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Thinking Theoretically about the Kurds

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ABSTRACT: *Thinking theoretically about three important and recent events affecting the Kurds can help us to understand better their political experiences.¹ These events include (1) The breakdown of the Turkish Government-Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) cease-fire in July 2015; (2) the failure of the advisory referendum on independence that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq held on September 25, 2017; and (3) the Turkish military incursion into northeastern Syria (Rojava or Syrian Kurdistan) in October 2019. I first examine five different theories of international relations as well as the concept of levels of analysis and theories of nationalism. In doing so, I refer intermittently to these three important recent events concerning the Kurds and then describe them more fully to illustrate how thinking theoretically can help explain what happened and why.*

KEY WORDS: *Constructivism; Feminism; Kurds; Liberalism; Marxism; Nationalism; Realism; Theory; Turkey*

Theory in international relations is a set of precepts or propositions that seek to describe, explain, and even modestly predict concepts and events.² The precept believed to be informing us is the explanatory variable, while the events being analyzed and explained are the dependent variables. To assess the strength of a theory's capacity to explain events, the researcher creates hypotheses to test the theory's accuracy. Good theories are generalizable and powerful. The former means that the theory purportedly works in different places and at varying times, while the latter means that the theory actually does do so. In this section, I offer five different theories scholars of international relations use to try to make sense of the millions of facts that confront them. Each theory has a distinct narrative and academic pedigree, but all can be marshalled to describe, explain, and even modestly predict what has, is, and even might occur. Scholars of international relations usually use theory to clarify broad events such as war, peace, cooperation, economic relations, efforts to create international law

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¹ For background to the Kurdish issue, see David McDowall (2004) *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd edn. (New York: I.B. Tauris). For a more recent analysis, see Michael M. Gunter (2019) *The Kurds: A Divided Nation in Search of a State*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers).

² For background, see Karen A. Mingst, Heather Elko McKibben & Ivan M. Arreguin-Toft (2019) *Essentials of International Relations*, 8th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), pp. 5–6, and 68–104. In addition, for background on various methodological and theoretical approaches to Kurdish studies, see Bahar Baser, Mari Toivanen, Begum Zorlu & Yasin Duman (eds) (2019) *Methodological Approaches in Kurdish Studies: Theoretical and Practical Insights from the Field* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books).

and organizations, and to protect the environment, human rights and security, among others. However, in this article I seek to show how theory also can be used more narrowly to describe and explain the Kurdish narrative. First, I will commence with the oldest and probably still most popular Realist (Power) perspective.

Realism

The realist or power theory of international relations explains what happens as the result of the perpetual struggle for power in the anarchic international system. Each state must provide for its own security. Therefore, all states seek to maximize their power and define their national interests in terms of a struggle for power.³ This, of course, is an ancient precept known to Thucydides, the Chinese Legalists, Kautilya, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, among many others. In his famous Melian dialogue that took place during the Peloponnesian Wars (431–404 BCE) and which has relevance to the present Kurdish situation as explained by the realist theory, the more powerful Athenians told the weaker Melians: ‘The powerful exact what they can and the weak grant what they must.’⁴ In a historical Kurdish analogy to this celebrated realist principle, the eminent Kurdish poet Ahmed Khani (1650–1707), explaining in his Kurdish national epic *Mem u Zin* why the Kurds seemed to be perpetual victims, observed: ‘These seas of the Turks and the Tajik [Persians], Whenever they move or stir, The Kurds become stained with blood.’⁵ More recently, Henry Kissinger illustrated the same realist rationale, when he justified terminating US aid to the Iraqi Kurds fighting against Iraq in 1975 by cynically explaining, ‘Covert action should not be confused with missionary work.’⁶ Thus, realists would explain the continuing Kurdish predicament by the struggle for power between them and the neighboring states and nations that surround them. They argue that independence for the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq would threaten the existence of Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Rojava, the predominantly Kurdish-populated region of northern Syria, represented a similar threat, while the brief peace between Turkey and that country’s Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) was an illusion in the Kurds’ continuing struggle for power in eastern Turkey.

Liberalism

In contrast to realism, the theory of liberalism sees humans and states as basically good, rational, and capable of cooperation. Issues of concern go beyond mere trepidation regarding security and survival to involve civil society, education, and justice.

³ Hans J. Morgenthau (1978) *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed, rev. (New York: Knopf) generally is recognized as the leading exponent of the modern, post-World War II realist school.

⁴ Thucydides (1963) *The Peloponnesian Wars*, Benjamin Jowett (tran.), revised and abridged with an introduction by P. A. Brunt (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., for Twayne Publishers), p. 181. Similarly, see Rupert Emerson (1971), who observed that “self-determination has from time to time been referred to as the right of the winner in a Darwinian conflict for survival,” In “Self-Determination,” *American Journal of International Law*, LXV, pp. 459–474, quote at p. 474

⁵ Ahmed Khani (2008) *Mem and Zin*, tran. by Salah Saadalla (Istanbul: Avesta), p. 31.

⁶ Cited in “The CIA Report the President Doesn’t Want You to Read” (1976), *The Village Voice*, February 16, pp. 85 and 87–88.

Thus, in contrast to realism, liberal theory maintains that injustice, aggression and war are not inevitable but can be diminished or even eliminated by institutional reforms and joint actions. Among many others, liberalism's origins stem from such 18th century enlightenment philosophers as Baron Montesquieu (1689–1755), who believed that the separation of powers would prevent tyranny and argued that education could overcome war; and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who thought that international anarchy could be superseded by a federation of republics that would cause war to wane. In the 19th century, among many others, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) expounded upon individual liberty, women's rights, and the abolition of slavery, while Richard Cobden (1804–1865) advocated for free trade, the reduction of armaments, and peace, among other concerns. In the 20th century, Woodrow Wilson promoted peace, self-determination, and the League of Nations. More recently, Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. have maintained that international cooperation is increasing because of 'complex interdependence.'⁷ This involves states being connected by multiple channels, a variety of issues besides simply security, and the resulting decline in the use of military force.

While liberals would grant the explanatory value of realism to explain why the KRG advisory referendum seemingly failed so dismally, they also would point out how the European Union (EU), Iran, Iraq, Turkey, the United States and others still accept the KRG as a semi-autonomous federal state in Iraq in the first place as well as its quick recovery and continuing existence. Furthermore, liberals would remind us of how Kurdish interests and state recognition in Turkey have improved greatly since the days when their very existence was denied and they were termed 'Mountain Turks.' As for Rojava, liberals would draw our attention to the enormous amount of international sympathy and even pressure in favor of the continuing Syrian-Kurdish experiment.

Constructivism

Constructivism explains political events by looking at perceived identities, norms, and social discourse. It argues that neither objects nor concepts possess fixed or objective meaning. Rather, meanings are constructed through social interaction that can give different meanings to identities and norms. Behavior depends on the subjective interpretation of reality. Identities are socially constructed. Thus, state behavior depends not on the objective reality of a situation, but on the subjective interpretation of that reality. Whereas realists and liberals view power in material terms, constructivists perceive power in nonmaterialist and intangible terms of ideas, culture, and language. For example, while the realists point out how the international system is anarchic, the constructivist argues that anarchy is what states and decision-makers make of it. It is not constant across time and/or space. Thus, anarchy leads to no certain outcome; this enables states to debate its meaning and give it definition.⁸ Indeed, the constructivist rebuffs the notion that sovereignty, the balance of power, or the international system exist objectively or result in objective norms.

⁷ Robert O. Keohane & Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (1977) *Power and Interdependence* (Boston: Little Brown).

⁸ On these points, see Alexander Wendt (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press).

Therefore, constructivist theory would explain the Kurdish dilemma by the threatening identity others give them. However, such an adverse persona does not and has not always been. For example, the Recep Tayyip Erdogan who now sees the Kurds as a threat earlier viewed the KRG, PKK and Rojava as possible partners in peace not only in the Iraq but also in Turkey and Syria. What occurred was not that they somehow changed their actual material characteristics, but that the Turkish president's identity of them altered.

Marxism

Karl Marx (1818–1883) viewed reality through economic lenses. The bourgeoisie or ruling classes exploited the proletariat or working classes to enrich themselves. This theory was in contrast to the three previous theories, which placed greater emphasis on political, social, and identity interpretations. Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) and John A. Hobson (1858–1940) took Marxism further to help explain how capitalism led to imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism. More recently, dependency theory—as first proposed by the Argentine economist and statesman Raul Prebisch (1901–1986)—sees underdeveloped states and exploited ethnic groups such as the Kurds as the result of being economically controlled by dominant states and multinational corporations. Thus, Marxist theory sees the Kurdish issue in terms of economic exploitation and resulting political domination by the more affluent states and their ruling economic elites.⁹ Indeed, the PKK first was created in November 1978 as a Marxist party struggling against its capitalist exploiters identified as the Turkish state. Only gradually did this Marxist interpretation give way (but only partially) to a more nationalist and even feminist explanation for the Kurdish predicament.

Feminism

Feminism offers yet another perspective and critique on international relations.¹⁰ Chief among its tenets is the exploitation of women and the view that the world would be more just, peaceful and even prosperous if women were given true equality with men. Some feminists, supported by PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, even would define the Kurdish problem as the result of overarching patriarchy. In fact, in recent years, Kurdish political parties in Turkey have mandated gender equality in their leadership roles. PKK leader Ocalan has been a very strong advocate of female equality.¹¹ Indeed, on one occasion, he declared: 'The key to the resolution of our social problems will be a movement for women's freedom, equality and democracy, a movement based

⁹ For an insightful interpretation along these lines, see Veli Yadirgi (2017) *The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey: From the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) as well as some of the earlier writings of Ismail Besikci such as his (1991) *Kurdistan & Turkish Colonialism: Selected Writings* (London: Kurdistan Solidarity Committee and Kurdistan Information Centre).

¹⁰ For background, see Cynthia Enloe (2014) *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press); and J. Ann Tickner (1988) Hans Morgenthau's Principles of Political Realism: A Feminist Reformulation, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 17(3), pp. 429–440.

¹¹ Abdullah Ocalan (2013) *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (Cologne, Germany: International Initiative Edition in cooperation with Mesopotamian Publishers, Neuss).

on the science of woman, called *jineoloji* in Kurdish.’¹² On June 14, 2019, as part of a *Perwerde* [education] delegation of U.S. and European academics invited by Rojava University, Camilla Powers attended the founding congress of the Women’s Council of Northern and Eastern Syria. She noted how *jineoloji* can ‘express a whole range of meanings from the study or science of women, women’s history and gendered knowledge, to research for women’s support and empowerment, and accountability to women’s perspectives. Women’s equal participation in all aspects of life is the fundamental demand of the revolution.’¹³

Numerous women also recently have occupied prominent positions and fought in Kurdish militias. For example, Hevi Ibrahim was appointed prime minister of the Afrin canton in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan). Ramziya Mohammed was the finance minister of one of the Rojava cantons, while Asia (Asya) Abdullah was co-chair of the ruling Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Rojava. Aysha Hisso was elected the new PYD co-chair on September 27, 2017. Kongra Star is the confederation of organized women’s structures in Rojava, and the Women’s Defense Units (YPJ), a female military force. Rojda Felat, a YPJ member, was also the overall commander of the combined Syrian Kurdish-Arab forces known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which took Raqqa from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in October 2017. Figen Yuksekdag was the co-chair of the Peoples Democratic Party (HDP), the leading pro-Kurdish party in Turkey, until she was convicted on charges of terrorism and lost her seat in parliament in February 2017. Nilufer Koc is the co-chair of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK), a broad-based body associated with the PKK.

Throughout history, the death and destruction of war have found additional expression in the sexual nature of militarism and warfare. The gendered face of war has attained an unprecedented dimension in the Syrian civil war. Here ISIS and other jihadist groups as well as the Assad regime and sections of the so-called Syrian Free Army have employed sexual violence to the extent of femicide, the systematic, planned, and conscious murder and degradation of women as tools of war. Arzu Demir, the Turkish author of a book on the YPJ militias, concluded, ‘There are always men thinking that women are slaves, but when women are an armed force, men are scared of them.’¹⁴

In Rojava, women, in general, have been given the right to divorce, which previously was an entitlement reserved only to men, to inherit property on an equal basis with men, and to keep their children and their homes in a marital breakup. Polygyny and child and forced marriages have been banned. The Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (Rojava) proclaims the elimination of discrimination against women in all spheres of life, while in the political sphere it mandates a 40 percent quota of women from the federal administration to the small neighborhood communes. Shariah law provisions that gave a woman’s testimony in court only half the weight of a man’s have been eliminated.

¹² Cited in Abdullah Ocalan (2017) *The Political Thought of Abdullah Ocalan: Kurdistan, Woman’s Revolution, and Democratic Confederalism* (London: Pluto Press), p. 93.

¹³ Cited in Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) (2019). Available at: knklondon@gn.apc.org, accessed September 24, 2019.

¹⁴ Cited in Rod Nordland, Women Are Free, and Armed, in Kurdish-Controlled Northern Syria, *New York Times*, February 24, 2018.

Levels of Analysis

Employing the concept of levels of analysis provides another heuristic perspective for thinking theoretically about the Kurds. This is a tri-level way of viewing and analyzing events first suggested by the international relations scholar Kenneth Waltz and subsequently elaborated upon by another academic, J. David Singer.¹⁵ The first or international level is the over-all system, that is the interacting components of the entire world (or largely in the case of the Kurds, the Middle East regional level). Is the system dominated by just one power or unipolar (for example, in the time of the Ottoman Empire), bipolar (for example, during the Cold War), or more accurately characterized today, as multipolar? In addition, what role do international and regional organizations play? How do they affect the system? The current international and especially Middle Eastern regional system's multipolar orientation would seem to encourage greater flexibility for and toward the Kurds. Different patterns of Kurdish initiatives would seem possible in such a world, thus allowing the Kurds to play other actors off against each other.

For example, the KRG's advisory referendum on independence in September 2017 met a virtually universal rejectionist response that at first seemed to call into question the Kurdish region's very existence. However, the anti-KRG alliance between Iran, Iraq, Turkey and the United States, made for strange bedfellows and seemed not likely to last because of their inherent differences. This situation might even allow the KRG to use imaginative divide-and-rule-tactics against its opponents, which would be an ironic reversal of the tactics they often have used in the past against the Kurds. For example, Sunni Turkey is not likely to continue to countenance Shiite Iran dominating Iraq and the KRG region, especially after Turkey had earned a special position for itself in the Kurdish region. Nor is Sunni Saudi Arabia likely to look in favor upon its archenemy, Shi'i Iran, fitting another piece into its jigsaw puzzle of building a Shi'i crescent from Iran to the Mediterranean. Iraq, of course, remains divided between the ruling Shi'is against the Sunni Arabs and the Kurds, but an influential Iraqi Shi'i leader, Muqtada al-Sadri, recently turned from supporting Iran to Saudi Arabia, further fragmenting the de-facto, anti-KRG alliance by weakening Iranian influence in Iraq. The United States likely will not continue to allow Iran to dominate Iraq while also dominating the KRG. Finally, Israel, the lone regional state that supported the KRG referendum, will not permit Iran or the Lebanese Shi'i militia, Hezbollah, on its borders with southern Syria. Thus, given the structure of the present regional system, the current de-facto, anti-KRG alliance is not likely to last, and the system itself will facilitate the KRG's partial revival.

The second or state level of analysis calls attention to the nature of the individual states interacting with the Kurds. Are they democratic or authoritarian? The democratic-peace hypothesis suggests that democracies are more hesitant to engage in armed conflict with other democracies,¹⁶ while authoritarian states that tend to predominate in the Middle East are more likely to take belligerent paths. This would suggest a

¹⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz (1954) *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press); and J. David Singer (1961) The Levels of Analysis Problem, in: James N. Rosenau (ed), *International Politics and Foreign Policy*, rev. ed., pp. 20–29 (New York: Free Press).

¹⁶ For background, see Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones & Steven E. Miller (1966) *Debating the Democratic Peace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press); and Steven W. Hook (ed.) (2010) *Democratic Peace in Theory and Practice* (Kent, OH: Kent State University).

continuing trying future for the Kurds. The democratic peace hypothesis, of course, broadens into the much older Kantian liberal theory broached above. Turning the Marxist theory on its head, is there a ‘capitalist peace’? Does capitalism and its accompanying post-Cold-War Washington Consensus thesis that only through liberal economic policies including privatization, trade liberalization, government deregulation and broad tax reform can economic development and peace occur suggests a more successful Kurdish future?¹⁷ To date, the Middle East regional states’ implementation of Washington Consensus-type economic policies do not seem to have benefitted Kurds or other minorities.

Finally, the third or individual decision-maker level of analysis calls our attention to the important roles of such Kurdish leaders as Abdullah Ocalan of the PKK, Massoud Barzani, the former president of the KRG and still president of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and Nechirvan Idris Barzani, the current president of the KRG, among many others. In addition, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the president of Turkey, Saddam Hussein, the former dictator of Iraq, and others readily come to mind as individual decision-makers who so clearly stamped their personal beliefs upon the Kurdish issue. Will Joseph Biden, the newly elected president of the United States, return to his former advocacy of KRG independence as part of his earlier three-state solution to Iraq’s continuing quandaries?¹⁸ Since dropped his advocacy of a three-state solution when he became vice president in 2009, he probably will not return to it as president. Official US policy continues to view dismemberment of Iraq as encouraging instability.

Nationalism

Theories of nationalism constitute a vast subfield in the study of international relations.¹⁹ Therefore, this article can touch only briefly on the subject to show its relevance to the Kurdish issue. Broadly speaking, there are two main schools of thought on the origins of the nation and nationalism. The primordialists or essentialists argue that the concepts have ancient roots and thus date back to some distant point in history. John Armstrong, for example, argues that nations or nationalities slowly emerged in the premodern period through such processes as symbols, communication, and myth, and thus predate nationalism. Although he admits that nations are created, he maintains that they existed before the rise of nationalism.²⁰ Anthony D. Smith agrees with the primordialist school, arguing that the origins of the nation lie in the *ethnie*, which contains such attributes as a *mythomoteur* or constitutive political myth of descent, a shared history and culture, a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity.²¹

The constructionists, on the other hand, maintain that nationalism is a recent construction that in effect has invented nations. The famous 19th century French

¹⁷ For background, see John Williamson (2000) What Should the World Bank Think about the Washington Consensus? *The World Bank Research Observer*, 15 (August), pp. 251–265.

¹⁸ See Joseph R. Biden & Leslie H. Gelb (2006) Unity through Autonomy in Iraq, *New York Times*, May 1.

¹⁹ For a sample of almost 50 different scholars, see John Hutchinson & Anthony D. Smith (eds) (1994) *Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

²⁰ John Armstrong (1982) *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina).

²¹ Anthony D. Smith (1986) *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell).

sociologist Ernest Renan, for example, wrote, ‘the existence of a nation ... is an everyday plebiscite.’²² By this, he meant the continuing will of a large group of people to be a nation is a prerequisite for a nation to exist. Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson have argued that states create nations. ‘Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist’²³—or as Anderson puts it, ‘imagines’²⁴ them through such mechanisms as ‘print capitalism.’ Mass printing helped to create a unified language out of a welter of dialects. The resulting mass literacy enabled large groups of people to communicate with each other for the first time, another prerequisite for nationalism to exist. Ernest Gellner also has emphasized the importance of modern industrialization for the rise of nationalism: ‘industrialization was bound ... also to be an age of nationalism.’²⁵ Massimo d’Azeglio, an Italian nationalist leader during the *Risorgimento*, reputedly exclaimed: ‘We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians.’²⁶ Eugene Weber has documented the recent process of changing ‘peasants into Frenchmen,’ that is how most rural and village inhabitants of France did not think of themselves as members of the French nation as late as 1870 or even up to the eve of World War I.²⁷ All these constructionist theoretical insights stress the role of modernity to help explain what they see as the recent, and therefore, for the Kurds, late and still tentative rise of nationalism.

Thus, most scholars would argue that nationalism itself is a recent phenomenon. In the first place, of course, the very concept of the nation and nationalism being the focus of one’s supreme loyalty is relatively new even in the West, where many would argue that it only began to develop in the latter part of the 18th century and specifically during the French Revolution, which began in 1789. The concept is even newer in the Middle East. Turkish and Arab nationalism largely emerged only after World War I following the demise of the multi-national Ottoman Empire and its emphasis on Islam as the supreme focus of one’s loyalty. Martin van Bruinessen, for example, disputes the oft-made claim that Ahmadi Khani’s 17th century epic *Mem u Zin* was a precursor of modern Kurdish nationalism. He argues that neither the political nor socio-economic prerequisites existed in 17th century Kurdistan for any notion of the nation to exist because tribes were the main collectivity with which the Kurds identified. ‘In general, people did not identify themselves as ethnic groups or nations in the way that people nowadays do.’²⁸ On the other hand, Iranian nationalism emerged at the beginning of the sixteenth century with the establishment of the Safavi Empire, which consciously presented itself as the heir to the ancient Iranian empire established by Cyrus the Great in 539 BCE. The ruler, Shah Ismail Safavi, also proclaimed 12-Imam Shia Islam as the official religion of Iran. One might say he preceded Benedict

²² Ernest Renan, Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? in Hutchinson and Smith (eds), *Nationalism*, p. 17.

²³ Ernest Gellner (1964) *Thought and Change*, 2nd edn. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson), p. 168.

²⁴ Benedict Anderson (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso).

²⁵ Ernest Gellner (2008) *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 39 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

²⁶ Cited in Benjamin Neuberger (1977) “State and Nation in African Thought,” *Journal of African Studies*, 4(2), p. 202.

²⁷ Eugene Weber (1976) *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University).

²⁸ Martin van Bruinessen (2003) Ehmedi Xani’s *Mem u Zin* and Its Role in the Emergence of Kurdish National Awareness, in: Abbas Vali (ed), *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, p. 44 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda).

Anderson by five centuries, for what his ‘imagination’ created has endured. Nevertheless, an estimated 8 percent of Iranians are Sunni Muslims, including about 50 percent of the Kurdish minority, and many of the latter live in Iran’s western region bordering the KRG.²⁹

Hugh Seton-Watson analyzes the rise of what he calls ‘official nationalism’ in such multi-national states as Russia and Hungary during the second half of the 19th century: ‘The leaders of the most powerful nations ... impose[d] their nationality on all their subjects—of whatever religion, language or culture As they saw it ... they were strengthening their state by creating within it a single homogeneous nation.’³⁰ Russification in the Russian Empire under Alexander III and Nicholas II imagined a nation without diversity, and subsequently became the model for many of the new states in the Middle East like Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Given this attitude, it is little wonder that Kurdish nationalism met repeated barriers.

M. Hakan Yavuz elaborates on the modern origins of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, writing that: ‘The state’s [Turkey’s] policies are the determinant factors in the evolution and modulation of ... Kurdish ethno-nationalism. The major reason for the politicization of Kurdish cultural identity is the shift from multi-ethnic, multi-cultural realities of the Ottoman Empire to the nation-state model.’³¹ The Kemalist reforms, which aimed to create a modern Turkish nation-state ‘resulted in the construction of Kurdish ethno-nationalism.’³² Throughout his analysis, Yavuz emphasizes that ‘the major difference between Turkish and Kurdish nationalism is the presence of the state Since Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran evolved in response to modernizing nation-states, it constantly stresses its ethnic ‘difference,’ sometimes even evoking racism to historicize itself.’³³ Hamit Bozarslan basically agrees with Yavuz’s analysis, arguing that two important factors preventing Kurdish nationalism from exerting significant influence from 1919–1921 were ‘the ideal of Islamic fraternity, and the fear of the establishment of an Armenian state.’³⁴ However, ‘the proclamation of the Kemalist Republic in 1923 meant the end of ... the Ottoman tacit contract between centre and peripheries [and] ... to a large extent explains the ... traditional [Kurdish] dignitaries ... participation in the subsequent revolts.’³⁵

Similarly in Iraq, Kurdish nationalism only began to develop after World War I in response to the attempts to build a modern Arab state that would permit no more than a minimal amount of Kurdish autonomy.³⁶ Thus, the revolts of Sheikh Mahmud

²⁹ A classic study of modern Iranian nationalism, including how the Kurdish minority relates to it, is Richard W. Cottam (1979) *Nationalism in Iran, updated to 1978* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press).

³⁰ Hugh Seton-Watson (1977) *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (Boulder: Westview), p. 148.

³¹ M. Hakan Yavuz (2001) Five Stages of the Construction of Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey, *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics* 7 (Autumn), p. 1.

³² Ibid, p. 2.

³³ Ibid, p. 3. For further analyses, see M. Hakan Yavuz (1988) A Preamble to the Kurdish Question: The Politics of Kurdish Identity, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 18(1), pp. 9–18; and Robert Olson (1991), Five Stages of Kurdish Nationalism, 1880–1980, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 12(2), pp. 392–410.

³⁴ Hamit Bozarslan (2003) Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey: From Tacit Contract to Rebellion (1919–1925), in: Abbas Vali (ed), *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, p. 165.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ For background, see C. J. Edmonds (1957) *Kurds, Turks and Arabs: Politics, Travel and Research in North-Eastern Iraq, 1919–1925* (London: Oxford University Press); Wadie Jwaideh (2006) *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press,);

Barzinji in the 1920s and Mulla Mustafa Barzani beginning in the 1930s were mainly tribal affairs at times opposed by more Kurdish *josh* (literally, little donkeys or Kurds who supported the Iraqi government in Baghdad). In discussing the revolts of Shaykh Mahmud Barzinji, for example, David McDowall argues, ‘he had little in common with today’s Kurdish leaders. Both the vocabulary and style are quite different. It is significant that Shaykh Mahmud did not waste his time appealing to nationalist sentiment. He was a *sayyid* [literally a reputed descendant of Muhammed], and the language his constituency understood was the language of Islam. In 1919 he appealed for a *jihad*, not a national liberation struggle. Furthermore, his style was to use kin and tribal allies and his aim was the establishment of a personal fiefdom.’³⁷

Only in the 1960s did the Kurdish movement in Iraq begin to take on the characteristics of a genuine nationalist movement. Following the destruction of the Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan in Soviet-occupied Iranian Kurdistan in 1946, the famous Iraqi Kurdish leader, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, retreated into the Soviet Union, a trek that subsequently became epic in the rise of modern Kurdish nationalism: ‘We marched for fifty-two days. In the high mountain passes the late spring snow was six to twelve feet deep. We fought nine encounters, lost four killed and had seven wounded.’³⁸ Even so, to his dying day, Barzani never fully exceeded the bounds of tribal chieftain. In part, this helps to explain his bitter disputes with Ibrahim Ahmad and Ahmad’s son-in-law, Jalal Talabani.

Saddam Hussein’s genocidal attempts to reduce the Kurds in the 1970s and 1980s had the opposite effect of fostering Kurdish nationalism. Iraq’s defeat in the Gulf War of 1991 spawned a de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq in which an increasingly strong sense of Iraqi Kurdish nationalism began to grow within a Kurdish-ruled state.³⁹ As argued in general by Gellner above, social and economic factors also played important roles in the development of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq. The oil industry, construction of major dams, cement and tobacco factories, and agricultural mechanization all created greater wealth and helped move people out of their smaller traditional valleys into the larger urban, industrialized world.

These theoretical insights into the origins of nationalism may help us to understand why the emergence of Kurdish nationalism was stunted and why it remains problematic. In addition, the more powerful claims of Arab, Iranian and Turkish nationalism as well as the Kurds’ mountainous isolation and resulting divisions also are significant factors in helping us to understand Kurdish nationalism’s tortuous progression.

Three Recent Kurdish Events

KRG Advisory Referendum

By 2005, the peaceful, stable situation in the KRG began increasingly to attract Turkish business interests.⁴⁰ Turkish firms became heavily involved in such projects as

³⁷ McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 158. Nevertheless, Sheikh Mahmud did declare himself “king of Kurdistan” in 1922.

³⁸ Cited in Dana Adams Schmidt (1964), *Journey among Brave Men* (Boston: Little, Brown), pp. 109–110; see also William Eagleton, Jr. (1963) *The Kurdish Republic of 1946* (London: Oxford University Press).

³⁹ Gareth R.V. Stansfield (2003) *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon).

⁴⁰ For background to this situation, see Michael M. Gunter & M. Hakan Yavuz (2005) The Continuing Crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan, *Middle East Policy*, 12 (Spring), pp. 122–133.

building modern, international airports in Irbil and Sulaymaniya as well as cement plants, among other projects. Turkish Prime Minister and subsequently President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan supported these economic initiatives for at least two reasons: (1) Such economic relations would help to alleviate the economically depressed situation in southeastern Turkey and lessen Turkish Kurds' support for radical Kurdish groups such as the PKK; and (2) Turkish-KRG economic relations also would help to bind the two, with Turkey, of course, as the senior partner. By the end of 2005, Turkish-Iraqi trade (much of it involving the KRG) had reached \$2.6 billion.⁴¹ On March 11, 2010, Turkey, in its own words, even opened a consul in the KRG capital Irbil 'towards bolstering and advancing the friendly ties and cooperation between Turkey and KRG in every field.'⁴²

The Erdoğan government's entrepreneurial spirit and the KRG's establishment of a business- friendly climate soon began to promote an 'undeclared economic commonwealth'⁴³ between the two. In 2011, the KRG became the sixth largest export market for Turkey with exports of \$5.1 billion. This had expanded to \$8 billion by 2013. The KRG had become Turkey's third largest market for exports. When Sinan Celebi, the KRG minister of trade and industry, visited Turkey in April 2012, he declared that 25 new Turkish companies were being launched every month in Iraqi Kurdistan, while more than a half of all the foreign companies registered in the KRG were Turkish. The 485 Turkish companies in the KRG in 2009 by 2013 had increased to approximately 1500. 'From shopping centers to housing projects to furniture stores and ubiquitous consumer and commercial ... goods, Turkish trademarks are to be seen everywhere ... including agriculture, banking and finance, construction, education, electrical power systems, health care, oil/gas extraction and services, telecommunications, transportation, tourism, and the water industry.'⁴⁴ Turkish soft power seemed to promise a better life for both Turkey and the KRG.⁴⁵

Economic cooperation inevitably began to lead to political cooperation. In 2013, Erdoğan invited KRG President Massoud Barzani to Diyarbakir, Turkey's de facto Kurdish capital. There Barzani was addressed as the KRG president, instead of being a mere warlord from northern Iraq as previously described. Twice the then-Turkish prime minister also used the heretofore forbidden term Kurdistan while addressing his audience. Erdoğan and Barzani appeared hand in hand on the podium before hundreds of thousands to declare 'the brotherhood of Turks and Kurds,'⁴⁶ while Erdoğan proclaimed: "We are building a new Turkey,' dedicated to all ethnicities and faiths.'⁴⁷

⁴¹ See www.Kurdishmedia.com, May 2, 2006.

⁴² Cited in "Erbil Turkish Consulate" (DATE) <http://erbil.co/listing/erbil-turkish-consulate>, accessed October 5, 2017.

⁴³ This citation and the following data were gleaned from Soner Cagaptay et al. (2015) Turkey and the KRG: An Undeclared Economic Commonwealth, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch 2387, March 16. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-and-the-kr-an-undeclared-economic-commonwealth>, accessed October 5, 2017.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ For background, see Mesut Yegen (2011) The Kurdish Question in Turkey: Denial to Recognition, in: Marlies Casier & Joost Jongerden (eds), *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, pp. 67–84 (London and New York: Routledge).

⁴⁶ Mehmet Umit Necef (2013) Barzani and Erdogan Meet in Diyarbakir: A Historical Day, Center for Mellemoststudier, December. (Odense: University of Southern Denmark).

⁴⁷ Cited in Asli Aydintasbas (2017) Why the Kurdish Referendum Is None of Turkey's Business, *Washington Post*, October 2; Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/10/02/why-the-kurdish-referendum-is-none-of-turkeys-business/>, accessed April 10, 2021.

What at the time seemed as an historic rapprochement made the KRG one of Turkey's closest regional allies as well as its third largest export market after Germany and the United Kingdom. At the same time, the Turkish-PKK peace process that had begun the previous March emphasized the concept of Turkey as the joint homeland of both Turks and Kurds. Turkey had become one of the main states supporting the KRG's economic independence, serving to facilitate the KRG's selling of oil and gas to the world market and bypassing Baghdad. Most significantly, Erdoğan even went so far as to declare that KRG independence was an internal Iraqi affair.⁴⁸ This seemed to imply that Turkey would accept KRG independence.

However, Erdoğan's support for Barzani in part was a tactic to win conservative ethnic Kurdish support in Turkey against the PKK, not complete backing of the KRG. An early caveat that Erdoğan was not fully on board with all this seeming new thinking concerning the KRG came when he failed to send military aid to the KRG after ISIS suddenly attacked in August 2014. Only timely US air support stopped the genocidal jihadists who had driven within 20 miles of Irbil.

Although Barzani for a long time had made his intentions clear about eventually seeking KRG independence, his announcement in June 2017 that an advisory referendum would be held at the end of September outraged Erdoğan as well as many others, including Baghdad and Tehran. Even the United States voiced its opposition, largely because it would splinter the alliance against ISIS.⁴⁹

Erdoğan accused Barzani of 'betrayal,'⁵⁰ threatened to starve the KRG's population, and even found Israel's hand in the matter: 'Once we put our sanctions in place, you'll be out in the cold... If we turn off the [crude oil] valve, it's over. If trucks do not take stuff to northern Iraq, they won't find food or clothing. How then will Israel send them anything?'⁵¹ At a forum in Istanbul, the seemingly enraged Turkish leader stated: 'After this, let's see through which channels the northern Iraqi regional government will send its oil, or where it will sell it.'⁵² The Iraqi and Iranian governments joined in the denunciations, and Baghdad closed the KRG international airports in Irbil and Sulaymaniya, an action that immediately hurt the KRG's important international travel links and lucrative tourism. All three bordering states held military exercises along the KRG's borders.⁵³ As already noted, even the United States voiced its displeasure, a position that the KRG found particularly galling given how that country in effect had birthed the KRG by destroying Saddam Hussein's government.

As a consequence of the negative interpretation that Turkey, and also Iran and Iraq, gave to the KRG referendum, Iraqi forces with strong Iranian support and Turkish and

⁴⁸ Galip Dalai (2017) After the Kurdish Independence Referendum: How to Prevent a Crisis in Iraq, *Foreign Affairs*, October 2. Available online <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-10-02/after-kurdish-independence-referendum?cid=int-now&pgtype=qss>, accessed October 2, 2017.

⁴⁹ U.S Department of State (2017) Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government's Planned Referendum, September 20. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/09/274324.htm>, accessed October 8, 2017.

⁵⁰ Cited in Mustafa Gurbuz (2017) Does Turkey Really Want to Punish Iraqi Kurdistan? October 3. Available at: <https://Arabcenterdc.org/policy-analyses/does-turkey-really-want-to-punish-iraqi-Kurdistan/>, accessed October 4, 2017.

⁵¹ Cited in Aydintasbas, "Why the Kurdish Referendum is None of Turkey's Business."

⁵² Cited in *Al-Jazeera*. (2017) Iraqi Kurds Vote in Independence Referendum, September 25. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/iraqi-kurds-vote-independence-referendum-170925032733525.html>, accessed September 27, 2017.

⁵³ Dalai, "After the Kurdish Independence Referendum."

US compliance, quickly occupied Kirkuk and other disputed territories, closed the KRG's two international airports, and took over the KRG's border crossings, among other actions. Massoud Barzani resigned as KRG president, and the Kurdish region fell from the heights of ambition to the depths of despair. Thus, we need to inquire into what explains this sudden negative turn in the fortunes of the Iraqi Kurds? Was it the result of a power struggle involving Turkey and the KRG's other regional neighbors? Had usually correct diplomatic procedures and international/regional institutions gone awry? Alternatively, was this contretemps the result of Turkey's and others' domestic politics? While the facts are the same, explanations can differ greatly. As illustrated above, thinking theoretically can better help us analyze and explain the different possibilities.

Realism, for example, clarifies why Turkey so strongly opposed the KRG referendum. Liberalism explains earlier Turkish cooperation, while constructivism aids understanding Erdoğan's creation of negative images of the Kurds rather than remaining more positive. Marxism focuses us on the important role economics played in initially bringing Turkey and the KRG together and subsequently having their relationship survive the animosities the referendum brought. Insights from theories of nationalism help to explain the continuing weakness and divisions in Iraqi Kurdish unity that came close to proving disastrous for them.

Breakdown of Turkish-PKK Cease-Fire July 2015

The violent Turkish-PKK struggle began in August 1984 and as of 2020 had resulted in more than 40,000 deaths. Turkey saw the struggle largely as existential to the continuance of its territorial integrity; the PKK Kurds viewed it as an attempt to maintain their long-term existence as a separate ethnic group. Given the gaping differences, attempts to mediate peace have been few and unsuccessful. The so-called Kurdish Opening from March 2013–July 2015 was arguably the lone exception. Indeed, by January 2013, Turkey was indirectly negotiating with Abdullah (Apo) Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK.⁵⁴ Subsequent reports indicated that officials from the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) also were meeting with such prominent PKK leaders in Europe as Sabri Ok, while other negotiations continued with Ocalan.⁵⁵

By the beginning of March 2013, these contacts seemed to be moving forward when a peaceful, pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) group arrived in Sulaymaniya in Iraqi-Kurdish-ruled northern Iraq to deliver a message from Ocalan to the PKK guerilla leaders ensconced in the Kandil Mountains bordering Iraq and Iran.⁵⁶ A similar letter was sent to senior PKK leaders in Europe. In his letter, Ocalan spoke about a cease-fire,

⁵⁴ Murat Yetkin (2013) "A Rare Chance in the Kurdish Problem," *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 7. Available at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/a-rare-chance>, accessed January 14, 2013. For recent, excellent background, see Cengiz Candar (2020) *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books).

⁵⁵ *Hurriyet Daily News* (2013) 100 PKK Militants to Lay Down Arms: Report, January 29. Available at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/100-pkk-militants>; accessed January 29, 2013; and *Hurriyet* (2013) PKK: Disarmament & Ceasefire in February?, January 29. Available at: <http://www.mesop.de/2013/01/29/pkk-disarmament-ceasefire>, accessed January 29, 2013.

⁵⁶ The following analysis is largely based on *Hurriyet Daily News* (2013) PKK Leader's Letter to Kandil Reaches Northern Iraq: Report, February 28. Available at: <http://www.mesop.de.de/2013/02/28/pkk-leaders-letter>, accessed March 1, 2013; and Ayla Jean Yackley (2013) Kurdish Rebel Leader Ocalan Airs Frustrations in Turkey Peace Process, Reuters, March 1. Available at: <http://www.mesop.de/2013/03/01/Kurdish-rebel-leader>, accessed March 1, 2013.

withdrawing PKK fighters from Turkey, the release of PKK prisoners, disarming and reintegrating some 7,000 PKK fighters into Turkish society, and constitutional reforms.

Ocalan, the imprisoned PKK leader, struck both optimistic and pessimistic positions: ‘Everybody should know that we will neither live nor fight as we used to You should know well that neither I nor the state will take a step back. [We will achieve] a historic peace and transition to democratic life.’ Ocalan then explained that ‘the PKK’s withdrawal from Turkey will be after a Parliament ruling and the Turkish Grand Assembly will approve it, a truth commission will be established. [Kurdish people who were exiled from their villages] will return to their villages. If these conditions are not met, the [PKK’s] withdrawal will not become real.’ Ocalan also elaborated on the subsequent political environment he expected after ‘the establishment of peace Neither house arrest nor amnesty, there will be no need for those. We will all be free.’ However, if the peace process fails, ‘a civil war will begin.’

As for the Turkish side, public opinion polls showed that the Kurdish peace talks had tentative public support, a great change from the past when any such suggestions were liable to bring accusations of treason. Gradually the Turkish government had begun to humanize Ocalan in an effort to pave the way for talks. Ocalan’s successful call for some 600 supporters to end a hunger strike that was creating dangerous repercussions for the government in the fall of 2012 was one example. In addition, Erdoğan declared, ‘If drinking poison hemlock is necessary, we can also drink it to bring peace and welfare to this country.’⁵⁷ A member of parliament from Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP), Galip Ensarioglu, said: ‘Ocalan is more reasonable than those who are outside. Ocalan is acting responsibly and is a chance for Turkey.’⁵⁸ Dr. Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkey’s National Intelligence Agency (MIT)—who was involved in the earlier Oslo talks with senior PKK leaders—had been speaking with Ocalan since late 2012. According to Ayla Akat, a BDP MP who recently had visited Ocalan: ‘Fidan and Ocalan have managed to understand each other.’⁵⁹

Background preparation already had brought Turks and Kurds together in Britain and Ireland to learn about the successful Friday Accords that finally brought peace to -nearly 25 years of Catholic-Protestant strife in Northern Ireland.⁶⁰ Erdoğan had approved these contacts. One such visit was to the Scottish parliament in Edinburgh to see how power might be devolved from the center successfully, a point crucial in the bargaining between Turkey and the PKK. The Turkish government also had established a cross-departmental agency to coordinate policy and responses concerning the Kurdish question from security to education and social policy. In recognition of these developments, the mainline US weekly magazine *Time*, in its issue of April 29/May 6, 2013, named the heretofore obscure Ocalan as one of ‘the 100 most influential people

⁵⁷ *Today’s Zaman* (2013) Turkey’s Erdogan Calls for More Support for Peace Move, February 26. Available at: <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-308165-turkey's-erdogan>, accessed March 1, 2013.

⁵⁸ *Hurriyet* (2013) Leak of Imrali Record Sparks Controversy over Its Source, February 29 [sic]. Available at: <http://www.mesop.de/2013/02/28/leak-of-imrali-record>, accessed March 1, 2013.

⁵⁹ Cited in Ian Traynor & Constanze Letsch (2013) Locked in a Fateful Embrace: Turkey’s PM and His Kurdish Prisoner, *The Guardian*, March 1. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/01/turkey-pm-kurdish-prisoner-peace>, accessed March 1, 2013.

⁶⁰ The data were taken from Ian Traynor (2013) Turks and Kurds Look to Good Friday Accords as Template for Peace, *The Guardian*, March 1. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/01/turk-kurd-good-friday-accords>, accessed March 1, 2013.

in the world' and called him a 'voice for peace.' Previously, such praise would have been inconceivable.

Unfortunately, these prospects for peace foundered on irreconcilable differences. It only remained for the peaceful, pro-Kurdish Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) to help deny Erdoğan's AKP a ruling majority by entering the Turkish parliament in the elections of June 7, 2015, for Erdoğan to feel it necessary to take up a strong Turkish nationalist role against the Kurds to regain his ruling majority. Within a month, heavy fighting had broken out again and continued as of this writing in 2021. Again, thinking theoretically as outlined above can help us to understand better these numerous and bewildering events.

Realism continues to help explain the renewed power struggle between Turkey and the PKK, while liberalism presents insights into why there was the brief period of a Kurdish Opening from 2013–15. Constructivism leads us to a better understanding of how each party initially could build a more positive image of the other but subsequently could fall back into more negative impressions. Theories of nationalism not only clarify why the nationalism of one seemed to imperil the other, but also how social and economic factors drove Kurdish identity.

Turkey's Incursion into Syrian Kurdistan in October 2019

On October 9, 2019, after many false starts, Turkey finally drove into a small section of northeastern Syria (Rojava or Syrian Kurdistan) in an attempt to establish a 'safe zone' to end what it claimed to be an existential PKK threat to its territorial integrity. U.S. President Donald J. Trump's decision to pull out some 1,000 US troops who were acting as advisers, supporters and protectors of the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party/Peoples Defense Units/Syrian Democratic Forces (PYD/YPG/SDF), or simply the Syrian Kurds, triggered the Turkish incursion. Widespread condemnation of Turkey and Trump quickly ensued. Detractors argued that the United States had (1) dishonorably deserted its Syrian Kurdish ally; (2) alienated future allies who no longer could trust it; (3) allowed some of the ISIS prisoners incarcerated by YPG guards to escape and potentially to revive the genocidal jihadist organization; (4) rewarded Turkish aggression; (5) handed the Assad regime new life; (6) consolidated Iran's political and military presence in Syria; and (7) enhanced the influence of Russia as potentially the ultimate arbitrator of the Syrian imbroglio, to the detriment of the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Six years earlier, on a road eventually not taken, Turkey initially had pursued a very different strategy. On July 25, 2013, amid reports that the Syrian Kurdish PYD was about to declare Kurdish autonomy in Syria, Turkey publicly invited its political representative Salih Muslim to Istanbul for talks. The PYD leader hastened to assure Turkey that his party's call for local administration of Syria's Kurdish regions did not mean it was seeking the kind of independence that would threaten Turkey.⁶¹ Although he previously had held secret meetings with Turkish officials, this new and highly visible encounter represented a potential road to cooperation in Turkish-PYD relations. Coming at the same time that Turkey had opened peace talks with the PKK in Turkey, these additional talks with the PYD represented a logical extension of the overall peace process between the two, as well as a tacit Turkish admission that the PYD and PKK were distinct enough to warrant separate discussions.

⁶¹ Hemin Khoshnaw (2013) Salih Muslim's Ankara Visit Marks Major Policy Change, *Rudaw*, July 29. Available at: <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/29072013>, accessed April 10, 2021.

Indeed, Ahmet Davutoglu, the Turkish foreign minister, explained that his country's new approach was in line with its ongoing decision to talk with PKK leader Ocalan about ending his organization's three-decade insurgency.⁶² Another Turkish official added, 'We have no problem with their [the PYD's] aspirations... . What we do not want from any group is that they use this situation opportunistically to impose their will by force.'⁶³ Ismail Arslan, the peaceful pro-Kurdish BDP mayor of Ceylanpinar, just across the border in Turkey, elaborated: Turkey 'has seen that treating the Kurds like an enemy and supporting groups like Nusra [the al-Qaeda affiliate in the Syrian civil war] is not good for Turkey.'

Upon its conclusion, PYD Representative Salih Muslim claimed his meeting had been positive and that he had conversed about security in the border regions with his Turkish interlocutors. He then listed the following specific points that had been discussed: (1) opening borders and border security; (2) distributing humanitarian aid; (3) explaining the PYD project for an interim government; and (4) demonstrating that the PYD proposals on interim local government were not a threat to Turkey. Two weeks later, the PYD leader followed up his talks in Istanbul with a second round in Ankara. These talks illustrated that Ankara was uncertain how far a new relationship should proceed. Should Turkey go as far with the PYD as it had with the KRG in Iraq and now seemed to be going with the PKK peace process? Should Turkey stop its implicit support for the Nusra jihadists? Might Turkey even realize that its fears of the inherently weak Syrian Kurds were overblown and seek instead to coopt them as it had the Iraqi Kurds?

If we fast forward October 2019, how can we explain Turkey's daring incursion into Syrian Kurdistan, a move that potentially is dangerous for its own future relations with Syrian Kurds?? Once again, we are presented with a host of different facts and hypothetical explanations. Thinking theoretically about the choices that were made and the events that ensued helps us to understand and explain them more rigorously and accurately.

When the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) won enough seats in the 7 June 2015 Turkish parliamentary elections to deny Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) a renewed majority, he opportunistically ended the PKK peace process and opted for an alliance with Turkish ultra-nationalists. The strategy worked: with the PKK banned, Erdoğan quickly regained his majority in the snap parliamentary elections held on November 1, 2015. Turkish cooperation with the PYD proved to be the road not taken. Their relations swiftly declined, with Turkey and its Arab allies first invading the Syrian Kurdish province of Afrin on January 21, 2018, conquering it by March 2018, and then continuing the process that led to the deadly incursion into Syria of October 9, 2019.

Realism continues to focus us on the factors that drove the Turkish decisions to invade northern Syria rather than to negotiate. However, liberalism aids our understanding for why Turkey at first seemed to negotiate and cooperate with the Syrian Kurds. Constructivism explicates the Turkish construction of negative images of the PYD and their supposed dangerous consequences for Turkish territorial integrity when instead more positive images could have been fashioned. Theories of nationalism reinforce our understanding of why Kurdish nationalism suddenly arose from

⁶² Fulya Ozerkan (2013) Turkey Softens Stance on Syria's Emboldened Kurds after Launching Peace Process at Home, *Daily Star* (Beirut), August 9. Available at: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=226577>, accessed April 10, 2021

⁶³ This and the following citation and data were adapted from Jonathan Burch (2013) Syrian Kurds Take Fragile Steps toward Autonomy, *Daily Star* (Lebanon), August 3. Available at: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Aug-03/226122-syrian-kurds-take-fragile-steps-toward-autonomy.ashx>, accessed April 10, 2021

practically nowhere in Syria as well as each protagonist's fear of the other. Insights from feminism sensitize us to gender discrimination and how increased female participation in the political process in the Kurdish areas of Syria may be conducive to more effective government and greater chances for peace.

Conclusion

Scholars, practitioners, and interested members of the lay public have offered varying explanations for these three recent Kurdish events discussed above. This article has sought to illustrate how insights provided by realist, liberal, constructivist, Marxist, feminist, and nationalist theories can clarify our understanding of these events. In addition, thinking theoretically in terms of levels of analysis offers us different insights according to over-all systemic, separate state and in our case proto-state entities, and individual decision-maker viewpoints.

Clearly, the state role of Turkey and its longtime leader Erdoğan are crucial in explaining all three of these Kurdish events. For example, despite Massoud Barzani's strong opposition to it, the Syrian Kurds' campaign to establish Rojava as a new, de facto Kurdish state on Turkey's border with northeastern Syria possibly conflated Erdoğan's inherent fear of any Kurdish state with the KRG⁶⁴ and helps to explain why he so strongly opposed the KRG advisory referendum on independence in September 2017. Thus, it only remained for the pro-Kurdish HDP to help deny his AKP a ruling majority by entering the Turkish parliament in the elections of June 7, 2015, for Erdoğan to take up a strong Turkish nationalist role against the Kurds to regain his ruling majority. Kurdish politics in Turkey and Syria had bitten him, and he responded angrily. Likewise, when KRG when it announced its intention to hold the referendum on independence on September 25, 2017, he felt the sting of that bite and reacted.

In addition, the KRG, PKK, and Rojava—arguably proto-state Kurdish entities—and their leaders, Massoud Barzani and Abdullah Ocalan, also played crucial roles. For example, despite its denunciations of the United States and others for the failure of KRG's advisory referendum,⁶⁵ the KRG was partially to blame. It had overreached and badly miscalculated in including Kirkuk and other disputed territories in the referendum in an overly ambitious attempt to implement unilaterally Iraqi Constitution Article 140 on the future of the disputed city.⁶⁶ The failure to put up even a fight for Kirkuk also illustrated continuing Kurdish nationalist weakness and disunity despite the KRG's existence since 1992 and further that the Kurds had over-estimated their military power.⁶⁷ Despite the appearance of military strength based on its success against ISIS, the KRG Peshmerga remained divided between supporters of Massoud

⁶⁴ See, for example, Hande Firat (2017) We Will Not Allow a Kurdish State on Our Borders: Erdoğan, *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 24. Available at: <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/we-will-not-allow-a-kurdish-state-on-our-borders-erdogan.aspx?pageID=517&nID=117059&NewsCatID=352>, accessed August 30, 2017. Erdoğan is quoted as declaring that the term "Kurdish state" is an "insult to my Kurdish brothers. . . . We will send those who want to break this nation [Turkey] apart to the grave."

⁶⁵ See, for example, "Barzani" No US 'Support' for Kurdish Referendum if Postponed (2017) *Rudaw*, November 11. Available at: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/11112017>, accessed November 15, 2017.

⁶⁶ For background on Kirkuk, see Liam Anderson & Gareth Stansfield (2009) *Crisis in Kirkuk: The Ethnopolitics of Conflict and Compromise* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

⁶⁷ For further penetrating thoughts on the KRG's miscalculations, see Denise Natali (2017) Iraqi Kurdistan Was Never Ready for Statehood, *Foreignpolicy.com*, October 31. Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/31/iraqi-kurdistan-was-never-ready-for-statehood>, accessed November 15, 2017; and Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi (2017) Iraq Kurdistan's Crisis: A Failure of Strategy, *The*

Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). It also lacked heavy weapons since Baghdad controlled what material Irbil received from foreign states, and had achieved its recent victories only because of indispensable U.S. air support, which was lacking when Baghdad reclaimed Kirkuk in October 2017.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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