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The Republic of Kurdistan, 1946

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CHAPTER VI. FINAL CONCLUSION

The sociological nationalist discourse in the case of the Kurdish nationalist movements of the twentieth century did not transform the broad outline of the Kurdish question. It did not enable the Kurdish nationalist movement to integrate all of its ethno-religious (Sunnis, Shi'ites, Yezidis, etc.) and ethno-linguistic (Kurmanji, Sorani, Zazaki, Hewrami, etc.) groups or form a unitary community across state borders.⁹²⁰ Before World War I, cultural and religious aspects were the most important components of Kurdish identity and the precise boundaries of Kurdistan were not a subjective issue. But this drastically changed after the First World War when the new modern nation-states were established throughout the Middle East. These new polities particularly Turkey, Iran and Iraq, had influenced the Kurdish nationalist movements to look forward to their own self-rule government in two ways. First, the modern nation-state was formed according to the identity of the dominant group and this inspired the Kurds, particularly the nationalists, to locate a Kurdish political identity to be realized through their own nation-state or autonomy. Second, integration and assimilation within the dominant group and more importantly, denial of the Kurdish identity, was a significant policy of these new modern nation-states in the Middle East. Therefore, the Kurds struggled to protect their own identity and eventually this struggle organized a political party which rooted itself within the Kurdish society. Abbas Vali rightly argued that 'Kurdish national identity is unmistakably modern.'⁹²¹

During the World War I, Kurdistan was a battlefield and with the formation of the new states in place of the Ottoman Empire, one might well have expected that the Qajars would also disintegrate into a number of smaller states. But, the Iranian government's territorial integrity and sovereignty was unharmed, especially when Reza Shah came to power and built a centralist and strong modern state. The main factor behind the social mobilization of the Kurds after 1941 lay in Reza Shah's policy towards Kurds between the two world wars. During the twenty years of Reza Shah's reign, modernization was an important policy to build a modern nation-state in Iran. For this reason, Reza Shah radically transformed the socio-political and economic situation of the traditional lifestyle of the Iranian inhabitants, where tribalism had been dominant. Forced migration and sedentarization of nomads and tribes in

⁹²⁰ Bozarslan, 'Some Remarks on Kurdish Historiographical Discourse in Turkey (1919-1980)', in Vali 2003, 38.

⁹²¹ Vali 2003, 104.

the Iranian plateau, especially of the Kurds, was an important policy of Reza Shah, through which many families became alienated from their original environment and the tribal leaders were exiled, imprisoned or killed. Establishment of modern education, reform and standardization in Persian language, prohibitions on the use of local languages, such as Kurdish, at schools throughout the country, and curtailment on the cultural rights, such as traditional dress, were implemented as parts of the main goal of Reza Shah's modernization policy. In other words, the foundation of a modern state was accomplished at the cost of suppressing political development and all manifestations of democratic aspirations. In short, this policy forced the national Kurdish identity to be integrated and assimilated in the dominant identity which was Persian. But, World War II had ruptured the process of modernization via the authoritarian policies of Reza Shah.

The intervention of the Allied Powers in Iran in August 1941 was seen by many Iranian Kurds as not only an opportunity to accomplish some measure of autonomy for Kurdistan, but after the exile of Reza Shah, it was also seen as way for the restoration of political, cultural, economic and units of the Kurdish tribes. The presence of the Great Powers in Iran changed the socio-political atmosphere. A part of Iranian Kurdistan, the territory from Mahabad to Saqqiz, was located between the territories controlled by the two Great Powers, Britain and the Soviet, and in this region the Kurdish cultural and especially political institutions were established. The JK party, which had a leftist ideology, is often considered to be the first Kurdish nationalist political party in the modern history of Iran. The JK party strived for the national independence of Greater Kurdistan. Unity among Kurds, more political power for the middle-class and the right to Kurdish education based on the Kurdish language were the major political demands of the JK party, which was the base for the establishment of the KDP and the Republic of Kurdistan.

Independence for Greater Kurdistan or just for Iranian Kurdistan was not the political ambition of the nationalists at the outset, when they strived for autonomy within Iranian territory. But it seemed that in the second half of its existence, the Republic of Kurdistan gave up the cause of autonomy and fight for it in the provincial councils. This demand was also problematic for the Kurdish leaders because Mahabad, the capital of the Republic, itself was not a province, but a part of the West Azerbaijan Province. Therefore, the Iranian and particularly Azerbaijan governments did not take the formation of the Republic seriously and considered it as a part of the Azerbaijan government. For this reason, although the negotiations between Azerbaijan and Iranian government representatives were on a formal level, the Iranian government did not seriously consider the demands of the Republic of

Kurdistan's leaders, when they visited Tehran for similar negotiations. Ghavam invited the Republic's leaders separately to Tehran, which was merely for provocative political purposes as it would increase the distrust and division between the Azerbaijan and Kurdish governments; Ghavam never had any serious intentions to discuss the Kurdish question.

Although the majority of the Kurdish community, including intellectuals and writers, considered the Republic of Kurdistan of 1946 as a nationalist project with a national character, it was a form of nationalism that was limited in its scope. Moreover Kurdish nationalism was not widespread and was more regional in its outlook. In 1946 it could not be defined using the generalized concept of nationalism. The maturity and development of nationalism depended on the existence of an increasingly industrial society. Agricultural transformation to the industrial society is, for Gellner, necessary for the development of nationalism, which spread its roots in the second half of the nineteenth century throughout Europe. To what extent was the Kurdish society in 1946 industrial? There was only one factory in all of Iranian Kurdistan -- it was predominantly an agricultural society during the period of the Republic of Kurdistan. The majority, more than 90%, of the Kurdish society in 1946 was illiterate, which is another reason that the Kurdish society in 1946 cannot be properly called a nationalist movement. Although the Republic printed a newspaper and several journals, it still failed to influence the tribal and agricultural nature of Kurdish society due to this high rate of illiteracy.

For Smith, three fundamental elements agitated the ideological movement of nationalism: national autonomy, national unity and national identity. The first two aspects are problematic with regard to the ideology of the Kurdish nationalism in 1946. The resoluteness of self-government, which is the substance of national autonomy was absent from the Republic's leadership. National unity could be interpreted in two ways: geographically only one third of Iranian Kurdish territory was under the control of the Republic of Kurdistan and more importantly, politically there was no unity within the Kurdish leadership. Military and political decision-making was managed mainly by the tribal chieftains and for the individual interests of those tribal leaders, rather than on behalf of a national agenda. In short, there was neither national unity among the Kurdish leaders nor collaboration between several Offices or Ministries of the Republic. The political identity of the Republic of Kurdistan was a product of modernity and it was created by distinguishing Kurdish identity from the emergent Turkish, Persian and Arab identities in the region. In other words, the separation of 'us' (Kurdish) from 'them' (i.e. Turkish) was necessary for the formation of the Kurdish political identity after the First World War.

This dissertation has argued that an important reason for the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan was a 'reaction of the self' in response to the 'action of the other'. The formation of the Autonomous Government of Azerbaijan affected the northern Iranian Kurds both politically and psychologically causing them to hastily proclaim the Republic of Kurdistan. The first political influence had to do with the relationship between 'self' and 'other'. When a neighbouring ethnic group managed to prepare themselves and eventually declare their own government, it encouraged the Kurds to concentrate on their own state building efforts. On the other hand, the rapid proclamation of the Republic, only a few weeks after proclamation of the Azerbaijan government, was a clear message to the Azerbaijan leaders that the Kurds are prepared to cooperate and have a friendly relationship with them but would not accept their leadership in Kurdistan. Yet another important reason for the swift formation of the Republic was that of fear. The establishment of the Azerbaijan government had caused serious political anxiety among the Kurds when they realized that not only would the Kurdish region come under the control of the Azerbaijan leaders, but the autonomy they enjoyed from 1941 onwards would also disappear.

All testimonials and resources related to this event provide evidence that the system of the Republic of Kurdistan, in comparison with the Azerbaijan government, enjoyed the support of the mass population. The Azerbaijan government was popular among needy section of the population, but due to its radical land reform measures it alienated the landowners. The Republic was popular amongst the Kurdish inhabitants and also protected the rights of other ethnic groups, such as Jews, Azeris, and Armenians. The Republic of Kurdistan was not a revolutionary movement meant to transform economic and social principles. Unlike Azerbaijan, it made no serious moves towards land reform, had neither Marxist indoctrination nor Soviet-trained military and political cadres. But its foremost aspiration was to secure the Kurdish nationalists' aim to eventually establish an autonomous government. The Republic was not only less experienced, less organized, and had a less sophisticated administration, but it also was founded in a society which still respected the tribal affiliations, kinships, family ties and religious brotherhood of elder times. The Kurdish society in 1946 was deeply influenced by tribalism and tribal relationships.

During the short reign of the Republic of Kurdistan some changes within Kurdish society were brought about. A central aspect of nationalism is language and this was an important part of one of the main political goals for the Republic. The Kurdish leaders of the Republic started several new Kurdish schools which taught in the Kurdish language. The Republic's leaders also attempted to increase the participation of women in political activities.

The first women's organization, which was supported by Ghazi Mohammad's wife, encouraged many women to take part in socio-political events of the Republic, particularly in the areas of education. Economic and social reform was the most important program of the Republic of Kurdistan, but in both of these aspects, the Republic fell short of its goals. In terms of development, the Republic was not very successful. This is to be expected, however, since it was the case that the economic situation of the central Iranian government worsened in the wartime and post-war periods, causing even harder times in Kurdistan and its surrounding regions. Although there were some cases of social reform, such as the Republic's establishment of a different civil court system, in general, their plan of social reform failed, especially with respect to the relations between peasants and landlords, since chieftains and landlords were the key policy-makers of the Republic. The Republic of Kurdistan also spent quite some effort on the formation of the national army. Although the leaders of the Republic tried to construct a modern Kurdish army, right until the end of the Republic their military retained its tribal character. In its short existence, the Republic did succeed in the field of communications by promoting Kurdish culture and language, by publishing and producing a range of materials, such as newspaper, journals, radio, cinema and theatre. These publications were undoubtedly made possible with the support of the Soviet government.

The increasing demand of the Republic's leaders for democracy, one of the most important principles of modernity, did not lead to the formation of the Republic of Kurdistan. Before, during and after the Second World War, the Iranian government never formally accepted the political or even the cultural rights of the ethnic Kurds in Iran. As a solution to the Kurdish question in 1946, Ghazi Mohammad demanded democracy from the central government, but the Iranian government did not pay heed to this. However, one of the significant factors that did lead to the formation of the Republic of Kurdistan was the events of World War II in Iran. The Republic was a product of hasty reactions to the larger events enveloping it, such as the presence of Great Powers in Iran. Thus, the existence of the Great Powers in Iran was another cause for the formation of the Republic of Kurdistan. Because of the collapse of the totalitarian regime of Reza Shah and the disarming of the military government in northern Iranian Kurdistan, there arose a possibility for the majority of the indigenous people to choose and determine their own fate by establishing their own government.

The Anglo-American policy towards Kurds in Iran was clear. From the beginning of the occupation of Iran in 1941, they did not support or encourage Kurdish political ambitions. The central policy of the Anglo-Americans was based on its relationship with the Iranian

central government whom they supported and advised. In contrast to this, the Soviet Union supported the regional powers against the Iranian government. One of these regional powers in Iran was the Kurds and the Kurdish government. The Soviets had not developed and were not planning to develop a long-term policy for Kurds and Kurdistan. Soviet politicians realized that the possible formation of a Kurdish state was not desirable for the Soviet policy in the region. The Soviets in fact saw the stabilization of a Kurdish government as more worrying, because for a long time after the First World War, the Soviets thought that the formation of a Kurdish state was the political project of British imperialists and they wanted to halt the British expansion. Therefore, Soviets had not only rejected a possible formation of a Kurdish state but also opposed any kind of autonomy. In 1945 and 1946, the Soviet's created a short-term policy for Kurds in Iran, which was mainly to provide them with printing press services, military facilities to the Republic of Kurdistan, maintain economic relations with the Republic, etc. The Soviet government intention was to use the Kurdish government as an instrument against the Iranian government for realization of their political and economic targets. These two antagonistic policies, which illustrate the conflicting of interests of the Great Powers, with the Anglo-American support of the Iranian government on the one hand and the Soviets supporting the regional movements on the other, especially the Azerbaijan government, lead to the post-war 'Iranian Crisis'. In the international context, this was known as the origins of the Cold War in the Middle East.

Traditionally, Russia tried to annex the lands accessing the southern open sea. In the nineteenth century, with the conquest of Central Asia and some northern provinces of Iran, the warm-water ports were coming closer for the Russians. Across this plausible expansion to the south, England was a strong power defending the route to India. For the British and Russians, oil was the economically and strategically vital commodity in the beginning of the twentieth century and there was plenty of oil in Iran. During World War II, the growing importance of Middle Eastern oil largely caused the 'conflict of interests' between the Soviet and the British governments. As World War II ended and weakened the British role in the Middle East, Britain's military presence in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, which were quickly losing force, existed purely to protect essential British imperial interests. Besides, whatever pretensions Britain still had of being a powerful state, the brutal truth was that the war-crippled British economy could not bear the cost of the global projection of its will. In reaction to Soviet actions in Iran, England found it necessary to cooperate with the United States against the Soviet Union to protect its oil interests in the Middle East. Britain continued to act as major player in the protection of 'The West', essentially of American

interests, in parts of the Middle East, even during the Truman administration. This time marked a crucial phenomenon in the twentieth century, when the US took Britain's place as the most dominant Great Power.

Most historians claim that political and economic interests motivated the presence of Soviet troops in northern Iran: the political case being Russia's pursuit for Iran as a buffer for its weak southern border, and the economical case being its interests in oil production in the Northern provinces. The national interests of the Great Powers were clearly on the agenda in the period of the Iranian crisis of 1945-46: the Americans appealed to Atlantic Charter's principles (see appendix I), the British protected their traditional empire, and the Soviets went as far south as possible. The Iranian crisis illustrated the conflict of interests of the Great Powers and thus marked the beginning of the origins of the Cold War in the Middle East. In the case of the Iranian crisis, the Anglo-American coordination against the Soviet Union required the Soviets to withdraw their troops from Iran. When Soviet troops were pulled back, it was mainly due to the fact that Soviet political strategies towards the Iranian crisis had failed. Yet, there are probably four more important factors that can explain the failure of Soviet policy during the Iranian crisis. First, the United Nations was an instrument for arbitration of disputes between nations. Second, from 1945 onwards, the US became an increasingly powerful counterforce against the Soviet presence in the Middle East. Third, the Soviets thought that the creation of two autonomous governments, Kurdish and Azerbaijan, had been enough to reach its goal of getting concessions of oil, but this plan had failed. And finally, the bilateral negotiations proved more effective than using open confrontation or unilateral action.

The development of the US policy towards Iran was to become the Western powers' 'front line' against the Soviet penetration into the Middle East. The whole question of Soviet-American relations is greatly confused by 'ideological baggage'. The Soviet Union is thought to be the aggressor throughout: obstinate, intransigent and expansionist. In describing American diplomacy towards Iran, Kuniholm highlighted the importance of local nationalisms. At the end of the First World War, nationalism in the Middle East represented little more than an inconvenient irritant to the great powers. By the end of World War II, it had become a major factor in policy-making. Powerfully reinforced by the development of the oil industry, it has since become a crucial constraint on the freedom of action of the super powers.