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The Kurdish Uprisings in the Middle East: A Survey

(1831-1979)

Behçet Kemal Yeşilbursa¹

Abstract

The period (1831-1979) witnessed the origins of Kurdish nationalist sentiments through a series of separate, smaller rebellions in the 19th century, through to a larger, more cohesive and discernible movement launched following the World War I. The Kurdish "problem", as it has often been called, has been a historiographical issue. Pressures of regional states meant that the research into the issue has been limited. However, that is fast changing. Rather than a legal or political entity, the term "Kurdistan" generally refers to an agreed geographical area. Kurdish populations are concentrated in Iran to the east of the region, Turkey to the north, Iraq to the south and west, and Syria to the northwest. Territory populated by the Kurds evolved over the previous two centuries, with some regions becoming consolidated, while others were subject to constant change. Although continuing international debate regarding the future of "Kurdistan" can be said to date from around 1918-20, the British archives hold significant material dating from the early 19th century. Identifying and presenting all available documents helps to shed a light on aspects of Kurdish nationalism and territoriality as they were perceived by contemporary observers. Being conducted within the larger context of diplomatic relations with Iran, Russia and Turkey, British observations are a useful source for three reasons: first, they monitor international boundary disputes and frontier issues; second, they present assessments of strategic defence issues against any possible incursion towards the British Indian Empire; and third, on a commercial level, provide a view to establishing channels for local trade. The object of this work is to present the geo-political context of the Kurdish "Problem" as reflected in the British archival documents.

Key Words: Kurds, Middle East, Turkey, Iraq, Iran.

Ortadoğu'da Kürt İsyanları: Genel Bir Bakış

(1831-1979)

Özet

19. yüzyıl bir dizi ayrı, daha küçük isyanlar yoluyla Kürt milliyetçi duyguların kökenine tanık oldu. I. Dünya Savaşı'nın ardından başlatılan daha büyük, daha uyumlu ve fark edilebilir bir harekete dönüştü. Bugün "Kürt sorunu", sık sık ifade edildiği gibi, tarih yazımıyla ilgili bir konu olmuştur. Bölgesel devletlerin baskısı, konuyla ilgili araştırmaların sınırlı olduğu anlamına geliyordu. Ancak, bu durum hızla değişiyor. Tüzel veya siyasi bir varlıktan ziyade, "Kurdistan" terimi genel olarak kararlaştırılan bir coğrafi bölgeyi ifade eder. Kürt nüfusu, İran'ın batısında, Türkiye'nin güneyinde, Irak'ın kuzeyinde ve Suriye'nin kuzey ve kuzeydoğusunda yoğunlaşmıştır. Kürtlerin yaşadığı bazı bölgeler konsolide olurken bazı bölgeler ise son iki yüzyıl boyunca sürekli değişime uğradı. "Kurdistan"ın geleceğine dair devam eden uluslararası tartışmaların daha çok 1918-20 yılları arasında yoğunlaştığı söylene de, İngiliz arşivleri 19. yüzyılın başlarından kalma önemli materyallere sahiptir. Mevcut tüm belgelerin tanımlanması ve sunulması, Kürt milliyetçiliğinin, çağdaş gözlemciler tarafından algılanmasına ışık tutmaya yardımcı olacaktır. İran, Rusya ve Türkiye ile olan diplomatik ilişkiler bağlamında yürütülen İngiliz gözlemleri, belgeleri üç nedenden dolayı yararlı bir kaynaktır: Birincisi, uluslararası sınır anlaşmazlıkları ve sınır konularını izler; ikincisi, Britanya Hindistan İmparatorluğu'na yönelik olası herhangi bir saldırıya karşı stratejik savunma konularının değerlendirmelerini sunar; üçüncüsü, ticari düzeyde, yerel ticaret için kanallar oluşturmak için bir görünüm sağlar. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Kürt "Sorununun" jeopolitik içeriğini İngiliz arşiv belgelerinde yansıtıldığı şekilde sunmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kürtler, Ortadoğu, Türkiye, Irak, İran.

Introduction

This paper does not deal with the details of the Kurdish Question but with the influence of the Kurdish question on the balance of political forces in the Middle Eastern region generally. It represents the reactions to the impact of the Kurdish nationalism. The Kurds, more or less continuously as a homogeneous community, inhabited astride the frontier of Turkey, Iran and

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Iraq with small overlaps into Syria and Armenia. It is for the most part a land of mountains, but on the southwest, it extends well into the Mesopotamia plain. In addition, there are isolated islands of Kurds far removed from this main body. The Kurds of Iraq can be reliably estimated at about 1.5 million, one-fifth of the total population. Reasonable guesses would be about the same for Iran and 2.5 million for Turkey, making with Syria and Armenia a grand total of about 5.5 millions in 1950s.²

The religion of the great majority is Sunni Muslim; the dervish orders have adherents in all parts of Kurdistan. The economy of Kurdistan is still primarily agricultural and pastoral. Until now, rural society has been essentially tribal, with groups of villages owning a sort of feudal allegiance to tribal chiefs (Beg, Agha) or dervish Shaikhs. Where there is no blood relationship with the villagers, such rule has been in places very vexatious. Owing to the spread of education and the consolidation governmental authority, this system has been breaking down. So far, there has been little industrialization; but the Kerkuk oil field lies on the edge of all Kurdish area, and employment here and on the great dams and other major development projects in Iraq must be creating a labour force very different from the simple peasantry of former times.³

Kurdish nationalism dates back to days of the semi-independent principalities which survived both in the Ottoman Empire (in parts now in Turkey, Iraq and Syria) and in Iran until the Middle of the 19th century. In its modern form, it developed on parallel lines with the similar Arab and Armenian movements. The first Kurdish newspaper appeared in 1897 and was published at intervals in Cairo, Geneva, London and Folkestone until 1902. It was revived in 1908 (after the Young-Turk Revolution) in Istanbul, and appeared again during the First World War in Cairo. The first Kurdish political club with an affiliated cultural society was founded at Istanbul also in 1908.⁴

The aspirations of the minorities were encouraged by the military defeat of Ottoman Empire in 1918, by Point 12 of President Woodrow Wilson's "programme of the world's peace", (concerning the autonomous development of the non-Turkish subjects of the Ottoman Empire) and by Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations. Kurdish delegates attended the Peace Conference. On 10 August 1920, the Treaty of Sévres provided for the recognition or creation not only of the Arab States of Hejaz, Syria and Iraq, but also of an Armenia and a Kurdistan.⁵

However, the Treaty of Sévres was never ratified, owing to the military revival of Turkey under Mustafa Kemal. It was replaced in 1923 by the Treaty of Lausanne, which confirmed the provision for Arab States south of the armistice line of 1918, but made no mention of an

² FO371/140682/E1821/9/59, The Kurds by C. J. Edmonds, 13 February 1959. FO371/140682/E1821/20, The Kurds and the Baghdad Pact Powers, 29 April 1959. C. J. Edmonds, "The Kurds and the Revolution in Iraq", *The Middle East Journal*, Volume: 13, Number: 1, (Winter 1959), pp. 1-10. Today, the total population of the Kurds in the Middle East can be reliably estimated at about 25 million; about 5 million in Iran, 5 million in Iraq, 10 million in Turkey and 5 million in Syria and Armenia.

³ FO371/140682/E1821/9/59, The Kurds by C. J. Edmonds, 13 February 1959. FO371/140682/E1821/20, The Kurds and the Baghdad Pact Powers, 29 April 1959. C. J. Edmonds, "The Kurds and the Revolution in Iraq", *The Middle East Journal*, Volume: 13, Number: 1, (Winter 1959), pp. 1-10.

⁴ FO371/140682/E1821/9/59, The Kurds by C. J. Edmonds, 13 February 1959. FO371/140682/E1821/20, The Kurds and the Baghdad Pact Powers, 29 April 1959. C. J. Edmonds, "The Kurds and the Revolution in Iraq", *The Middle East Journal*, Volume: 13, Number: 1, (Winter 1959), pp. 1-10.

⁵ FO371/140682/E1821/9/59, The Kurds by C. J. Edmonds, 13 February 1959. FO371/140682/E1821/20, The Kurds and the Baghdad Pact Powers, 29 April 1959. C. J. Edmonds, "The Kurds and the Revolution in Iraq", *The Middle East Journal*, Volume: 13, Number: 1, (Winter 1959), pp. 1-10.

Armenia or a Kurdistan. The Mosul Vilayet was excluded from the Lausanne settlement, and the question of its future was referred to the League of Nations. Turkey at first refused to accept the League's award in favour of Iraq in 1925, but finally renounced her sovereignty in the Treaty of Ankara between Turkey, Iraq and Britain signed in 1926.⁶

Nevertheless, this dream of an independent Kurdistan remained on record in an international document and was not forgotten. Though not applicable to them, the Treaty stimulated the hopes of the Kurds in Iran for independence in a united Kurdish States. After 1920, armed nationalistic risings occurred in all three countries. The Kurds in Iraq under Shaikh Mahmud resisted incorporation in Iraq for some years. In Turkey, the most formidable revolt was that of Shaikh Said of the Kharput region in 1925, and there were others at Siirt, Ağrı and elsewhere. In Iran, in 1922, Saiyid Taha and Ismail Agha Shikak, achieved widespread successes for a time; and in 1945-46, the Kurds in Iran set up the "Kurdish Republic of Mahabad."⁷

As elsewhere, language has served as the handmaid of nationalism. Up to 1918, except for the limited journalistic activity already mentioned, very little Kurdish had been printed. In 1918, Kurdish was introduced by the British military administration as the official language in Iraq. Since then there has been in Iraq a regular if not very prolific output of periodicals, anthologies and new works of all kinds, and the language is now generally used for private correspondence; Baghdad radio had a Kurdish service for some years. There was some journalistic activity at Mahabad in Iran at the time of Republic. For some years, a cultural Centre at Damascus published a magazine and a few books in Roman script, but this was rather an academic exercise for a group of intellectuals. In Soviet-Armenia, some Kurdish verse was published in the Cyrillic alphabet.⁸

2. The Period of 1831-1855

There were at least two major Kurdish revolts during this period, chiefly as a direct result of the Perso-Turkish War of 1828-29. By 1838, British officials had begun referring to a "the Kurdish question" particularly in regards to free migration. Further revolts occurred at Van, led by Bedr (or Pedr) Khan in 1846-47, leading to reprisals, including the arrest of numerous Beys over 1849-52. There was also a revolt in Jezirah in 1854.⁹

3. The Period of 1856-1878

Traces the impact of administrative changes set out by the Ottoman government and an increased international interest, which followed the Treaty of Paris 1856, in the Kurds and "Kurdistan". An increase in Kurdish activism with a significant revolt-taking place in Van in 1856, with another being led by Bedr Khan in 1858-59. Unrest accelerated from 1876, initially over the Kurdish resistance to conscription into the Ottoman army, and by 1878 parts of the

⁶ FO371/140682/E1821/9/59, The Kurds by C. J. Edmonds, 13 February 1959. FO371/140682/E1821/20, The Kurds and the Baghdad Pact Powers, 29 April 1959. C. J. Edmonds, "The Kurds and the Revolution in Iraq", *The Middle East Journal*, Volume: 13, Number: 1, (Winter 1959), pp. 1-10.

⁷ FO371/140682/E1821/9/59, The Kurds by C. J. Edmonds, 13 February 1959. FO371/140682/E1821/20, The Kurds and the Baghdad Pact Powers, 29 April 1959. C. J. Edmonds, "The Kurds and the Revolution in Iraq", *The Middle East Journal*, Volume: 13, Number: 1, (Winter 1959), pp. 1-10.

⁸ FO371/140682/E1821/9/59, The Kurds by C. J. Edmonds, 13 February 1959. FO371/140682/E1821/20, The Kurds and the Baghdad Pact Powers, 29 April 1959. C. J. Edmonds, "The Kurds and the Revolution in Iraq", *The Middle East Journal*, Volume: 13, Number: 1, (Winter 1959), pp. 1-10.

⁹ Burdett (ed.), *Passim*. Also, see FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147.

region, notably around Kharpüt, were said to be verging on the state of anarchy. Dersim Rebellion 1878-79.¹⁰

4. The Period of 1879-1899

A state of chaos prevailed in the province of Van at the start of 1879. By August, the Kurds of Hakkari were in a state of open revolt with Shaikh Abeydullah as their leader. While increased military activity and tensions on the Perso-Turkish border in 1881 caused hardship for and resentment among Kurds trying to cross the frontier, 100,000 Kurdish families nonetheless reportedly fled Iran to Turkish territory. A state of turbulence continued from 1883-1887, leading to virtual autonomy in some regions, including Hakkari. This was ended by an Ottoman expedition in 1890 with the specific aim of repressing the Kurds. Intra-Kurdish quarrels broke out in 1894.¹¹

In 1888, after witnessing a Kurdish revolt, W. G. Abbott, the British Consul of Tabriz, Iran, wrote to his superiors in London; "*Still, I am far from thinking that Europe has heard the last of this Kurdish question. It will probably be asked hereafter, what is to be done with Kurdistan?*"¹² At the time of the report, Britain had already been involved in the affairs of Kurdistan for half a century with British technical and diplomatic teams working alongside their Russian counterparts to formalize the division of Kurdish-populated regions between the Ottoman Empire and Iran (1843-1914).¹³

5. The Period of 1900-1914

August 1905 Kurdish forces under the leadership of Ibrahim Pasha were at the gates of Diyarbakir. January 1905 they sent a petition appealing to the British Government to be placed directly under British protection. Revolts at Moush in 1910, Khuyt in 1911, and under the leader Simko (who became active from 1913), all with the goal of seeking Kurdish autonomy from the Committee of Union and Progress.¹⁴

6. The Period of 1914-1920

A special mission under Major E. Noel was sent to approach Shaikh Mahmoud to represent British interests in Suleimaniya. Shaikh Mahmoud was initially made governor, albeit with limited powers, but by 1919 had turned on the British and had become the leader of a series of revolts. The Cabinet in November 1919 cited policy as being aimed at "setting up a ring of autonomous Kurdish states around the border of the Arab vilayet of Mosul". In stark contrast to this, a policy was then adopted in January 1920 to not file a mandate for Kurdistan, while also not permitting its restoration to Turkey, nor supporting its partition. In addition, Lord

¹⁰ Burdett (ed.), *Passim. Also, see* FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147.

¹¹ Burdett (ed.), *Passim. Also, see* FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147.

¹² Burdett (ed.), *Passim. Also, see* FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147. Today, the Kurds in Iraq are understood to constitute between 15 and 20 per cent of the total population (26 million in the 2003 census). Avshalom H. Rubin, "Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq: Centralization, Resistance and Revolt, 1958-1963", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume: 43, Number: 3 (May 2007), pp. 353-382.

¹³ Burdett (ed.), *Passim. Also, see* FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147.

¹⁴ Burdett (ed.), *Passim. Also, see* FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147.

Curzon at the San Remo conference of April 1920 had begun expressing doubts about the direction for "Kurdistan".¹⁵

In the aftermath of the First World War, Britain's influence over "Kurdistan" intensified. With the Ottoman Empire defeated and Iran in a state of collapse, the officers of the Foreign and India Offices, together with their counterparts in *Quai d'Orsay*, assumed responsibility for much of the Middle East. While the idea of creating a Kurdish homeland on former Ottoman lands attracted some support, ultimately the Middle East's new European masters chose to divide "Kurdistan" among the newly formed states of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Kurdish protests, petitions, and resistance were ignored.¹⁶

7. The Period of 1921-1926

The diplomatic failure of the Allies to sufficiently advance the provision for a Kurdish state set off a chain of revolts in areas of the former *vilayet* of Kurdistan beginning with Simko's campaign. Allied reversal of the agreement of 1923, reached at the Lausanne Conference, dashes the diplomatic creation of a Kurdish respecting the Kemalist government. Major revolts continued to erupt, notably in 1925 in the form of the Shaikh Said rebellion, and again with the Dersim revolt in Turkey in 1937-38, which led to martial law being declared. Retreat and exile of Simko to Iraq in late 1926.¹⁷

8. The Period of 1926-1929

By June 1927, one official was expressing the view that the Kurdish nationalist movement had reached a hiatus. The attitude and policy of the Kemalist government was now affecting the Kurds, the policy involved plans for mass deportations along with a campaign of repression of nationalist activities from July-December 1927. Kurdish declaration of independence and establishing of the Republic of Ararat in 1927. Evaluation undertaken of the consequences of the defeat in June 1929 of Iranian Kurds in the attempted Mangur Revolt.¹⁸

9. The Period of 1930-1939

A significant British review of policy and promises made to Kurds, which were undertaken in the context of Anglo-Iraqi cooperation in August 1930. Mass meetings of Kurds

¹⁵ Burdett (ed.), *Passim*. Also, see FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147. C. J. Edmonds, "The Kurds of Iraq", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Winter 1957), pp. 52-62.

The Treaty of Sevres (1920) envisaged the setting up of an autonomous Kurdistan, but was never ratified because of Turkish opposition. Instead, the Kurds found themselves divided by the international frontiers of Turkey, Iraq and Syria where under the Ottoman Empire only provincial boundaries had existed. However, the establishment of an independent Kurdistan uniting all the Kurds divided by international frontiers was not an immediate aim, though it has long been the dream of almost every Kurd. The 1966 Programme of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) stated that the Kurds were fighting "for liberation and the autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan within the framework of the Iraq Republic." See FCO51/191/RR6/10, "The Kurdish Problem in Iraq, 1963-1971", 6 December 1971. FO371/140682/E1821/9/59, The Kurds by C. J. Edmonds, 13 February 1959.

¹⁶ Burdett (ed.), *Passim*. Also, see FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147.

¹⁷ Burdett (ed.), *Passim*. Also, see FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147. C. J. Edmonds, "The Kurds and the Revolution in Iraq", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Winter 1959), pp. 1-10.

C. J. Edmonds was formerly in the British Foreign Service. In 1922, he was seconded for service under the Iraqi Government and from 1935 to 1945 was Adviser to the Ministry of the Interior. He was lecturer in Kurdish at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London.

¹⁸ Burdett (ed.), *Passim*. Also, see FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147.

and plans for a major anti-Arab revolt in Iraq, 1931. The Khoybun Revolt took place over the period 1929-31, leading to attempts to define the boundaries of Kurdistan in 1931-32. The Kurds were forced migration during the period 1939-1945, in which one-estimate claims 700,000 Kurds died.¹⁹

10. The Period of 1940-1944

During the World War II in which both Iran and Iraq were effectively under Allied occupation. A Kurdish revolt occurred in Persia in December 1941, supported by Assyrian and Chaldean factions, leading to full military engagement with Iranian forces, and ultimately a Kurdish defeat in January 1942. Continued disturbances in western Iran January 1942, notably the Kurdish advanced on Rezaieh in western Azerbaijan. Unrest among Kurds in the autumn of 1942 led to Iranian military operations and surveillance in northern "Kurdistan". Various incidents involving Kurds, such as an attack on Mazlu village, suggested they would not undertake attacks if Russians offered any resistance. The frontier situation from August 1943 points to a lack of control, allowing for subsequent incursions and cross-border raids by Kurds.²⁰

11. The Period of 1945-1950

Since 1945, there had been little manifestation of Kurdish political nationalism in any of the three countries (Turkey, Iran and Iraq). The intellectual leaders seemed to have been persuaded that for the time being, in the face of the opposition of the three governments, nothing could be done to forward their aspirations for an independent united Kurdistan; they could only wait in the hope that some future international upheaval would give them, or their sons, an opportunity of renewing their movement with some chance of success.²¹

From 1945, the Iraqi Kurdish situation had become focused on the activities of Mullah Mustapha. A report from Capt. Stokes, the Political Adviser at Erbil, referred to "the confederacy of Barzan" as an "autonomous Kurdistan" established by Mullah Mustafa. Tours of the region by British officials in late 1945, aimed at assess the interaction between local officials and Mullah Mustafa. This period also saw the formation of political protest parties, the "Kurdish Democratic Party" dates from 1946 for example. Temporary creation of "The autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan" in the western Azerbaijan area of Mahabad, 1946. Mahabad continued to be a focal point the nationalist movement, at least until 1949.²²

12. The Period of 1951-1965

Barzan revolt of 1954. The Shah launches an attack against the Juamri Kurds 1956. Decision was made by many Iraqi Kurds in February 1963 start a revolt under leadership of

¹⁹ Burdett (ed.), *Passim. Also, see* FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147.

²⁰ Burdett (ed.), *Passim. Also, see* FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147. Ofra Bengio, "Iraqi Kurds: Hour of Power?", *Middle East Quarterly*, (Summer 2003).

²¹ FO371/140682/E1821/9/59, The Kurds by C. J. Edmonds, 13 February 1959. FO371/140682/E1821/20, The Kurds and the Baghdad Pact Powers, 29 April 1959.

²² Burdett (ed.), *Passim. Also, see* FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147. Michael M. Gunter, **The Kurds of Iraq**, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

Mullah Barzani. Iranian assistance was offered to Iraqi Kurds in 1963. Negotiations in 1964 for a ceasefire among the Iraqi Kurds proved unfruitful and gave way to renewed fighting in 1965.²³

Resentment against the ruling majority was perhaps less in Iraq than in the other two countries, because it was here that the Kurds had had the fairest deal: only in Iraq were they legally recognised as a minority having certain rights of their own *qua* Kurds, or was their language used for elementary education, local administration and legal proceedings, or was there any lively cultural and journalistic activity. This was due to: (a) the obligation on the Mandatory Power to keep open until 1923 (Treaty of Lausanne) the possibility of their adhering to a Kurdish State; (b) the conditions under which the League of Nations had awarded the Mosul Vilayet to Iraq in 1925; and (c) the guarantees demanded by and given to the League when Iraq was admitted to membership in 1932. One or two Kurdish Ministers were normally included in every Cabinet.²⁴

It was not surprising, therefore, that the news of the revolution in Iraq on 14 July 1958, followed as it was by the landing of American and British troops in Lebanon and Jordan and the sabre-rattling of the Soviet Union, should have suggested to Kurdish nationalist in three countries (Turkey, Iran and Iraq), that this might be the international upheaval for which they had been waiting and that they should have put in hand the preparation of a memorandum on the Kurdish Question for the Summit Conference as first demanded by Nikita Khrushchev, who was the leader of the Soviet Union from 1955 until 1964, succeeding Stalin.²⁵

An event which particularly struck the popular imagination was the return to Iraq at the beginning of October 1958 of Mulla Mustafa Barzani, the rebel tribesman from Iraq, who was driven over the frontier in 1945, took service with the "Kurdish Republic of Mahabad" and on its collapse escaped to Soviet-Armenia, where he was given high military rank and encouraged to broadcast in Kurdish from Erevan. Mulla Mustafa's welcome by Arabs and Kurds alike was on a royal scale, and he was hailed not only as a Kurdish "leader" but as a champion of the general struggle against the "reactionary and colonialist monarchy". After twelve years at Mahabad and as an honoured guest of the Soviets, the General Mustafa of to-day must be a very different person from the comparatively unsophisticated tribesman of 1945; but it is difficult to explain this rapid build-up into a national all-Iraqi figure otherwise than as the work of a well-organised chain of Communist propagandists, long or quickly established in all parts of Iraq.²⁶

13. The Period of 1966-1979

The period begins with a strategic conference in Iraq, which planned to remove Kurds from all oil-bearing areas in 1966; this was at a time when the British Government had effectively declared neutrality on the (Iraq) Kurdish question. Mustafa al Barzani delivered a

²³ Burdett (ed.), *Passim*. Also, see FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147. Avshalom H. Rubin, "Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq: Centralization, Resistance and Revolt, 1958-63", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (May 2007), pp. 353-382.

²⁴ FO371/140682/E1821/9/59, The Kurds by C. J. Edmonds, 13 February 1959. FO371/140682/E1821/20, The Kurds and the Baghdad Pact Powers, 29 April 1959. C. J. Edmonds, "The Kurds and the Revolution in Iraq", *The Middle East Journal*, Volume: 13, Number: 1, (Winter 1959), pp. 1-10.

²⁵ FO371/140682/E1821/9/59, The Kurds by C. J. Edmonds, 13 February 1959. FO371/140682/E1821/20, The Kurds and the Baghdad Pact Powers, 29 April 1959. C. J. Edmonds, "The Kurds and the Revolution in Iraq", *The Middle East Journal*, Volume: 13, Number: 1, (Winter 1959), pp. 1-10.

²⁶ FO371/140682/E1821/9/59, The Kurds by C. J. Edmonds, 13 February 1959. FO371/140682/E1821/20, The Kurds and the Baghdad Pact Powers, 29 April 1959. C. J. Edmonds, "The Kurds and the Revolution in Iraq", *The Middle East Journal*, Volume: 13, Number: 1, (Winter 1959), pp. 1-10.

list of demands to the Iraq government in April 1966. Over 400,000 Kurds were expelled by the government of Iraq over 1970-76, despite the terms of the 1970 "settlement" negotiated with the Government and accepted by Mullah Mustapha. Growing tensions between Kurds and government of Iraq were evident in 1973, and an ultimatum was given to the KDP by Saddam Hussein in March 1974. Iraqi Kurdish refugees in Iran and their forcible re-settlement from 1976-1977 affected wider relations between Britain, Iran and Iraq. The Pahlevi regime in February 1979, labelled the KDP as "counter-revolutionary" following the setting up of KDP HQ at Mahabad-their first revolt since 1949.²⁷

Conclusion

The Turkish and Iranian Governments were following developments in Iraq very closely and perhaps anxiously. They were also probably considering a number of proposals for improving communications, initiating development projects, and extending material benefits such as social services in their Kurdish provinces, in order to conciliate with public feelings. It was, however, in the field of education and cultural activity that the most difficult decisions were to be made.

The first alternative was to continue in the policy that had been pursued up until that point, namely of denying Kurdish racial sentiment, and discouraging or, in some cases, forbidding all Kurdish cultural and literary activity, particularly journalism. Such an alternative would rely on an extension of the educational system of that time with the Turkish (or Iranian) language as the medium of instruction, and the complete denial of the existence of a Kurdish language. The hope was to be that future generations would forget about the origins of a Kurdish race or language, and thus grow up as Turks or Iranians loyal to their nations and ready to defend their integrity. However, such a policy had not been successful so far, and it was doubtful that it could be maintained for long without an opposing policy across the borders being actively pursued.

The second alternative was to follow the approach Iraq had adopted; specifically, to accept the existence of a Kurdish identity. This policy, imposed first by the Mandatory Power and then by the League of Nations, was at first disapproved of by the Arab rulers; but later it was not only endorsed, it in fact became extended. Possible objections were expected to be along the line that such a policy would promote a stronger feeling of solidarity among the Kurds of the three states, which would inevitably and rapidly lead to demands for separation. There were a number of arguments refuting these objections. First, the impetus of Kurdish nationalism could not be dampened; second, should Turkey, as the nation with the largest Kurdish population, take the lead in winning Kurdish support, the abnormal situation in which Iraq, which had the smallest Kurdish population of the three, was the attractor would be reversed; and finally that, with satisfied Kurdish populations in each of the three countries together with an unfavourable geography for the formation of a separate Kurdish state, it might be possible for the three governments to come to arrangement based on liberal toleration. However, Turkish and Iranian statesmen had preferred the first alternative.

Soviet support of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq, Turkey and Iran was common knowledge. Together with Kurdish resurgence due to the Iraqi Revolution and the discontent of the Kurdish minorities in Iran and Turkey, this situation was clearly in the Soviets' favour. However, the objectives of Kurdish and Arab nationalism were inevitably irreconcilable. Therefore, although

²⁷ Burdett (ed.), *Passim*. Also, see FO371/140682; FO371/52369; FO371/2718; FCO8/3243; FCO8/3244; FCO2335; FCO8/2308; FCO51/147. F. Michael Wuthrich, "The Kurdish Question in Turkey, Iraq and Beyond", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 2, (March 2012), pp. 303-310.

the resurgence of the Kurdish question in Iraq clearly posed a difficult problem to Iran and Turkey, it was certainly a puzzling issue for the other countries, both inside and outside the region. It was a powerful additional force which underlined the historical divisions in the Arab world between Baghdad on the one hand, and Damascus and Cairo on the other.

By reversing the cautious policies of Nuri Said, the new Iraqi government was in effect proclaiming an Arab-Kurdish common front disguised as an "anti-imperialist" brotherhood. It was also true that Kurds who were influenced by the Soviets, such as Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the Barzan family, were being used as figure-heads in these events. To see events in perspective, however, it is necessary to view them in relation to the trend towards Arab unity embodied in Nasser's United Arab Republic.

Clearly, the Iraqi Revolution had set in motion two opposing trends of political thought: one advocating Arab unity; and the other supporting Iraqi separatism beyond Arabism, underlining that Iraq was far from a wholly Arab country. The first trend was represented by Rashid Ali and Arif, the second by the Premier Qasim. The leaders of the movement towards unity with Egypt and Syria were suppressed and brought to trial with the death penalty foreseen. The rift was so clear that not even a counter revolution would heal it. Popular opinion put the blame on Soviet influence, with Qasim choosing Moscow over Cairo. However, there was no clear evidence to indicate this, and it overlooked the Soviet interest in remaining on good terms with Cairo. The more plausible explanation was that Qasim's choice was influenced by Kurdish nationalism, especially given that this movement emphasised the historical antipathy of Baghdad for Levantine Arabism. For the time being it seemed more attractive for the revolutionary Arabism of Baghdad to share a common cause with a Kurdish movement which its leaders knew as embarrassing to their close neighbours in Turkey and Iran, than to flirt with what was to them the vague emotionalism of Arab unity. At this point it should be mentioned that critics of the alleged "divide and rule" British policy at that time appeared to have no knowledge of the real forces at work. Divisive forces have historical roots, going back further than British influence.

The Kurds of Iraq were always wary of any trend towards Arab unity. Their dislike of the abortive Iraq-Jordan Federation can be given as an example. All their influence was likely to be used against Iraq's joining the UAR. Any Iraqi government which followed such a cause would lose their support. The reality of events following the Iraqi revolution demonstrated that the Iraqi Arab leaders had been willing to pay a high price for that support. Indeed, Kurdish ambitions were to an important degree the key to events in Baghdad at that time.

However, the picture must also be viewed from a wider perspective. The Iraqi Kurds constituted only about one-quarter of the Kurdish ethnic group, one-half being in Turkey, and the remaining quarter in Iran. If any foreign power, whether the USSR, the USA, the UK, or even Iraq itself, were actively to support the consolidation of the Kurds either to form a new Kurdish State (as contemplated in the abortive Treaty of Sèvres of 1920), or to join with the Kurds of Iraq, the Arabism of Baghdad would be under serious threat. There was probably a total of more than 5 million Kurds, and about 4 million Arabs in Iraq. This suggests that, however emotionally the Arab-Kurdish front in Baghdad may have been proclaimed at that time, no Baghdad government was likely going to support Kurdish nationalism without reservations.

The Soviets had a number of Kurds living in the Armenian USSR. They had been using them as an "anti-imperialist" voice since 1946, and they know far more about them than the Western powers. They were well aware of the dilemma that support of Kurdish nationalism

after a certain point was incompatible with Arab unity. Even limited support had already had the result of further alienating the new Arab idea in Baghdad from Mediterranean Arabism. For these reasons, it was unlikely that Moscow would support the Kurds, or the Communist Party of Baghdad, in all-out opposition to the UAR. It would be against Soviet interests deliberately to agitate the friction developing between Iraq and Egypt.

For the West the problem was rather different. Britain had always supported a fair deal for the Kurds; in fact, it was only British insistence that gave them better treatment in Iraq (e.g., their own schools, use of their own language, their own local officials) than in Iran or Turkey. However, even in the days of the Mandate the British Government did not, following the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), envisage Kurdish separatism, and were prevented from doing so in Turkey and Iran. Indeed, to support an independent Kurdish State would be impossible for a member of the Baghdad Pact, and would inevitably alienate both Turkey and Iran. The British Government could no more do so than support the formation of a Pathan State out of Pakistan. However, it would still be advisable for Britain or the US to check the atmosphere Turkey and Iran to see if they would alleviate Kurdish separatism by more generous treatment of the Kurdish minorities within their boundaries.

To conclude, Soviet desires to keep good relations with the Arab world should have made it against their interest to use Kurdish nationalism beyond a certain point as a means of entry to the heart of the Middle East. However, the events of 1946 showed how badly the Soviets had failed to appreciate the real balance of forces, or the internal situation, in this region at that time. They could make a similar mistake again. The visions of the disruption of Turkey or Iran or both would likely prove too much for the Kremlin. The best way to make sure that this did not happen was for the West to understand the forces that operated, to publicize the dangers widely and show that they were prepared.

The division of the Ottoman Kurdish populations amongst three inhospitable countries proved to be a costly solution. Turkey, for example, has witnessed almost thirty Kurdish rebellions. Iraq, too, fought a series of unforgiving wars against the Barzani-led Kurdish rebels from the time of its foundation until the present day. In Syria, the Kurds have been the subjects of a system that has, for many years, deprived them of their right to citizenship. Paradoxically, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 has acted to empower the Syrian Kurds. However, the threat presented by Islamist militants, the antipathy of the Syrian opposition, and the continuing power of the Ba'athist regime, mean that their future remains uncertain. The history of Iran and its Kurdish population has been far from stable. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed numerous examples of persecution and repression directed towards Iran's Kurds as well as examples of rebellion and resistance.

Part of the reason why Kurdish history has often been defined by conflict and violence can be attributed to the ways regional actors have viewed the Kurdish "question". More precisely, the political establishments in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, have regarded the issue as one of vital national security and, more broadly, regional stability. Indeed, it could be argued that these states have benefited from the Kurdish presence, since the possibility of a Kurdish nation has constituted one of the very few areas of geopolitical common ground in a region often divided against itself. There have, of course, been exceptions. Iran has, at times, offered support to Iraqi Kurdish rebels, largely in order to gain advantage over Baghdad. Similarly, during the 1980s and 1990s Syria provided political and logistical support to the PKK as it waged war on Ankara. Nevertheless, for much of the last century the common agenda aimed at suppressing Kurdish demands allowed these states to maintain an uneasy coexistence.

Today, the world's approximately 30 million Kurds are often described as the biggest ethnic group without a nation-state. Still, the question of how this state of affairs came to pass and the processes nurturing that predicament have yet to be thoroughly studied. Indeed, the policies of regional states have often made it difficult to study any aspect of the Kurdish people. The Kurdish "problem" has thus become a historiographical issue as well. That, however, is changing quickly as new generations of young academics and intellectuals are laying the foundations of the field of Kurdish studies.

This paper will no doubt lead to new insights and greater understanding of evolution of the Kurds and "Kurdistan". Perhaps not so coincidentally, while referring to the cross-border movement of tribes, one of the first documents refers to the "Kurdish Question," while one of the last, dated 1979, is entitled "The Kurdish Problem". In the hundred and fifty years covered by the paper, the Kurds went from being a "question" needing an answer to a "problem" urgently demanding a solution. Thus, considering the fact that the "Kurdish question" has yet to find a solution, it seems that reassessing the *longue durée* development of the issue should constitute one of the most important tasks for scholars and academics with an interest in the region. In this regards, the documents to be found within the archives will be of great importance.

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Appendix-I: Distribution of Kurds in the Middle East. Source: The National Archives, UK. FO370/2718.

