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Final Paper

## A Kurdish Diaspora

In the world today, there are numerous ethnic diasporas. A product of state turmoil and militaristic discontent, refugees fleeing from their homeland is as old as human settlement itself. As conflict in the Middle-East has reached new levels of unrest, the case of the Kurds is as relevant as ever. The people known as the Kurds are an estimated 25 million in number—the largest number of a self-determined ethnic group that is without a state. There are however, numerous strong Kurdish political nationalistic movements in Turkey, Iran, Iraq Syria areas of Western Europe.<sup>1</sup> Kurdistan then, or the original region where the Kurds originated from and until recently inhabited, is comprised of sections of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, where Kurds make up 23 percent of the Turkish and Iraqi population and 10 percent of Iran.<sup>2</sup> In looking at the circumstances of the Kurds, the need for an autonomous state is real, but there is no doubt that the path will be a difficult one. Before we can look at concerns of Kurdish nationalism however, we must know something of their history to discover why so great a diaspora exists in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> Faleh A. Jabar and Hosham Dawod Ed., *The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics*, (London, Berkley, Beirut: Saqi Books, 2006), 11.

<sup>2</sup> David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2-3.

While a sound history of the Kurdish people is vital to understand both the causes of their diaspora as well as their claims to the territory of Kurdistan, the fundamental problem is that none exists. The root of the problem of recorded Kurdish history according to the historian Maria O'Shea in the anthology *The Kurds* is because "The Kurds are marginalized in all their host cultures; thus version of or role in history is not really covered by mainstream historians."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, while the renowned British historian Bernard Lewis, in his seminal text *The Shaping of the Modern Middle-East* claims that the Kurds "are the one remaining linguistic and ethnic minority of any [surviving] importance (in the region) and that there is evidence that they have been there since remote antiquity"<sup>4</sup> he fails to mention the people in any way other than as a barrier to Arab unity in Iraq.<sup>5</sup> While recent scholarship has taken interest in the Kurds from the time of Saddam Hussein as his atrocities toward the Kurds in the late 1980's, there has been a great deal of attention given to the Kurds, but the problem of a foggy early history remains. When researching the historiography of the early Kurdish period, the work by O'Shea was very helpful in dispelling much of the assumptions, if not outright propaganda of Kurdish ethnic and territorial roots.

As we have seen, the region's oppressors wrote the majority of Kurdish history or those who seek to slant opinion against the peoples, both of which of course lack credibility. This leaves the modern accounts of pro-Kurd writers and

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<sup>3</sup> Jabar and Dawod, *The Kurds*, 120.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Shaping of the Modern Middle-East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *The Shaping of the Modern Middle-East*, 93-95.

historians, which is also best read with a suspicious eye. The core issue of these writers is their wish to present an ethnically pure heritage of the Kurds, which because of countless invasions is next to impossible, the cause being the geographical location of Kurdistan which all major highways from East to West passed through, ensuring that all major raiding parties and armies moving between Iran and Mesopotamia would pass through it.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the fundamental problem with modern histories of the Kurds is a failure to realize that the history of the Kurds and the history of Kurdistan are distinct. While numerous Kurdish “histories” exist of which an investigation here would serve little purpose, two popular theories of which no evidence exists have become popular tools of Kurdish nationalistic movements. The first proposed by the late Abdul Rahman Qassemli, former president of the Democratic Party of Kurdish Iraq, states that the Kurds are direct descendants of the Gutis, a people that inhabited the same Anatolia/Zagros axis of modern day Kurdistan. The second thesis is held by Mehrdad Izady, Harvard professor and Kurdish scholar, who groups all peoples who lived in the Kurdistan region and did not acquire a separate identity as Kurdish. If this is the case, Kurds can claim credit for the Neolithic Revolution, the advent of agriculture, domestication of animals, urban design and use of material technologies, all prior to Mesopotamia.<sup>7</sup> As previously stated, what both of these popular theories suffer from is a rigid attempt to make crystal clear the ancient connection between the Kurds and Kurdistan.

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<sup>6</sup> David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 23.

<sup>7</sup> Jabar and Dawod, *The Kurds*, 116-117.

History for the Kurds then does not become solid until the Arab conquests of Mesopotamia in 637, when the Kurds allied with the Sassanian Empire in an attempt to repel the Muslim invaders. Thus, the identity and actions of the Kurds, including systematic tribal submissions to Islam, fell under the celebrated historical pen of the Arabs. From here, two enduring themes of the Kurds developed, first was a reputation for political dissidence and second was submission or rebellion to central governments, namely Persian, Arab and Turkish.<sup>8</sup> After Arab rule was firmly submitted in the region—no doubt which was aided by Islamic unity, they became noted for their valor in Arab armies facing forces from Byzantium, Armenia and Persia. In addition, the Kurds large numbers and existence within several ethnically diverse areas made them political tools of rulers, such as when the Abbasid caliphs wished to dilute the power of the Turks in the caliphal army before the 11<sup>th</sup> century and then by the Saljuqs against the Arabs after that. For the next two hundred years relations between the Kurds and holders of power in the region were tense at best, but the area remained stable. A seminal change for the worse occurred during the third decade of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when Mongol raiders arrived.

The result of Mongol rule across Kurdistan left the economy in shambles. A century later, after countless Kurdish tribes who had faced near extinction by the Mongols had recovered their numbers, revenue from the sale of crops was one tenth of what it had been in pre-Mongol times.<sup>9</sup> With Kurdish society decimated by the new ruling class, a great majority of Kurdish tribes abandoned their homes in favor

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<sup>8</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* 21.

<sup>9</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* 24.

of the mobile wealth that pastoralism provided, accounting for a shift to a nomadic culture which unfortunately went far to ensure that future Kurdish claims to Kurdistan would go unrecognized. Another major blow to Kurdish autonomy occurred in 1393 when Tamerlaine captured Baghdad. Upon further Western conquests, he gave rule of the region to his son Jalal al Din, who sacked every major city of the Jazira area, solidifying a Kurdish nomadic existence.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottomans came to power, bringing with it a highly centralized government which derived the bulk of taxable income from agriculture. As farming requires permanence, the Empire came to view any tribal societies living within its realm as a threat. With attempts to register and tax tribes came resistance, both in the form of continued travel and the adherence to an extreme form of Shi'i Islam known as *qizilbash* which threatened the stability of the western Ottoman border. With numerous *qizilbash* uprisings came a move to destroy the tribal lifestyle by the new Ottoman Sultan Salim Yavuz in his expedition of pacifism, which initially killed an estimated 40,000 of the sect's adherents. His successes prompted him to move against the Shah Ismail and his Safavid Empire of Azerbaijan, which during the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 established the territorial line that existed until 1914.<sup>10</sup> Now split between two empires, the Sunni Kurds living within the Safavid territory faced extirpation in addition to a general Iranian policy of reigning in tribes for reasons of political stability. In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire tightened its

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<sup>10</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 26

central government to strengthen the nation as a response the Western encroachments, effectively ending what autonomy the Kurdish tribes had left.

While the history leading up to the point of Western interaction was severe throughout a great deal of Kurdish history, the post-World War One period has been the worst. Following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire by the Allied Powers, the region was carved up and the nations of Turkey, Iran Iraq and Syria were created with a pen. With the construction of a modern state came the most centralized governments to date and with it came the term of “official nationalism” in which leaders of the state imposed their nationalism on their subjects in an attempt to make homogeneous the state in the name of political and national security.<sup>11</sup> While assimilation was the claimed goal, in reality, a great deal of work was done at this time to eliminate or “cleanse” ethnic minorities from the new states. Most notoriously was the work of Saddam Hussein and his Ba’ath party who unleashed a genocidal effort against the Kurds of Northern Iraq. Initially disguised as an attempt to quell the rebellious populations of Northern Iraq, as time passed, more and more evidence came to light that exposed the mindsets and actions of Saddam and his party members. Audiotapes were seized in the early 1990’s which contained discussions with Ali Hassan al-Majid, Secretary General of the Ba’ath Party’s Northern Bureau. His campaign of mass deportations of villagers living in the Autonomous Region of Iraqi Kurdistan to military complexes was fed to the international community as efforts to pacify the region. In one of the recordings, al-

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<sup>11</sup> Jabar and Dawod, *The Kurds*, 232

Majid, upon witnessing the complete surrender of northern rebels says, “what am I supposed to do with them, these goats? Then a message reaches me from that great man, the father [Hussein] saying take good care of the families of the saboteurs and this and that. But take good care of them? No, I will bury them with bulldozers.”<sup>12</sup> While the efforts of Kurdish rebels during this time were that of a genuine guerrilla force against the Iraqi government; a misguided attempt to further the Kurdish nationalist cause during the Iran/Iraq war. What followed was known as Anfal—Spoils of War, the title of the eighth chapter of the Koran. This was no more than an attempt for Saddam Hussein to extract brutal revenge on the Kurds for dissidence during the war. Though the majority was Sunni Muslims, he termed them infidels to gain support from the Muslim community.<sup>13</sup>

The actions of the Ba’ath party created a massive emigration that further expanded the Kurdish diaspora. At war’s end, Iran announced that it would accept Kurdish refugees, prompting a massive influx. In a documentary video by British journalist Charles Wheeler, the impact of the escape was highlighted by a forty-mile stretch of Kurdish refugees some 500,000 strong snaking along a steep mountainous trail toward Iran. In addition, an estimated one million had already entered Iran while another 500,000 were still in Iraq.<sup>14</sup> Acts of discrimination during this time and up to today have not been limited to Iraq, as Kurds in Turkey were reclassified as mountainous Turks in need of assimilation. In addition, in Syria many Kurds

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<sup>12</sup> A Middle East Watch Report, *Genocide in Iraq: the Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Heather Pringle, “Witness to Genocide,” *Archaeology* 62 (2009)

<sup>14</sup> Charles Wheeler, *The Plight of the Kurdish Refugees* [video] (1991), retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/8471440.stm>.

were denied citizenship while the modernizing efforts of Iran's Reza Shah Pahlavi ended Kurdish nomadism and with it their way of life. In fact, the Islamic Revolution as a whole has left no place for a Kurdish national identity.<sup>15</sup>

With the history of strife experienced both in and outside of Kurdistan, it is little wonder that support for an autonomous region for the Kurds has gained a great deal of international attention. Most recently with the U.S. invasion of Iraq and overthrow of the Ba'ath regime, serious efforts have been made to secure a permanent zone to house the Kurds. Considerations of a Kurdish federalist state were given attention following the Gulf War in Iraq. As the area in Northern Iraq was by now a de facto Kurdish region, only a constitution and stable government was needed to run the area. The problem however, is that for a federation to work, the government of the main state must be strong and stable enough to see that the new state within a state is properly ran and remains fair to other ethnic minorities. The problem with Iraq however is crippling instability which at the current time has no ability to support a new state within its borders. Prospects outside of the Middle-East are no better. In the region of Georgia, Yezidi Kurds enjoyed a great deal of autonomy and governmental support until the area became an independent nation, reducing the number of Kurds from 35,000 to less than 6,000 over a period of three decades. Democracy, they say, is the prime problem as it prevents the minority from being a separate entity yet also blocks full integration.<sup>16</sup> An even

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<sup>15</sup> Jabar and Dawod, *The Kurds*, 232.

<sup>16</sup> No Author, "The Yezidi Kurds: the Problem of Diasporas and Integration into Contemporary Society," *Journal of the Central Asia and & the Caucasus* (2003) Retrieved from [www.aina.org/reports/tykaaog.pdf](http://www.aina.org/reports/tykaaog.pdf)



greater problem than a lack of government stability in Iraq is the history of horrors and discontent experienced by the Kurds from the people of the states which they inhabit. Denise Natali, political science professor at University of Salahaddin—a region in Kurdistan Iraq and author of *The Kurds and the State* puts it perfectly with this quote:

The bigger challenge is erasing the past. Even if each central government opens its political space and recognizes the distinct Kurdish ethnic identity, will Kurds de-emphasize their sense of ethnonationalism and integrate into their political centers as Iraqi, Turkish and Iranian citizens? After more than eighty years of exclusionary policies, ethnic cleansing-programs, discrimination, and a new world order where small nations become states, is it realistically possible to contain Kurdish ethnonationalism peacefully within each state?<sup>17</sup>

Scholarly opinion holds that for the Kurds to achieve an autonomous state capable of receiving vital support from advanced nations, the Kurds in Iraq must first be seen giving their all in supporting and working to make federalism a reality in Iraq. In addition, the concentration of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Syria must also resist from following the lead of their Iraqi brethren and move to succeed in their respective nations. Only then, should federalism in Iraq truly fail, will the Kurds have a right, in the name of self-determination and regional stability to construct a Kurdish nation. While federalism has been problematic due to animosity and

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<sup>17</sup> Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005) 184.

suspicion of the region's two major Kurdish political parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan PUK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party KDP, tensions which have led outsiders to claim the greatest obstacle to a Kurdish is the Kurds themselves, hope can be found in the economic efforts of the region.

In the 128-page government report/prospectus titled *The Kurdistan Region: Invest in the Future*, an impressive body of work and flashy advertisements go far to convince the reader—the target being investors and entrepreneurs—of the stability and financial opportunity that exists in the Kurdish region. With full-page endorsements from Western figures including Bernard Kouchner, French Foreign Minister; David Miliband, U.K. Secretary of State; members of Canadian Parliament and two U.S. Congressmen, support for the regional government and the economic potential of its people appears high. As said by Joe Wilson and Lincoln Davis, both members of the U.S. Congress, “Iraqi Kurdistan has transformed into a beacon of stability, security and prosperity in Iraq, as well as the entire Middle East.”<sup>18</sup> In reading through this recently published work, with forwards and sections titled “A Beacon of Stability” “Lawful Kurdistan” “Why Invest in Kurdistan?” and “Forging Partnerships” which includes the US and United Kingdom, one cannot help but see potential in the area. And what of the pivotal leaders of the region's two main political parties? They have declared a true and come together to promote economic growth, security and political stability across

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<sup>18</sup> Brendan O'Leary Ed., *The Kurdistan Region: Invest in the Future* (Washington, DC: Newsdesk Media, 2009) 23.

the region, stating, “When the Kurds had a disagreement with Baghdad, they used to go to the mountains and fight. Today they engage politically.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> O’Leary, *Invest in the Future*, 51.

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