. Through processes of ethnogenesis—such as adopting a collective name, establishing perceived boundaries, preserving origin myths, and cultivating symbolic practices—the Kurds have maintained a sense of internal cohesion and distinct identity despite political fragmentation and external domination. These symbolic foundations, Öcalan argues, provide both the historical legitimacy and the cultural resources necessary for the formation of a modern Kurdish nationhood. From the ethno-symbolist perspective, these tribal bonds preserve rituals, oral histories, and local customs, acting as repositories of Kurdish cultural memory. However, they also create internal divisions, making it difficult to mobilize a cohesive

political movement across Kurdistan. Öcalan's analysis suggests that overcoming the centrifugal effects of tribalism requires the symbolic redefinition of unity through shared myths, common narratives, and cultural practices, which later became a key element in the PKK's ideological shift toward democratic confederalism and grassroots organization.

According to Öcalan (2011), the historical evolution of nationalism demonstrates that while early nationalism once served as a progressive force for oppressed peoples, in the capitalist era it became closely tied to expansionism, chauvinism, and reactionary politics. Nationalism borrowed characteristics from religious chauvinism, asserting dominance through sacred symbols and metaphysical justifications, as seen in the example of German fascism. Consequently, modern political nationalism—whether capitalist or state-socialist—serves primarily to institutionalize the dominance of ruling classes over broader society, creating a persistent structural disconnect between society and state.

Öcalan emphasizes that there is no substantive difference between historical state structures, whether Sumerian civilization or Soviet socialism.⁶⁹ Both systems maintain hierarchical class dominance, and the collapse of the Soviet bloc demonstrates that the differences between nation-states are largely superficial, reflecting forms of governance rather than genuine social change.

⁶⁹ 'Real socialism', which emerged as the favoured caption, implied that the economic political, and social make-up of the Soviet bloc societies was a distinct mode of production, with its immanent tendencies, which could not be grasped either by reference to the concepts of Western social science or by the instruments of official communist ideology. Its defining feature was the primacy of politics over economics and the intertwining of the two. Party, state bureaucracy, security apparatus, and military formed a power elite, presiding over a bureaucratically centralized, segmented society. Extensive economic growth exhausted the natural and human resources of countries tied into patterns of dependence devoid of economic logic but rooted within the overriding needs of the military-industrial complex. Economic interests, rather than being based upon economic rationality, were distorted by this redistribution mechanism. Finely graded occupational and hierarchical privilege incorporated most of the population into an artificial set of dependencies. Moreover, social relations substituted for the absence of civil society, the missing meso-level, connecting the individual and family to the state-sponsored organizations and institutions, and sought to break out of the segmentalism and opaqueness which allowed the rulers to manipulate sections of society, often against each other; see: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100407166>

Therefore, traditional nation-state solutions cannot address the Kurdish national question, as they inherently prioritize elite control over collective rights (Öcalan, 2011).

Democratic Confederalism versus the Nation-State

From Öcalan's perspective, political nationalism is primarily an instrument of minority ruling classes, where the state functions to preserve and advance elite interests. In contrast, nationalism as a cultural phenomenon expresses a collective identity, patriotism, and respect for shared heritage without necessarily requiring state power (Öcalan, 2011). This distinction allows the concept of self-determination to be separated from the state. Self-determination becomes the right and ability of individuals and communities to govern themselves directly, rather than relying on the formation of a nation-state (Jongerden, 2022). The state is therefore seen not as a neutral or progressive institution, but as a historically contingent instrument that emerged in opposition to communal cooperation, functioning as a vehicle for exploitation, hierarchy, and social control (Jongerden, 2022:3).

By contrast, democratic confederalism draws on historical forms of communal organization, dating back to Neolithic societies (c. 10,000–4,000 BCE), which emphasized cooperation, mutual responsibility, and coexistence. It recognizes the right to an equal and autonomous life, grounded in historical and natural coexistence, rather than state-centered authority (Jongerden, 2002). The modern nation-state, emerging alongside the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalist economies, institutionalized central authority and secular governance. Despite secular foundations, many nation-states incorporate religious or cultural elements into national identity, often as a political tool rather than a natural societal evolution (Öcalan, 2011:10). In essence, democratic confederalism rejects the nation-state as a necessary or inherently progressive

structure, proposing instead a system of bottom-up, participatory governance that aligns with historical communal practices while protecting ethnic, cultural, and political pluralism. Öcalan (2011) argues that when the nation-state exceeds the structural foundations established by the bourgeois revolution, citizens are transformed into atomized subjects, disconnected from political institutions and collective governance. In this framework, state authority primarily upholds the interests of the ruling elite, enforcing bureaucracy as a tool of social control.

With the rise of capitalist modernity in Europe, nation-states expanded bureaucratic structures to penetrate all aspects of society, creating mechanisms that discipline labour, regulate culture, and control daily life (Öcalan, 2011). Bureaucracy and the modern nation-state are thus inseparable components of capitalist modernity, forming a “cage” that imprisons natural social relations. Under these conditions, both material and intellectual capacities are exploited to serve a small ruling minority, **while society is shaped into a** homogeneous entity defined by a single culture, language, religion, and national identity. The idea of national citizenship becomes a tool to enforce this uniformity, replacing individual autonomy with subordination to the state (Öcalan, 2011). Importantly, the nation-state—whether capitalist, socialist, or otherwise—is instrumental in maintaining elite domination. It ensures the production of goods, profits, and societal structures to benefit a small minority, not the majority. Consequently, the establishment of a separate nation-state, such as a hypothetical Kurdish state, would primarily serve ruling elites rather than the broader population, imposing new forms of inequality and injustice (Öcalan, 2011). In Öcalan’s view, the nation-state is therefore inherently limited as a solution to the Kurdish national question, as it perpetuates hierarchical control rather than fostering social justice, equality, or democratic self-governance.

The Kurdish question is often framed as an ethnic and national problem, rooted in the fragmented tribal structures of Kurdish society and the absence of a cohesive national identity. At first glance, the most practical solution might appear to be the creation of a traditional nation-state (Öcalan, 2011). However, Öcalan emphasizes that any preconceived political plans—whether through separatism or pursuing self-determination within authoritarian frameworks—are ultimately illusory and unattainable. Therefore, a truly comprehensive solution must be grounded in a democratic project that addresses the deep-rooted structural and political constraints, aiming to democratize the entire region rather than imposing a top-down state-based resolution (Öcalan, 2011:19). Conceivably, democratic confederalism represents a non-state political administration that organizes society democratically through collective consensus, without reliance on state bureaucracy (Öcalan, 2011:21). It is a flexible, multicultural, and anti-monopoly governance system, grounded in principles of ecology, feminism, and communal economy, ensuring that society's diverse needs are met through shared management of production and consumption (ibid.).

Although the PKK's ideological and political transformations began long before Abdullah Öcalan's arrest, his prison writings catalyzed a profound shift: from an insurgent, Marxist-Leninist organization focused on armed national liberation, to a contemporary mass movement striving for peace through the establishment of a society based on democratic confederalism (White, 2015). In line with this new approach, the PKK established the Koma Komalên Kurdistan (KKK – Council of Associations of Kurdistan), later renamed Koma Ciwakên Kurdistan (KCK – Kurdistan Communities Union), which serves as the umbrella organization for all PKK-affiliated bodies in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the Kurdish Diaspora (White,

2015:131). The KCK organizes society from the grassroots up, structuring itself across cities, towns, neighbourhoods, streets, villages, tribal communities, and households (ibid.).

By promoting radical democracy as an alternative to the nation-state, the KCK emphasizes self-determination based on the capacities and capabilities of the people themselves, rather than hierarchical representative systems. Consequently, the movement has become a unique political and socio-cultural force, dedicated to building a form of radical democracy independent of the nation-state model and capable of addressing both local and broader Kurdish social and political needs.

“The practical organizational framework of the KCK is set out as an agreement between its participants, *sÖzleşme*, also known as ‘the Constitution of Kurdistan’. This envisages the KCK as a democratic, social and confederal system with members and its own judiciary, which tries to gain influence on central and local administration.An investigation by a group of German leftists who visited Turkey’s Kurdish areas and interviewed many Kurds attempting to put democratic confederalism into practice reveals that KCK/PKK supporters attempting to build the new autonomist structures inside the shell of the old society are expending an enormous amount of energy. The authors admit that the Kurds have not yet managed to build stand-alone structures that are completely independent of the Turkish nation–state, although the existing democratic confederal structures do demonstrate a potential counter-power to that state” (White, 2015:133).⁷⁰

Based on the theoretical framework of this research, modern statehood in the Middle East is typically founded on collective-ethnic nationalism, resulting in governments that operate through centralized and often authoritarian structures. The historical experience demonstrates that the formation of a Kurdish nation-state within this framework would likely replicate similar patterns of hierarchical control, elite domination, and exclusion. In contrast, the democratic confederalism approach offers a more authentic and sustainable solution, as it emphasizes

⁷⁰Here, part of White’s quotation has been taken from Democratic Turkey Forum (2012) ‘Backgrounder on the Union of Communities in Kurdistan, KCK, 22 July, www.Tuerkeiforum.net/new/index.php?title=Backgrounder_on_the_Union_of_Communities_in_Kurdistan,_KCK.

grassroots democracy, cultural pluralism, and self-determination, making it particularly suitable for addressing the Kurdish national issue and, more broadly, the challenges faced by other ethnic-national groups.

The New Paradigm as a Feminist Revolutionary Manifestation

One of the most significant dimensions of the PKK's ideological and political reorientation is its radical feminist transformation, which is widely regarded as a distinctive and foundational element of its new paradigm shift. In his writings and speeches on gender and sexuality, Abdullah Öcalan argues that women's liberation constitutes the precondition for all forms of social and national liberation. As he asserts, "no nation can be free unless women are free," because "the enslavement of women was the first form of slavery," and therefore, "national liberation is possible only through the liberation of women" (International Initiative, 2003:7).⁷¹ Within this framework, the establishment of autonomous women's institutions and movements is considered essential for empowering women and strengthening their individual and collective social status. These structures aim not only to increase women's participation in political and social life but also to fundamentally restructure social relations on the basis of full gender equality, thereby directly challenging deeply entrenched patriarchal systems (ibid.).

Furthermore, Öcalan locates the roots of gender oppression in a long historical process that extends beyond feudal social relations. He argues that the subordination of women is deeply embedded in approximately 5,000 years of hierarchical civilization, beginning with the

⁷¹ International Initiative is a non-profit intellectual and academic circle who are translating and publishing Öcalan's books and prison notes from 2003, and they are grouping under "Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan - Peace in Kurdistan"; source: WWW.freedom-for-Ocalan.com

emergence of slavery and class society (Öcalan, 2003:9). According to this perspective, the institutionalization of slavery marked a decisive turning point in human history, initiating a broader process of domination that led to the systematic marginalization and erasure of women from social, political, and historical spheres. Consequently, the liberation of women is not treated as a secondary social reform but as a central revolutionary process necessary for overcoming all forms of hierarchy, domination, and exploitation embedded in capitalist modernity and the nation-state system.

The decline of women's historical role signifies not only the loss of gender equality but also the broader erosion of human freedom and social justice. According to Öcalan, patriarchal domination constitutes the foundation of all subsequent forms of hierarchy, as gender-based oppression established the structural model later reproduced in class and state domination (Öcalan, 2003). In this sense, patriarchy represents the earliest and most deeply rooted system of exploitation. However, gender-based enslavement differs from class and national oppression in its methods of legitimization. Unlike other forms of domination, which often rely on direct coercion, the subordination of women has been normalized through ideological mechanisms, cultural narratives, and emotional manipulation that conceal its exploitative nature (Öcalan, 2003:11). Biological differences between men and women have historically been instrumentalized to justify unequal social roles and the exclusion of women from positions of authority. The social construction of "women's work" as inferior or inappropriate reinforced patriarchal control and contributed to the systematic devaluation of women's labor and social contributions. As a result, women were persistently represented as the "weaker sex," a perception that became deeply embedded in social, cultural, and political institutions over time

(ibid.). This process not only marginalized women but also normalized gender hierarchy as an essential component of social organization.

Therefore, within Öcalan's framework, the liberation of women becomes the central condition for the liberation of society as a whole. The dismantling of patriarchal domination is understood as a prerequisite for overcoming class exploitation, state oppression, and broader systems of hierarchical power. Consequently, the new paradigm places women's emancipation at its core, viewing it not as a separate social issue but as the driving force behind the broader revolutionary transformation toward a democratic, egalitarian, and non-statist social order.

"If we want to construe true meaning to terms such as *equality*, *freedom*, *democracy*, and *socialism* that we so often use, we need to analyze and shatter the ancient web of relations that has been woven around women. There is no other way of attaining true equality (with due allowance for diversity), freedom, democracy and morality" (Ocalan, 2003:11).

In his historical analysis, Öcalan challenges the assumption that patriarchy is an inherent or permanent feature of human society. He argues instead that early human communities were predominantly matricentric, organized around the spiritual, social, and material authority of women (Öcalan, 2003:13). Within this framework, motherhood constituted the epistemological and social foundation of natural authority. The figure of the mother was universally recognized and respected, not only because of her reproductive role but also because of her central function in sustaining and organizing social life. Thus, the enduring significance of motherhood derives from its dual character: it represents both the biological basis of human continuity and the concrete social foundation upon which communal existence was structured (Öcalan, 2003:14).

According to this perspective, the emergence of Neolithic societies following the end of the last Ice Age—approximately twenty thousand years ago—marked a decisive stage in human social

development. These societies, characterized by increasingly sophisticated tools and permanent settlement patterns, represented a significant advancement beyond earlier nomadic tribal formations (Öcalan, 2003). The Neolithic period witnessed transformative developments, including the agricultural revolution, the establishment of village life, the expansion of trade, and the institutionalization of mother-centered family structures, clans, and tribal organizations. Öcalan interprets this era as one in which social organization was structured around women's authority and communal cooperation. He describes this system as a form of "primitive socialism," which persisted for millennia and stood in fundamental contrast to the hierarchical, state-centered order that would later emerge with the rise of class society and patriarchy (Öcalan, 2003).

According to Abdullah Öcalan, the transition from matricentric social organization to patriarchal dominance was closely linked to changes in the division of labor, particularly the growing prominence of hunting. He argues that the increasing effectiveness and prestige associated with hunting gradually elevated the social status of male hunters, enabling them to assume leadership positions within tribal and clan structures (Öcalan, 2003). In anthropological terms, this shift was reinforced by an emerging ideological alignment between the "wise old man" and the "shaman," figures who, although not originally part of the core productive group, acquired symbolic and intellectual authority. This alliance contributed to the formation of an early ideological opposition to women's traditional authority and can be interpreted as the initial stage in the institutionalization of patriarchal power (Öcalan, 2003).

Öcalan further suggests that the consolidation of patriarchal ideology was facilitated by a tripartite alliance between young male hunters, who assumed responsibility for the tribe's

physical protection, wise elders, who provided social legitimacy, and shamans, who exercised spiritual authority. This alliance gradually produced the military, administrative, and ideological foundations of hierarchical rule, marking the emergence of a war-centered culture and the early formation of authority, domination, and dynastic structures (Öcalan, 2003). Nevertheless, during this transitional period, maternal authority and elder women continued to play a crucial role in maintaining collective welfare, as social organization had not yet become fully structured around private property or accumulation. However, as voluntary cooperation increasingly transformed into institutionalized authority and self-interest, coercive power began to conceal itself behind the rhetoric of collective security and communal benefit. In this way, the foundations were laid for the eventual emergence of class society, patriarchy, and state-based domination.

“This constitutes the core of all exploitative and oppressive systems. It is the most sinister creation ever invented; the creation that brought forth all forms of slavery, all forms of mythology and religion, all systematic annihilation and plunder. The organized force of proto-priest (shaman), experienced elder and strong man allied to compose the initial and longest enduring patriarchal hierarchic power, that of holy governance. This can be seen in all societies that are at a similar stage: until the class, city and state stage, this hierarchy is dominant in social and economic life” (Öcalan, 2003:18).

According to Abdullah Öcalan, although the balance between the sexes gradually shifted against women in Sumerian society, a relative degree of gender parity persisted until approximately the second millennium BCE. However, from around 2000 BCE onward, the consolidation of patriarchal structures and the institutional empowerment of men led to a profound deterioration in women’s political, social, and cultural status. Women were increasingly reduced to conditions resembling slavery, as their autonomy was denied and their existence subjected to systematic humiliation, control, and exploitation (Öcalan, 2003). Öcalan characterizes this transformation as one of the most destructive turning points in human history, arguing that the erosion of women’s

equality represented a broader collapse of fundamental human values. In this view, the subordination of women—particularly in the Middle Eastern context—signified a decisive break from the natural course of human social development and marked the emergence of hierarchical and oppressive social relations (Öcalan, 2003).

Furthermore, Öcalan interprets this transition as inherently counter-revolutionary, as it undermined what he describes as women's historically central role in sustaining communal life, ethical values, and harmonious relations with nature. He argues that the suppression of women's social authority weakened emotional intelligence, empathy, and life-affirming cultural practices, thereby contributing to the rise of domination, exploitation, and alienation. Consequently, the establishment of patriarchy not only subordinated women but also fundamentally reshaped human society, laying the ideological and structural foundations for class hierarchy, state power, and broader systems of social oppression.

“In its place has been born the cursed analytical intelligence of a cruel culture that has surrendered itself to dogmatism and detached itself from nature; that considers war to be the most exalted virtue and enjoys the shedding of human blood; that sees his arbitrary treatment of woman and his enslavement of man as its right. *This* intelligence is the antitype of the egalitarian intelligence of women that is focused on humanitarian production and animate nature” (Öcalan, 2003:22).

According to this theoretical framework, patriarchy emerged through early alliances between male authority and the sacred legitimacy embodied by the shaman, which contributed to the development of hierarchy as the foundational principle of authoritarian social organization (Öcalan, 2003:23). This process gradually institutionalized patriarchal hierarchy, consolidating authority and deepening class differentiation, ultimately laying the groundwork for the emergence of the state as a formal structure of domination. However, historical evidence suggests that, for extended periods, authority remained localized within single-family lineages or

tribal units. Consequently, the scope of their power was geographically and socially limited, confined to specific kinship groups and territories, until the later development of territorially organized state systems (ibid.).

Central to this analysis is the argument that women's subordination was enforced through the construction of a new patriarchal morality grounded in the material interests and personal desires of men (Öcalan, 2003:24). Patriarchal ideology not only legitimized gender domination but also facilitated the accumulation of private wealth and the institutionalization of private property. As these processes unfolded, the internal cohesion and relative equality of earlier communal societies diminished, gradually leading to increased social tensions and inequalities. Under the dominance of patriarchal ethics, social organization became increasingly structured around violence, warfare, oppression, and exploitation, often justified through expansionist ambitions and sustained conflict. Over time, class-based authority emerged as the dominant organizing principle of society, and the state became institutionalized as the central mechanism for protecting and reproducing these hierarchical relations (ibid.). Therefore, within this theoretical perspective, the liberation of women is understood not merely as a question of gender equality but as a fundamental prerequisite for dismantling hierarchical domination and overcoming the structural foundations of state power and class oppression.

“Without an analysis of woman's status in the hierarchical system and the conditions under which she was enslaved, neither the state nor the classed system that it rests upon can be understood. Woman is not targeted as the female gender, but as the founder of the matriarchal society. Without a thorough analysis of women's enslavement and establishing the conditions for overcoming it, no other slavery can be analyzed or overcome. Without these analyses, fundamental mistakes cannot be avoided” (Öcalan, 2003:25).

Historically, sexism has functioned as a foundational ideology of power since the emergence of hierarchical social order. Within this framework, the domestication of women is conceptualized

as the earliest form of slavery, predating and structurally informing other forms of domination (Öcalan, 2003:26). However, gender discrimination extends beyond unequal power relations between men and women; it represents the crystallization of broader systems of domination that permeate all levels of social organization (ibid.). In this sense, the subjugation of women has not only constituted a distinct form of oppression but has also served as a model and enabling condition for the institutionalization of other forms of social slavery and hierarchical control (ibid.).

From this perspective, class society emerges as a central mechanism through which gender discrimination is reproduced and normalized across social, political, and economic spheres. This system operates through the hierarchical structure of the household, which functions as a microcosm of broader societal power relations. Consequently, without a comprehensive analysis of patriarchy and socially constructed masculinity as socio-cultural systems, it is not possible to fully understand the structural foundations of the state or its embedded culture of violence, warfare, and domination, which primarily serve to protect the interests of ruling minorities (Öcalan, 2003:28). The modern nation-state, as the most developed institutional expression of minority rule—reinforced through nationalism, militarism, and bureaucratic authority—derives a significant portion of its power from patriarchal structures and the systematic oppression of women. Patriarchy thus becomes both a social foundation and a political instrument through which state authority and hierarchical domination are maintained and reproduced (ibid.).

“Sexism just as nationalism is an ideology through which power is generated and nation-states are built. Sexism is not a function of biological differences. To the dominant male, the female is an object to be used for the realization of his ambitions. In the same vein, when the housewifization of women was done, he started the process of turning males into slaves; subsequently, the two forms of slavery have become intertwined” (Ocalan, 2003:28).

Thousands of years after the consolidation of patriarchy—described as the “first great sexual rupture”—the discrimination and subjugation of women intensified further through its formal legitimization within monotheistic religions systems, which were structured around masculine authority and male-centered religious practices (Öcalan, 2003). In earlier polytheistic belief systems, deities often functioned as symbolic intermediaries between humanity and nature, reflecting a more pluralistic cosmology that maintained a closer conceptual relationship between human society and the natural world. However, with the rise of patriarchal ideology and its institutionalization through monotheism, this relationship was fundamentally transformed. According to Öcalan, monotheistic religions contributed to a deeper separation between human consciousness and nature, reinforcing hierarchical authority and centralizing spiritual power in a singular, transcendent male figure (ibid.). Furthermore, monotheistic religions systems incorporated and reinterpreted the moral traditions, ethical values, and intellectual elements of subordinated classes and marginalized ethnic groups, integrating them into a unified sacred order that ultimately served the consolidation of centralized authority (Öcalan, 2003). This transformation also reshaped human subjectivity by replacing diverse mythological representations with the doctrine of a single, absolute God. As imperial political structures increasingly aligned themselves with monotheistic belief, authority shifted from decentralized sacred traditions to centralized religious and political systems grounded in singular divine legitimacy (ibid.). This shift had profound consequences for the social status of women, as religious authority became exclusively masculinized. The role of divine intermediary and prophetic leadership was historically restricted to men, reinforcing patriarchal norms and further marginalizing women from positions of spiritual, social, and political influence. In this way,

monotheistic institutional structures contributed significantly to the historical entrenchment and ideological justification of gender hierarchy (Öcalan, 2003).

Historically, the patriarchal family has constituted the foundational unit of hierarchical social organization and ideological reproduction. In this sense, the dynastic order must be understood as an integrated system in which ideological domination and institutional structure are mutually constitutive and inseparable (Öcalan, 2003:35). The historical concentration of male authority over women's lives, bodies, and social environments parallels the broader processes through which ruling minorities have monopolized the accumulation and control of economic capital (ibid.). Patriarchal domination, therefore, represents not merely a cultural phenomenon but a structural mechanism closely linked to the emergence and consolidation of class power.

From an existential perspective, Öcalan conceptualizes women's social position as the earliest and most enduring form of colonial domination, arguing that women's biological and social existence became the first "colony" subjected to systematic control, exploitation, and denial of autonomy (Öcalan, 2003:35). Within this framework, the family emerges as a central institutional mechanism through which hierarchical power relations are reproduced and normalized across generations. Its historical consolidation can be attributed to several interconnected functions. First, by institutionalizing male authority, the family operates as the primary micro-foundation of state power, embedding hierarchical governance within everyday social relations. Second, it ensures the continuous extraction of unpaid reproductive and domestic labour from women, thereby sustaining broader systems of economic exploitation. Third, women's roles within the family have been instrumentalized to serve demographic, sexual, and reproductive functions essential to the continuity of social and political order.

Finally, by normalizing relations of domination and dependency, the family has functioned as a model through which broader systems of colonialism, slavery, and social inequality have been legitimized and reproduced throughout human history (ibid.). Accordingly, the patriarchal family represents not merely a private social institution but a central site for the construction, internalization, and perpetuation of hierarchical ideology and dynastic power relations. It is within this institutional context that relations of domination are naturalized, providing the sociological and ideological foundation upon which wider structures of state authority and class rule are built.

While the ancient Kurds were able to maintain and strengthen their independent tribal existence within the Sumerian and Hittite civilizations, the emergence of early dynastic states effectively curtailed this autonomy (Öcalan, 2003:39). In these pre-dynastic contexts, semi-nomadic, semi-guerrilla lifestyles and tribal structures allowed women to exercise significant influence and freedom, a tradition reflected in the relative prominence and resilience of Kurdish women compared to other Middle Eastern societies. However, with the rise of patriarchal dynastic states, successive foreign occupations of Kurdistan, and the Islamization of the region from the 7th century onward, the status of Kurdish women deteriorated more markedly than that of women elsewhere in the Middle East (ibid.).

The Islamization of Middle Eastern societies further entrenched the male-dominated family as a sacred institution, exacerbating the denial of women's rights. Combined with economic disadvantage, limited individual freedoms, and entrenched tribal customs, these dynamics severely constrained women's social and political agency (Öcalan, 2003:40). Traditional tribal-patriarchal practices, such as "honor killings," illustrate the extreme forms of gendered social

control, where the perceived loss of a woman's honor is interpreted as a threat to communal and familial reputation. In such contexts, male actors may justify lethal violence against women as a means of restoring personal and communal dignity. Öcalan argues that the eradication of honour-based violence and the broader subjugation of women necessitate the complete democratization of Kurdish society. This democratization would enable the fundamental restructuring of social institutions, including marriage, to ensure equitable coexistence between men and women. By addressing the entrenched feudal and patriarchal norms, such reforms aim to guarantee women's autonomy and full social, political, and economic freedom (ibid.).

Consequently, the PKK's struggle for liberation is not solely a response to external political colonialism but also an effort to confront internal feudalism and patriarchal oppression. Transforming these socio-cultural structures is essential for elevating women's status and, by extension, achieving the emancipation of society as a whole (Öcalan, 2003:40). In patriarchal-capitalist societies, both men and women experience oppression; however, systemic power imbalances between genders perpetuate social hierarchy and inequality. A radical reorganization of social relations is therefore required to dismantle these inequalities and achieve genuine emancipation (ibid.).

Öcalan further emphasizes that women's oppression is not only indicative of societal subjugation and moral decline but also reflects structural deceit, exploitation, and violence. Patriarchal norms fundamentally obstruct a thorough and scientific understanding of gender issues. These norms contribute to social injustices, limit freedoms, and escalate aggression, including sexual violence, all perpetuated by dominant male positions. It is imperative that we challenge and dismantle these harmful structures. Addressing men's attitudes and relinquishing patriarchal dominance is

thus a central challenge, as entrenched male privilege impedes personal growth and societal transformation. Men must recognize that their historical dominance, while socially sanctioned, ultimately limits their own freedom, agency, and capacity for self-development (Öcalan, 2003:50).

“In order to lead to a meaningful life, we need to define woman and her role in societal life. This should not be a statement about her biological attributes and social status but an analysis of the all-important concept of a woman as a being. If we can define woman, it may be possible to define man. Using man as point of departure when defining woman or life will render invalid interpretations because a woman’s natural existence is more central than a man’s. A woman’s status is demeaned and made out to be insignificant by the male-dominated society, but this should not prevent us from forming a valid understanding of her reality. Thus, it is clear that a woman’s physique is not deficient or inferior; on the contrary, the female body is more central than that of a man. *This* is the root of man’s extreme and meaningless jealousy. The natural consequence of their differing physiques is that woman’s emotional intelligence is much stronger than man’s. Emotional intelligence is connected to life; it is the intelligence that governs empathy and sympathy. Even when a woman’s analytic intelligence develops, her emotional intelligence gives her the talent to live a balanced life, to be devoted to life, and not to be destructive.

As can be seen even from this short argumentation, man is a system. The male has *become* a state and turned this into the dominant culture. Class and sexual oppression develop together; masculinity has generated the ruling gender, ruling class, and ruling state. When man is analyzed in this context, it is clear that masculinity must be killed (Öcalan. 2003:51).

From a conceptual standpoint, achieving salvation, liberation, and a truly free life is contingent upon a revolutionary transformation in the status of women—a transformation that requires a “complete divorce” from the five-thousand-year-old legacy of male domination (Öcalan, 2003). Consequently, the notion that societal problems should first be addressed through the state, with issues such as the family and women addressed only thereafter, is fundamentally flawed. The analysis of the state cannot be divorced from the study of the encompassing social institutions that constitute it. Social phenomena are organically interconnected, and analyzing one dimension in isolation inevitably produces incomplete understandings and insufficient solutions (Öcalan,

2003). Thus, the primary focus for resolving social challenges in the Middle East must center on achieving gender equality. Establishing a society where women can create and participate in social structures independent of traditional male-dominated frameworks is both a prerequisite and a guiding principle for meaningful social transformation (Öcalan, 2003).

Over recent decades, the PKK has undergone a profound feminist transformation within its organizational structure. Its theoretical and ideological stance on women's issues, combined with practical organizational activities, has generated the most radical changes within the party and the broader Kurdish communities. This transformation has fostered a widespread social movement aimed at restoring women's full rights and initiating a socio-cultural renaissance in Kurdish society. Consequently, alongside improving women's status, there has been a gradual erosion of feudal-tribal culture (White, 2015).

By 1995, the PKK declared at the community level its commitment to ending all forms of oppression against women and achieving gender equality in all spheres of social and political life. Recognizing women's revolutionary potential and dynamism, the party sought to lead their social mobilization through a robust organizational structure (White, 2015). The first PKK Women's Congress, was held in late 1992, emphasized women's independent activity and organization. The first official PKK Women's Congress took place on International Women's Day, 8 March 1995. A 23-member executive was elected, which subsequently founded the *Tevgera Jinen Azadiya Kurdistan* (TJAK—Kurdistan Women's Freedom Movement). This organization later became the *Yekîtiya Jinen Azadiya Kurdistan* (YJAK – Association of Free Women of Kurdistan) and is currently known as *Yekîtiya Jinen Azad* (YJA Star – Free Women's

Units).⁷² By 1993, women constituted approximately one-third of the armed forces, a proportion that has grown to roughly one-half in recent years (Merdjanova, 2021; White, 2015).

Although women initially joined the armed struggle in limited numbers, the PKK's presence in universities and urban centers from the early 1990s attracted more female participants. Beyond armed struggle, women have played key roles in civil society and the political sphere (Merdjanova, 2021). Kurdish women initially gained credibility by challenging the feudal-patriarchal structures of male domination in Kurdish society. With the emergence of pro-Kurdish legal political parties since 1999, women assumed leadership positions and contributed actively to public political life (Merdjanova, 2021:12).

In 1999, the first women's party, the Kurdistan Working Women's Party (Partiya Jinên Karkerên Kurdistan, PJKK), was established. It was renamed the Women's Liberation Party (Partiya Jina Azad, PJA) in 2000 and transformed into the Kurdish Women's Liberation Party (Partiya Azadiya Jinêya Kurdistanê, PAJK) in 2004 (Merdjanova, 2021). In 2005, the High Women Council (Koma Jinên Bilind, KJB) was formed as a confederate umbrella organization, uniting Kurdish women's political organizations across Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and the Diaspora (ibid.).

⁷² In the data above on the PKK's women's association collected by Paul White (2015), 'STAR is a melding of the name of the pagan goddess Ishtar and the Kurdish word *sterk*, meaning star. The origins of the word are Kurdish, from Mesopotamia, according to Ocalan, who tells women to become goddesses, promising that new and respected desexualized boundaries of female identity are closely associated with the refusal of any other love than that of the homeland'; source: Paul White 2015 *The PKK: Coming Down From the Mountains* London: Zed Books Ltd, pp.136

Since 2008, Kurdish women have participated actively in legal pro-Kurdish parties, particularly the People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) and the Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi, BDP), institutionalizing fundamental gender equality policies (Merdjanova, 2021). Political engagement allowed women to assume responsibilities beyond traditional familial roles, inspiring collective organization against patriarchal structures. Participation in parties such as the BDP, which integrates party ideology with Kurdish movement mobilization strategies, has facilitated women's access to positions of authority and fostered self-confidence (Merdjanova, 2021). Moreover, inspired by the PKK's revolutionary feminism and the principles of democratic confederalism, women's engagement in legal political parties occurs alongside independent political organization within society, reflecting a dual approach to gender equality: one that combines formal political participation with grassroots activism.

Indeed, the radical feminist transformation within the PKK in recent decades has generated significant collective political mobilization among women, fostering personal, social, and political change. Active participation in legal public politics represents just one dimension of this transformation (Merdjanova, 2021). From the late 1990s onward, the PKK's feminist initiatives also inspired the formation of numerous Kurdish civic associations, in which women sought to organize autonomously. These organizations focused on social research, literary and political publications on women's issues, education, arts, health, and legal counseling (Merdjanova, 2021). Women's magazines affiliated with feminist groups primarily emphasized resistance against sexist and racist practices, including violence against women within the Kurdish community. Publications also addressed the systemic denial of Kurdish women's ethnic identity,

manifested through war, abuse, rape, forced migration, and daily humiliation (Merdjanova, 2021).

Political and cultural activities of Kurdish feminists from the mid-2000s onward, together with the rise of Turkish trans-ethnic feminist movements, facilitated cooperation with leftist feminists. These alliances recognized the inherently discriminatory nature of Turkish collective ethnic nationalism and acknowledged the double standards faced by Kurdish women. Additionally, the Kurdish women's movement has built a broad social network encompassing numerous associations in urban and rural areas, addressing domestic violence, supporting local economic initiatives, and establishing links with human rights organizations (Merdjanova, 2021).

In summary, Kurdish women's activism over the past decades has been central to challenging traditional patriarchy and tribalism, advancing national feminist efforts toward democratization through decentralization, regional autonomy, inclusive citizenship, and equal rights for women and all minorities. These endeavours are a direct manifestation of the PKK's radical feminist transformation.

Paradigm Shift: From National Liberation to Ethno-national Movement

Based on the evidence presented above, it is clear that the political and ideological developments within the PKK have fundamentally distinguished this organization from traditional Kurdish nationalist groups in several key respects. These transformations, coupled with the party's structural reorganization, represent the most significant advancement in formulating solutions to the Kurdish national question beyond the conventional nation-state framework. Indeed, the

PKK's ideological evolution over the past few decades constitutes a paradigmatic shift from orthodox Marxism to a specific form of libertarian socialism.⁷³

The PKK's principal challenge in Kurdish politics has been to distinguish itself from traditional elite-driven, tribalist politics rooted in betrayal and narrow interests. This distinction has facilitated the emergence of broad-based political and ethno-cultural movements (Ozcan, 2006:107). In the PKK-led movement, the focus has shifted away from the traditional elites' attempts to gain limited local autonomy and mobilize the masses as political instruments. Instead, the priority is the humanistic reconstruction of Kurdish society based on the agency of free and autonomous individuals.

Central to Öcalan's philosophy of "educational war" is the goal of liberating human nature from the constraints imposed by property relations and hierarchical structures in the civilized world. This approach aims to reshape human attitudes toward humanism and social responsibility (Ozcan, 2006:107). Initially, intensive philosophical, moral, and spiritual guidance focuses on fostering self-recreation in the personalities of individuals seeking to join the organization. Öcalan emphasizes transforming the individual Kurdish personality, providing the foundation for societal rehabilitation through collective self-governing confederations of self-aware individuals (Ozcan, 2006).

A rational resolution to the Kurdish question, therefore, requires the establishment of a society grounded in humanist values. This process involves dismantling the "debased Kurdish personality" and nurturing a "naturalized personality" that encourages self-awareness and

⁷³ Based on the general data of this thesis, in the final section related to the conclusion, this paradigm shift will be explained in detail; emphasis added for further explanation.

autonomy (Ozcan, 2006). Over centuries, Kurdish society has been shaped by oppression, leaving the collective personality degraded and constrained. Consequently, resistance and transformative efforts must begin with rigorous self-criticism at the individual level, alongside a critical examination of organizational structures and practices (Ozcan, 2006).

Education and organization constitute two fundamental pillars of the PKK's ideological and political framework. These pillars operate in tandem: education facilitates personal transformation, while organization channels these transformed individuals toward collective political action (Ozcan, 2006). According to Ozcan (2006), formal party membership and participation in the PKK's organizational structures require engagement with a philosophy of "lifestyle," encompassing self-reflection, personal development, and the cultivation of ethical, social, and political consciousness.

The PKK's profound ideological and organizational changes since the early 1990s mark a shift from a positivist leftist insurgent group to a socialist, ethno-national mass movement. This transformation is evident in the delegation of executive power from the party leadership to elected representatives within various social institutions. The relationship between party cadres and these representatives has been addressed in the PKK's monthly publication *Serxwebun* (*Independence*) under the headings "People's Assembly in Kurdistan" and "On the State—Party Relations," which primarily examine the attitudes and practices of party cadres toward the elected representatives of the people (Ozcan, 2006).

"If we do not intend handing the people over to some persons whom no one knows, to *agha*⁷⁴ and gendarme-like personalities, to newly emerged despots, then, first and foremost the party cadres must assimilate themselves into democratic culture, be absorbed into democracy and

⁷⁴ The word *agha* is a synonym to *lord* or *master* in English, (emphasis added).

convert democracy into a lifestyle for themselves The party will not govern the state by instructing people's assemblies. The governance of the state, uniting the masses around ourselves and motivating and directing them towards a common end will be through mass organizations" (*Serxwebun*, April 1993).

Indeed, well before Öcalan's arrest and imprisonment, the PKK had already undergone significant ideological and organizational transformations, evolving into a more cohesive and effective movement capable of pursuing its objectives. By adapting to a shifting political and social landscape, the PKK emphasized the social "principle of conduct," which, even as a conceptual claim, replaced the Leninist interpretation of Marxist class theory in the context of the imperialist era. In this context, Öcalan's interpretation of Marx's materialist conception of history emphasizes that society can be transformed by turning individuals from passive observers into active participants. This transformation has been regarded as a central concern for humanity since the emergence of class divisions and early civilizations (Ozcan, 2006). Moving beyond traditional Marxist frameworks focused on class struggle, Öcalan's theory highlights the creation of a more humanistic society through socialist democracy, as well as radical efforts to counter environmental destruction and capitalist consumerism (Ozcan, 2006:15). Even prior to his imprisonment, Öcalan described the era of class societies as the "civilization of Satan," arguing that it structured humanity's spiritual life around selfishness, greed, and power. In this framework, socialism becomes the only path to escape the dehumanizing "flood" of the capitalist-imperial era.

Within the PKK's ideological revival, the organization increasingly framed itself as a movement for humanization, with the political aim of establishing a society grounded in humanitarian principles. By the late 1990s, the terminology shifted from "Kurdish Revolution" to the broader concept of the "Great Anatolian Revolution," reflecting a redefinition of socialism as a project

for humanization rather than mere pursuit of party or state power. The first theoretical articulation of the PKK as a “humanitarian movement” can be traced to Öcalan’s speeches from 1994.

“The PKK movement, beyond being an entity of nationalization and national emancipation, is a humanization movement. For that reason, our struggle is not only for the liberation of the Kurdish people but it also, in a sense, means the liberation of the humanity of the world. The loftiness of the Kurdish people will in the final analysis mean the loftiness of the world’s humanity too. If a people have so descended to the bottom in a part of this world, I think one cannot speak of the exaltation of humanity. Ignoring Kurdistan to such an extent is the measure of the world’s foolishness, and we will arrive at humanity from this very contradiction (Ocalan, 1994a:517).⁷⁵

In contradiction with orthodox Marxism and Real socialism, the PKK criticizes the Soviet Revolution, defining it as a vulgar form of communism that has drained socialism's vitality by prioritizing economic growth, the party, and the state power (Ozcan, 2006). In addition, unlike the experience of socialism in the Soviet Union and its counterparts in satellite countries, known as "one-party “state socialism, the PKK's struggle for "socialism in Kurdistan" is seen as a massive humanitarian revolution that does not recognize state borders (Ozcan, 2006). In contrast to establishing humanitarian socialism, which requires the dissolution of the state and the party, the process of socialism (of the Soviet type) occurred oppositely; people's liberty dissolved into the state and one-party politics instead (Ozcan, 2006).

One key aspect of the new approach is *shaping a socialist individual* instead of solely establishing a state or a party. According to Ocalan, "If the individual quality of socialist cadres, whether in the conditions of victory or during a completely normal political or military activity,

⁷⁵This part of statements selected from one of Öcalan’s books written in Turkey and translated by Ali Kemal Ozcan; source: Abdullah Öcalan (1999) *Kürt Aşkê; Yaşamalê, (Kurdish Love; How Man Ought to Live?)*, Vol.III, *Weşanen Serxwebun, Köln*.

is not resolved accurately, all efforts can quickly bring opposite results." ⁷⁶ Ocalan's and PKK's critique of "existing state socialism" represents a unique form of socialism theory, wherein the primary objective is to mould a socialist individual and their way of life rather than seizing political power.

While this theoretical approach conceives party organization as a living organism embodying human values in practice, it simultaneously acknowledges the practical realities and limitations of state socialism, including its embedded capitalist elements and lingering post-feudal contradictions (Ozcan, 2006). Within this framework, "Kurdistan socialism" is envisioned as capable of creating the structural conditions necessary to guide society from its most backward stages to the most advanced human development. As Ozcan (2006:118) notes, in the two decades preceding his arrest, the reimagining of Öcalan's persona became both a prominent example and a highly effective mechanism for inspiring transformation and motivating his followers. In addition to emphasizing the struggle for socialism and social humanization, Öcalan underscores the central role of ideology as a driving force in both individual and organizational practices, viewing it as the most effective instrument for achieving these transformative goals (Ozcan, 2006:120).

"Instead of saying '*our people are ignorant, thoughtless*' which is repeated in abundance by everybody, we will in general say: our people are ideologyless, without morale and have been descended to the level of bestiality because of being deprived of these basic concepts . . . If I could become a great voice, the most fundamental cause of this is improving myself ideologically. If the fact is looked at from a closer distance, one may see that I did not work

⁷⁶ This part of Öcalan's statements translated by Ali Kemal Ozcan from; Ocalan, A. (1998) *Sasyalizmde Israr İnsanOlmaktalsradır, Weşanên Serxwebun, Köln.*

vulgarly with weapons. I did not work with money either. My style of executing the work is through ideology”(Öcalan 1998:59).⁷⁷

Ideological changes, political transformations, and organizational reforms emerge when the struggle expands through widespread mass participation and continuous mutual engagement. During certain phases of its development, the PKK has undertaken extensive efforts to reshape individual personalities and humanize society, aligning closely with Öcalan’s vision of personal and collective transformation. Öcalan frames this process as a shift from the persona of a freedom fighter to that of a peace advocate committed to humanistic freedom (Ozcan, 2006). Central to this approach is his philosophy of personality transformation, known as the "self-analysis" method, which encourages individuals to pursue excellence and freedom within their own personalities and serves as the primary tool for training party cadres (Ozcan, 2006).

These ideological transformations constitute more than mere adjustments; they fundamentally challenge the PKK’s political doctrine and organizational structure. The party has evolved beyond the traditional conception of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, assuming the characteristics of a socialist organization within Turkey and promoting democratic solutions to nationality issues by advocating confederal democracy over oligarchic and authoritarian governance (Ozcan, 2006). Embracing democratic confederalism represents a decisive shift, transforming the PKK from a national liberation movement into a grassroots ethnonational mass movement. While its theoretical framework incorporates elements of ethnic identity, historical consciousness, and cultural heritage, these are employed symbolically to assert Kurdish rights rather than to pursue traditional nation-state nationalism (Ozcan, 2006:229).

⁷⁷ This part of Öcalan’s statements have also quoted from the same source; A. Öcalan (1998) *Sosyalizmde Israr İnsan Olmaktır İsrar, Weşanên Serxwebun, Köln*.

Traditional nationalism, characterized by the formation of a nation-state, fundamentally clashes with the political and socio-economic realities faced by Kurdish society. The division of the Kurdish homeland, the lack of a shared national consciousness, and the Kurdistan Region's economic dependence on the Turkish market—combined with the absence of an indigenous bourgeoisie—render the pursuit of an independent nation-state historically unfeasible (Ozcan, 2006). Even calls for local autonomy within existing states have often been marginalized or exploited as geopolitical tools in regional conflicts (Ozcan, 2006). The PKK's approach to nation-building in Kurdistan diverges from conventional modern nationalism due to its recognition and defense of pre-feudal institutions. By organizing ethnic and cultural mass movements around these institutions, the PKK has been the first political organization in Kurdish history to assert their inherent legitimacy and naturalness (Ozcan, 2006:231). Moreover, while pan-Turkist narratives often deny Kurdish existence as a historical nation, the PKK's acknowledgment of this historical reality has significantly expanded its influence and credibility, strengthening its role as a transformative social and political force (Ozcan, 2006).

In summary, the PKK's approach to Kurdish nationalism in Turkey demonstrates that this phenomenon does not align with classical nationalism, which traditionally equates the concept of a "homeland" with the necessity of a nation-state. Instead, the PKK consciously emphasizes the innate ethno-cultural sentiments of the Kurdish masses as the primary source of mass mobilization (Ozcan, 2006:233). Its extensive educational programs have not only revived suppressed Kurdish ethnic identity but also fostered a new organizational culture that transcends traditional tribal structures, emerging as a central expression of Kurdish socio-cultural movements in Turkish Kurdistan (ibid.).

By advocating democratic confederations rather than a nation-state solution, the PKK has shifted its focus from national liberation to promoting mass cultural and ethnic movements within the framework of a democratic republic. This new theoretical orientation replaces the classical statist thesis, proposing that a socio-political framework based on democratic confederalism offers a fundamental solution to the challenges faced by ethnic groups and nationalities. Furthermore, the PKK has replaced the conventional strategy of armed struggle aimed at military victory with a defensive use of arms until a political settlement can be reached, prioritizing political and social mobilization over traditional people's war strategies (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012).

Over the past three decades, the PKK has undergone profound internal ideological and political transformations while maintaining its commitment to the emancipation of the Kurdish people. This process has created a sustained ethnocultural and political movement with significant influence on regional and national politics. The organization's persistent struggle demonstrates its capacity to generate lasting social and political change, particularly in advancing political representation, gender equality, ethnic and cultural identity, and human rights in Turkey. Despite the government's continued refusal to recognize the fundamental ethnic and cultural rights of Kurds and its designation of the PKK as a terrorist organization, the party retains genuine credibility among the Kurdish population and in regional and international political contexts, underscoring its commitment to a democratic and peaceful resolution of the Kurdish national question (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012; Merdjanova, 2021; Ozcan, 2006).

Paradigm Shift: From Orthodox Marxism to Libertarian Socialism

As previously discussed, the PKK has undergone a paradigmatic political and ideological transformation, evolving from a traditional Marxist-Leninist organization into a distinct form of

Libertarian Socialist movement. Critiquing the legacy of Real Socialism, libertarian socialists argue that:

“Since the main challenge to capitalism has always come from that which called itself socialism, it is hardly surprising that capitalist social relations have survived in half the world by calling themselves socialist. ‘Socialism’ has become another name for capitalism, another form of capitalism: in ‘victory,’ socialism has been more totally buried than it ever could have been in defeat. Capitalism has dissolved the socialist alternative by stealing away its name, its language, and its dreams”(Diemer, 1997:1).

From this perspective, socialism is primarily about freedom: the liberation from domination, repression, and alienation that obstruct the natural flow of human creativity, thought, and action (Diemer, 1997). This emphasis on human liberation closely aligns with Öcalan’s concept of humanitarian socialism, which integrates both theoretical and practical dimensions. Furthermore, the libertarian socialist critique of state capitalism directly resonates with the PKK’s new approach, which rejects centralized, hierarchical forms of governance and instead seeks to foster self-governing, decentralized communities.

“We do not equate socialism with planning, state control, or nationalization of industry, although we understand that in a socialist society (not “under” socialism), economic activity will be collectively controlled, managed, planned, and owned. Similarly, we believe that socialism will involve equality, but we do not think that socialism *is* equality, for it is possible to conceive of a society where everyone is equally oppressed. We think that socialism is incompatible with one-party states, with constraints on freedom of speech, with an elite exercising power ‘on behalf of’ the people, with leader cults, with any of the other devices with which the dying society seeks to portray itself as the new society”(Diemer, 1997:2).

Moreover, the libertarian socialist conception of socialism extends beyond economic transformation to encompass a broader cultural and social revolution, including the liberation of women and children, the critique and transformation of everyday life, and the reconfiguration of social relations alongside the more traditional concerns of socialist politics (Diemer, 1997).

These dimensions closely correspond with the PKK's ideological framework and political objectives, particularly its emphasis on women's liberation, social transformation, and the reconstruction of ethical and communal life. Furthermore, the libertarian socialist critique of capitalism strongly parallels Öcalan's thesis of capitalist modernity, which he characterizes as a system rooted in domination, exploitation, and alienation. In response, Öcalan proposes an alternative model grounded in socialism and a socialist way of life, centered on democratic participation, communal values, and the restoration of human freedom beyond the confines of capitalist social relations.

"We do not think that capturing the economy and the state leads automatically to the transformation of the rest of social being, nor do we equate liberation with changing our lifestyles and our heads. Capitalism is a *total* system that invades all areas of life: socialism must be the overcoming of capitalist reality in its *entirety*, or it is nothing. Libertarian politics concerns itself with the liberation of the individual *because* it is collective and with the collective liberation *because* it is individualistic. Being a socialist is not only an intellectual thing; it is a matter of having the right ideas or the right intellectual approach. It is also a matter of how you lead your life"(Diemer, 1997:2).

Based on this analysis, the PKK's paradigm shift represents a profound ideological rupture with orthodox Marxism and statist nationalism, marking its transformation into a movement ideologically aligned with libertarian socialist thought.

Typology of Kurdish Nationalism and Its Implications for Political Action

According to the theoretical framework employed in this study, evaluating the definition of the Kurdish nation and nationalism requires acknowledging that the conceptualization advanced by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) closely aligns with Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolist approach (2009). However, when assessing the implications of Kurdish nationalism for political

action, the typology proposed by Liah Greenfeld and Jonathan Eastwood (2005) provides a more analytically relevant framework.

Based on the collected data and its articulation within an ethno-symbolist perspective, the Kurds have historically existed as an ethnic community—what Smith refers to using the French term *ethnie*—characterized by shared myths of common ancestry, collective historical memories, elements of shared culture, an attachment to a historical territory identified as Kurdistan, and varying degrees of social and tribal solidarity (Smith, 2001). This characterization corresponds closely to Smith’s definition of ethnicity and ethnic community. However, unlike modern nations—defined in ideal-typical terms as named human populations sharing a historic territory, common myths and memories, a mass public culture, a unified economy, and a common legal system granting equal rights and duties to all members—the Kurdish nation differs in several critical respects.

Although the Kurdish nation possesses many of these features, its geopolitical fragmentation has prevented it from fully developing into a consolidated “mass nation” capable of incorporating all members into a unified political community of equal citizens. Furthermore, while the Kurdish nation constitutes a political community, it lacks a unified legal and institutional framework defining citizenship rights and responsibilities. This institutional absence results directly from its division among multiple states, which has historically obstructed the development of modern nation-state nationalism grounded in political unity, sovereignty, and centralized authority (Smith, 2001:19).

Ethno-symbolism thus provides an essential analytical lens for understanding the relationship between Kurdish ethnicity and Kurdish nationhood. It emphasizes the importance of subjective

cultural elements—including shared myths, memories, symbols, values, and traditions—in shaping national identity over extended historical periods. This approach helps explain how Kurdish national consciousness has persisted and re-emerged despite prolonged political fragmentation and external domination.

In conformity with ethno-symbolist theory, both historical evidence and the PKK's ideological framework affirm that Kurdish ethnicity has existed continuously throughout recorded history, although its transformation into modern nationhood has followed a complex and uneven trajectory (Smith, 2001:23). Shared memories, particularly those associated with historical golden ages, mythological narratives such as the Newroz legend of Kawa the Blacksmith, and enduring attachments to ancestral territory, have served as powerful symbolic resources for modern Kurdish nationalism. These ethno-symbolic elements have provided Kurdish political movements, including the PKK, with the cultural foundation necessary for mobilizing collective political action.

Summary

This chapter examined the historical, socio-economic, and political conditions that led to the emergence of the contemporary ethno-national movement in Turkish Kurdistan and the formation and transformation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). It first analyzed the post-1938 "period of silence," during which the Turkish state implemented systematic repression and assimilation policies aimed at eliminating Kurdish identity. During this period, rural Kurdish populations remained under the control of landlords and sheikhs, reinforcing clientelist relations and preserving the existing social order. Simultaneously, the transition to capitalism,

mechanization of agriculture, and commercialization led to mass rural displacement and migration to urban centers, fostering social discontent and weakening traditional structures.

The chapter then demonstrated how urbanization, industrialization, and education contributed to the rise of Kurdish political consciousness from the 1960s onward. While Kurdish activists initially participated in Turkish leftist movements, ideological disagreements—particularly over the prioritization of class struggle over national rights—led to their gradual separation. Political instability, military interventions, and regional developments further facilitated the formation of independent Kurdish political organizations. Within this context, a group led by Abdullah Öcalan established the PKK in the 1970s, initially pursuing an independent socialist Kurdistan through armed struggle. This movement played a significant role in challenging state repression, weakening feudal relations, and revitalizing Kurdish identity.

The chapter also highlighted the PKK's major ideological transformation, particularly after Öcalan's imprisonment in 1999. The organization moved away from orthodox Marxist-Leninist nationalism and the goal of an independent nation-state toward a model based on democratic confederalism, grassroots democracy, and peaceful political struggle. Öcalan's theoretical framework emphasized the historical roots of Kurdish identity, the central role of women's liberation, and the critique of hierarchy, patriarchy, and state power. This transformation enforced necessary reforms within the movement, prioritizing gender equality and establishing a strong joint leadership political organization.

Finally, the chapter argued that the redefined approach of the Kurdistan Workers' Party represents a broader critique of nation-state nationalism and advances an alternative model grounded in democratic autonomy and pluralism. The findings suggest that this paradigm offers

a potential framework for addressing the Kurdish question in Turkey while contributing to wider theoretical debates on nationalism, state power, and alternative political formations. Moreover, this paradigm shift demonstrates how, by drawing on cultural foundations and an ethno-symbolic framework alongside a structural critique of the nation-state, the movement articulates an alternative vision for a democratic resolution of the Kurdish national question. This cultural perspective also provides a valuable analytical foundation for future research in the political sociology of Kurdish nationalism across different parts of Kurdistan.

FINAL SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This epilogue synthesizes the theoretical framework and empirical findings of the research, offering an integrated analytical conclusion and directions for future scholarship.

The Kurdish National Question as a Historical and Social Reality

The Kurdish national question represents a long-standing historical and political issue rooted in the denial of the ethnic and national rights of the Kurdish people. The formal territorial division of Kurdistan under the Treaty of Lausanne institutionalized Kurdish fragmentation among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, consolidating their political marginalization.

Historical evidence demonstrates that Kurdish identity has been preserved through tribal institutions, shared myths, collective memory, and cultural continuity despite prolonged foreign domination, internal fragmentation, and geopolitical constraints. However, tribal divisions, religious rivalries, and external interventions prevented the formation of unified national sovereignty.

Kurdish Nationalism and the Role of Ethno-Symbolism

Drawing on Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolist framework, this research confirms that Kurdish nationalism is rooted in shared cultural symbols, myths of ancestry, historical memory, and collective traditions. These elements provided the foundation for Kurdish national consciousness, enabling the preservation of identity despite statelessness and political fragmentation.

Nevertheless, Kurdish nation-state nationalism has historically failed to secure Kurdish rights. Instead, the imposition of collective-ethnic nationalism by regional states contributed to authoritarian state formation and the continued suppression of Kurdish identity.

The Rise of the PKK and Paradigm Transformation

The emergence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party marked a turning point in Kurdish political mobilization. Initially founded as a Marxist-Leninist national liberation movement seeking an independent state, the organization later underwent a profound ideological transformation under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan.

This paradigm shift replaced nation-state nationalism with democratic confederalism, emphasizing democratic autonomy, gender equality, pluralism, and grassroots political participation. Consequently, the movement evolved from a state-oriented militant organization into a broader social movement focused on civil rights, democratic transformation, and social emancipation.

Theoretical Implications and Future Research

This research unequivocally demonstrates that collective ethnic nationalism in the Middle East has significantly contributed to the establishment of authoritarian states. The Kurdish experience underscores the clear limitations of conventional nation-state frameworks in effectively addressing the national questions of minority groups.

In stark contrast, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) presents a compelling non-statist model rooted in cosmopolitan democratic participation, cultural recognition, and social equality. This

innovative framework plays a crucial role in advancing theoretical debates surrounding nationalism, political organization, and alternative forms of democracy.

Future research should advance the political sociology of Kurdish nationalism through systematic empirical investigation, comparative analyses of other stateless national movements, and critical examination of alternative political models that move beyond the conventional nation-state framework. Furthermore, this thesis demonstrates that a hybrid methodological and theoretical framework—integrating ethno-symbolist and socio-historical approaches—offers a robust and effective analytical tool. Such an approach can serve as a valuable reference point for future scholarship by enabling a deeper and more historically grounded understanding of nationalism, identity formation, and political mobilization in Kurdistan and comparable contexts.

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