The Unfolding Tapestry: A History of Kurdish Nationalism

1. Introduction: The Genesis and Enduring Quest of Kurdish Nationalism

Kurdish nationalism, known in Kurdish as *Kurdayetî* (کوردایەتی, literally "Kurdishness" or "Kurdism"), is a political and cultural movement asserting that the Kurdish people constitute a distinct nation.[1] Its most ambitious and historically consistent goal has been the establishment of an independent, sovereign state of Kurdistan. This envisioned homeland would ideally encompass the Kurdish-majority territories that currently lie within the modern borders of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.[1] This aspiration for statehood, whether in the form of a unified entity or through varying degrees of autonomy within existing states, has been a central and defining feature of the movement, though specific strategies and the precise nature of the desired polity have fluctuated among different Kurdish groups and across different historical periods.[3] The inherent demand for the revision of established international borders positions *Kurdayetî* as a significant and persistent challenge to the territorial integrity of these four Middle Eastern states. This fundamental objective to redraw the political map largely explains the consistent, and often severe, repressive measures adopted by the affected governments, as the success of such a nationalist project would entail considerable territorial and political losses for them.

The Kurds are an indigenous people of the Middle East, considered the fourth-largest ethnic group in the region.[3] They are predominantly Sunni Muslims, though other faiths and sects exist among them, and they speak Kurdish, an Indo-European language with several distinct dialects.[3] Their ancestral lands, often referred to as Kurdistan, are largely mountainous and have historically formed a complex frontier zone between major empires, notably the Ottoman and Persian (later Iranian) empires.[2] The geopolitical landscape of the Middle East was dramatically reconfigured following World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The subsequent political settlement, largely driven by British and French imperial interests, led to the creation of new Arab-majority nation-states. This process resulted in the division of Kurdish-inhabited territories among Turkey, Iran, Iraq (under British Mandate), and Syria (under French Mandate), thereby transforming the Kurds into significant ethnic minorities in each of these newly configured or consolidated states.[2] This partitioning, often viewed by Kurds as an arbitrary imposition that disregarded their historical and ethnic contiguity, became a foundational grievance and a primary catalyst for the intensification and spread of modern Kurdish nationalism.

The geographical dispersion of the Kurdish people, while a source of political fragmentation and a hindrance to unified action, paradoxically contributed to the resilience of the nationalist movement. Repression in one state often led to the shifting of political or cultural activities to

another, where conditions might be temporarily more permissive.[2] For instance, Paris became a hub for exiled intellectuals who founded organizations like Xoybûn [2], and French Mandate Syria later served as a center for Kurdish cultural activities when repression in Turkey intensified.[7] This dynamic made the complete eradication of the nationalist sentiment and its organizational expressions exceedingly difficult for any single state to achieve.

The academic and political discourse surrounding Kurdish nationalism often engages with the question of its origins, typically framed within the primordialist versus modernist debate.[6] Primordialists contend that Kurdish national identity is ancient and inherent, rooted in centuries of distinct culture, language, and historical experience. This perspective can lend greater historical legitimacy to claims for statehood, portraying them as the reawakening of a long-suppressed national right. Conversely, modernists argue that nationalism, including its Kurdish variant, is a more recent phenomenon, largely a product of modern socio-economic conditions such as industrialization, the rise of centralized states, and the dissemination of nationalist ideologies from the 19th century onwards. This view might frame Kurdish nationalism more as a reaction to specific modern state policies of exclusion, assimilation, or oppression. The way in_Swhich these origins are understood carries political weight, influencing how both Kurds and external actors perceive the legitimacy, inevitability, and nature of Kurdish national aspirations.

This report will trace the historical trajectory of Kurdish nationalism from its early manifestations in the 19th century. It will examine its evolution and diversification across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria through the turbulent decades of the early to mid-20th century and into the complex geopolitical environment of the Cold War, up to the late 1970s. The analysis will focus on its ideological underpinnings, key figures and organizations, significant revolts and attempts at state formation, and the profound impact of state policies and international dynamics on the Kurdish quest for self-determination.

2. Foundations of Kurdish National Consciousness (19th Century)

In the early 19th century, the vast, mountainous region historically known as Kurdistan was primarily divided between the declining Ottoman and Qajar Empires.[5] Within this territory, Kurdish society was characterized by a series of semi-autonomous principalities or emirates, such as Bitlis, Hakkari, Bohtan, Bahdinan, Soran, and Baban in the Ottoman sphere, and Ardalan and Mukri largely under Qajar influence.[5] These emirates were governed by powerful hereditary rulers known as *mîrs* or emirs, who often enjoyed considerable self-government (*Kürt hükümetleri*) within their domains. Under their patronage, Kurdish language, literature, and distinct cultural practices often flourished.[9] The Ottoman central state, particularly before the Tanzimat reforms, had limited direct administrative penetration into many Kurdish provinces due to the challenging terrain and rudimentary communication systems, compelling Istanbul to rely on informal agreements and alliances with these local Kurdish leaders.[2]

This traditional order began to unravel with the onset of Ottoman centralization policies, most notably during the Tanzimat era (roughly 1839-1876, with specific impacts on Kurdish emirates

between 1834 and 1847).[5] Driven by a desire to modernize the state and consolidate imperial authority, and spurred by events such as the challenge posed by powerful autonomous figures like Muhammad Ali Pasha of Egypt [5], the Sublime Porte systematically sought to dismantle the autonomous Kurdish principalities. This process, which involved military campaigns and the deportation or co-optation of princely families, led to the destruction of the traditional Kurdish emirates by mid-century.[5]

The erosion of the emirates created a significant power vacuum in Kurdish society. This void was increasingly filled by religious leaders, or sheikhs, particularly those associated with influential Sufi orders such as the Qadiri and the Naqshbandi-Khalidi.[5] These sheikhs often commanded considerable spiritual and, consequently, temporal authority among the Kurdish populace. Later in the century, especially following the decline of some sheikhly uprisings and further Ottoman administrative changes, tribal chieftains (*aghas*) rose to greater prominence. Their influence was notably solidified by Sultan Abdulhamid II's establishment of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry Regiments in 1890, which were largely composed of Kurdish tribesmen loyal to the Sultan and commanded by their own aghas.[5] This transformation from a system of hereditary secular rule by emirs to leadership dominated by religious figures and then tribal chiefs had profound and lasting consequences for the structure and unity of Kurdish political mobilization in subsequent eras. Future nationalist movements would often be led by individuals whose authority derived from these religious or tribal bases, which, while potent sources of local mobilization, could also become significant factors in internal division and susceptibility to manipulation by central governments.

Throughout the 19th century, numerous uprisings occurred as Kurdish leaders resisted the encroachment of Ottoman and, to a lesser extent, Qajar central authority.[9] Many of these early revolts represented a complex interplay of motives: a defense of traditional privileges, regional power struggles, and an emerging, though not always fully articulated, sense of distinct ethnic consciousness. Labeling all such early resistance as "nationalist" in the modern sense can be anachronistic, obscuring the evolving nature of Kurdish political identity. For example, the 1806 rebellion led by Abdurrahman Pasha of the Baban Emirate, while significant in regional history and sometimes cited by later nationalist historians as an early Kurdish nationalist movement, appears from primary sources to have been primarily aimed at expanding his own realm's power and achieving greater autonomy from neighboring Ottoman pashas, rather than seeking full independence for a unified Kurdish nation.[5] Nevertheless, such revolts, including Abdurrahman Pasha's, did serve to bring the "Kurdistan question"—the political status and rights of the Kurdish people and their lands—to the attention of the Ottoman and Persian states, as well as to interested European powers.[5]

The first movement widely recognized by historians as a modern expression of Kurdish nationalism was the uprising led by Sheikh Ubeydullah of Nehri in 1879-1880.[2] Sheikh Ubeydullah, a powerful landowner and head of the influential Shemdinan family, which also held significant religious standing, explicitly demanded political autonomy, or even outright independence, for the Kurds. He envisioned a Kurdistan free from both Ottoman and Persian interference and sought recognition for such a state.[2] His revolt, which spanned territories in both empires, was ultimately suppressed by Ottoman forces, and Ubeydullah was exiled.[2]

Towards the close of the 19th century and into the early 20th, the intellectual seeds of a more modern, ideologically-driven Kurdish nationalism began to sprout. These initial impulses came from a new class of Ottoman-Kurdish intellectuals, civil servants, military officers, and medical doctors.[9] Often hailing from aristocratic or notable Kurdish families and educated in major Ottoman cities like Istanbul or in Europe, these individuals were exposed to and influenced by contemporary European nationalist ideas and the concept of the bourgeois revolution.[9] They began to found the first Kurdish cultural associations, political organizations, and publications. A landmark in this development was the establishment of the first Kurdish newspaper, aptly named *Kurdistan*, published in Cairo in 1898 by descendants of the exiled Prince Bedirxan.[9] This nascent intellectual movement, however, was not monolithic. From its early stages, it exhibited a key internal division that would persist: some, like the Bedirxan family, advocated for full independence and the creation of a sovereign Kurdish state, while others, such as the Sheikh families from Semdinan, including Seyyid Abdülkadir (Sheikh Ubeydullah's son), favored a path of autonomy within the existing imperial structures.[9] The emergence of this intellectual nationalism in cosmopolitan centers like Istanbul and Cairo, and in European exile, reflects a pattern common to many nationalist movements, where diaspora communities and urban elites play a pivotal role in formulating and disseminating nationalist ideologies. While this can provide intellectual leadership and international connections, it also carries the potential for a disconnect between the political programs articulated by these elites and the immediate, everyday concerns of the broader rural and tribal populations they aim to represent, potentially creating another layer of internal complexity within the nationalist movement.

3. The Post-Ottoman Rupture and the Rise of Modern Movements (Early 20th Century – Interwar Period)

The First World War (1914-1918) and the subsequent dissolution of the Ottoman Empire marked a cataclysmic turning point for the peoples of the Middle East, including the Kurds. The collapse of the centuries-old imperial order presented what many non-Turkish nationalities perceived as a "golden opportunity" to achieve self-determination and potentially establish their own nation-states.[11] For the Kurds, however, this period of upheaval brought both fleeting hope and profound, lasting disappointment. The war itself inflicted immense suffering upon Kurdish-inhabited regions, characterized by widespread devastation, famine, and the displacement of populations due to military operations and scorched-earth tactics employed by various warring parties.[2] Furthermore, the political climate within the late Ottoman Empire had already grown hostile to non-Turkish identities. The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), which seized power in 1908, increasingly adopted a radical form of Turkish nationalism. This ideology, particularly in its later phases, contributed significantly to the empire's disintegration and fostered deep-seated anti-Ottoman sentiments among Kurds and other minorities, who faced policies of political oppression and forced resettlement, leaving a destructive legacy in Kurdish national memory.[2]

Amidst the post-war redrawing of the Middle Eastern map by the victorious Allied Powers, the

Treaty of Sèvres, signed on August 10, 1920, between the Allies and the defeated Ottoman government, offered a brief glimmer of hope for Kurdish aspirations. Articles 62, 63, and 64 of this treaty included provisions for the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region in southeastern Anatolia, with the explicit possibility of opting for full independence within a year if the Kurdish population so desired and if the Council of the League of Nations consented.[2] This proposed Kurdistan was envisaged to be under British influence, and the Kurds inhabiting the Mosul Vilayet (then under British occupation and later incorporated into Iraq) were to be given the option to join this entity.[11] Some Kurdish nationalist groups, particularly those advocating for autonomy, had received a degree of British encouragement and support in the period leading up to the treaty.[10] However, the geographical boundaries of this Sèvres Kurdistan were not comprehensive, notably excluding significant Kurdish areas such as the Van region.[11]

The promise of Sèvres, however, remained unfulfilled. The treaty was never implemented, succumbing to a confluence of formidable challenges. The most significant was the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1922), led by Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk), which successfully resisted the Allied partitioning of Anatolia and rejected the terms of Sèvres.[11] Allied imperial ambitions and rivalries, particularly concerning the control of resources like oil and strategic territories, also played a role. Bolshevik Russia, seeking to break its international isolation and counter British influence, provided crucial military and material aid to Mustafa Kemal's nationalist forces, further undermining the Sèvres framework.[11] Critically, as some analyses suggest, the very model of a centralized nation-state as envisioned by Sèvres found "very little interest or propensity" within the fragmented and decentralized socio-political structure of Kurdish society at the time, which lacked a unified leadership and a cohesive national strategy.[11] This internal dimension, characterized by tribal loyalties, feudal structures, and deep divisions between factions advocating for autonomy versus outright independence, proved to be a significant impediment to capitalizing on the Sèvres moment. It suggests that even if external political conditions had been more uniformly favorable, the internal cohesion necessary for the Kurds to assert a unified claim to a centralized state was far from guaranteed, a factor with enduring relevance for understanding the challenges to Kurdish state-building efforts.

The Turkish victory in the War of Independence led to the negotiation of a new treaty. The Treaty of Lausanne, signed on July 24, 1923, formally recognized the Republic of Turkey within its contemporary borders and, in stark contrast to Sèvres, made no mention of Kurdish autonomy or any form of Kurdish statehood.[2] This treaty effectively sealed the division of the Kurdish-inhabited territories of the former Ottoman Empire among four newly created or consolidated nation-states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.[2] Within each of these states, Kurds became a significant ethnic minority, often denied specific collective rights or even official recognition of their distinct identity.[3] This division, perceived by many Kurds as a profound historical injustice, became a central and enduring grievance fueling Kurdish nationalist movements for decades to come.

In this tumultuous period, several Kurdish nationalist organizations emerged, reflecting the evolving political consciousness and the differing aspirations within Kurdish society. These

organizations, often led by intellectuals and traditional elites, navigated a complex landscape of collapsing empires, nascent nation-states, and foreign interventions. The table below summarizes some of the key organizations active in the early 20th century:

Organization Name	Dates of Activity (approx.)	Key Leaders/Figures	Primary Ideology/Goals	Main Region(s) of Operation/Influence	Notable Activities/Impact
Kurd Society for Cooperation and Progress	1908-1909	Sheikh Abdulkadir, Emin Ali Bedir Khan	Cultural promotion, education, Kurdish rights within Ottoman framework	Istanbul, Ottoman Kurdish areas	Published "Kurdistan" newspaper, established Kurdish school; banned by CUP government. [10]
Society for the Elevation of Kurdistan (KTC/SAK)	1918-c.1921/23	Sheikh Abdulkadir, Bedir Khan family members (Emin Ali, Celadet, Kamuran), Şerif Pasha	Wilsonian self-determination, autonomy, independence (internally divided on this)	Istanbul, Eastern Anatolia, Diaspora	Lobbied at Paris Peace Conference, published *Jîn* magazine, supported Koçgiri Rebellion; banned by Turkish nationalists. [2]
Xoybûn (Hoyboun / Kurdish League)	1927-1946	Celadet Alî Bedirxan, Kamuran Alî Bedirxan, Memduh Selim, Ihsan Nuri Pasha, Haco Agha	Kurdish independence, establishment of a Kurdish state, secularism, republicanism	Syria (political wing), Turkey (Ararat region - military wing), Lebanon, Diaspora	Led the Ararat Rebellion (1927-1930), formed alliances (e.g., with Armenians), international appeals. [16]
Source: Data compiled from.[2]					

Prominent figures during this era included **Şerif Pasha**, an early advocate for Kurdish autonomy who represented Kurdish interests at the Paris Peace Conference through the KTC/SAK.[10] **Sheikh Abdulkadir**, son of Sheikh Ubeydullah, was a co-founder of the Kurd Society for Cooperation and Progress and later president of the KTC/SAK; he initially favored

autonomy within a Turkish state but was executed in 1925 for his alleged involvement in the Sheikh Said Rebellion.[9] The **Bedir Khan family**, particularly descendants of the last Emir of Botan, Prince Bedirxan, such as Emin Ali, Celadet Alî, and Kamuran Alî Bedirxan, were staunch proponents of Kurdish independence and played pivotal roles in early Kurdish journalism (the "Kurdistan" newspaper) and in nationalist organizations like the KTC/SAK and Xoybûn.[9] Celadet and Kamuran Bedirxan would later become central figures in the Kurdish cultural revival in Syria and Lebanon during the French Mandate period.[7] **Ihsan Nuri Pasha**, a former Ottoman and Turkish military officer, became the military commander of the Ararat Rebellion, appointed by Xoybûn.[16] Even figures like **Said Nursi**, later a renowned Islamic scholar, were involved in early Kurdish associational life, urging Kurdish unity while initially maintaining loyalty to the CUP.[10]

The intellectual currents of this period were profoundly shaped by the collapse of the Ottoman millet system, the rise of Turkish nationalism with its secularizing and centralizing tendencies, the promise of Wilsonian self-determination, and the growing articulation of a distinct Kurdish ethno-national identity. This identity was sometimes influenced by external, including Russian anthropological, ideas about Kurdish racial and linguistic distinctiveness from Turks.[2]

The early 20th-century Kurdish nationalist organizations, while championing Kurdish rights and aspirations, were themselves often characterized by significant internal ideological and strategic divisions. The split within the KTC/SAK over the question of autonomy versus independence is a prime example.[9] This pattern of internal factionalism, evident from the nascent stages of modern Kurdish nationalism, became an enduring characteristic and a persistent source of weakness for the broader movement, foreshadowing later and often more violent conflicts between various Kurdish political parties. Furthermore, the reliance of key organizations like Xoybûn on exiled intellectuals and leaders, with its political center often in cities like Beirut, Damascus, or Paris, created a dynamic where the ideological heart of the movement was geographically, and sometimes experientially, detached from the Kurdish masses in their mountainous heartlands.[2] While exile offered safety from repression and access to international networks, it also posed challenges in terms of effective mobilization, communication, and ensuring the direct relevance of political programs to the diverse needs and perspectives of the broader Kurdish population.

4. Kurdish Nationalism in Divided Lands: State Policies and Resistance (Interwar to Mid-20th Century)

The aftermath of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) solidified the division of Kurdistan, compelling Kurdish nationalist movements to adapt and respond to the distinct political realities and state policies within Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. This period was characterized by varying degrees of state repression, assimilation efforts, and armed Kurdish resistance.

A. Turkey: Kemalist Nation-Building and Kurdish Resistance

The establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk ushered in an era of radical nation-building predicated on the ideology of Turkish nationalism.[12] This

project aimed to create a homogenous, secular Turkish nation-state from the diverse remnants of the Ottoman Empire. For the Kurds, who constituted the largest non-Turkish ethnic group, these policies had profound and often devastating consequences. The Kemalist regime pursued aggressive policies of **Turkification**, which sought to assimilate Kurds into a singular Turkish identity.[8] The very existence of a distinct Kurdish ethnicity was often denied; Kurds were officially referred to as "Mountain Turks".[12] The Kurdish language was banned in public life, education, and administration, and Kurdish cultural expressions were suppressed.[2] Kurdish schools, newspapers, and associations were shut down.[2] The Treaty of Lausanne had denied Kurds any special minority status or autonomy, and the new republic vigorously enforced this denial.[9] The state's secularization policies also alienated many conservative Muslim Kurds, who saw the abolition of the Caliphate and other religious institutions as an attack on their way of life.[2]

In response to these pressures, several major Kurdish revolts erupted, all of which were met with overwhelming military force by the Turkish state:

- **The Sheikh Said Rebellion (1925):** This was the first large-scale Kurdish nationalist uprising against the Turkish Republic.[27] Led by Sheikh Said, a Naqshbandi religious leader, the rebellion was fueled by a combination of religious opposition to secularism, anger at the denial of Kurdish identity, and nationalist aspirations.[19] The Turkish government viewed the revolt as a serious threat and responded with brutal force, including extensive military operations and aerial bombardments.[19] The rebellion was crushed within months. Sheikh Said and many of his followers were captured and executed by newly established Independence Tribunals; estimates suggest over 600 executions and more than 7,000 prosecutions.[19] The aftermath saw the Turkish state intensify its assimilationist policies, exemplified by the "Report for Reform in the East" (*Şark Islahat Raporu*), which explicitly advocated for the Turkification of the Kurdish regions.[19] The rebellion also led to mass displacement of Kurdish populations.[19]
- **The Ararat Republic (1927-1931):** This was a more organized attempt to establish a Kurdish proto-state, centered on Mount Ararat in eastern Turkey.[2] The revolt was led by the Xoybûn (Hoyboun) party, a nationalist organization founded by Kurdish intellectuals and notables in exile.[16] Ihsan Nuri Pasha, a former Ottoman and Turkish military officer, served as the military commander of the self-proclaimed republic, while Ibrahim Heski led its civilian administration.[16] The provisional capital was designated as Kurd Ava.[16] Xoybûn sought international recognition and support, appealing to the Great Powers and the League of Nations, but these efforts were largely thwarted by Turkish diplomatic pressure on Britain and France, who subsequently restricted the activities of Xoybûn members.[16] The Turkish military launched successive campaigns against the Ararat Republic, ultimately suppressing the rebellion by September 1931.[16]

Numerous other smaller uprisings and acts of resistance continued in various parts of Turkish Kurdistan until the late 1930s, all of which were met with similar repressive measures by the Turkish state.[9]

B. Iraq: British Mandate, Unfulfilled Promises, and Early Revolts

Iraq, as constituted in 1920 from the former Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra, was a creation of British imperial policy and placed under a League of Nations Mandate administered by Britain.[8] The Kurdish-inhabited northern regions, particularly the Mosul Vilayet, became a focal point of British strategic interest due to their oil reserves and their location on imperial communication routes.[8]

British policy towards the Kurds in Iraq was characterized by ambiguity and often contradictory approaches.[8] While some figures in London, such as Winston Churchill (then Colonial Secretary), briefly entertained the idea of a separate Kurdish entity or buffer state, British officials on the ground, notably High Commissioner Sir Percy Cox, advocated for the incorporation of Kurdish territories into the new Iraqi state.[8] This latter view, driven by the desire to secure British imperial interests and control over oil resources, ultimately prevailed, often enforced through military means, including aerial bombardment of Kurdish areas resistant to Baghdad's authority.[8]

The Kurds were given official assurances regarding their rights. The 1921 Provisional Iraqi Constitution stated that Iraq was composed of multiple ethnic groups with equal rights and nominally enshrined the equal legal status of the Kurdish language with Arabic.[2] The 1932 Local Languages Law, a condition imposed by the League of Nations for Iraq's independence, further aimed to protect Kurdish linguistic rights in administration and education.[2] However, these promises frequently remained unfulfilled in practice.[8] Arab nationalist ministers and officials in Baghdad were often suspicious of Kurdish aspirations, viewing them as a threat to Iraqi national unity and sometimes attributing them to British machinations designed to weaken the Iraqi state.[30] Practical challenges, such as the lack of Kurdish-language textbooks and trained Kurdish teachers, also hampered the implementation of linguistic rights.[30]

The **Mosul Question**—the dispute over the final status of the oil-rich Mosul Vilayet (which included Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah)—further complicated the Kurdish situation. Both Kemalist Turkey (which claimed the vilayet as part of its National Pact) and Britain (which sought to attach it to Iraq) vied for control.[28] During the Lausanne Conference negotiations (1922-1923), both sides attempted to manipulate Kurdish leaders and factions to bolster their respective claims.[8] Ultimately, the League of Nations awarded Mosul to Iraq in 1926. Following this, Britain moved to reassure Turkey that there would be no question of Kurdish independence within Iraq.[8] Most Kurds in the region had strongly resisted incorporation into Iraq, as evidenced by their widespread refusal to vote in favor of Faisal as King of Iraq in the 1921 referendum.[8]

Kurdish aspirations for self-rule manifested in several uprisings:

- **The Kingdom of Kurdistan (1921-1924, with a brief resurgence in 1925):** Led by Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji in Sulaymaniyah, this was a significant early attempt to establish an autonomous Kurdish entity.[2] Sheikh Mahmud initially cooperated with the British but later declared himself King of Kurdistan. His rule was short-lived, as the British, viewing his independent ambitions as a threat to their plans for Iraq, used their air power and supported Iraqi forces to crush his kingdom.[33] Historians attribute the failure of this attempt partly to Sheikh Mahmud's misjudgment of British colonial interests, which did not favor an independent Kurdistan, especially after the

confirmation of significant oil deposits in the region.[33]

- Other Kurdish tribal rebellions against British and Iraqi rule occurred in 1922 (suppressed by 1924) and again under Sheikh Mahmud's leadership in 1930-1931 and 1932, all of which were eventually suppressed.[35]

C. Iran: Pahlavi Centralization and Kurdish Resistance

Under the Qajar dynasty, which ruled Iran until 1925, Kurdish communities (both Sunni and Shia) generally experienced a degree of integration and were often treated as part of the broader Muslim majority, enjoying certain political and land rights without facing intense pressure to assimilate.[2] This changed significantly with the rise of the Pahlavi dynasty under Reza Shah (from 1925), who embarked on a program of aggressive centralization and Persianization, mirroring Kemalist policies in Turkey.[8]

- **The Simko Shikak Revolts (1918-1922, 1926):** Ismail Agha Shikak, known as Simko, a powerful chieftain of the Shikak tribe, led a series of major revolts in northwestern Iran.[36] Simko's forces, at times receiving support from elements within the disintegrating Ottoman Empire [38], managed to establish control over a considerable area, including the city of Urmia, and repeatedly defeated Iranian government forces.[36] The nature of Simko's movement is debated by historians. Some view it as a significant early bid for Kurdish independence or broad autonomy.[36] Others argue that while elements of Kurdish nationalism were present, the revolts were primarily driven by Simko's ambition to establish his personal tribal authority over the region, characterized by traditional tribal power dynamics and, at times, plunder, including attacks on Assyrian and Azerbaijani communities.[36] Simko was defeated by the Iranian army in 1922 and forced to flee to Turkey.[38] He launched another, shorter-lived rebellion in 1926, which was also suppressed.[37] Simko was eventually lured into a trap and assassinated by Iranian forces in 1930.[37]
- **The Republic of Mahabad (January-December 1946):** This was the most significant attempt to establish a modern Kurdish state entity in Iran during this period.[2] It emerged in the context of the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran during World War II, which weakened the central Pahlavi government's control over the northern regions.[9]
    - **Establishment and Leadership:** The Republic was proclaimed in Mahabad, a town in northwestern Iran, in January 1946. Its president was Qazi Muhammad, a respected religious judge and leader of the newly formed Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), which itself had evolved from an earlier cultural-nationalist organization, the Komeley Jiyanewey Kurdistan (JK or Society for the Revival of Kurdistan).[33]
    - **Political Program:** The Republic aimed for Kurdish autonomy within the Iranian state, the official use of the Kurdish language in education and administration, the election of a Kurdish provincial council, and fostering unity with the neighboring Soviet-backed Azerbaijan People's Government.[41]
    - **Soviet Influence:** The Mahabad Republic was heavily reliant on the political, material, and military support of the Soviet Union, which occupied northern Iran at

the time and promoted Kurdish (and Azeri) nationalism to expand its own influence.[9] However, Soviet support was ambivalent; Moscow initially seemed to prefer Kurdish autonomy within the Soviet-sponsored Azerbaijani entity rather than a fully independent Kurdish state.[41]

- **Military Force:** General Mustafa Barzani, the Iraqi Kurdish leader who had taken refuge in Iran after earlier failed revolts in Iraq, along with approximately 3,000 of his *peshmerga* fighters, formed the core of the Mahabad Republic's army.[9] While this provided military strength, the presence of these "outsider" Iraqi Kurds reportedly caused some friction with local Mahabad tribes and strained the Republic's limited resources.[33]
- **Collapse:** The fate of the Mahabad Republic was sealed by international power politics. In March 1946, under intense pressure from the Western powers (primarily the United States and Great Britain) and in accordance with wartime agreements like the Yalta Conference, the Soviet Union agreed to withdraw its forces from Iran.[33] The Soviet withdrawal, completed by June 1946, left the Mahabad Republic politically and militarily isolated. Internal support also dwindled as local tribes, no longer benefiting from Soviet aid, became less committed.[33] The Iranian army, under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, moved to reassert central control. Facing overwhelming odds and wishing to avoid a civilian massacre, Qazi Muhammad decided against armed resistance.[33] Iranian forces entered Mahabad in December 1946, swiftly dismantling the Republic's institutions, banning the Kurdish language and destroying Kurdish books.[33] Qazi Muhammad and other leaders of the Republic were tried for treason and executed in Mahabad on March 31, 1947.[33]

D. Syria: French Mandate, Cultural Renaissance, and Early Post-Independence Policies

Syria, under French Mandate from 1920 to 1946, became an important, if complex, arena for Kurdish political and cultural activity, particularly due to the influx of Kurdish refugees and intellectuals fleeing persecution in Kemalist Turkey.[7]

- **Kurdish Life under French Mandate:** The French authorities, pursuing their own colonial interests, implemented policies that had a mixed impact on the Kurds. In the Jazira region of northeastern Syria, the French encouraged the settlement of Kurdish (and Christian Assyrian/Armenian) refugees who had fled Turkey, particularly after the Sheikh Said Rebellion (1925) and the Ararat Rebellion (1927-1931).[46] These refugees were often granted citizenship.[47] The French aimed to develop the agricultural potential of Jazira and viewed these refugee populations as "friendly" elements that could bolster French influence and serve as a counterweight to Arab nationalism.[23]
  - **Xoybûn (Hoyboun):** This influential Kurdish nationalist organization, founded in Bhamdoun, Lebanon, in 1927, established its political wing in Damascus.[18] Led by prominent figures such as the Bedir Khan brothers (Celadet and Kamuran) and Haco Agha, Xoybûn orchestrated the Ararat Rebellion in Turkey and engaged in diplomatic efforts to promote the Kurdish cause.[18] The French authorities' stance

towards Xoybûn was pragmatic and often duplicitous. Initially, some French intelligence officers and local administrators saw utility in supporting Kurdish nationalist activities as a means to pressure Turkey, particularly during sensitive border negotiations.[23] However, French support was always conditional and aimed at maintaining control. When Turkish diplomatic pressure mounted, or when French interests shifted (e.g., after the Franco-Syrian treaty of 1936 which foreshadowed Syrian independence), the French restricted Xoybûn's activities and curtailed overt support for Kurdish nationalism.[16]

- **Kurdish Cultural Renaissance:** Despite the political complexities, the French Mandate period witnessed a significant Kurdish cultural revival, particularly in the Kurmanji dialect, largely driven by exiled intellectuals.[7]
  - **Key Figures:** Celadet Alî Bedirxan and his brother Kamuran Alî Bedirxan were central to this movement.[7]
  - **Publications:** Celadet Bedirxan founded and edited the seminal journal *Hawar* (The Calling/The Cry) in Damascus (1932-1943). *Hawar* played a crucial role in standardizing the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish using a modified Latin alphabet (the "Bedirxan alphabet" or *Hawar* alphabet), publishing Kurdish folklore, poetry, and linguistic studies, and promoting Kurdish education.[7] It received some financial assistance from the French authorities, though this often came with political oversight and pressure to avoid overtly political content.[23] *Hawar* was accompanied by an illustrated supplement, *Ronahi* (Enlightenment, 1942-1945).[7] Kamuran Bedirxan, based in Beirut, edited the weekly newspaper *Roja Nû* (New Day, 1943-1946) and its literary supplement *Stêr* (Star, 1943-1945).[7]
  - **Cultural Associations:** Various Kurdish cultural clubs and societies, such as the Salah al-Din Club in Damascus and *Ciwanên Kurd* (Young Kurds) in Jazira, were established to promote Kurdish language literacy, organize cultural events, and foster a sense of national identity.[23] Other important figures in this cultural movement included the poets Cegerxwîn and Qedrîcan [23], as well as early political organizers like Osman Sabri and Nûredin Zaza who were also involved in literary and cultural activities.[48]
- The primary objective of this cultural movement was to strengthen Kurdish national consciousness and feelings of belonging by reviving and standardizing the language, developing Kurdish education, and preserving popular Kurdish literature and traditions. The motto "independence lies in our language" encapsulated this belief.[23] This period in Syria, therefore, inadvertently served as a crucial incubator for modern Kurdish cultural nationalism, especially for the Kurmanji-speaking Kurds, providing a relatively more permissive environment for such activities compared to the severe repression in Kemalist Turkey at the time. The development of the Latin-based Kurmanji alphabet in Syria had a lasting impact, eventually being adopted by many Kurds in Turkey as well.[20]

- **Early Policies of Independent Syria:** Following Syria's independence in 1946, the political tide turned against the Kurds. The ascendant Arab nationalist ideology viewed Kurdish aspirations with suspicion and hostility.[44] The Syrian state began to perceive the Kurdish presence and any expression of distinct identity in regions like Jazira as a "Kurdish danger" to national unity and Arab identity.[45] This marked the beginning of a long period of marginalization, discrimination, and political repression for Syrian Kurds, which would intensify in the subsequent decades.[53]

The interwar and immediate post-WWII period was thus a crucible for Kurdish nationalism. The short-lived Kurdish statelets—the Kingdom of Kurdistan in Iraq, the Ararat Republic in Turkey, and particularly the Republic of Mahabad in Iran—despite their ultimate failures, became powerful symbols in the Kurdish collective memory.[2] They demonstrated the tangible possibility of Kurdish self-rule and provided historical precedents that fueled future nationalist narratives and aspirations, reinforcing the idea that Kurdish statehood, however difficult to achieve, was not an impossible dream. This era also starkly illustrated a recurring pattern: Kurdish nationalist movements often sought and received support from external powers (Britain in Iraq, the French to some extent in Syria, the Soviets in Mahabad), only to be abandoned when the geopolitical interests of these patrons shifted. This fostered both a pragmatic, if often desperate, search for alliances and a deep-seated skepticism about the reliability of foreign support, contributing to the enduring Kurdish adage: "No friends but the mountains." The nature of Kurdish resistance also varied significantly by region, shaped by the specific policies of the ruling states and the local socio-political structures, highlighting that "Kurdish nationalism" was not a monolithic phenomenon but one refracted through diverse local conditions.

5. Kurdish Nationalism in the Cold War Era (1950s-1970s)

The Cold War (roughly 1947-1991) profoundly reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, and Kurdish nationalist movements found themselves navigating a treacherous terrain dominated by superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as complex regional alliances and conflicts. Both superpowers and various regional states often viewed and interacted with Kurdish movements primarily through the lens of their own strategic interests, leading to a period of conditional support, manipulation, and frequent abandonment for Kurdish aspirations.[55]

The United States, focused on containing Soviet influence and maintaining access to oil resources, generally prioritized its alliances with key regional states like Turkey (a NATO member) and Pahlavi Iran (a crucial pillar of US policy in the Gulf).[57] While the US occasionally provided covert support to Kurdish groups, particularly Iraqi Kurds, it was often to destabilize Soviet-leaning regimes (like Iraq under Qassim and later the Ba'athists) or to serve the interests of its allies (e.g., supporting Iraqi Kurds in the 1970s at the behest of the Shah of Iran).[56] This support was typically tactical and withdrawn when broader geopolitical calculations shifted, as starkly demonstrated by the US abandonment of the Iraqi Kurds

following the 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq.[57]

The Soviet Union also engaged with Kurdish nationalist movements, particularly in Iraq and Iran, offering varying degrees of political, financial, and sometimes military support.[39] Soviet motivations included countering Western influence, pressuring pro-Western regimes, and promoting sympathetic leftist or nationalist forces.[63] Mustafa Barzani, the Iraqi Kurdish leader, maintained close ties with the USSR for a period and received considerable Soviet backing.[62] However, Soviet policy towards the Kurds was often inconsistent and pragmatic, balancing support for Kurdish aspirations against its strategic state-to-state relationships, notably with Iraq after the signing of the Soviet-Iraqi Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1972, which led to a downturn in overt Soviet support for Iraqi Kurds.[62] The USSR's policy towards its own Kurdish minority also fluctuated significantly over time, ranging from cultural promotion to repression and deportation.[61]

Regional alliances formed in the Cold War context also impacted Kurdish movements. The Baghdad Pact (1955), which included Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom (later renamed CENTO after Iraq's withdrawal in 1958), was, in part, aimed at coordinating efforts to prevent and suppress Kurdish nationalist movements, which were perceived as potentially pro-Soviet or destabilizing.[67] The pact included understandings that member states would not support Kurdish minorities in other signatory countries, further isolating Kurdish groups and limiting their room for maneuver.[69] Syria, though not a formal member for most of this period, often aligned with these states in opposing pan-Kurdish aspirations.[69]

This complex web of external interventions, driven by Cold War logic and regional power plays, often meant that Kurdish groups became dependent on patrons whose interests rarely aligned fully or consistently with Kurdish goals of unity or independence. This dependency frequently fueled or exacerbated divisions within the Kurdish nationalist camp, as different factions aligned with rival external patrons.

A. Turkey: The Rise of Leftist Kurdish Nationalism and State Repression

The 1950s in Turkey, under the Democrat Party government of Adnan Menderes, saw a relative relaxation of the most overt forms of forced assimilation, with the government often seeking to co-opt traditional Kurdish tribal and religious leaders into the state system.[70] The military coup of 1960, followed by the promulgation of a new constitution in 1961, initially brought a period of increased political liberalization and wider civil liberties, which created new openings for political expression.[70]

During the 1960s and early 1970s, socio-economic changes, including improved educational opportunities for some Kurds and increased labor migration from the underdeveloped Kurdish-majority southeast to western Turkish cities, contributed to the emergence of a new, more broadly based, and increasingly secular and leftist Kurdish national movement.[70] This movement often found expression through student activism and newly formed political and cultural organizations.

- **The Workers Party of Turkey (Türkiye İşçi Partisi - TİP):** Founded in 1961, TİP was a legal socialist party that became an important, albeit complex, avenue for articulating Kurdish grievances.[70] Influential Kurdish intellectuals and activists within TİP

successfully pushed the party to address the Kurdish question more directly. This culminated in the party's 1970 congress adopting a resolution that recognized the Kurds as a separate nation and condemned the national oppression they faced.[70] However, these discussions often remained confined to intellectual circles, and TİP itself faced internal divisions over the Kurdish issue. The party was banned following the 1971 military memorandum.[70]

- **Revolutionary Cultural Eastern Hearths (Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları - DDKO):** Established in 1969 by Kurdish university students and intellectuals, initially in Ankara and Istanbul, the DDKO quickly expanded, opening branches in several cities in the Kurdish-majority provinces.[70] The DDKO was a left-wing organization that organized seminars on Marxism and socialism but also explicitly discussed the Kurdish question, demanding greater cultural freedom and socio-economic development for the eastern provinces.[75] It published bulletins highlighting the grievances of Kurdish peasants and workers and even staged short theater plays in Kurdish.[76] Abdullah Öcalan, later the founder of the PKK, was among those who participated in DDKO activities in Istanbul.[76] The DDKO was banned after the 1971 military intervention, and many of its prominent leaders and members, including Musa Anter, Necmettin Büyükkaya, İsmail Beşikçi, and Mehdi Zana, were arrested and prosecuted in military courts where their Kurdish identity was often denied by the state.[70]
- **Illegal/Underground Kurdish Parties:**
    - **Democratic Party of Kurdistan in Turkey (Türkiye Kürdistan Demokrat Partisi - T-KDP or PDK-T):** This clandestine party was established in 1965, largely inspired by and initially aligned with Mustafa Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq.[70] The T-KDP initially drew support from more traditional Kurdish elites and advocated for Kurdish autonomy or independence.[70]
        - **Internal Divisions and Key Figures:** The T-KDP experienced significant internal factionalism towards the end of the 1960s. One faction continued under leaders like **Sait Elçi**, maintaining a more conservative nationalist line.[70] A more radical, left-populist faction emerged under the leadership of **Dr. Şivan (Sait Kırmızıtoprak)**.[70] Dr. Şivan, a medical doctor, advocated for armed struggle to achieve an independent, socialist Kurdistan and was influenced by contemporary anti-colonial movements and Marxist-Leninist thought.[74] He and some followers went to Iraqi Kurdistan in 1969 to prepare for an armed insurrection in Turkey.[70] In a tragic and still debated series of events, both Sait Elçi and Dr. Şivan (along with some of his associates) were killed in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1971. Allegations implicated rival Kurdish factions, Barzani's KDP, and possibly Turkish intelligence (MIT) involvement.[70] These deaths dealt a severe blow to the early T-KDP movement.
    - **Other Leftist and Nationalist Groups (Pre-PKK):** The 1970s, despite the repressive atmosphere following the 1971 coup, witnessed a proliferation of various underground Kurdish leftist and nationalist organizations.[78] These groups

often espoused Marxist-Leninist or Maoist ideologies and viewed Kurdistan as a colonized entity requiring national liberation. They engaged in publishing clandestine journals, organizing student and worker groups, and debating strategies that ranged from cultural rights advocacy to armed struggle. Notable among these were groups associated with publications like *Rizgarî* (Liberation) and the *Komal* publishing house, the Kurdistan Socialist Party of Turkey (TKSP), which achieved some local electoral successes, the KİP/DDKD (a post-1977 successor to DDKO ideals, advocating armed struggle), and the Kurdistan National Liberationists (KUK), which had ties to the Barzani movement in Iraq and sometimes clashed with other emerging Kurdish groups like the nascent PKK.[71]

- **State Repression (Post-1971 Military Memorandum):** The military intervention of March 12, 1971, marked a turning point, leading to a period of intense state repression against all leftist and Kurdish nationalist movements.[70] Martial law was declared in many provinces, particularly in the Kurdish-majority southeast. Legal organizations like TİP and DDKO were banned, and thousands of activists, students, and intellectuals were arrested, imprisoned, and often subjected to torture.[26] The constitution and penal codes were amended to facilitate harsher prosecution of activities deemed separatist or subversive.[70] The ban on the public use of the Kurdish language and expressions of Kurdish culture was enforced with renewed vigor.[26] This severe repression, while aiming to crush the Kurdish movement, paradoxically contributed to its further radicalization, pushing many activists towards clandestine organization and more militant forms of struggle.[70]
- **Origins of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK):** It was in this climate of heightened repression and radicalization that the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) emerged.[7]
    - The group's ideological core formed in the early to mid-1970s among a circle of Kurdish students in Ankara, many of whom had been active in or influenced by the Turkish radical left (e.g., Dev-Genç) and earlier Kurdish student initiatives like DDKO.[82] This group, led by **Abdullah Öcalan** (known as "Apo"), initially called themselves the "Kurdistan Revolutionaries" (*Apocular*).[82]
    - The PKK's initial ideology was a fusion of Marxism-Leninism and Kurdish nationalism, advocating for the establishment of an independent, unified, and socialist Kurdistan through armed struggle.[78] It distinguished itself from earlier Kurdish nationalist parties by its more radical revolutionary stance, its emphasis on class struggle alongside national liberation, and its recruitment base, which often included individuals from lower socio-economic strata and rural backgrounds, rather than solely traditional elites or urban intellectuals.[84] The killing of Haki Karer, an ethnic Turk and a close associate of Öcalan, by rival factions in 1977, is often cited as a key event that galvanized the group towards formal party organization.[82]
    - The PKK was formally founded at a congress held in the village of Fîs, near Lice in Diyarbakır province, on November 27, 1978.[82] Besides Abdullah Öcalan, other key

founding figures included Cemil Bayık, Mazlum Doğan, and Mehmet Karasungur.[82]
    - In the late 1970s, leading up to the 1980 military coup in Turkey, the PKK engaged in armed actions, primarily targeting individuals and groups it deemed feudal collaborators with the Turkish state, as well as rival Kurdish and Turkish right-wing or Islamist organizations, in a bid to assert its dominance within the Kurdish political landscape.[82]

B. Iraq: Autonomy Negotiations, Betrayal, and Intra-Kurdish Rivalry

The 1950s and 1970s were a period of intense political upheaval and conflict for Iraqi Kurds, marked by cycles of rebellion, negotiation, and renewed warfare, deeply enmeshed in both Iraqi domestic politics and broader regional and Cold War dynamics.

- **The KDP under Mustafa Barzani and the Emergence of the PUK:**
    - The **Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)**, under the charismatic and often autocratic leadership of Mulla **Mustafa Barzani**, was the preeminent Iraqi Kurdish political and military force for much of this period.[34] Barzani, who had led his followers into exile in the Soviet Union after the collapse of the Mahabad Republic, returned to Iraq following the 1958 revolution that overthrew the Hashemite monarchy.[34] He consolidated his power over various Kurdish tribes and spearheaded the Kurdish struggle for autonomy. The KDP, while nationalist, was also deeply rooted in Barzani's tribal authority and traditional structures.[89]
    - The **Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)** was founded on June 1, 1975, by a group of leftist and nationalist intellectuals and activists, most notably **Jalal Talabani**, Nawshirwan Mustafa, and Fuad Masum.[2] The PUK's formation was a direct consequence of the collapse of the 1974-1975 Kurdish revolt led by Barzani and a reaction against what its founders perceived as the KDP's traditional, tribal-based, and overly centralized leadership.[89] The PUK aimed to provide a more modern, ideologically diverse (initially with strong socialist leanings), and broader-based alternative for the Kurdish national movement.[92]
    - From its inception, the PUK became a significant rival to the KDP, leading to a period of intense and often violent **intra-Kurdish conflict** from the mid-1970s onwards, which severely weakened the overall Kurdish position.[34]
- **Cycles of Conflict and Negotiation with Ba'athist Regimes:**
    - The 1958 revolution, led by General Abd al-Karim Qassim, initially brought a period of hope for Iraqi Kurds, with Qassim's government making some positive gestures towards Kurdish rights and allowing Barzani's return.[34] However, Qassim's failure to deliver on promises of meaningful autonomy and his attempts to play different Kurdish factions against each other led to disillusionment.
    - The **First Iraqi-Kurdish War (1961-1970)** erupted after negotiations broke down.[34] This was a protracted guerrilla war in which Barzani's KDP forces fought against successive Iraqi governments.
    - A significant breakthrough appeared with the **March 1970 Autonomy Agreement** (also known as the March Manifesto) between the KDP and the Iraqi Ba'athist government (which had come to power in 1968). This agreement

promised substantial Kurdish self-rule in northern Iraq, recognition of Kurdish as an official language, Kurdish representation in the central government, and various cultural and administrative rights.[60] This was a landmark achievement, representing the most extensive recognition of Kurdish rights by any state in the region at that time.
    - However, the implementation of the 1970 agreement faltered due to mutual distrust and, crucially, disputes over the status of the oil-rich Kirkuk province and other ethnically mixed areas, which the Ba'ath government was determined to keep under central control and subject to Arabization policies.[60]
    - The failure of the autonomy agreement led to the **Second Iraqi-Kurdish War (1974-1975)**.[34] During this conflict, Barzani's KDP received significant covert military and financial support from the United States (orchestrated by Henry Kissinger), Iran (under the Shah), and Israel.[56] This support was not primarily aimed at achieving Kurdish independence but rather at weakening the Soviet-aligned Ba'athist regime in Baghdad and serving the regional interests of Tehran and Washington.
    - The Kurdish revolt collapsed dramatically in March 1975 following the **Algiers Agreement** between Iran and Iraq.[59] In this accord, Iran agreed to cease all support for the Iraqi Kurds in exchange for territorial concessions from Iraq along the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Deprived of Iranian logistical support and facing a full-scale Iraqi offensive, the Kurdish resistance crumbled. Barzani and much of the KDP leadership, along with tens of thousands of refugees, fled to Iran.[59] This event was a profound trauma for Iraqi Kurds, seen as a major betrayal by their external backers, particularly the US and Iran.
    - In the aftermath of the 1975 collapse, the Iraqi Ba'athist regime under Saddam Hussein intensified its repressive policies in Kurdistan. This included large-scale forced displacement of Kurdish populations, destruction of villages, and systematic **Arabization** campaigns aimed at changing the demographic makeup of strategic areas, particularly around Kirkuk and other oil-producing regions.[2] These policies laid the groundwork for the even more brutal Anfal genocide against the Kurds in the 1980s.[2]
- **Iran-Iraq Dynamics and Kurdish Proxies:** The Iran-Iraq relationship was a key factor influencing the Kurdish struggle. Iran under the Shah viewed the Iraqi Kurds as useful proxies to exert pressure on Baghdad.[57] Conversely, Iraq at various times provided support to Iranian Kurdish opposition groups.[11] This pattern of regional rivals using Kurdish movements in neighboring countries as instruments in their own conflicts was a recurring theme, often with devastating consequences for the Kurds themselves, who were caught in the crossfire or abandoned when alliances shifted.

The experience of Iraqi Kurds during this period—marked by large-scale revolts, extensive foreign intervention, the achievement and subsequent loss of a significant autonomy agreement, and brutal state repression—became a central and often tragic reference point for Kurdish movements in other parts of Kurdistan. The successes and failures in Iraq, particularly

the leadership of Mustafa Barzani and the KDP, and later the emergence of Jalal Talabani and the PUK, directly influenced Kurdish political organizing and aspirations in neighboring countries, fostering cross-border linkages but also, at times, importing Iraqi Kurdish internal rivalries into the broader Kurdish political sphere.

C. Iran: KDPI and Komala under the Shah and the Dawn of Revolution

Kurdish nationalism in Iran during the 1950s-1970s evolved under the shadow of the Pahlavi monarchy, which, particularly after the 1953 coup that restored Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to full power, pursued policies of centralization and Persianization, suppressing ethnic minority expressions.

- **Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI/PDKI):**
    - Following the collapse of the Republic of Mahabad in 1946 and the execution of its leader Qazi Muhammad, the KDPI was severely weakened but managed to survive underground.[42] It experienced a brief, limited revival during the nationalist premiership of Mohammad Mosaddegh (1951-1953), a period of relative political openness, and cooperated with the Tudeh (Communist) Party.[42] However, the CIA-MI6 orchestrated coup in 1953 that ousted Mosaddegh and consolidated the Shah's power led to renewed and intensified repression of all opposition groups, including the KDPI.[42]
    - Throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, the KDPI faced significant challenges, including arrests, internal divisions, and the Shah's security apparatus (SAVAK) actively working to dismantle its networks.[42] For a time, there were attempts to unify with Barzani's KDP in Iraq, but these did not come to fruition.[42] The Shah's regime, while suppressing its own Kurdish movement, began to support Barzani's KDP against the Iraqi government in the 1960s and 1970s. This complex dynamic led to periods where the KDP-Iraq reduced its support for the KDPI to maintain good relations with Tehran.[42]
    - In response to repression and marginalization, a faction within the KDPI, disillusioned with the pro-Barzani leadership of Abdullah Ishaqi (Ehmed Tewfiq), pushed for a more active struggle. This led to the formation of a "Revolutionary Committee" which launched a small-scale, ill-fated armed uprising in Iranian Kurdistan in 1967-1968. This revolt was quickly suppressed by the Iranian military, with some reports suggesting that Barzani's KDP, under pressure from the Shah, may have even assisted in tracking down the Iranian Kurdish rebels.[39]
    - A crucial turning point for the KDPI came with the rise of Dr. **Abdulrahman Ghassemlou** to the leadership as Secretary-General in 1973.[42] Ghassemlou, a charismatic and European-educated intellectual, revitalized the party. Under his leadership, the KDPI adopted a more social-democratic orientation and participated actively in the broad coalition of forces (including Islamic, leftist, and liberal groups) opposing the Shah's regime in the lead-up to the 1979 Iranian Revolution.[42]
- **Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan (Komala):**
    - Komala (full name: *Komełey Şorrişgêrrî Zehmetkêşanî Kurdistanî Êran* - Society of

Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan) emerged as a distinct political force, founded clandestinely in 1969 by a group of Kurdish students in Tehran, including **Abdullah Mohtadi**.[97] It publicly announced its existence on the eve of the 1979 Revolution.[100]
    - Komala's ideology was initially rooted in Marxism-Leninism, with strong Maoist influences, particularly in its emphasis on organizing the peasantry and urban working class and its focus on class struggle as intertwined with national liberation.[97] This differentiated it from the more traditionally nationalist KDPI. Komala often viewed Kurdish nationalism through a class lens and was critical of feudal structures within Kurdish society.[97]
    - During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Komala, like the KDPI, engaged in armed struggle against the Islamic Republic and received support (arms, funding, safe havens) from Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which sought to destabilize Iran by backing Iranian opposition groups.[100]
- **Relations between KDPI and Komala, and State Repression:**
    - Both the KDPI and Komala played significant roles in the 1979 Kurdish rebellion that erupted in Iranian Kurdistan immediately following the Islamic Revolution, demanding autonomy and rights for the Kurdish people.[39] The new Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini, however, swiftly moved to consolidate power and rejected Kurdish demands for self-rule, leading to a brutal military crackdown in Kurdish areas.[39]
    - While both parties fought against the central government, their relationship was often fraught with tension, ideological differences, and competition for influence and popular support within Iranian Kurdistan.[97] Komala, with its more radical leftist stance, sometimes viewed the KDPI as bourgeois nationalist or a "class enemy".[97] These rivalries eventually escalated into armed clashes between the KDPI and Komala peshmerga forces during the 1980s, even as both were fighting the Iranian regime.[100] This intra-Kurdish conflict further weakened the Kurdish resistance in Iran.
    - The Shah's regime in the 1960s and 1970s, and subsequently the Islamic Republic from 1979 onwards, employed severe repressive measures against all Kurdish nationalist activities, including arrests, imprisonment, torture, and military operations.

The rise of distinct leftist ideologies within the Iranian Kurdish nationalist movement, exemplified by Komala and the transformed KDPI under Ghassemlou, marked a significant evolution from earlier, often tribally-led or more traditionally nationalist movements in Iran. This ideological shift attracted new demographics, such as students, urban intellectuals, and segments of the peasantry and working class, to the Kurdish cause. However, it also introduced new fault lines within the broader Kurdish society and between different nationalist organizations, reflecting the complex interplay of class, national, and ideological allegiances.

D. Syria: Party Proliferation, Ba'athist Repression, and the "Arab Belt"

For Syrian Kurds, the period from the 1950s to the 1970s was characterized by the

fragmentation of their nascent political movement, increasing state repression under successive Arab nationalist and Ba'athist regimes, and systematic policies aimed at altering the demographic and cultural landscape of Kurdish-inhabited regions.

- **Evolution and Fragmentation of Kurdish Political Parties:**
    - The first modern Kurdish political party in Syria, the **Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS or KDP-S)**, was established in 1957.[44] Its founders included prominent Kurdish intellectuals and activists such as **Osman Sabri**, **Nûredin Zaza**, and **Abdul Hamid Darwish**, with some initial support and encouragement from Iraqi Kurdish figures like Jalal Talabani, who was then in exile in Damascus.[48] The KDPS's initial objectives focused on promoting Kurdish cultural rights, achieving economic progress for Kurdish areas, and advocating for democratic change within Syria.[106]
    - The KDPS was never legally recognized by the Syrian state and operated largely underground. It faced immediate repression, particularly after a crackdown in 1960 which saw many of its leaders arrested and imprisoned on charges of separatism.[106]
    - From the 1960s onwards, the KDPS was plagued by internal divisions and factionalism, leading to numerous splits.[2] These splits were driven by a combination of factors:
        - **Ideological Differences:** Tensions arose between more traditional/conservative nationalist wings and modernist/leftist-leaning factions.[45]
        - **Leadership Rivalries:** Personal ambitions and competition among key figures contributed to the fragmentation.[106]
        - **External Influences:** The growing KDP-PUK rivalry in Iraqi Kurdistan often spilled over, with Syrian Kurdish factions aligning themselves with either Barzani's KDP or Talabani's PUK, further deepening the divisions.[52]
    - A major split occurred in 1965, dividing the KDPS into a "Left Wing" (often associated with Osman Sabri and more radical stances) and a "Right Wing" (led by Abdul Hamid Darwish, who generally adopted a more moderate approach).[52] Darwish's faction later evolved into the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party (PDPKS) in 1976, formally aligning with Talabani's PUK in Iraq.[52]
    - By the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the Syrian Kurdish political scene was characterized by a multitude of small, often competing parties (by some estimates, at least ten), many of which had minimal ideological differences but were built around individual leaders or families.[45] This extreme fragmentation significantly weakened the collective political influence of Syrian Kurds.
- **Ba'ath Party Policies: Arabization and Repression:**
    - The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party seized power in Syria in a 1963 coup, establishing a one-party state with a strong Arab nationalist ideology.[111] General Hafez al-Assad consolidated his rule through another coup in 1970, further entrenching

an authoritarian and repressive political system.[45]

- The Ba'athist regime implemented systematic discriminatory policies against its Kurdish minority, viewing Kurdish identity and aspirations as a threat to Arab national unity and state security.[2]
  - **The 1962 Special Census:** A pivotal act of denationalization occurred in 1962 when the Syrian government conducted an "exceptional" census exclusively in the predominantly Kurdish Hasakah governorate (Jazira region).[45] The stated purpose was to identify "alien infiltrators" who had allegedly crossed illegally from Turkey and Iraq. As a result, an estimated 120,000 Syrian Kurds (around 20% of the Kurdish population in Syria at the time) were arbitrarily stripped of their Syrian citizenship and classified as *ajanib* (foreigners) or, if they lacked any identity documents, *maktoumeen* (unregistered/concealed).[113] This stateless status, which was hereditary, had devastating consequences, denying affected Kurds basic civil, political, economic, and social rights, including the right to own property, work in government jobs, access state education and healthcare, vote, or obtain passports.[60]
  - **The "Arab Belt" Policy (*Al-Hizam al-Arabi*):** This was a comprehensive demographic engineering project officially launched by Hafez al-Assad's government in 1973, though its conceptual basis (the "Hilal Report" of 1963) predated his rule.[45] The policy aimed to create a 10-15 kilometer wide and approximately 375-kilometer long "Arab belt" along Syria's northern border with Turkey, primarily in the Kurdish-majority Jazira region.[47] This involved the expropriation of fertile agricultural lands from Kurdish farmers and the forced displacement of an estimated 140,000 Kurds.[45] Their lands were then given to Arab Bedouin families, many of whom had themselves been displaced by the construction of the Tabqa Dam on the Euphrates River. These Arab settlers received state support, including free housing in newly constructed "model villages," weapons, and agricultural aid.[47] The objectives of the Arab Belt policy were multiple: to alter the demographic composition of the border region in favor of Arabs, to sever ties between Syrian and Turkish Kurds, to secure state control over resource-rich areas (Jazira has significant oil and cotton production), and to counter perceived Kurdish separatist tendencies.[47] Although the active settlement campaign was reportedly halted in 1976, the discriminatory land laws and demographic changes were not reversed.[113]
  - **Cultural and Linguistic Suppression:** The Ba'athist regime also imposed severe restrictions on the Kurdish language and culture. The use of Kurdish in official settings, education, and even in business names was prohibited.[53] Publishing books or music in Kurdish was banned, and expressions of Kurdish identity, such as traditional songs and dances, were often outlawed

under laws against "weakening national sentiment".[54] Children could not be registered with Kurdish names.[114]

- **Kurdish Resistance and the Rise of PKK Influence:**
    - Despite the intense repression and fragmentation, Kurdish political parties continued to operate clandestinely, advocating for cultural and civil rights, and protesting discriminatory policies.[106] Forms of resistance included distributing leaflets, organizing petition campaigns, and attempting small-scale demonstrations, all of which were met with arrests, torture, and prosecution by the security services.[2]
    - A significant development in the late 1970s was the growing influence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) from Turkey among Syrian Kurds.[45] Hafez al-Assad's regime, engaged in its own geopolitical rivalries with Turkey (particularly over issues like the Sanjak of Alexandretta, water rights on the Euphrates River, and Turkish support for Islamist groups in Syria), saw the PKK as a useful proxy force.[45] Consequently, Syria allowed the PKK to establish training camps and operational bases on its territory (including in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, then under Syrian control) from which to launch attacks against Turkey.[45] This strategic alliance, while serving Assad's regional aims, inadvertently led to a revival of Kurdish identity and a strengthening of Kurdish nationalism within Syria itself, as many Syrian Kurds were drawn to the PKK's more radical and assertive brand of nationalism.[45]

The policies of the Ba'athist regime in Syria—particularly the 1962 census and the Arab Belt project—had a profoundly negative and lasting impact on the Kurdish population, creating deep-seated grievances related to statelessness, land confiscation, and cultural suppression. This systematic repression, while aimed at quashing Kurdish nationalism, ultimately fueled resentment and sustained underground political activity. It also created a political vacuum and a sense of disillusionment with the existing fragmented Syrian Kurdish parties, which inadvertently paved the way for the PKK to gain significant traction among Syrian Kurds, a development that would have major implications for the future of the Kurdish question in Syria and the broader region.

The following table provides an overview of some of the major Kurdish political parties and movements active across the four key states during the 1950s-1970s:

Country	Party/Movement Name	Key Leaders	Dominant Ideology	Primary Goals	Key Activities/Events	Relationship with State	External Influences/Support
Turkey	Workers Party of Turkey (TİP) (Kurdish faction)	M. A. Aslan, K. Burkay (within TİP)	Socialism, Kurdish Rights	Recognition of Kurds, cultural/economic rights	Parliamentary activity, 1970 resolution on Kurds	Legal then banned (1971)	Turkish Left

	Revolutionary Cultural Eastern Hearths (DDKO)	M. Anter, N. Büyükkaya, İ. Beşikçi	Leftism, Kurdish Cultural Rights	Cultural freedom, regional development	Mass rallies, publications, student organizing	Legal then banned (1971)	TİP, Turkish Left
	Democratic Party of Kurdistan in Turkey (T-KDP/PDK-T)	Sait Elçi, Dr. Şivan (S. Kırmızıtopraak)	Nationalism, (later) Left Populism/Socialism	Autonomy/Independence	Clandestine organizing, planned armed struggle	Illegal, repressed	KDP-Iraq (Barzani)
	Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (emerging late 1970s)	Abdullah Öcalan	Marxism-Leninism, Kurdish Nationalism	Independent Socialist Kurdistan	Student organizing, early armed actions	Illegal, intensely repressed	Syrian support (late 70s), Palestinian groups
Iraq	Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)	Mustafa Barzani	Nationalism, Tribal Conservatism	Autonomy, Independence	1st & 2nd Iraqi-Kurdish Wars, 1970 Autonomy Agmt.	Conflict/Negotiation	USSR (early), Iran (Shah), US, Israel (conditional)
	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (est. 1975)	Jalal Talabani, N. Mustafa	Leftism, Socialism, Nationalism	Autonomy, Democratic Iraq	Guerrilla warfare post-1975, rival to KDP	Conflict	Varied (Syria, Libya at times)
Iran	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI/PDKI)	(Post-Mahabad leaders), Abdulrahman Ghassemlou (from 1973)	Nationalism, (later) Social Democracy	Autonomy, Democratic Iran	1967-68 revolt, role in 1979 Revolution, armed struggle post-79	Illegal, repressed by Shah & Islamic Rep.	Iraq (Saddam) at times
	Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan (est. 1969, public 1979)	Abdullah Mohtadi	Marxism-Leninism, Maoism	Socialist Revolution, Kurdish Rights/Autonomy	Role in 1979 Revolution, armed struggle post-79	Illegal, repressed by Shah & Islamic Rep.	Iraq (Saddam) at times

Syria	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) & factions	O. Sabri, N. Zaza, A. H. Darwish	Nationalism, (later) Leftist/Progressive factions	Cultural rights, democratic change, autonomy	Clandestine organizing, party splits	Illegal, repressed	KDP-Iraq, PUK-Iraq (for respective factions)
	Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party (PDPKS) (from KDPS-Right Wing, formal 1976)	Abdul Hamid Darwish	Moderate Nationalism, Socialism	Kurdish rights, federalism	Political organizing, alignment with PUK-Iraq	Illegal, repressed	PUK-Iraq
Source: Data compiled from sources including.[2]							

This table underscores the diverse and often fragmented nature of Kurdish political mobilization during the Cold War. While sharing a common aspiration for greater rights and recognition, Kurdish movements were shaped by the specific political contexts of their host states, leading to varied ideologies, strategies, and alliances. The interplay of state repression and external patronage further complicated these dynamics, often fueling internal divisions while simultaneously ensuring the persistence of the Kurdish question on the regional agenda.

6. Cross-Cutting Themes in the History of Kurdish Nationalism (to late 1970s)

Several overarching themes consistently emerge when examining the history of Kurdish nationalism from its 19th-century origins through the tumultuous Cold War era. These themes relate to the influence of external powers, internal Kurdish dynamics, the impact of broader regional conflicts, the role (or lack thereof) of international institutions, and the enduring importance of cultural nationalism.

The Role of External Powers: Support, Manipulation, and Betrayal

A defining characteristic of the Kurdish nationalist struggle has been its deep entanglement with the interests and interventions of external powers, both regional and international.[8] Powers such as Great Britain and France in the post-Ottoman settlement, and later the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, along with regional states like Iran, Iraq,

Syria, Turkey, and Israel, all engaged with Kurdish movements in various capacities. However, this engagement was rarely driven by a primary concern for Kurdish self-determination. Instead, support for Kurdish groups was typically tactical and instrumental, aimed at achieving the external power's own geopolitical objectives, such as containing rival states, securing access to resources like oil, gaining strategic leverage in regional conflicts, or countering the influence of an opposing superpower bloc.[29]

This instrumentalization meant that Kurdish groups were often used as proxies in larger conflicts. Consequently, support was frequently conditional and ephemeral, leading to a recurrent pattern of Kurdish movements being encouraged and armed by external patrons, only to be abandoned when the geopolitical calculations of those patrons shifted or when their immediate objectives were met.[8] The British handling of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq post-Mosul settlement [8], the Soviet withdrawal of support for the Mahabad Republic once its oil interests with Iran were addressed [33], and the US abandonment of the Iraqi Kurds after the 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq [57] are prominent examples of this pattern. This history of manipulation and betrayal fostered a deep-seated mistrust of external powers within many Kurdish circles, contributing to the well-known Kurdish adage, "No friends but the mountains" [122], while simultaneously underscoring a pragmatic, if often desperate, understanding of the necessity of seeking external alliances. The "weaponization" of Kurdish factions by competing regional and international powers was also a primary driver of intra-Kurdish conflict. External support, while sometimes essential for the survival or short-term gains of a particular group, often came with conditions that forced Kurdish factions into opposition with one another, thereby undermining the potential for long-term pan-Kurdish unity.

Internal Dynamics: Factionalism, Ideological Conflicts, Leadership Rivalries, and Tribal Structures

Kurdish nationalism, despite its overarching goal of self-determination, has been persistently characterized by significant internal divisions and factionalism throughout its history.[2] These divisions stemmed from multiple sources:

- **Ideological Conflicts:** From the early 20th century, tensions existed between proponents of full independence versus those advocating for autonomy within existing states.[9] Later, particularly from the 1960s onwards, new ideological cleavages emerged with the rise of leftist thought (Marxism-Leninism, socialism, Maoism) within nationalist circles. This created friction between more traditional, conservative nationalist movements (often with tribal or religious underpinnings) and modern, secular, and often revolutionary leftist groups.[11]
- **Leadership Rivalries:** Competition for leadership and influence among prominent individuals, families, and their respective factions has been a constant feature. Examples include the early differences between the Bedirxan family and Seyyid Abdülkadir [9], the enduring KDP-PUK rivalry in Iraqi Kurdistan led by the Barzani and Talabani camps respectively [34], the conflicts between KDPI and Komala in Iran [105], the splits within the T-KDP in Turkey [70], and the proliferation of numerous small, often

leader-centric, parties in Syria.[45]

- **Influence of Tribal Structures:** Traditional Kurdish society was, and in many areas remains, characterized by strong tribal affiliations and loyalties, with aghas (tribal chieftains) and sheikhs (religious leaders) wielding considerable power.[2] These tribal structures played a complex and often dual role in the context of nationalism. On one hand, they helped preserve Kurdish particularism, language, and customs, and could serve as effective networks for mobilization against central state authorities.[72] On the other hand, deep-seated inter-tribal rivalries, and the prioritization of tribal interests over broader national ones, frequently hindered the formation of unified Kurdish fronts and made Kurdish society susceptible to "divide and rule" tactics by central governments.[72] Modern nationalist movements had to navigate this tribal landscape, sometimes co-opting traditional leaders, sometimes challenging their authority, and often finding their efforts complicated by these pre-existing loyalties. The tension between these traditional societal structures and modern nationalist ideologies (often secular or leftist) represents a fundamental cleavage within Kurdish society that continuously impacted the nationalist project.
- **Geographical and Regional Differences:** The division of Kurdistan among four different states, each with its own distinct political system, socio-economic conditions, and policies towards its Kurdish minority, inevitably led to the development of separate Kurdish political trajectories and priorities in each part.[3] This fragmentation hindered pan-Kurdish coordination and the development of a unified strategy.

The Impact of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

The Arab-Israeli conflict, a dominant feature of Middle Eastern geopolitics from 1948 onwards, also had an indirect but notable impact on Kurdish nationalist movements, primarily through Israel's regional foreign policy. As part of its "periphery doctrine"—a strategy developed in the 1950s and 1960s aimed at forging alliances with non-Arab states and minorities on the periphery of the Arab world to counter Arab hostility—Israel established contacts with and provided support to Iraqi Kurds, particularly Mustafa Barzani's KDP.[55] This support, which included military training, arms supplies, and intelligence cooperation, was most significant from the 1960s until the mid-1970s.[118] Israel's primary motivation was to weaken Iraq, a key Arab adversary, by keeping its military preoccupied with the Kurdish insurgency in the north.[118] This cooperation was often facilitated by, and coordinated with, Iran under the Shah, who also had an interest in destabilizing the Iraqi regime.[121]

However, Israeli support for the Kurds was tactical and subject to broader regional dynamics. When Iran and Iraq reached the Algiers Agreement in 1975, leading Iran to cease its support for the Iraqi Kurds, Israeli (and US) aid also ended, contributing to the collapse of Barzani's revolt.[118] For the Arab states, particularly those with significant Kurdish populations like Iraq and Syria, any perceived Kurdish links with Israel were viewed with extreme suspicion and often used as propaganda to delegitimize Kurdish aspirations, portraying them as tools of Zionism and Western imperialism.[30] This further complicated the Kurdish position within the Arab world. There is less documented evidence of significant Israeli engagement with Kurdish movements in Turkey or Syria during this specific 1950s-1970s timeframe, as Israel's focus

was primarily on the Iraqi Kurds due to the direct confrontation with Iraq.

The Role of International Bodies (League of Nations, UN)

The engagement of international bodies like the League of Nations and, later, the United Nations with the Kurdish question during the period up to the late 1970s was generally limited and largely ineffective in advancing Kurdish aspirations for self-determination.

The League of Nations was involved in the aftermath of World War I, particularly concerning the **Mosul Question**. Its decision to award the Mosul Vilayet to the British Mandate of Iraq came with stipulations that Iraq, upon gaining independence and seeking League membership, must enact constitutional protections for its minorities, including linguistic and cultural rights for the Kurds.[2] While these provisions were formally adopted (e.g., the 1932 Local Languages Law in Iraq), their implementation was often weak, inconsistent, and undermined by the central Iraqi government.[2] The League also formally approved the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon, which, as discussed, had a complex impact on Kurdish political and cultural life in Syria.[131] Appeals made by Kurdish groups to the League of Nations, such as Xoybûn's efforts concerning the Ararat Republic, generally yielded little tangible result, as the League was dominated by the interests of its powerful member states (Britain and France) and prioritized the sovereignty and territorial integrity of existing or newly formed states over minority self-determination claims.[16]

During the Cold War era (1950s-1970s), the United Nations' role regarding the broader Kurdish question remained marginal. The UN Charter emphasized state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, and the superpower rivalry often paralyzed the organization on politically sensitive issues involving minorities within national borders. While humanitarian concerns might occasionally arise, direct UN political intervention in support of Kurdish nationalist goals was largely absent. The provided research does not indicate significant UN involvement in mediating Kurdish conflicts or advancing Kurdish political rights in Turkey, Iran, or Syria during this specific period.[93] The consistent failure of these international bodies to meaningfully address Kurdish aspirations, despite early (and unfulfilled) promises like those implied in the Treaty of Sèvres or the limited rights mandated by the League, reinforced a Kurdish perception of international indifference or even hostility. This often pushed Kurdish movements towards greater self-reliance or into the precarious embrace of state patrons whose support was, as noted, frequently unreliable.

Cultural Nationalism: Language, Literature, and Identity Preservation

Throughout the 20th century, cultural nationalism has been a vital and resilient dimension of the Kurdish struggle, serving as a crucial means of preserving and promoting Kurdish identity, language, and heritage, especially in the face of intense assimilationist policies by states like Turkey and Syria.[2]

Efforts in cultural nationalism focused on several key areas:

- **Language Standardization and Promotion:** A primary goal was the development and standardization of the Kurdish language, which has several major dialects (e.g., Kurmanji, Sorani).[4] The work of Celadet Alî Bedirxan and his circle in French Mandate Syria was particularly significant for the Kurmanji dialect, leading to the creation of a Latin-based alphabet (the *Hawar* alphabet) which facilitated literacy and publication.[7]

- **Publications:** The establishment of Kurdish-language newspapers and journals was a hallmark of this cultural activism. Early examples include *Kurdistan* (Cairo, 1898) [9], followed by influential periodicals like *Hawar* and *Ronahi* (Damascus, 1930s-40s), *Roja Nû* (Beirut, 1940s), and *Jîn* (Istanbul, post-WWI).[7] These publications served as platforms for disseminating nationalist ideas, publishing Kurdish literature and folklore, and discussing linguistic and cultural issues.
- **Literature and Folklore:** There was a concerted effort to collect, document, and publish Kurdish oral traditions, folk songs, legends, and classical poetry, as well as to encourage the creation of modern Kurdish literature.[7] This was seen as essential for constructing a shared national heritage and consciousness.
- **Education:** Promoting education in the Kurdish language was a consistent demand, though rarely achieved in state school systems. Clandestine schools or private initiatives, where possible, attempted to fill this gap.[10]
- **Cultural Associations:** Kurdish intellectuals and activists formed various cultural societies and clubs to advance these goals, organize events, and provide spaces for Kurdish cultural expression.[9]

Cultural nationalism often flourished in diaspora communities or under temporarily more tolerant (though frequently instrumental) regimes, such as the French Mandate in Syria, which became a haven for Kurdish intellectuals fleeing Turkey.[7] During periods of intense political and military repression, when overt political organizations were banned and armed struggle was untenable, cultural activism often provided a more resilient and continuous thread for the nationalist movement. It served as a vital space for maintaining and reinforcing Kurdish identity, fostering a sense of collective belonging, and transmitting nationalist ideals to new generations, thereby laying the groundwork for future political mobilization.

7. Conclusion: A Century of Struggle and Unresolved Aspirations

The history of Kurdish nationalism through the late 1970s is a narrative of an enduring and multifaceted quest for self-determination, played out against a backdrop of profound geopolitical shifts, persistent state resistance, and complex internal dynamics. From the early stirrings of national consciousness in the 19th-century Ottoman and Qajar empires to the diversified and often radicalized movements of the Cold War era, the core aspiration of *Kurdayetî*—the assertion of Kurdish nationhood and the demand for political rights, ranging from cultural recognition and autonomy to full statehood—remained a constant, albeit elusive, goal.[1]

Several patterns emerge from this century of struggle. The division of Kurdish-inhabited lands following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of modern nation-states in the Middle East became the foundational grievance, transforming Kurds into minorities within often hostile state structures.[2] This division fueled a persistent, though geographically fragmented, resistance. Kurdish nationalism evolved from early revolts led by traditional tribal or religious figures, often reacting to the erosion of local autonomies [5], to more modern,

ideologically diverse movements increasingly led by urban intellectuals, students, and political party structures.[9] These movements adopted a range of ideologies, from traditional nationalism to various strands of socialism and Marxism-Leninism, particularly from the 1960s onwards.[72]

A recurring cycle of mobilization, revolt, state suppression, and subsequent re-emergence characterized the Kurdish experience in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq.[2] States consistently responded to Kurdish aspirations with policies of assimilation (Turkification, Persianization, Arabization), denial of identity, and often brutal military repression.[2] This repression, however, frequently had the counterproductive effect of strengthening Kurdish resolve and radicalizing segments of the nationalist movement, ensuring its persistence.

The engagement of external powers was another constant, yet deeply ambivalent, feature. Regional and international actors frequently manipulated Kurdish movements for their own strategic advantage, offering conditional support that was often withdrawn when geopolitical interests shifted, leaving Kurdish groups vulnerable and fostering a legacy of betrayal.[33] This instrumentalization also exacerbated internal Kurdish factionalism, as different groups aligned with competing external patrons.[34] Internal divisions—stemming from ideological conflicts, leadership rivalries, tribal loyalties, and differing regional priorities—remained a significant and persistent challenge to pan-Kurdish unity and effectiveness throughout this period.[3]

The legacy of these historical events profoundly shaped contemporary Kurdish politics and the enduring nature of the "Kurdish Question." The unfulfilled promise of international recognition, epitomized by the Treaty of Sèvres and its swift abandonment at Lausanne, remains a potent symbol in Kurdish nationalist narratives.[9] Decades of state-sponsored violence, forced displacement, and cultural suppression have left deep collective traumas and have powerfully informed Kurdish political identity and demands for justice and self-rule.[2] The experiences of the Cold War, with its cynical manipulations by superpowers, engendered a lasting skepticism towards international interventions among many Kurds.

The history of Kurdish nationalism up to the late 1970s reveals a painful learning curve regarding the limitations of armed struggle against powerful, centralized states, particularly in the absence of sustained and reliable international support. It also highlighted the critical, yet largely unachieved, necessity of overcoming internal fragmentation to present a more unified front. Repeatedly, major revolts and attempts at state-building, from Sheikh Said's uprising to the Ararat and Mahabad Republics and the protracted wars in Iraqi Kurdistan, were ultimately defeated militarily or collapsed due to a combination of overwhelming state force, withdrawal of external backing, and internal weaknesses.[16]

Nevertheless, the very continuity of resistance, coupled with the development of distinct Kurdish political parties, cultural institutions, a modern literary language, and a vibrant press (even if often in exile or underground), solidified a modern Kurdish national consciousness that increasingly transcended purely tribal or localized identities.[7] This resilience ensured that, despite the formidable obstacles and repeated setbacks, the Kurdish quest for recognition, rights, and self-determination would remain a significant and unresolved issue in the Middle Eastern political landscape, a testament to the enduring power of an identity forged in shared experience and aspiration. The period culminating in the late 1970s saw the groundwork laid

for even more widespread and internationally prominent Kurdish movements in the decades that followed, including the rise of the PKK in Turkey and the eventual establishment of a de facto autonomous region in Iraqi Kurdistan.

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