

## Does Kurdish Nationalism Have a Navel?

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The origin of Kurdish nationalism is destined to create much controversy among many people who judge the question from the angle of legitimacy. However, questioning the origins and the genealogy of Kurdish nationalism should not be seen as an attempt to delegitimize it. It is, in fact, a critique of the imprecision or vagueness of nationalism in general. In this context, the present research seeks answers to two main questions. First, when did Kurdish nationalism emerge as a political movement? Second, what is the relationship between Kurdish nationalism and the “past”—in other words, what type of connection did Kurdish nationalism have with the “past” when it emerged? Let me immediately respond to these questions. First, this chapter proposes that Kurdish nationalism originated from the unstable political environment created by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. Second, Kurdish nationalism, like most nationalisms, did not necessarily have an organic link with previous times. These conclusions clearly contradict political positions suggesting that history has always been a battleground for ethnic groups to realize their self-government and that “nationalism” is the end point of political evolution in the teleological process. Nationalists clearly feel uncomfortable with the modernist position, assuming that the view that Kurdish nationalism is created and new

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would mean that it does not have credibility or legitimacy. Lest I be misunderstood, this chapter does not question the credibility of Kurdish nationalism. I do suggest, however, that the correct dating of Kurdish nationalism and the question of the link with the past have greater implications.

In order to provide a larger perspective for my arguments, I would first like to refer to a very stimulating debate on the origin of nationalism that took place on October 24, 1995, on the campus of Warwick University. The debaters on the panel were Anthony Smith and Ernest Gellner. Smith is a well-known critic of the modernist school. He is also the student of late Ernest Gellner, a modernist himself. Gellner is known for his stance not only against the primordialist school of nationalism but more significantly against the position that categorizes nationalism as a premodern concept. The issue discussed at the Warwick Debates is quite relevant to the argument of this chapter.

In the Warwick Debates the two scholars presented their views on the

origins of nationalism in a very concise yet eloquent way. In his opening remarks, Anthony Smith pointed out the heart of the issue under consideration: the relationship between nationalisms and the past. Before presenting his view, Smith summarized Gellner's general position on the subject:

[T]he nation is not only relatively recent; it is also the product of specifically modern conditions—those of early industrialism or its anticipations, social mobility, the need for mass literacy, public education and the like. It is the modern transition from spontaneous, non-literate “low” cultures to highly cultivated, literate and specialized “high” cultures that engenders nationalism and nations. (Smith 1996, p. 359)<sup>1</sup>

Acknowledging the validity of this statement, Smith responded by claiming that it tells only half the story. The connection with the past was the missing part. In order to demonstrate his point, Smith offered his definition of nationalism:

By “nationalism” I shall mean an *ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity and identity of a human population, some of whose members conceive it to constitute an actual or potential “nation.”* A “nation” in turn I shall define as *a named human*

*population sharing an historic territory, common myths and memories, a mass public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all members.* (Smith 1996, p. 359; emphasis in the original)

After this definition, Smith went into describing some modernists as being “materialists” and warned that this line of thinking should not lead us to categorize nationalism as imagined or fabricated. In fact, he suggested, “nations and nationalisms are also the products of preexisting traditions and heritages which have coalesced over the generations” (Smith 1996, p. 361). Hence Smith's main disagreement with the modernists comes from the claim that modernists disregard the role of the past.

Modern political nationalisms cannot be understood without reference to these earlier ethnic ties and memories, and, in some cases, to pre-modern ethnic identities and communities. I do not wish to assert that every modern nation must be founded on some antecedent ethnic ties, let alone a definite ethnic community; but many such nations have been and are based on these [preexisting] ties. (Smith 1996, p. 361)

Smith bases his claim on the link with the past on *ethnie*, a term that he introduced to modern scholarship. Smith claims that *ethnie* does not carry

ethnic or racial connotations; it refers only to dimensions such as a common myth of descent, a shared history, a collective name, and a distinctive shared culture. Hence nationalists are in fact “political archaeologists” trying to construct a nation by rediscovering and reinterpreting the past in order to reconstitute the community as a modern nation:

[The task of nationalists] is indeed selective—they forget as well as remember the past—but to succeed in their task they must meet certain criteria. Their interpretations must be consonant not only with the ideological demands of nationalism, but also scientific evidence, popular resonance and patterning of particular ethnohistories. (Smith 1995, p. 16)

Smith does not see the modern nation existing throughout history, yet he believes that the major ingredients that paved the way to modern nationalisms were present in history. In other words, perhaps the whole essence of the

nation was not present, but essential traits existed. Thus the task of nationalists is nothing but to assemble these fragmentary essences into modern nations. It is this position that emphasizes the elements existing in history and hence the link with the past that Ernest Gellner rejects.

In his response to his student Smith, Ernest Gellner clarified the disagreement:

[T]he dividing line between what I now call primordialists and modernists, where one side says that nations were there all the time or some of them were anyway, and that the past matters a great deal; and where the modernists like myself believe that the world was created round about the end of the eighteenth century, and nothing before that makes the slightest difference to the issues we face. (Gellner 1996, p. 366)

At this point, Gellner posed a significant question about whether nations were created at some point or rather evolved into what they are today. To elaborate on his position, he introduced a powerful analogy and asked: did Adam have a navel? The case in point is that Adam did not need a navel. “It’s perfectly possible to imagine a navel-less Adam,” he suggested, “because navels, once they were engendered by the original process by which they were engendered, perform no further function. I mean you could live navel-less and there is no problem” (Gellner 1996, p. 367). Other parts of Adam, however, such as his blood circulation or his food consumption or his breathing, had to be created as if they existed before, so that he could survive. Here Gellner hinted with his analogy that the existence of certain developed or-

ganic systems does not prove that Adam was not created at a certain time. For Adam to survive, they had to be created in “a misleading way” that may project the idea that they evolved to that stage.

Using the Adam analogy on nations to demonstrate the irrelevance of the past, Gellner stated:

[O]n the whole the ethnic, the cultural national community, which is such an important part of Anthony’s case, is rather like the navel. Some nations have it and some don’t and in any case it is inessential. What in a way Anthony is saying is that he is anti-creationist and we have this

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plethora of navels and they are essential, as he said, and this I think is the crux of the issue between him and me. (Gellner 1996, p. 367)

In other words, Gellner trivialized Smith’s term *ethnie* by comparing it to the navel, whose existence is not vital for the creation of a nation.

In this chapter I am more concerned with Gellner’s contention that some nations have navels and some do not and in any case having a navel (read as the link with the past) is inessential. This intellectual position raises more specific questions. Does Kurdish nationalism have a navel? Is it essential for Kurdish nationalism to have a navel? As I have argued elsewhere, my reading of Kurdish nationalism fits better with the modernist school, for I suggest that Kurdish nationalism was created at the end of World War I (Özoğlu 2004; see particularly chapter 4). At that stage it did not need a navel, for its relation with the past was “unnatural,” as I explain below.

A significant distinction must be made here to clarify my position. I claim that Kurdish identity and Kurdish nationalism are like two adopted brothers. They are related in the context of their adopted family, but they do not necessarily have a biological bond with each other. In other words, Kurdish identity and nationalism do not share the same genealogy. In this context, we can state with a degree of confidence that Kurdish nationalism did not have a navel but Kurdish identity or Kurdishness did indeed have one (see the discussion below). Kurdish identity has evolved in time into what it is today. So the link with the distant past in determining group identity exists. This link is not predetermined, however; on the contrary, its development to a certain direction is accidental, affected by external forces in the course of history.

Kurdish nationalism, in contrast, was created at a certain point in history that coincides with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. It was created based on the political realities of its time and on a blurry snapshot of Kurdish identity at that moment. As noted above, it did not have a navel. At the present, however, the political realities of the world make it almost mandatory that children of Kurdish nationalism imagine such a navel, without which Kurdish nationalism is conceived as illegitimate. Let me repeat lest my point be misunderstood. My attempt to demonstrate the createdness of Kurdish na-

### The Genealogy of Kurdish Identity

As noted above, a common mistake among those who emphasize the link between nationalism and the past is the confusion prevalent in distinguishing collective identity from nationalism.<sup>2</sup> Anthony Smith's *ethnie*, which emphasizes the role of the past, would fit better in the concept of group identity than nationalism. Critics may argue that the link with the past is a valid one because nationalism bases itself upon group identity. But I submit that nationalists most often ignore such an evolution or mutation, fearing that accepting this would potentially harm its legitimacy. Instead they attempt to "imagine" a group with a unique essence that persists throughout the ages. Nationalists often take an intentionally blurry snapshot of a group at a certain moment and claim the existence of this unique group and their struggle for self-determination persisting throughout history. What evolves in fact is not nationalism but group identity. At this point let me try to demonstrate the evolution of Kurdish identity.

My assumption in this chapter is that Kurdish identity is not rigid and has gone through several overlapping stages of evolution.<sup>3</sup> These stages are dialectical, dialogical, and monological in nature. I further suggest that in all these stages the overarching assumption is that Kurdish identity evolves in relation to an exterior force. Elsewhere I have examined the interrelation between Kurdish identity and surrounding strong states and Islam (Özoğlu 2004 and 2006). In what follows, I summarize my points regarding the Kurdish identity formation.

The dialectical interaction is a process in which local identities clash with outside forces and the synthesis is a step forward in the evolution of Kurdish identity. The interaction between Kurdish identity and the Ottoman Empire is a case in point. This Hegelian view can readily be demonstrated in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Kurdish/Ottoman (later Turkish) interactions. Substantial evidence suggests that as the clashes took place between the Kurds and the state, Kurdish identity reached a new level to accommodate larger groups, such as non-Muslim Kurdish speakers and groups such as the Zazas in Central Anatolia and the Lurs of Iran. This form of evolution, however, cannot be extrapolated to earlier periods.

For example, we can speak of a voluntary interaction between the Kurdish identity and external forces. This state is called the dialogical interaction and can be defined more as a communication than as a clash. In some cases

the difference between the dialogical and dialectical interaction is a matter of perception. Ottoman/Kurdish relations until the mid-nineteenth century, when the empire introduced more centralization policies, can be regarded as an example. During this time Kurdish principalities were mainly autonomous, and Kurdish identity was influenced by the empire's general perception of its Muslim subjects. As the members of the Muslim ruling elite, Kurdish leaders emphasized their religious identity that united them with the state based upon their linguistic background. It must be evident to the reader that I have avoided employing the term "ethnic" and preferred "linguistic." The main reason for this is that ethnicity was not a common denominator for the groups at the time. Even though today we retrospectively label human groups based on ethnicity, another highly elusive term, sufficient evidence demonstrates that prior to the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries ethnicity was not a group identity around which the members gathered in the Ottoman Empire.

In the formation and evolution of the group identity, another level exists that has been mostly ignored for a variety of reasons. I call this the monological process. When compared to the dialectical and dialogical, this process is very distinct. In this stage, external forces—the Ottoman Empire or Islam in the Kurdish case—impose a certain identity on the group, with minimal interaction. The term "Kurd" as a distinct group was introduced and defined, however imperfectly, by outsiders in earlier texts, which indicates the validity of this claim. Many scholars have argued that attempts to connect the present-day Kurds to ancient people of Mesopotamia (such as Medes or Kardû) lack substance and credibility. I have suggested that an examination of Kurdish identity should begin with historical records that speak of a group of people as the Kurds. We are not certain as to who introduced the term "Kurd" as a group identity. We know, however, that the earliest available record by a Kurd that talks about Kurds as a cohesive group comes from the sixteenth century. This book, titled *Şerefname*, was written by the Kurdish tribal leader Şerefhan (1990) and clearly shows a perception of Kurds as a distinct group. Although Şerefhan's understanding of "Kurd" does not entirely match what the term means today, it still is an invaluable source for the students of Kurdish identity and nationalism. It tells us what the term "Kurd" as a group identity meant to him. We can trace the evolution of a perception from this point onward.

The reader must be warned that the term “Kurd” was in circulation centuries before Şerefhan. The earliest reliable source referring to a group of people as the Kurds comes with the Arab invasion of the area in the seventh century. Arab travelers and geographers made use of the term as a group identity without any clear definition. In other words, the term “Kurd” was in circulation as a group identity 900 years prior to Şerefhan. But we have no evidence prior to the sixteenth century that Kurds saw themselves as a distinct group above the tribal level. This lack of evidence allows me to suggest that a group identity was first imagined and then imposed on them by outsiders. Kurds were imagined by outsiders as a distinct and cohesive social (not necessarily political) unit. I therefore suggest that at this earlier stage Kurdish identity stemmed from the monological process in which outsiders imposed their perception on the local groups. In time, this perception was adopted by those who were labeled as such.

In the long journey of Kurdish identity formation, dialectical, dialogical, and monological stages most often overlapped. The perception of who the Kurds were was constantly altered, modified, and mutated. Still, no matter how different the Kurdish identity today may be compared to that of the seventh, sixteenth, or eighteenth centuries, they are interconnected and the link with the past does exist. Can we say the same thing for Kurdish nationalism?

### The Genealogy of Kurdish Nationalism

One of the greatest challenges to tracing the genealogy of Kurdish nationalism is the lack of a universal definition for the concept of nationalism. The term no doubt provokes different meanings in different people’s minds. Nationalism, like most social terms, is very problematic. To date, no consensus exists among scholars as to what constitutes a nation and what defines nationalism. Hence serious scholars—although amazed at the effects of nationalism on the human imagination—are challenged by the ambiguous nature of it.

It should be noted that variable definitions of the term are also among the greatest assets of nationalism. This inadvertent flexibility provides nationalism with ideological compatibility. The term’s variant meanings make nationalism seem compatible even with contradictory ideologies such as socialism, religion, secessionism, imperialism, anticolonialism, and fascism. Such a high

degree of adaptability, unfortunately, does not allow a universal definition that both provides a scholarly ground for comparison and at the same time complies with indigenous variations.

The definition of Kurdish nationalism is not immune to the confusion stemming from the vague nature of the term “nationalism.” Like other nationalisms, Kurdish nationalism is extremely difficult to define because it registers different meanings in people’s minds. As hard as it is to offer a sat-

isfactory definition of Kurdish nationalism, however, I am obliged at least to offer the following working definition. “Kurdish nationalism” refers to an intellectual and political movement that is based mainly (though not entirely) upon two premises—the belief in a consistent Kurdish identity, which is rooted in ancient history; and the conviction of an unalienable right of self-determination in a historic Kurdish homeland or territory. It is important to repeat that this study recognizes Kurdish nationalism as a political movement, not as a claim by an individual for self-determination in a territory. This definition excludes historical evidence indicating the existence of Kurdish consciousness as a proof for nationalism. Let us look at some historical documents by the Kurds that can readily be confused with nationalism.

### The Nationalist Dimension of Ahmed-i Hani in the Seventeenth Century

The first example of such literature is the well-known epic *Mem-u Zin*, written by Ahmed-i Hani (Ehmede Xani, b. 1651), a Kurdish man of religion and poet. In his work, Ahmed-i Hani demonstrates a clear group consciousness when he distinguishes the Kurds from Arabs, Turks, and Iranians. In a section titled “Derde Me” (Our Ills) in *Mem-u Zin*, which was completed in 1695, he writes:

If only there were harmony among us, If  
we were to obey a single one of us, He  
would reduce to vassalage  
Turks, Arabs and Persians, all of them.  
We would perfect our religion, our state,  
and would educate ourselves in learning and wisdom.  
(van Bruinessen 1992, p. 267)

Look, from the Arabs to the Georgians,  
The Kurds have become like towers.  
The Turks and Persians are surrounded by them.  
The Kurds are on all four corners.  
Both sides have made the Kurdish people  
Targets for the arrows of fate.  
They are said to be keys to the borders,  
Each tribe forming a formidable bulwark.  
Whenever the Ottoman Sea [Ottomans] and Tajik Sea [Persians]  
Flow out and agitate,  
The Kurds get soaked in blood,  
Separating them [the Turks and Persians] like an isthmus.  
(Hassanpour 1992, p. 53)

Inspired by the epic *Meme Alan*, transmitted orally in the region, Ahmed-i Hani's epic is in the form of a love story between Mem and Zin, with the exception of the section mentioned above. By virtue of this section and being written in the Kurmanci dialect of Kurdish, Ahmed-i Hani's *Mem-u Zin* is regarded as the "national epic of the Kurds" by present-day Kurdish nationalists. This section does treat the Kurds as a tribal confederation and, more importantly, seeks self-rule for them.

The section "Our Wills" contains many references to the Kurds. Ahmed-i Hani seems to use "Kurd" and "al-Akrad" (its Arabic plural) interchangeably with "Kurmanci," a sublinguistic group in Kurdish society. This clearly testifies that he regarded the Kurmanci speakers as Kurds; yet it is not very clear whether he regarded other groups such as the Zazas, Lurs, or Kelhurs as Kurds. Unlike the *Şerefname*, *Mem-u Zin* does not mention any of the other subgroups or categorize them as Kurds. Nor does Ahmed-i Hani explicitly define "Kurdistan." His account rather implicitly describes it as a region lying in the middle of Persian (Ajam), Ottoman (Rum), Arab, and Georgian (Gürcü) lands (Ahmed-i Hani 1975, p. 56). Did the word "Kurd" mean only the Kurmanci speakers for Ahmed-i Hani, living among the above-mentioned groups? This was indisputably not the understanding of the Kurds in the twentieth century, which was inclusive. But no available information indicates that Ahmed-i Hani's definition incorporated other linguistic groups within the umbrella of the Kurds. Hence his perception of the

Kurdish society may not have coincided with that of the twentieth-century writers.

The quantity of surviving copies makes it clear that *Mem-u Zin* was read widely in Kurdistan in later times and that manuscripts were copied by local religious leaders (imams and mullahs of Kurmanci origin) and by Sufi *tariqas* (van Bruinessen 1992, p. 267). We simply have no information, however, on how many people read Ahmed-i Hani's version of the epic and what messages they received from it. *Mem-u Zin* was written in verse, which made it easier to memorize, and was undoubtedly a very popular story. But it is unclear whether *Mem-u Zin's* continuing popularity stems from its love story or from its protest against Persian and Ottoman misrule. What is indisputable is that in the twentieth century the epic took pride of place in Kurdish literature as the first manifestation of Kurdish nationalism.

Nonetheless, it is misleading to label *Mem-u Zin* as nationalist literature. For one thing, it is highly unlikely that Ahmed-i Hani sought a nation-state for the Kurds as we recognize them today. His complaints about the Safavid or Ottoman rule and his desire for a Kurdish (Kurmanci) king do not necessarily prove that Kurdish nationalism as a political movement existed in the seventeenth century. Our knowledge is too incomplete to make such a claim

by merely interpreting Ahmed-i Hani's resentment of the Ottoman and Persian rule. In fact, only after the penetration of the Western concept of nationalism into the Kurdish community early in the twentieth century did *Mem-u Zin* become a monument of nationalist literature for the Kurds and mobilize them politically. In the seventeenth century Ahmed-i Hani possibly concerned himself only with the Kurmanci speakers; hence his perception of the Kurds consisted mainly of the tribal Kurmancis. Consequently, it is not the epic but the political and the intellectual environment of the twentieth century that *retrospectively* qualified this piece of literature as nationalist. Therefore it is safe to state that the genealogy of Kurdish nationalism does not go as far back as the seventeenth century.

### Bedirhan Pasha and His Revolt of 1847

Another significant character in the discussions on the origin of Kurdish nationalism is Bedirhan Pasha (1802/3–1869/70), who became the ruler of Botan in 1835 and controlled this strong emirate in the first half of the

nineteenth century. His revolt of 1847 is considered nationalist by many Kurds.

A loyal subject until 1842, Bedirhan seemed very agitated by the new Ottoman administrative policies in the following five years and revolted against the Ottoman state in the summer of 1847.<sup>4</sup> Provoked by the centralization policies of the empire in the *Tanzimat* period, this revolt caused so much chaos in the region that when it was suppressed on July 29, 1847, a new medal (the Medal of Kurdistan) was issued to those who had fought against Bedirhan.

As noted above, the significance of Bedirhan and his revolt comes from later Kurdish claims that it was a nationalist uprising. But Nazmi Sevgen, in a study on the Bedirhan family, has uncovered several Ottoman documents to demonstrate that this revolt was not nationalistic. The Ottoman archives indicate that Bedirhan's revolt did not stem from nationalism in any real sense of the term but from a new administrative system enforced by the Ottoman central government aimed at dividing Bedirhan's land and weakening his authority. According to the new system, Botan (the emirate's core territory) remained in the Diyarbakır province, while Cizre (a subdistrict) was attached to Mosul, whose governor, Mehmet Pasha, was at odds with Bedirhan. A letter dated December 10, 1842, from the governor of Diyarbakır, Vecihi Pasha, to Bedirhan demonstrates this arrangement:

We have heard that there exists disharmony and quarrelsomeness between you and the governor of Mosul, Mehmet Pasha, stemming from

the attachment of Cizre district to Mosul, and that you are full of anxiety [*vesvese*]. . . . As long as you serve and stay loyal to the Ottoman state, Mehmet Pasha cannot do you harm. The matter was referred to Istanbul and to the governor of Mosul, Mehmet Pasha. Hence you should be free from such anxiety. (Sevgen 1982, pp. 72–73)<sup>5</sup>

As this document indicates, Bedirhan was agitated at the attempt to divide his emirate administratively. Similar letters in the Ottoman archives conclusively demonstrate that Bedirhan revolted to keep his emirate administratively intact. His revolt does not have any expressed nationalistic aim. Therefore it should not be referred to as the origin of Kurdish nationalism.

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Prior to 1847 Bedirhan was loyal to the Ottomans and helped local governors to govern the Kurdish land. This made him a well-known and respected figure in the Ottoman provincial administrative structure. Thus it should not be very surprising that even after his revolt was suppressed Bedirhan was not condemned to death but placed on the Ottoman payroll. Immediately after the revolt, Bedirhan was sent to Istanbul, where he arrived on September 12, 1847, and died in Damascus, Syria, in 1869–70.

### The Sayyid Ubeydullah Revolt of 1880–81

The Sayyid Ubeydullah revolt is another event that has been regarded as the first Kurdish nationalist movement. Therefore we need to examine the nationalistic dimensions of this revolt. Ubeydullah was a member of the Şemdinan family, which proved to be one of the most influential and politically active Kurdish families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although it only became visible to the European powers in the second half of the 1880s, this family had enjoyed high prestige (particularly in the Hakkari region) due to its religious genealogy prior to the nineteenth century. Its *silsila* (spiritual genealogy) is that of the Khalidiyya branch of the Naqshbandi *tariqa*, and the family traces its origin back to Abd al-Qadir Gilani, a twelfth-century Baghdadi mystic and the founder of the Qadiri order. The ancestry of the Şemdinans extends to the Prophet himself through his daughter Fatima. With such a pedigree, the Şemdinans were spiritual leaders of local communities and advisors of Kurdish emirs, which apparently generated the necessary income to be a great land-owning family.

The Şemdinans emerged as political and military leaders of the Kurds in the second half of the nineteenth century and controlled a vast region in southeast Anatolia and northwest Iran. The rise of the Şemdinan family headed by Sayyid Ubeydullah in the 1870s and 1880s marks an important era in which political power changed hands from tribal leaders to the Naqshbandi Şemdinan family. Until this time, the Sufi sheikhs generally had

functioned under tribal leaders as spiritual advisors. Although Naqshbandi sheikhs had personal charisma and enjoyed intertribal influence, the political history of the region confirms that in addition to their religious duties they became political or military leaders with the rise of the Şemdinan family. Ubeydullah seems to be one of the first examples of such leadership.

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Several reasons seem to explain the rise of Ubeydullah. The most important is the power vacuum created by the destruction of Kurdish tribal leadership in the nineteenth century. Desperate for income to compete with the European powers, Sultan Mahmut II (1808–39) initiated a centralizing policy to collect taxes directly from the areas controlled by local rulers. The Kurdish leadership in Kurdistan consisted mainly of tribal chiefs who ruled over vast areas while paying only lip service to Istanbul. The most notable of these tribal confederacies in the Ottoman Empire were the Botan, Baban, and Hakkari, who competed with one another. After a series of military expeditions, the Ottoman state dismantled the authority of these powerful tribes in the first half of the nineteenth century. As mentioned above, the Bedirhan family was removed from power in the last semi-independent emirate, Botan, in 1847. From this time until the outbreak of the Turco-Russian war of 1877–78, there is no record of a powerful Kurdish leader in the region. In the aftermath of this brutal war, which paralyzed the area, Sayyid Ubeydullah of Şemdinan filled the political and military power vacuum and assumed Kurdish leadership not only in most of Ottoman Kurdistan but also in Iran.

Primary sources indicate the power of Sayyid Ubeydullah in 1880, when he led an uprising against Qajar Persia and the Ottoman Empire. Seemingly concerned with the well-being of the Christian (mainly Armenian and Nestorian) population in the region, Britain monitored the uprising closely (*Parliamentary Papers* 1881, 5:1–82). British correspondence confirms that Ubeydullah was the paramount chief of the Kurds in 1880, and his political control extended over a vast region that was formerly controlled by the Botan, Bahdinan, Hakkari, and Ardalan confederacies.

It seems that the main reason for the revolt was the promise made to Armenians after the signing of the Treaty of Berlin on July 13, 1878, by the Ottoman Empire. The treaty stipulated that the Sublime Porte would undertake all necessary steps to protect Armenians against the Circassians and the Kurds (article 61). To show his dissatisfaction with the treaty, in July 1880 Ubeydullah warned Tosun Pasha, the *mutasarrıf* (governor of a subdivision) of Başkale: “What is this I hear, that the Armenians are going to have an independent state in Van, and that the Nestorians are going to hoist the British flag and declare themselves British subjects? I will never permit it, even if I have to arm the women” (*Parliamentary Papers* 1881, 5:7).<sup>6</sup>

Thus Wadie Jwaideh (1960, p. 231), the author of a comprehensive study on the Kurds, is correct when he states that “fear of the Armenian ascendancy in Kurdistan appears to have been one of the most powerful reasons behind [Ubeydullah’s] attempt to unite the Kurds” and lead them to revolt. It should be added, however, that Ubeydullah also publicly presented his movement as an attempt to restore law and order in the region and sought the support of the Christians against the Persian and Ottoman states. Ubeydullah complained that these two states had done nothing to stop the aggression of rival Kurdish tribes: the Shekak of Persia and the Herki of the Ottoman Empire. To achieve this aim, for a short time local Christians (Nestorians) provided him with military support (*Parliamentary Papers* 1881, 5:74).<sup>7</sup>

Hoping to enforce law and order in the area where he had ambitions to rule and where the Armenians were receiving support for self-rule from the British and French, Ubeydullah invaded the northwestern territories of the Qajar state in September 1880, expanding his sphere of control in the Persian territories. But Ubeydullah’s militia, consisting mainly of Kurdish tribesmen, was easily defeated by the Qajars. Upon his return to the Ottoman territories, Ubeydullah surrendered to the Ottoman authorities in early 1881. They exiled him to Istanbul and then to Hijaz, where he died in 1883.

The Ubeydullah revolt is important not only because it demonstrates the emergence of new political leadership in Kurdistan but, more importantly, because some students of Kurdish nationalism identify this revolt as the origin of the Kurdish nationalist struggle. They say this because the sheikh had demanded a Kurdish state (independent or autonomous) governed by himself. British documents seem to attest that Ubeydullah from time to time entertained the idea of separation from the Ottoman and Persian empires. Ronald Thomson, a British officer in Tehran, wrote in a letter in October 1881:

The Sheikh ... states that he and all the Kurdish Chiefs are now agreed as to necessity of establishing *a united Kurdistan* [emphasis added] in order that they may be in a position to manage their own affairs without the interference of either Turkish or Persian authorities. ... There seems to be no doubt from ... the proclamations and correspondence which [Ubeydullah] has lately sent to various Kurdish Chiefs along the lines of the Persian border that his design is to detach the entire

Kurdish population from their allegiance to Turkey and Persia and to establish under his own authority a separate autonomous Principality. (*Parliamentary Papers* 1881, 5:45)<sup>8</sup>

The most convincing evidence of Ubeydullah's "nationalist" aim comes from a letter that he himself supposedly wrote. In a letter to Dr. Cochran, an American missionary in the Hakkari region, Sayyid Ubeydullah stated:

The Kurdish nation, consisting of more than 500,000 families, is a people apart. Their religion is different [from that of others], and their laws and customs distinct. . . . We are also a nation apart. We want our affairs to be in our hands, so that in the punishment of our own offenders we may be strong and independent, and have privileges like other nations. . . . This is our object [for the revolt]. . . . Otherwise the whole of Kurdistan will take the matter into their own hands, as they are unable to put up with these continual evil deeds, and the oppression, which they suffer at the hands of the [Persian and Ottoman] governments. (*Parliamentary Papers* 1881, 5:47–48)<sup>9</sup>

The question of the intended meaning of the phrase "Kurdish nation" immediately arises. Unfortunately, we do not know what word the sheikh used that was rendered as "nation" by the translators or possibly by Cochran himself. It is not only possible but also probable that Ubeydullah, a Naqshbandi sheikh, did not know the explosive meaning of the word "nation" or at least that the word did not mean the same thing to him that it did to Cochran. Therefore caution should be exercised in drawing any conclusions about the nationalist intention of Ubeydullah based on this text.

Relying on the aforementioned letter to demonstrate the secessionist fervor of Ubeydullah, some scholars state that Ubeydullah's statement "certainly leaves no doubt as to his strong nationalist sentiment" (Jwaideh 1960, p. 227). But other primary sources contain confusing, if not contradictory, evidence about the nature of Ubeydullah's secessionist aim. A good example of this can be found in a letter written by Major Henry Trotter, the British consul-general in Erzurum, in October 1880: "I believe the Sheikh to be more or less personally loyal to the Sultan; and he would be ready to submit to his authority and pay him tribute as long as he could get rid of the

Ottoman officials, and be looked at *de lege* as well as *de facto* as the ruling Chief of Kurdistan" (*Parliamentary Papers* 1881, 5:17).<sup>10</sup> As demonstrated in this excerpt, primary sources do not consistently testify that Sayyid Ubeydullah's movement was secessionist. Was it even nationalist? Ubeydullah entertained the idea of an independent principality, yet he was ready to settle for the recognition of his authority in Kurdistan within the Ottoman state. He

wanted to be the ruler of a principality similar to those of the earlier Kurdish emirates but greater in its territory to match his influence in the region. Ubeydullah's aim to rule a Kurdish principality similar to that of Bedirhan is evident in an earlier British report (July 11, 1880) to Henry Trotter from Emilius Clayton, the vice-consul of Van: "The Sheikh [Ubeydullah] was going to send his son to Constantinople with the following proposal. He will point out the large sum paid to the Sultan by Beder Khan Bey, when semi-independent, and will offer to pay a still larger sum if his authority over Kurdistan is recognized, and his rule is not interfered with" (*Parliamentary Papers* 1881, 5:17, p. 7).<sup>11</sup>

Although Sayyid Ubeydullah wanted to be the ruler of Greater Kurdistan and the present scholarship retrospectively labels him a nationalist, it seems very unlikely that the participants (who at one point included some Nestorian Christians) in his revolt were motivated by nationalist designs. This revolt can simply be seen as Sayyid Ubeydullah's demand for greater control in the region; however, it undoubtedly provided the Kurdish nationalist movements in the twentieth century with the symbol for a struggle against a dominant state.

The Ubeydullah revolt of 1880–81 seems more like an intertribal revolt than a national one. With his religious appeal as a Naqshbandi sheikh, Sayyid Ubeydullah's authority transcended the tribal boundaries. Either directly or through his *khalifas* (deputies), he spread his influence over a vast area where the Kurds were divided by their tribal loyalties but united by their respect to Sayyid Ubeydullah. When Sayyid Ubeydullah called for an uprising in 1880, he thus enjoyed remarkable support from the members of the local tribes and was able to exercise political authority over a large territory that included formally powerful Kurdish emirates.

These Kurdish revolts resulted in the exile of Kurdish leaders to Istanbul, where Kurdish notable families interacted with one another with much greater frequency than before. The cultural, political, and intellectual

atmosphere of the Ottoman Empire that arose with the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 also provided Kurdish notables of Istanbul with a rare occasion to establish cultural and later political organizations that gave birth to Kurdish nationalism.

From the declaration of the Second Constitutional Period of 1908 to the end of World War I in 1918, the Kurds formed several societies, a majority of which stopped short of making political demands. They could not go beyond functioning essentially as cultural clubs for the Kurdish nobility. Therefore, although these pre-1918 Kurdish societies were the prime example of the Kurdish cultural efflorescence, they should not be seen as nationalist orga-

nizations. Political organizations that pursued an openly nationalist agenda emerged only at the end of World War I.

### From *kttc* to *ktc*: The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism

These post–World War I organizations followed a distinct nationalist program and called for Kurdish self-determination. To highlight this ideological shift, this section discusses two significant Kurdish societies representing the cultural and political Kurdish organizations. The Kurdish organization *Kürdistan Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (Society for Mutual Aid and Progress of Kurdistan, *KTTC*) emerged in 1908. This organization was governed by the children of Ubeydullah and Bedirhan and was based in Istanbul. Although it was Kurdish, the *KTTC* was not nationalist, as clearly indicated in its constitution:

A beneficial society [*cemiyet-i hayriye*] by the name of *Kürdistan Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti* has been established to consolidate Kurdish ties [*revabıt*] with [the Ottoman state] while protecting the Constitution [*Meşrutiyet*] as the only way for progress and explaining to those Kurds who are not aware of the virtues of the Constitution [*Kanun-u Esası*] that it is responsible for the happiness of the people and also compatible with the great rules of Islam. [It shall] protect the high esteem [*mübbecele*] of being an Ottoman and strengthen the relations with the Armenian, Nasturi, and other citizens of the Ottoman Empire. [It shall also seek] solutions to the problems among the tribes and confederacies [*kabail ve aşair*] by uniting them [and it shall]

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encourage commerce, agriculture, and education. (*Kürdistan Terakki ve Teavün Cemiyeti Nizamnamesi* n.d.)<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, this was very carefully worded to reiterate the position of the Kurds as an inseparable part of the Ottoman Empire; the Kurds, it implied, did not pursue secessionist or even autonomist policies. This passage may also indicate, however, that by desiring unification of the Kurdish tribes the *KTTC* wanted to represent Kurds at large in Istanbul; hence it wished to obtain more political leverage from the government. As the Ottoman Empire entered World War I and its demise became imminent, this Kurdish society was replaced by another: the *Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti* (Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan, *KTC*). The most significant aspect of the *KTC* was that it followed a distinct nationalist line and was involved in political activities for Kurdish self-determination. Another telling aspect of the formation of the *KTC* is that its leadership consisted almost entirely of members of the *KTTC*. Let us examine this first Kurdish nationalist organization in more detail.

The Mudros Armistice, signed on October 30, 1918, between the Ottoman Empire and the victorious Allied powers, was a death sentence for the empire. The elite group in the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) escaped from the empire, but secondary members of the party were arrested and exiled to Malta. The empire was in complete disarray. Meanwhile, Woodrow Wilson declared his Fourteen Points, which recommended political self-determination for all ethnic minorities.

It is against this background that the KTC was established on December 17, 1918, approximately one and a half months after the Mudros Armistice. The founders of the KTC were the same Kurdish notables prominent in the earlier Kurdish organizations.

The constitution of the KTC states that the purpose of the society is to ensure the general well-being of the Kurds (article 1).<sup>13</sup> Article 4 states that the responsibility of the administration (*beyet-i istisare*) is to work toward the advancement of Kurdistan and the Kurdish people (*Kürt kavmi*). Contrary to the KTTTC's constitution, the political position of the KTC in the Ottoman Empire is left unclear. We do not know if this ambiguity was meant to disguise its nationalist aim or if the society originally did not develop a clear nationalist program. The KTC leaders chose to establish the society legally

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and to function within the Ottoman context, which might suggest the latter, but it is impossible to know because of the lack of information. Soon, however, the KTC was actively involved in creating a form of Kurdish identity not as part of Ottoman identity but separate from it.

If its constitution does not state that the KTC is a Kurdish nationalist organization, its subsequent activities and publications definitely attest to this. The best evidence comes from the newspaper *Jin*, which published many articles that were unmistakably nationalist propaganda. For example, in one article Siverekli Hilmi addresses Kurdish youth: "The time of following others is past. . . . Work only for your own people. Do not forget that we have a language of our own, however neglected, and a rich history. Here you have a formula for independence: action and initiative" (Bozarslan 1988, vol. 2, p. 401).

In addition, the political activities of the KTC members confirm that the KTC sought international assistance for its nationalist designs. For example, on August 4, 1919, the executive committee of the KTC visited the American, French, and British representatives in Istanbul to explain Kurdish nationalist aspirations in the empire. Zinar Silopi (Kadri Cemilpaşa) states:

The KTC leaders visited American, British, and French representatives in Istanbul and argued for the national rights of the Kurdish people. In a

meeting with the American representative, Sayyid Abdulkadir, Emin Ali Bedirhan, Said Nursi, and Dr. Mehmet Bey pointed out the boundaries of Kurdistan on the map and asked for alliance on the sea. Upon the reply of the American representative indicating the U.S. intention to create an independent Armenia at the expense of land called Kurdistan, Said Nursi responded, "If Kurdistan had a seacoast, you would destroy it with your naval power; but you cannot enforce such a decision in the mountains of Kurdistan." (Silopi 1991, p. 57)

The threat of an independent Armenian state in Kurdistan seemed to validate the KTC activities in the eyes of the Ottoman government, because the Kurds had always been seen as a balancing power in the region against any Armenian threat to the empire's territorial integrity. Moreover, until 1919 the Ottoman governments were not terribly bothered by Kurdish political activities. The Damat Ferit Pasha government only became concerned about the

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nationalist propaganda of the KTC when the Kurdish representatives sought international support for a Kurdish state in 1919. On July 10, 1919, the representatives of the Ottoman government—Avni Pasha, the minister of the Marine Department; Haydar Efendi, a former Şeyh-ül-İslam (chief juriconsult); and Ahmet Abuk Pasha, a former minister of war—met with the KTC members: Sayyid Abdulkadir, Emin Ali Bedirhan, Mevlanzade Rifat, Captain Emin, and Colonel Avni Bey. British intelligence was able to obtain information regarding the content of the meeting. A British report dated July 21, 1919, states that, when asked to explain the KTC's meeting with the British without the permission of the government, Mevlanzade Rifat replied:

[A]ccording to the Wilsonian principles every nationality had the right to work for their own welfare and... the Kurds were convinced that the only power which could assure them freedom and security was Great Britain. They had therefore considered it desirable to approach the British Authorities. I asked how it could be possible for the Turkish Government to grant any form of autonomy to the Kurds, seeing that the Turks themselves were not sure of their own future. (British Foreign Office 1985, p. 696)<sup>14</sup>

Notably, this document hints that the Istanbul government entertained the idea of granting autonomy to the Kurds. Whether the Ottoman government was serious about this or only trying to ensure the loyalty of the Kurds is unknown. But we do know that the KTC was overtly seeking independence or at least autonomy in 1919, encouraged by the Wilsonian principles. Scores of articles and editorials published in *Jin* ask for independence or autonomy (Göldaş 1991, pp. 237–89). Therefore, unlike the previous Kurdish

organizations, we can justifiably categorize the KTC as the first nationalist organization.

In search of the origin of Kurdish nationalist movements, so far we have examined Kurdish uprisings and literature produced by the Kurds. The conclusion is obvious: Kurdish revolts prior to World War I did not have any express nationalistic design. Among the literature produced by the Kurds, Ahmed-i Hani's position for self-rule comes closest to the modern ideology of nationalism. Ahmed-i Hani cannot be considered the father of Kurdish nationalism, however, for his understanding of the Kurds does not overlap with

that of the present. His call for a Kurmanji king to protect the Kurmanjis against Ottoman and Persian misrule lacks the necessary ingredients of a nationalist movement. It should be noted that *Mem-u Zin* fell far short of creating a political movement. Ottoman and British archival documents indicate that nineteenth-century Kurdish uprisings were motivated by the desire of local Kurdish notables to recover or expand their control of the land.

After 1908 the Kurds, along with other communities in the Ottoman Empire, enjoyed a liberal political environment, but this liberal period did not last long. After the Balkan Wars of 1912–13 the CUP leadership that ran the empire single-handedly with little or no regard for political opposition reversed the multiethnic liberalization process and put an emphasis on the Turkish elements of the Ottoman Empire. Even in this period we do not see any express desire for Kurdish self-determination. Kurdish organizations chose to operate within the Ottoman system and preserved their decentralist/Ottomanist identity while celebrating their own communal one until the emergence of the KTC. Therefore I suggest that Kurdish nationalism originates at the end of World War I with the formation of the KTC.

When the KTC initiated a nationalist agenda, it propagated its ideology based upon a Kurdish identity that was specific to the realities of the post-World War I environment. Corresponding with the strategic map of Kurdistan, this understanding of Kurdish identity was much more inclusive. The Lurs of Iran, the Zazas, and even the non-Muslim Kurdish-speaking population were included in the new Kurdish identity. It was this snapshot of Kurdish identity that became the basis for Kurdish nationalism. In the service of promoting it, Kurdish leaders also tried to give historical depth to the Kurdish struggle by selectively using the prior Kurdish literature and uprisings. In reality, however, the nationalist link with the past was engineered.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined several issues concerning the origin and the genealogy of Kurdish nationalism. The first argument concerns timing: when

did Kurdish nationalism emerge? This research has suggested that we should exercise caution in labeling Kurdish movements prior to World War I as nationalist. I demonstrated here that Kurdish nationalism as a political movement originates from the end of World War I.

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I further suggest that Kurdish militant and intellectual movements prior to World War I should not even be seen as “Kurdish protonationalism.” This might be rather misleading, if it assumes that these militant and intellectual movements were destined to evolve into full-fledged nationalisms. The available evidence is just too inconclusive to support this claim. There is no evidence to prove that Kurdish nationalism would have materialized if the Ottoman Empire had survived World War I. This also applies to most other nationalisms that emerged at the end of the Ottoman Empire. Surely, Turkish and to some extent Arab nationalisms were responses to the crumbling empire. Their success in creating nation-states, I suggest, was not the inevitable and natural order of political evolution; nor is nationalism the “end of history,” if I may borrow the expression of Francis Fukuyama (1993).

The other argument dealt with the createdness of Kurdish nationalism. This chapter has contended that Kurdish nationalism was not the result of an evolutionary process; it was created at a certain time in history, at the end of World War I. On a theoretical level, I have argued against Anthony Smith’s point that nationalisms are based upon preexisting elements and against his emphasis on nationalism’s link with the past. Although Smith’s argument for the *ethnie* certainly has merit for the formation of identity, we must be careful in extrapolating it to nationalism. True, most nationalisms base themselves upon perceived ethnic identities; however, the perception of identity is fixed at the time it is created. In other words, nationalists utilize a selective group identity, which is most responsive to the realities of their time. In many cases nationalists do not entirely acknowledge the evolving (or constructed but real) nature of the group identity. For Kurdish nationalists, Kurdish identity possesses a unique essence. Although they do not (in fact cannot) deny the shifting nature of Kurdish identity, they ignore this very point on purpose.

Elsewhere I have argued that Kurdish nationalism was created by a cadre of Kurdish notables consisting of the children of the previous generation of Kurdish religious and tribal elite (Özoğlu 2004). They were based in Istanbul and were heavily influenced by the projects of Arab and Turkish nationalists. When the collapse of the Ottoman Empire became imminent, they felt obligated to subscribe to the idea of nationalism as the Arabs and the Turks did earlier. No doubt they utilized the past in the service of creating a nationalist discourse, a common practice for all nationalists; and like all other nationalists, they were highly selective. “Collective forgetting” more than the

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shared memory was the main mode utilized. As mentioned above, the link with the past was engineered, not discovered. For this reason, when Kurdish nationalism was created, a navel was painted in to make it look natural.

On the practical level, we must understand the nationalists' need to establish a link with the distant past. In order to recruit followers for the nationalist ideology and to claim legitimacy, nationalists feel obligated to present their case as a natural flow of history. Therefore I take issue with Gellner: although such a link with the past is imaginary, it is significant and necessary to imagine it in order to claim credibility and attract a following to create a nation-state.