

Martin van Bruinessen, 'Kurdish identities and Kurdish nationalisms in the early twenty-first century'

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Kurdish identities and Kurdish nationalisms in the early twenty-first century

Martin van Bruinessen

I have been writing about the Kurds for forty years now and have never found a satisfying way of defining who the Kurds are and what they want. In my first attempt, which fortunately remained unpublished, I called them ‘a tribal people of nomads and semi-nomads whose desire for a nation state of their own came too late, after the Middle East had been cut up into Persian, Turkish and Arab states.’ An older expert on the region pointed out that most nomads had long been settled, and that I had omitted the important factors of language and religion; he suggested calling them ‘a people of Muslim peasants speaking an Indo-European language.’ In retrospect I remember that probably all the Kurds with whom I had until then had longer conversations about Kurdistan and the Kurds were themselves neither nomads nor peasants but townspeople – but it is true that those urban interlocutors also associated Kurdishness with the tribes and the mountains and a long history of resistance against the state rather than their own, partially assimilated, way of life. I have since adopted the pragmatic solution of accepting people’s self-definition: a Kurd is a person who calls himself/herself Kurdish and is considered as such by his/her surroundings. The Kurds are amply documented in historical sources as a distinct population but never clearly defined.¹

Belonging to a tribe, language, religion and territory (‘homeland’) remain important constituents of Kurdish identities, but attempts to define an unambiguous Kurdish identity by these attributes are doomed to failure. Belonging to a Kurdish tribe inevitably places one in a position of (at least potential) conflict with other Kurdish tribes and non-tribal communities; language or dialect group as well as religious affiliation constitute major fault lines running through the Kurdish nation as conceived by nationalists, and regional identities, as seen most clearly in Iraqi Kurdistan, continue to override wider solidarities. Among those who are most outspoken about their Kurdish identity, we find people who do not belong to a tribe, do not speak Kurdish, are not Sunni Muslims, or have for generations lived far away from Kurdistan. Kurdish political identity – by which I mean a degree of identifying oneself with, or participating in the broader Kurdish movement – may unite Kurds of different languages or dialects and religions, of rural as well as urban backgrounds, from different parts of Kurdistan and from the diaspora. But that would exclude those Kurds who reject the largely

¹ In my dissertation (‘Agha, shaikh and state. On the social and political organization of Kurdistan’, Utrecht University, 1978), I refrained from defining Kurdish identity but spoke of Kurdistan as the region, on the periphery of several states, in which Kurds constitute the dominant element of the population.

secular nationalist movements and identify themselves primarily as Muslims (or as Yezidis, or as Alevis) and feel represented by religion-based movements and parties.²

In practice, one's identity is often more clearly defined by what one is *not* than by any positive attributes. People may define their identities by contrast with relevant Others; depending on the situation, different Others may be most relevant. A Kurd in Syria or Iraq is, most obviously, *not* an Arab, a Kurd in Iran is *not* an Azeri or a Persian, and a Kurd in Turkey is *not* a Turk – at least in some situations. But these ethnic identities are not mutually exclusive; one of my interlocutors in Iran, in 1975, insisted on being Azeri and Persian as well as Kurdish and appeared not even to understand my naïve question as to what he 'really' was, and I met Kurds in Turkey who appeared convinced that they were (ethnic) Turks. A Kurdish migrant worker in Germany in the 1960s was definitely *not* a German but would not feel the need to distinguish himself strongly from Turkish migrant workers. The armed conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s no doubt had a major impact on people's sense of what they are; I never met my Iranian interviewee again but it would surprise me if he had not felt obliged to choose between the three ethnic identities, and the violence in Turkey similarly 'awakened' many people in the East to their ethnic identity. In the same period, a Kurdish diaspora emerged in Western Europe, which became increasingly distinct from the Turkish diaspora.³

These Others have been relevant in more than one sense: when Kurdish political identity began taking its shape, it did so in dialogue and debate with these Others. The Kurdish movement of Iraq developed its political ideas and forms of action in debates and polemics with Arab socialist and nationalist movements and adopted much of their discourse. In Turkey, the Kurdish movement developed in close relation with the Turkish left as well as in communication with the Iraqi Kurdish movement, and the same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of the development of Kurdish political identity in Iran and Syria. The Kurds in these various countries, especially those who were educated and urbanised, developed distinctly different *habitus* and political styles, in many ways more similar to those of their Arab, Turkish or Persian counterparts than to those of the Kurds of neighbouring countries. Each part of Kurdistan had its own Kurdish movement, different in character from those of the other parts – although there was communication and occasionally co-operation between them.

In each part of Kurdistan there are moreover groups and communities whose Kurdishness has been contested or denied either by themselves or by their neighbours. Yezidis, Alevis, speakers of Zaza or Gurani dialects (rather than Kurmanci or Sorani), and non-tribal peasants of the region may or may not define themselves as Kurds. For all of them, Kurmanci-speaking, tribal Sunni Kurds have often been

² Martin van Bruinessen, 'Kurdish paths to nation', in: Faleh A. Jabar and Hosham Dawod (eds), *The Kurds: nationalism and politics*, London: Saqi, 2006, pp. 21-48 (originally published as 'Nationalisme kurde et ethnicités intra-kurdes', *Peuples Méditerranéens* 68-69 (1994), 11-37).

³ Bahar Başer, *Diasporada Türk-Kürt sorunu. Almanya ve İsveç'te ikinci kuşak göçmenler*, İstanbul: İletişim, 2013.

the most significant Other, by contrast with whom they defined their identities. Especially Yezidis and Alevis have, like the Christian minorities, traumatic memories of mistreatment at the hands of their Sunni Kurdish neighbours. Many members of these communities do not wish to be associated with the (Sunni) Kurds and avoid all contact. Conversely, many conservative Sunni Kurds whom I met in the 1970s refused to recognise Yezidis and Alevis as Kurds, in spite of their speaking Kurdish. Among the leaders of the Kurdish political movements since the 1960s, however, Yezidis and especially Alevis have been strongly represented, and these leaders have made great efforts to awaken an awareness of Kurdish identity in their communities. They experienced competition, increasingly strong from the 1980s onwards, from political activists who insisted on other ethnic identities: Zaza, Alevi, or Yezidi.⁴

It is thus possible to speak of the Kurdish people as consisting of a core, with a strong and unambiguous Kurdish identity, and a large periphery of individuals and communities, with varying degrees of attachment to Kurdish identity and with potentially other ethnic identities. I mean the term periphery in a metaphorical sense, but many of these communities are in fact also geographically peripheral. In Turkey the core corresponds rather closely with the region of Southeast Anatolia, and the periphery with the ethnically mixed zone from Gaziantep to Erzincan and Erzurum. In Iraq, the territory of the Kurdish Regional Government controls most of the core, and large parts of Kirkuk and Mosul contain peripheral populations that have a more ambivalent relation with Kurdish identity. Shi'i and Sunni leaders, Arab and Turkish as well as Kurdish nationalists have made efforts to draw these populations into their orbits.⁵ In Iran, there is a clear boundary between (Sunni) Kurds and (Shi'i) Azeris in the north, but in southern Kurdistan the Kurdish core shades into a zone peopled by Kurdish Shi'is and Ahl-i Haqq, and speakers of Hewrami, Gurani and Leki dialects, all of whom have more than one identity option and have been relatively marginal in the Kurdish movement.

Religion continues to constitute a more significant fault line than language/dialect. In Turkey the Sunni-Alevi divide remains deep and marked by absence of trust, and although there have not been serious Sunni-Shi'i conflicts among the Iranian and Iraqi Kurds in recent times, the communities appear to be more separate than they were before as a result of the general Islamic resurgence. The Yezidis are the most strictly endogamous community, which prevents their integration with the other Kurds. The threat of ISIS has made them dependent on protection by the Kurds, but the Yezidi communities have a memory of maltreatment and abuse by Sunni Kurds too, so that their relations with their Sunni Kurdish neighbours are marked by a low level of trust. Other religious minorities –

⁴ Bruinessen, 'Kurdish paths to nation'; Martin van Bruinessen, "'Aslını inkar eden haramzadedir!': the debate on the ethnic identity of the Kurdish Alevis', in: Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, et al. (eds), *Syncretistic religious communities in the Near East*, Leiden: Brill, 1997, pp. 1-23.

⁵ On the complexities of ethnic belonging in Kirkuk, see Martin van Bruinessen, 'Iraq: Kurdish challenges', in: Walter Posch (ed.), *Looking into Iraq*, Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2005, pp. 45-72. Available online at: https://www.academia.edu/2521973/Iraq_Kurdish_challenges. On the Shabak, one of these communities of ambiguous ethnic affiliation, see Michiel Leezenberg, 'The end of heterodoxy? The Shabak in post-Saddam Iraq', in: Khanna Omarkhali (ed.), *Religious minorities in Kurdistan: beyond the mainstream*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014, pp. 247-67.

Ahl-i Haqq (also known as Yarsan or Kaka'i), Shabak, Sarli – are similarly vulnerable, and have in the past sought protection by defining themselves as Kurds or Turkmen or even Arabs and by associating themselves with Shi'i or Sunni religious authorities.

Kurdish identity (or identities) and Kurdish nationalism (or nationalisms) have been articulated differently in different circumstances, and the demands associated with that identity have been changing accordingly. Two major developments of the early twenty-first century, the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq and the declaration of self-governing cantons in the Kurdish zones of Syria, have clearly brought out the existence of competing visions of Kurdish political self-expression. The dominant political movements in these two regions represent fundamentally different versions of Kurdish nationalism. Besides these two, there is yet a third variety of Kurdish ethnic self-assertion that has become increasingly significant since the Iranian Revolution, namely Kurdish Islamism. In the following sections of this article, I shall sketch how these three varieties of Kurdish nationalism, as well as other identity claims, have taken shape in the major political upheavals of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

The Kurdish movement in Iraq : nationalism focused on territorial control

The Iraqi Kurdish movement has since 1961 carried out an armed struggle against the central government, in the course of which its aims came to be defined as self-government (*hukmî zatî*, usually translated as 'autonomy') in Iraqi Kurdistan and democratic representation in the central institutions of the Iraqi state. These two aims were not equally important to all sections of the Kurdish movement – democratic representation in the centre was only of concern for the urban elements, whereas the tribes just wanted less government intervention. The movement has always consisted of an uneasy alliance of diverse elements: urban educated political activists, who were the driving force of the party apparatus (KDP, Kurdistan Democratic Party); tribes, which provided much of the military force of the movement but whose loyalty could never be taken for granted, and the Barzani family with their battle-hardened followers, who constituted the core of the movement's fighting force. In the 1960s, the party activists hailed predominantly from Sulaymani and other Sorani-speaking cities, and the Barzanis and their tribal allies (as well as their tribal enemies) were predominantly from the Kurmanci-speaking northern region of Badinan.

When conflicts arose between Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the KDP's political bureau (led by Ibrahim Ahmad and Jalal Talabani) over the direction the movement should take, Barzani simply dismissed the Ahmad-Talabani group and appointed men personally loyal to him to lead the party. Squeezed between Baghdad and Barzani's men, the Ahmad-Talabani group in 1966 for a brief period actually fought against Barzani. This conflict resulted in a lasting political division of the Iraqi Kurdish

movement, in which phases of violent confrontation alternated with periods of accommodation and co-operation. A year after the final defeat of Mulla Mustafa Barzani in 1975, Jalal Talabani established a new party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which included students and intellectuals from the Sulaymani region along with peshmerga loyal to Talabani, and established headquarters on the Iraqi-Iranian border; Barzani's sons Masud and Idris reorganised the KDP and established a modest peshmerga presence close to the Turkish border. In the following years and throughout the Iran-Iraq war, both parties carried out mostly symbolic actions showing their claim to represent the southern and northern parts of Iraqi Kurdistan, but avoided major confrontations with the Iraqi army. There were several major clashes between them, however, which are still remembered with anger by both sides.⁶

Since the international intervention of 1991 and thanks to continuing international protection, a large part of Iraqi Kurdistan has been de facto self-governing, in an uneasy co-existence of the two main parties, each of which controlled its own territory and had an equal share in the joint government. The KDP controlled the border with Turkey and thereby the main source of revenue from the trans-border trade; the PUK controlled most of the border with Iran, which was however of lesser economic significance. By the mid-1990s, the KDP and PUK were engaged in a fratricidal civil war, among other reasons over the redistribution of the region's revenue. The KDP succeeded in expelling the PUK from Erbil (for which it invoked the help of Saddam Hussein's army!) and has since been the dominant party of the two.⁷ International pressure persuaded the Kurds to end the civil war, and for a number of years there were two Kurdish governments, one based in Erbil, the other in Suleymani. Only after the American invasion of Iraq (2003) did the two governments reunite and establish the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which took part in the American-supervised negotiations for a preliminary Iraqi Constitution and obtained major political gains. Whereas the Americans had been in favour of a unified and centralised Iraq, the Transitional Administrative Law of mid-2004 opened the way to federalism and allowed the autonomous KRG considerable powers over regional affairs and a fair share of the national budget, as well as a significant representation in the central government. Following elections in 2005, Masud Barzani became the President of the KRG, and his cousin Hoshiyar Zibari Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Baghdad government; the position of President of Iraq was given to Jalal Talabani.⁸ Cabinet positions in the KRG were divided between KDP and PUK, and the parties agreed to take turns appointing the Prime Minister.

Among the long-time dual objectives, autonomy and representation, the KDP and the Barzani family appeared to focus primarily on the former, and Talabani and the PUK took a leading role in the latter.

⁶ Martin van Bruinessen, 'The Kurds between Iran and Iraq', *MERIP Middle East Report* 141 (1986), 14-27.

⁷ Osman Aytar, *Kurdistan bi fiift-fifti*, Istanbul: Weşanên Nûjen, 1995; Faysal Dağlı, *Birakuji (Kürtlerin iç savaşı)*, Istanbul: Belge Yayınları, 1994; Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurdish predicament in Iraq. A political analysis*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

⁸ The Kurds have thus held two presidencies for the past decade: Masud Barzani is still the KRG's president, and when Talabani had to retire from the Iraqi presidency for health reasons, he was replaced by his close associate Fuad Mahsum.

Talabani had long been the Kurdish politician in whom Arab politicians placed most trust, believing that he understood their concerns.

The vast majority of the Iraqi Kurds were, however, no longer interested in remaining part of Iraq as a unitary state and desired nothing less than independence. The experience of the 1988 genocidal Anfal campaign (when at least 50,000 Kurdish men, and probably many more, were taken from their villages and taken away to be killed) had shattered their belief that autonomy was sufficient to offer them protection. Although the political leaders were aware of the enormous practical difficulties standing in the way of independence, pressure from below has forced them, and especially Barzani, to adopt a discourse in which full independence is the ultimate objective. There is also a broad consensus among Iraqi Kurds that their self-governing region should be expanded to include the city and most of the province of Kirkuk as well as other districts with a mainly Kurdish population. The sudden rise of ISIS in 2014, which conquered Mosul and moved towards Kirkuk and Erbil, putting the Iraqi army to flight, provided the Kurds with a welcome opportunity. Peshmerga forces stopped the ISIS offensive and took control of the contested territories, which they have not left since. They have been very reluctant to take the struggle against ISIS to Arab-inhabited territory and have stuck to defending Kurdish territory, in conformity with the classic nationalist aspiration of making political and ethnic boundaries coincide.

However, the territorial ambitions remain limited to Iraqi Kurdistan; all parties and politicians reject the idea of a united Kurdistan. The KRG recently decided to have only the Sorani dialect as its official language, decreasing the status of the Kurmanci dialect spoken in Badinan; this will ultimately make the dialect boundary coincide with the boundary between Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan, further consolidating Iraqi Kurdistan as a distinct entity. The KDP continues, however, to project itself as the elder brother of related parties in the other parts of Kurdistan, most notably in Syria and Turkey. Most Kurdish parties and movements of neighbouring countries have a presence, and even military camps, in Iraqi Kurdistan – including parties with which the KDP is ideologically at odds, such as the PKK.

The Kurdish region is the freest and most stable part of Iraq and formally, i.e., according to its Constitution, a liberal democracy with periodic elections and limited tenure of the elected President. In practice, the entire system is based on patronage; most resources are controlled by the KDP and PUK, and opportunities depend on one's connections with one of these parties. Well-connected businessmen can make a fortune but for those who do not have the right connections, there is little access to employment, education and other facilities. The economy is like that of a rentier state; most income derives from oil and transit trade and is redistributed by the parties among their clients.⁹ The tribes,

⁹ Michiel Leezenberg, 'Urbanization, privatization, and patronage: the political economy of Iraqi Kurdistan', in: Faleh A. Jabar and Hosham Dawod (eds), *The Kurds: nationalism and politics*, London: Saqi, 2006, pp. 151-79; Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010.

including those that in the 1980s were allied with the central government and fighting the Kurdish movement, have become incorporated into the two main parties' patronage system, which has consolidated the positions of the tribal leaders.

Whatever the Constitution says, the KDP and thereby the KRG is much like a family enterprise of the Barzani family, and it is hard to imagine that Masud Barzani or Neçirvan Barzani could lose their positions of control. In the Sulaymani region, the same is true of the Talabani family and their closest associates. The Gorran ('Change') party was established a few years ago as a more democratic and less 'corrupt' alternative to the two established parties, but soon developed into a similar patronage-based political machine.

The Kurdish movement in Turkey and Syria: from pan-Kurdish nationalism to 'democratic autonomy'

As in Iraq, the Kurdish movement and underground parties that emerged in Turkey and Syria in the from the 1960s onwards found their first and strongest support among educated and urbanised members of the traditional elite and gradually broadened their class base when higher education became more widely available. Most of the movements adopted one or another variety of socialism as their ideology, though the tribal elite remained well-represented among their leadership. The major exception to this was the PKK, which from the start sought to represent the exploited classes and considered the tribal elite as collaborators in the colonisation of Kurdistan.¹⁰ Occasional alliances with one tribal group in a conflict with another notwithstanding, the party has remained firmly opposed to tribal power relations as well as to traditional tribal values. In the course of the fifteen years of full-blown guerrilla war, the PKK has in many regions succeeded in transforming social relations and abolishing the worst forms of feudal exploitation. (The counter-insurgency measures by the state have, obviously, had an even greater impact on social relations, through the *korucu* system and forced village evacuations, which caused the growth of impoverished urban neighbourhoods and weakened tribal ties.)

In its formative years, the group that became the PKK embraced a Marxist-Leninist, proletarian and anti-colonial discourse, defining Kurdistan as colonised by the ruling classes of the states of the region and seeking to liberate and unite all its parts. Its nationalism was never purely ethnic, for the party has always acknowledged the existence of, and granted equal rights to, other ethnic groups in Kurdistan as well as co-operated with ideologically close non-Kurdish organisations. The presence of non-Kurds among its founding members and political leaders was a matter of pride and considered an expression

¹⁰ Martin van Bruinessen, 'Between guerrilla war and political murder: the Workers' Party of Kurdistan', *MERIP Middle East Report* 153 (1988), 40-6; Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, 'Born from the left: the making of the PKK', in: Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden (eds), *Nationalisms and politics in Turkey: political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish issue*, London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 123-42.

of revolutionary internationalism. The PKK actively recruited members and collaborators in the neighbouring parts of Kurdistan, challenging all established parties.

A major change in orientation occurred in the early 1990s, when the PKK attempted to convert its reputation for military prowess into political capital and inspired efforts to build civil society and legal party activity within the existing Turkish social and political system. In a famous press conference in Damascus in 1993, in which he announced a unilateral ceasefire, Öcalan redefined his party's ambitions as Kurdish rights within the existing Turkish state; he indicated that he believed that it was possible to reach a political settlement with then President Özal.¹¹ The more recent process of 'Türkiyelileşme', although inspired by ideas of radical democratisation that the party came to embrace much later, is compatible with this change of orientation that began more than two decades ago. The ideas of grassroots democracy and bottom-up confederal structures, which are part of the new ideology, are however a major departure from the highly centralised and top-down party organisation, which the PKK will not easily be able to shed.

From a party aiming to establish a united, independent Kurdistan through a proletarian revolution, the PKK has become a movement engaging in a broad range of military and political activities in the framework of existing states, focusing primarily on Turkey but remaining active in various ways in the neighbouring countries. The ideas of radical democratisation and self-government, derived from the writings of the libertarian socialist and ecologist Murray Bookchin, involve self-organisation and decision-making in local councils, and bottom-up organisation through the confederation of local councils and representation in higher-level councils.¹² It is no longer a *nationalist* movement but a *post-nationalist* one, for which the ideal of a Kurdish nation state has lost its relevance even though Kurdistan as a regional entity remains of crucial symbolic value.

Kurdish ethnicity is not the defining element of the self-governing councils espoused by the PKK and its affiliated organisations; some are multi-ethnic, reflecting local conditions, and some may even consist entirely of religious or ethnic minorities living among the Kurds. The idea of autonomy and self-sufficiency at the level of the urban neighbourhood or village in combination with the voluntary confederation of similar communities differs significantly from the conventional ideal of autonomy for

¹¹ Martin van Bruinessen, 'Turkey and the Kurds in the early 1990s: Guerrilla, Counter-insurgency, and Emerging Civil Society', in Martin van Bruinessen, *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism versus Nation-Building States. Collected Articles*, Istanbul: ISIS, 2000; on the political developments of the 1990s, see Ayhan Işık, Bülent Bilmez, Ronayî Önen and Tahir Baykuşak (eds), *1990'larda Kürtler ve Kürdistan*, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2015.

¹² For different explanations of 'democratic autonomy' as adopted in PKK ideology see: Cuma Çiçek, 'Demokratik özerklik üzerine', *Birikim* 261 (2011), 45-53; Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, 'Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the project of Radical Democracy', *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012), online at <http://ejts.revues.org/index4615.html>; Çetin Gürer, *Demokratik Özerklik / Bir Yurttaşlık Heterotopyası*, Notabene Yayınları, 2015. Bookchin's partner, Janet Biehl, wrote her impressions of the PKK's implementation of Bookchin's ideas: 'Report from The Mesopotamian Social Forum' (05.10.2011), <http://new-compass.net/node/265>. Many of Bookchin's books are available in Turkish translation, e.g. *Geleceğin Devrimi: Halk Meclisleri ve Doğrudan Demokrasi* (Ankara: Dipnot, 2015).

Iraqi, or Turkish, Kurdistan. The confederation of local councils does not need to take ethnic or state boundaries into account. Kurdistan is still the defining geographical identity of the movements as a whole, but theoretically this pattern of organisation can cover larger parts of Turkey or Syria and incorporate significant other ethnic communities on equal terms – as appears to be the case in the Syrian Kurdish region (Rojava) controlled by the PKK's sister organisation PYD. The KCK (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, Union of Communities of Kurdistan), which was established in 2007, is a confederal body of a higher level, the umbrella organisation of various military, political and civilian networks, including the PKK and its sister parties in neighbour countries. In spite of the radical democratic ideal, the KCK remains firmly led from above, by one of the PKK's top military leaders.¹³

The uprising in Syria provided the Kurds with a laboratory in which to experiment with their concept of radical democracy. There are numerous Kurdish parties and organisations in Syria, most of which are more or less affiliated with the Iraqi KDP or PUK and have a rather narrowly defined following. The PKK's sister party PYD was one of the few exceptions. Unlike the other parties it had, moreover, a considerable armed following, and it succeeded in gaining the upper hand in the three regions of Northern Syria where the Kurds were concentrated – even in the region of Cezire in the Northeast where it had not previously been very influential.¹⁴ Initially the Kurdish regions remained safeguarded from the violent conflicts spreading across all of Syria, for the PYD and its armed forces (YPG and YPJ) did not directly confront the central government; they had persuaded the Syrian army to voluntarily withdraw from the region and hand over control to the PYD. The expansion of ISIS in 2014 and its offensive towards Kobani wreaked havoc and uprooted a large part of the population, but it also gained the PYD and its armed forces, which valiantly defended the region, broad international sympathy.

The military organisation and civilian administration set up by the PYD is in principle based on the ideas of radical democracy, with self-governing local and regional councils, gender and ethnic equality, and bottom-up confederal organisation. The three cantons of Efrîn, Kobanî and Cezîre, which together make up Western or Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava), are the largest regional bodies. On all levels, the principle of co-chairmanship (functions being shared by a woman and a man) is maintained, and it is attempted to integrate non-Kurdish ethnic or ethno-religious groups: Arab, Turkmen, Süryani, Yezidi. Some of the other Kurdish parties have agreed to co-operate and work within this system, but other remain opposed and constitute a passive opposition. Similarly, some of the Christian

¹³ For an idealised view of the KCK organisation, see Biehl, 'Report from The Mesopotamian Social Forum'. The KCK has been led by the PKK's most senior military commanders, Murat Karayılan and Cemil Bayık, whose approach remained firmly top-down.

¹⁴ Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2014; idem, Harriet Allsopp, 'The Kurdish Autonomy Bid in Syria: Challenges and Reactions', in: Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter (eds), *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2013; Thomas Schmidinger, *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan: Analysen und Stimmen aus Rojava*, Wien: Mandelbaum Verlag, 2014.

communities take an active part in civic as well as military activities and are apparently treated as equals, but others refuse to recognise PYD rule as legitimate.

It is, due to the war conditions, hard if not impossible to establish how the self-governing councils operate in practice, and I am not aware of any serious direct observations.¹⁵ There are numerous sympathetic press reports on the defence of Kobani, and especially the PYD's female warriors (YPJ, Yekiniyen Parastina Jinan, Women's Defence Units) have appealed to the imagination of foreign journalists. The experiment in democracy has been praised by radical academics as one of the most significant experiments in stateless self-organising, but their appreciation of the experiment is based on what their hosts told them rather than actual observation.¹⁶ Sympathetic visitors paint a rosy picture of the ongoing revolution,¹⁷ whereas the well-informed NGO KurdWatch, which is connected with a rival political movement, tends to be extremely critical of everything undertaken by the PYD.¹⁸ It is clear, however, that numerous councils have been formed through which major sections of the population take part in decision-making. To what extent it is possible for these councils to reach decisions independent of instructions from the political and military leadership of the PYD and YPG remains a moot point.

The experience of taking part in deliberations in self-governing councils must in itself be a revolutionary process, as are the empowerment of women through the co-chair principle, and the co-operation on equal terms between different ethnic and ethno-religious communities. In Turkey, similarly, there are experiments with such councils in urban neighbourhoods, not only in the cities of the Southeast but also in Western Turkey. Theoretically this form of self-organisation and confederation could expand well beyond the Kurdish regions and Kurdish enclaves, and be a model for the organisation of all of Syria, or all of Turkey. It may not even be a threat to the existing state system, if the states can accommodate a significant degree of decentralisation. A functioning bottom-up democracy is extremely difficult to realise, for it requires a radically different attitude and way of thinking; paradoxically, the PKK may be capable of achieving this to some degree precisely because of its centralised and authoritarian leadership, a remnant of its Marxist-Leninist past. The ideas of ecology, radical grassroots democracy and confederalism are studied and apparently embraced by

¹⁵ Schmidinger, *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan* is the most serious recent study. Schmidinger's interviews with people of various political persuasions provide a nuanced overview, but he was not able to observe any of the deliberations directly.

¹⁶ E.g., David Graeber, 'Why is the world ignoring the revolutionary Kurds in Syria?', *Guardian*, October 8, 2014; Michael Taussig, 'The mastery of non-mastery', at *Public Seminar*, August 7, 2015, <http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/08/the-mastery-of-non-mastery/>.

¹⁷ E.g., Arzu Demir, *Devrimin Rojava hali*, Istanbul: Ceylan Yayınları, 2015.

¹⁸ See www.kurdwatch.org. This NGO is affiliated with the liberal Kurdish Future Movement (Şepêla Pêşerojê ya Kurdî), which favours co-operation with the Arab opposition to the Asad regime. It has been accusing the PYD of the imprisonment, torture and assassination of opponents, forced recruitment of minors into the armed forces and various other forms of misdemeanour.

people at all levels of the organisation, who can explain them rationally – although emotionally they have not yet been able to detach themselves from the dream of Kurdish independence.

The Iraqi KDP's nationalism and the PKK's post-nationalism are the main competing ideologies, representing very different ways of Kurdish self-expression and self-assertion.¹⁹ These two parties are also the main political forces, whose political rivalry is palpable in all parts of Kurdistan. There have been a few rare instances of co-operation, such as in November 2014 when a small group of Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga travelled, with their weapons, through Turkey to Kobani to take part in the defence of that city,²⁰ and less convincingly a year later in the liberation of Sinjar from occupation by ISIS,²¹ but most of the time the parties have been working against each other. The KDP supports a coalition of Syrian Kurdish parties, most of which refuse to co-operate with the PYD. In turn, the PYD is said to refuse entry into Rojava to members of those other parties who have been giving military training in Iraqi Kurdistan. The PKK is fiercely critical of the KDP for the 'feudalism' and corruption with which it associates the party; the KDP blames the PKK for its violent politics, sectarianism and unwillingness to co-operate with others except as the leading partner. The Kurdish parties and movements of Turkey that do not belong to the broad PKK-aligned movement tend to be drawn towards the KDP and show affection for the person of Masud Barzani as an iconic leader of the Kurds. Dissidents from the ranks of the PKK have placed themselves under the protection of the KDP. The contest between these two rival parties and ideologies is likely to remain a significant factor for some time to come.

Kurdish 'Islamic nationalism'

A large number of Kurds, probably the majority, are pious Sunni Muslims. It may therefore be somewhat surprising that all political parties of some significance have been secular and have never endorsed the public performance of religious ritual. Mulla Mustafa Barzani was known to be a conservative, religiously pious man but under his leadership the KDP remained strictly secular. The PKK was initially anti-religious but has come to some degree of acceptance of Islam because of its importance to major sections of Kurdish society. In the past few decades, however, a number of movements have emerged that are both Islamic and take pride in Kurdish identity, and which I am inclined to call 'Islamic nationalist', although most of them are in principle opposed to nationalism. In

¹⁹ For the sake of clarity I do not mention the other Kurdish parties here, none of which is in a position to compete with these two. The PUK, though somewhat friendlier to the PKK, represents similar versions of nationalism and governance to those of the KDP.

²⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/01/kurdish-peshmerga-kobani-isis-syria>.

²¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/13/peshmerga-forces-sinjar-isis-oust-gunfire-kurdish>.

Turkish Kurdistan, this includes several minor groups of the Nurcu movement,²² but also the reformed Hizbullah movement and the more recent Azadi Initiative; in Iran the Maktab-i Qur'an established by the late Ahmad Muftizade;²³ and in Iraqi Kurdistan Ali Bapir's Islamic Group of Kurdistan (Komal-i Islamiy Kurdistan) and the Islamic Union of Kurdistan (Yekgirtûy Islamiy Kurdistan).²⁴ I believe that this Kurdish Islamic nationalism represents an important third variety of Kurdish nationalism, which may well gain more influence in the coming decades.

The Muslim social formations in which pious Kurds took part tended to play down Kurdish identity, or ethnicity in general. Many of the small and middle-sized businessmen whom Necmettin Erbakan approached in the 1970s when he was building up Turkey's first modern Islamist movement, the Milli Görüş movement (which gave rise to a series of political parties beginning with Milli Nizam Partisi and Milli Selamet Partisi, and in which the AK Party is also rooted), were Kurds but neither Erbakan nor the people concerned made any public comments on their ethnic background.²⁵ The Milli Görüş parties represented the interests of so-called Anatolian capital, the small and medium-sized enterprises of Central and East Anatolia, which were engaged in an unequal competition with the larger and more modern enterprises based in Turkey's West. Central and East Anatolia were also the regions where in the 1970s the MSP received the highest percentage of votes. Ideologically, the Milli Görüş movement was strongly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, though Erbakan adapted the ideas to Turkey's conditions.²⁶ The intended meaning of the term 'Milli' ('national') in the movement's name did not refer to the ethnic or civic secular nationality of 'Türk' or 'Türkiyeli' but to the collectivity of Sunni Muslims of the Ottoman Empire and more specifically of Anatolia.

Iran's Islamic Revolution and the writings of Ali Shariati that gained widespread popularity in its wake had a major effect on the thought and organisation of Kurdish Islamists in Turkey and Iraq. After the 12 September 1980 coup in Turkey and during the Iraq-Iran war that broke out in the same month, Islamist activists from Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan fled to Iran and hence to Afghanistan, where some of them briefly took part in the jihad against the Russian occupation.²⁷ Inside Turkish Kurdistan,

²² Fulya Atacan, 'A Kurdish Islamist group in modern Turkey: shifting identities', *Middle Eastern Studies* 37(3) (2001), 111-44.

²³ Sabah Mofidi, 'Religion and Politics in Eastern Kurdistan (With a Focus on Maktab Qur'an During Iranian Revolution, 1979)', *Journal of Politics and Law* 8(3) (2015), 36-50, online at <http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/jpl/article/viewFile/50787/27255>.

²⁴ Michiel Leezenberg, 'Political Islam among the Kurds', in: Faleh A. Jabar and Hosham Dawod (eds), *The Kurds: nationalism and politics*, London: Saqi, 2006, pp. 203-30.

²⁵ How crucial Kurdish support was for Erbakan's project is brought out clearly by Fehmi Çalmuk, *Erbakan'ın Kürtleri: Milli Görüş'ün Güneydoğu Politikası*, İstanbul: Metis, 2001.

²⁶ The most explicit formulation of the ideology was in a book published in the mid-1970s: Necmettin Erbakan, *Millî Görüş*, İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 1975.

²⁷ Little is known of the Iranian and Afghan adventures of these activists, although they must have had a major influence in shaping subsequent developments. One of them published his memoirs, which are interesting reading: Yakup Aslan, *Bir rüyanın ardından gerçekleşen sessiz devrim*, İstanbul: Ozan Yayıncılık, 2014. Aslan was severely disappointed by the Afghan *mujahidin* and spent most of his years of exile in Iran, where he was in contact with Muftizade's Maktab-i Qur'an group, a reformist Sunni association. The most famous Iraqi Kurd to

various local Islamist associations emerged but most of these were ephemeral and soon vanished again. The most significant Islamist movement to emerge was Hizbullah, which in the 1990s became embroiled in a violent conflict with the PKK. Hizbullah co-operated closely with the state's counter-insurgency forces during those years and was widely perceived as a puppet of those forces, earning it the nickname of 'Hizbi Kontra'. Besides Kurdish nationalists, Hizbullah also targeted other Muslim groups, including the Kurdish Nurcu Zehra *cemaat*, whose leader İzzettin Yıldırım it kidnapped, tortured and killed, and the rival Islamist Menzil group.²⁸

The year 2000, when Hizbullah's leader Hüseyin Velioğlu was killed in a shootout with the police in Istanbul and other top leaders were arrested, was a turning point in the history of the organisation. Under a younger new leadership, it attempted to transform itself from a secretive clandestine sect into a civil society organisation (Mustazaf Der, Association of the Powerless), and sought a public mass base.²⁹ The Danish cartoon crisis of 2006 provided it with the opportunity to organise a protest meeting, its first successful attempt at mass mobilisation. In a new form of rivalry with the secular Kurdish movement, which had adopted Newroz as the major occasion of mass mobilisation, Hizbullah started organising similar mass meetings (in Diyarbakir taking place in the same location, and almost exactly a month after Newroz) in commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birth, the Kutlu Doğum celebrations. It showed that it could mobilise significant numbers of people for these religiously defined occasions – perhaps not as many as came to the Newroz celebrations but enough to fill the same large open spaces. (According to local observers, quite a few people participated in both Newroz and Kutlu Doğum meetings.) In 2010, Hizbullah organised another mass meeting, which appeared to indicate an increasing identification with Kurdish national concerns: a meeting to commemorate Shaykh Said.

In earlier phases, Hizbullah had embraced Islamic internationalism and fiercely rejected (Kurdish) nationalism, refusing to make a distinction between Kurds and Turks and Arabs, although from the beginning all its members were Kurds and it used the network of Kurdish medreses to organise support. Its search for a mass base, during the past decade, has led it to recognise and even emphasise the Kurdish aspect of its identity. Internally, followers communicate with each other in Kurdish; in its mass mobilisation, it appeals to Islamic as well as Kurdish identity. Many of its organisers and

join the Afghan jihad was Mela Krêkar, who later returned to Kurdistan as a radical jihadist (and who is currently in prison in Norway on charges of terrorism). Other Iraqi Kurdish Islamists are believed to have received training from Iran's intelligence services during the war.

²⁸ The best study of Hizbullah in this phase is Ruşen Çakır, *Derin Hizbullah: İslamcı şiddetin geleceği*, Istanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2001, revised edition 2011. A brief overview of the violence against rival Muslim groups here at pp. 78-85. On subsequent developments, the most important study is Mehmet Kurt, *Din, şiddet ve aidiyet: Türkiye'de Hizbullah*, Istanbul: İletişim, 2015.

²⁹ Mustazaf-Der was established in 2003 and was closed down by the authorities in 2012. To replace it as a legal vehicle, Hizbullah established a political party, the Hür Dava Partisi (Hüda-Par).

propagandists are Kurdish *mele*, medrese graduates.³⁰ In a book published by Hizbullah's own publishing house that explicitly addresses Kurdish identity, the author is fiercely critical of secular nationalism (which he calls *ulusalcılık*), but speaks in passing of the 'liberation of the Kurds', which he claims cannot be expected from secular nationalism. The implication seems to be that Hizbullah considers the liberation of the Kurds, whatever it means by this, as one of its objectives.³¹

Among Kurdish Nurcu, there has also been an increasing awareness of the significance of their Kurdish identity, based on the recognition that the Kurds are not treated equally by the state or even by the leadership of the mainstream Nurcu movements, which had censored the writings of Said Nursi and his original name of Said-i Kurdi, deleting all references to Kurds and Kurdistan. For the Med-Zehra and Zehra groups, the earlier phases of Said-i Kurdi's life, when he was involved in Kurdish social and political activities, are an integral part of his exemplary personality, and both groups stress their Kurdish identity – Zehra in cultivating Kurdish medrese culture and the Kurdish language, Med-Zehra in expressing a specifically Kurdish Islamist disposition, in which beside Said Nursi, Shaykh Said is cultivated as an icon.³² Most of these Kurdish Nurcu speak freely of their dedication to the Kurdish nation (*milliyet* – a term used in a positive sense by Said Nursi himself) but reject the idea of Kurdish nationalism (*milliyetçilik*). Their arguments bring to mind the debates in the Kurdish associations in Istanbul in the early twentieth century, in which one faction held secular nationalists ideas and strove for Kurdish independence, and another – to which Said-i Kurdi as well as Abdullah Cevdet belonged – advocated decentralisation (*adem-i merkezîyetçilik*) as the solution.³³

Of the various Kurdish Islamic associations and communities, the most clearly nationalist is the recent Azadi Initiative (Hak, Adalet ve Hürriyet için Kürdistan İslami İnisiyatifi), founded in Diyarbakir in 2012 by Islamist personalities of various backgrounds. This group's name, Azadi, is a deliberate reference to the association of the same name that prepared the Shaykh Said uprising. In its founding

³⁰ The first to draw attention to Hizbullah's emergence as an alternative political carrier of Kurdish identity was Emre Uslu in his Ph.D. dissertation: Emrullah Uslu, 'The Transformation of Kurdish Political Identity in Turkey: Impact of Modernization, Democratization and Globalization', PhD thesis, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, 2009. Uslu had been an officer of the anti-terror branch of Turkey's police headquarters, and later was an influential columnist at *Taraf* and *Today's Zaman* newspapers.

³¹ 'Ulusalcılık, laik milliyetçiliktir. (...) Ulusalcılık Kürtleri özgürleştirmez.' Abdulkadir Turan, *Ümmetin bir azası olarak Kürtlerde İslamî kimliğin gelişmesi*, Istanbul: Dua Yayıncılık, 2011, p. 328.

³² On Med-Zehra, see Atacan, 'A Kurdish Islamist group', and (by the leader of the group) Muhammed Sıddik Şeyhazade, *Nurculuğun tarihçesi: medeniyet-i İslamiyye*, Istanbul: Tenvir, 2003. Zehra is best known by the monthly *Nûbihar* that it has published since the early 1990s, the longest-living Kurdish cultural journal.

³³ I wish to thank my interlocutors at the Demokratik Hukukçular Derneği in Haseki, Istanbul for debating these issues with me and helping me clarify my understanding. They had all grown up in the Nurcu tradition but were not affiliated with any specific Nur cemaati, and their personal views ranged from rejection to hesitant acceptance of Kurdish nationalism.

statement, the group declared its willingness to co-operate with Kurdish movements of different persuasions, including Hizbullah and the Kurdish nationalist mainstream.³⁴

The political objectives of Kurdish ‘Islamic nationalism’ may not be very clear and may differ from group to group, but for all mentioned groups both Shaykh Said and Said Nursi are sources of inspiration. Most of their members have been educated in the Naqshbandi or the Nurcu tradition, and they look towards the two Said as exemplifying alternative ways of representing the interests of the Kurdish nation. Compared to the mainstream Kurdish movement, Kurdish ‘Islamic nationalism’ in Turkey is as yet weak and lacks the power to mobilise masses for more than a religious gathering. Hûda-Par’s performance in elections was very modest and incomparable with the mainstream pro-Kurdish party. However, a comparison with Iraqi Kurdistan suggests that the Kurdish ‘Islamic nationalist’ associations have a potential for growth.

Both the Islamic Group (Komal) and the Islamic Union (Yekgirtû) of Kurdistan, which evolved from more radical and marginal Islamist currents, have sought accommodation with the political establishment of Iraqi Kurdistan and have transformed themselves into political parties that take part in the elections for the Kurdish Region’s parliament. In the 2009 elections, they received 4 and 6 per cent of the vote, respectively; by 2013 they raised their share of the vote to 6 and 10. They have moreover gained much indirect influence over the pious segment of the population, as allegedly around 80 per cent of the religious functionaries (*mele*) is affiliated with either Yekgirtû or Komal.

It should be noted that not all Islamic groups with Kurdish members have evolved towards a stronger ethnic Kurdish awareness and ‘Islamic nationalism.’ In each part of Kurdistan there are various Salafi and Ikhwan-influenced groups that consider ethnicity and nationality as totally irrelevant. These groups may not have a very numerous following yet but they have a significant impact on political developments. Non-Salafi cemaat in Turkish Kurdistan, including various tarikat and Nurcu cemaat (with the exception of Zehra and Med-Zehra), remain ‘millî’ in the Milli Görüş sense, are strictly loyal to the AKP, and reject Islamic as well as secular nationalism.

Concluding observations

Presently the most significant ideological debate and power struggle among the Kurds is that between the varieties of nationalism represented by the KDP and the PKK. In Syria and Turkey, movements that have adopted the PKK’s concept of democratic autonomy and confederalism are the dominant or

³⁴ ‘İslami Kürt hareketi yola çıktı: Azadi İnisiyatifi’, *Demokrat Haber*, 9 Haziran 2012, online at: <http://www.demokrathaber.net/guncel/islami-kurt-hareketi-yola-cikti-azadi-inisiyatifi-h9338.html>.

mainstream ones, but in both there are many individuals and groups that reject the PKK and its ideas of reorganising society and look towards the KDP as the only alternative with sufficient power. This includes, in Turkey, what remains of the earlier Kurdish political movements as well as dissidents who have broken away from the PKK, but also many of those whom I have called Kurdish ‘Islamic nationalists.’ Masud Barzani, perceived to be a conservative and religious-minded leader, is more acceptable to the last-named group than any of the other Kurdish political leaders.

The growing importance of Islamic and Islamist groups (cemaat) among the Kurds seems to have several implications for Kurdish identity movements and Kurdish nationalism. On the one hand, some of the Islamic groups appear to place more emphasis of Kurdish identity and perhaps even adopt a form of Kurdish ‘Islamic nationalism.’ On the other hand, the secular Kurdish movements have seen themselves forced to make symbolic gestures of acceptance of Islamic discourse and conservative values. This may in turn lead to some strain with the non-Sunni minorities.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, and especially in the zone under KDP control, the presence of Islam in public life has become increasingly prominent, and social relations are increasingly dominated by conservative values and concerns. Whereas in the past Yezidis, Kaka’is, and other religious minorities were unquestioningly considered as Kurds, this is no longer self-evident. Even before the conquest of Sinjar by ISIS, the relations between the Yezidis of Sinjar and the KDP had been strained. The Kaka’is are still well-integrated in the political and military institutions of the KRG, but a further strengthening of Sunni Islam in the region may raise doubts among this minority about their future among the Kurds, as it has among the much smaller and weaker community of Shabak.³⁵

In Turkey, the HDP has embarked on a dialogue with the various Islamic cemaat and associations active in Kurdistan but it remains strongly secularist, and at the same time engages its Alevi and Yezidi supporters too. Nonetheless, the growing strength of Islamic movements among the Kurds may result in a growing distance between Kurdish Alevis and Yezidis on the one hand and Sunnis on the other. Theoretically, the post-nationalist ideas of radical decentralisation and grassroots democracy embraced by the mainstream Kurdish movement should be better capable of accommodating the various religion- and language-based identities without subjecting one to the other. But it may prove hard for many to give up on the older (but modernist) nationalist focus on well-delimited territories and clear ethno-national boundaries.

³⁵ On the latter community, see Michiel Leezenberg, ‘The end of heterodoxy? The Shabak in post-Saddam Iraq’, in: Khanna Omarkhali (ed.), *Religious minorities in Kurdistan: beyond the mainstream*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014, pp. 247-67.