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Transnational Aspects  
of the Kurdish Question

MARTIN VAN BRUINESSEN

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**van Bruinessen: *Transnational Aspects of the Kurdish Question***

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**ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE  
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**Transnational Aspects of the Kurdish Question**

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## Territory and Deterritorialisation: Kurdistan

Simplifying a complex question, one may observe that the objectives of all Kurdish political movements of the past century have concerned two central issues, culture and territory. The Kurdish language and the region historically known as Kurdistan are the Kurds' most important national symbols. It is only seemingly a paradox that many of the most active participants in the present Kurdish movement (especially so in the case of Turkey's Kurds) speak but little Kurdish and have long lived outside Kurdistan. Pre-modern Kurdish uprisings were mostly directed against outside interference in the affairs of local communities; the insurgents as well as their leaders had strong local roots and usually spoke the same Kurdish dialect. Ideas of a common Kurdish identity or of Kurdistan as a natural territorial unit, however, did not occur to them. These ideas are not entirely a modern development — we find them quite explicitly expressed in the work of the seventeenth-century poet Ehmedê Xanî — but only in the twentieth century did they get something of a wider appeal. The first Kurdish nationalist associations were established, significantly, outside Kurdistan, and in Kurdistan itself it was only in the largest and most modern towns that initially gained some influence.

Ernest Gellner defines nationalism, in the first sentence of his celebrated study, as "primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent".<sup>1</sup> Nationalist sentiment, he continues, is a feeling of anger aroused by the violation of this principle (or a feeling of satisfaction due to its fulfilment). The Kurdish case appears at first sight an appropriate illustration of this definition. Often heard complaints of nationalist Kurds concern the division of Kurdistan and the incorporation of its parts into different states, each of which is dominated by other ethnic groups: a double violation of the principle. There have been no serious attempts, however, to establish an independent united Kurdistan; all political movements of this century, with the partial exception of the PKK, have concentrated their efforts on only one part of Kurdistan. This was at least in part due, no doubt, to the fact that these movements were generally dependent on the support or at least connivance of a neighbouring country and needed the Kurdish parts of neighbour states as supply routes and relatively safe zones to take refuge to in the face of an irresistible government offensive. All major movements have moreover, if only for pragmatic reasons, accepted the political incorporation of their national unit in the existing states and only demanded moderate forms of self-rule. Their professed objectives were variants of the Iraqi KDP's slogan, "Autonomy for Kurdistan and democracy for all of Iraq".

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p.1.



The name of Kurdistan (or its Arabic equivalent, *diyar al-Akrad*), which denotes a territory of which the Kurds are the most conspicuous though by no means the only inhabitants, has been in common use for at least six centuries — at least until it was banned in Turkey in the late 1920s. Apart from a gradual expansion in north-western direction in the course of that period, oriental authors are in general agreement as to the geographical extent of that territory, although it never was politically united.<sup>2</sup> There were, until the early nineteenth century, dozens of semi-independent Kurdish emirates but no overarching confederate structure. The larger entities into which the emirates were integrated were vast multiethnic empires, and none of these empires ever incorporated all of them. Kurdistan was divided between the Iranian and Ottoman empires in the 16th century, and the Ottoman part was broken up further into Turkish, Iraqi and Syrian parts in the wake of the First World War. Although the pragmatic demands of most Kurdish political leaders concern only the parts within the borders of their respective states, the territory that has emotional significance is Kurdistan, not any of its constituent parts.<sup>3</sup>

Kurdistan never was the land of the Kurds alone; its population was ethnically and religiously highly heterogeneous. Historical Armenia and Kurdistan overlapped to a great extent, and presently Assyrian (Aramaic speaking Christian) nationalists prefer the name of *Beth Nahrain* (Mesopotamia) as a non-ethnic designation for (part of) the same region. Following the massacres of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Kurds' erstwhile Armenian and Assyrian neighbours mostly survive in the diaspora. In the course of the past century, voluntary or forced displacement has been the experience of ever more Kurds too. In their new places of residence, a large proportion of them have retained or rediscovered a strong sense of Kurdish identity and instead of gradually merging with the host populations or other migrants from the same wider region they have organised themselves in

<sup>2</sup> The seventeenth-century Turkish traveller, Evliya Celebi, gives a generous description of its extent: "It is a vast territory: from its northern extreme in Erzurum it stretches by Van, Hakkari, Cizre, 'Amadiya, Mosul, Shahrzur, Harir and Ardalan to Baghdad, Darna, Dartang and even as far as Basra: seventy day's journeys of rocky Kurdistan. If the six thousand Kurdish tribes and clans in these high mountains would not constitute a firm barrier between [Persia] and the Ottomans, it would be an easy matter for the Persians to invade Asia Minor. (...) Kurdistan is not as wide as it is long. From Harir and Ardalan on the Persian frontier in the east to Damascus and Aleppo [in the west], its width varies from twenty-five to fifteen day's journeys. In these vast territories live five hundred thousand musket-bearing Shafi'i Muslims. And there are 776 fortresses, all of them intact". (*Seyahatname*, book IV, ms. Topkapi Bagdat K. 305, fol. 219a).

<sup>3</sup> The Turkish, Iraqi and other parts of Kurdistan do not have their own distinctive names. There are regions in Kurdistan with well-established names and distinctive identities, such as Badinan, Hakkari or Hawraman, but none of them has acquired the symbolic significance that Kurdistan has.

Kurdish diasporas. Due to a combination of political factors and technological developments, these diasporas have increasingly become (re-)oriented towards the part of Kurdistan and the state of origin. This is, of course, a well-known phenomenon among other migrant groups too, and there has recently been a boom in studies of diasporas and transnationalism.

The term “transnational” is commonly used to refer to various types of social relations and interactions that transcend “national” boundaries. Like the term “national”, which is used by some to refer to states and by others to political communities that are not necessarily (and in fact, in most cases are not) co-extensive with states, the term “transnational” may also cause confusion by conflating rather different types of situations. It is obviously an appropriate term to refer to the network of contacts and the complex of activities connecting Kurdish communities in Germany, Great Britain and Turkey, but I would object to its use for networks linking the Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian parts of Kurdistan because in the latter case the essential element of distance from the homeland is lacking.<sup>4</sup> (“Trans-state” or “cross-border” would be more appropriate terms here). There are, in the case of the Kurds, a number of different diasporic situations to which the term “transnational” may be more or less appropriate.

Numerous Kurds were displaced within Kurdistan but across state borders, e.g. the Kurds from Turkey who resettled in north-eastern Syria to escape the repression that followed the rebellions of the 1920s and 1930s, the 50,000 Iraqi Kurds who fled to Iran during and immediately following the 1974-75 war (of whom part still remain in Iran), and the 65,000 fleeing to Turkey during Iraq’s genocidal Anfal campaign.<sup>5</sup> A similar case is that of the Kurdish guerrilla movements that have operated from base camps in other parts of Kurdistan, across state borders. One is not inclined to speak in these cases of diasporas and transnationalism, because the displaced still live among other Kurds, but these cases have in fact much in common with those that are discussed below.

Very large numbers of Kurds have migrated from Kurdistan to another part of the state of which they are citizens. Throughout the centuries Kurdish tribes were resettled in central and western Anatolia, in north-eastern or eastern

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<sup>4</sup> One leading scholar of diaspora questions, Gabriel Scheffer, repeatedly used the term “diaspora” in connection with the Kurds living in these different parts of Kurdistan, but this appears to reflect the misconception that the Kurds ended up in several neighbour countries because they were dispersed from their homelands.

<sup>5</sup> For more on these population movements see my “Shifting national and ethnic identities: the Kurds in Turkey and the European diaspora”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 18 (1998), no 1, 39-52.



Iran.<sup>6</sup> Due to deportations, labour migration and flight from the war, millions of Kurds now live in such cities as Istanbul, Izmir, Tehran, Abadan, Baghdad, Basra and Damascus. Sources close to the Turkish government have even claimed that more than half of Turkey's Kurds now live in central and western Turkey. I believe that this is an exaggeration, but the very fact of this exaggeration indicates how politically significant the diaspora phenomenon is. (Optimistically, Turkey's authorities appear to believe that massive migration will automatically solve the Kurdish question).

The most significant diasporas, however, are constituted by those Kurds who went further afield and left both Kurdistan and the state to which they belonged. The nineteenth century witnessed a large-scale migration of Yezidi Kurds to Russian-controlled Transcaucasia (the present republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan), and under Stalin a large proportion of the Transcaucasian Kurds were deported to Central Asia and Siberia, where many still remain.<sup>7</sup> Since de-Stalinisation, however, the Soviet Kurds have played a major role in the development of modern Kurdish culture, and through their printed media but especially radio broadcasts from Yerevan they have had a considerable impact on the national awareness of the Kurds in Kurdistan.

Labour migration from Turkey, beginning in the 1960s, resulted in very large Kurdish communities in Lebanon, Germany and other West European states, Libya, Russia, Australia. Students and political refugees have since the late 1970s played a crucial role in organising and politicising these diasporas. Ethnic awareness among these workers' communities was in the beginning almost non-existent: the migrants in Europe had come there as "Turkish guest workers" and this remained long their most relevant identity. Only gradually did specifically Kurdish networks and associations emerge within these communities. From the 1980s on, these communities' orientation towards developments in Kurdistan and Turkey was considerably strengthened, and (political and cultural) organisations that transcended local and state boundaries became ever more prominent among them. In the present paper I shall be especially concerned with the last-named Kurdish communities and their relations both with the host societies and with their countries of origin.

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<sup>6</sup> Until recently, it was hardly known how many Kurds had lived in central and western Anatolia before the recent mass migration. It was in the European diaspora that these Anatolian Kurds discovered about each other and began investigating their history and cultural traditions. They now publish a cultural journal, *Bîrnebûn*, devoted to these subjects, in Stockholm. A first survey of the central Anatolian Kurds was made by Nuh Ateş, *İç Anadolu Kürtleri* (Köln: KOMKAR, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Ismet Chériff Vanly, "The Kurds in the Soviet Union", in: Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl (eds.), *The Kurds, a contemporary overview* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 193-218.

## Exile and Nationalism

There is an intimate connection between exile and nationalism. The experience of exile has been part and parcel of the history of Kurdish nationalism. The exiling of Kurdish leaders who were considered as rebellious or otherwise dangerous was standard practice in Iran as well as the Ottoman Empire well before the era of nationalism, and it continued in the successor states as one of the standard government responses to expressions of Kurdish self-awareness. The resettlement of tribes was one of the means by which both empires maintained control of their territories; by the seventeenth century there were already considerable Kurdish populations in northeastern and eastern Iran as well as in central and even western Anatolia. In response to the Kurdish rebellions of the 1920s, Turkey adopted mass deportations as a policy of "nation-building". The 1934 Resettlement Law explicitly states that its aim was to assimilate the bearers of other cultures (i.e., primarily the Kurds) to Turkish culture. Although the law was not implemented all over Kurdistan, many tribes were deported wholesale in accordance with it.<sup>8</sup> In more recent years, the suppression of the Kurdish armed insurrections in Iraq and Turkey (and to a lesser extent that in Iran) have led to enormous population displacements, forcing millions to leave their villages and, in most cases, the wider region. Exile from Kurdistan, in these cases, was a consequence of nationalism.

But there is yet another relationship between exile and nationalism. The awareness of Kurdistan as a homeland, and of the Kurds as a distinct people, has often been strongest in those Kurds who lived elsewhere, among people of different languages and cultures. The first Kurdish associations were established in Istanbul and more distant places of exile, by Kurds who had studied in other languages and had been exposed to modern ideas. It was exile that brought educated Kurds of different regional backgrounds together and thereby helped them to imagine Kurdistan as their common fatherland. It was exile that transformed Kurdistan from a vaguely defined geographical entity into a political ideal.

### *Kurdish Journalism and Exile*

A century ago, in 1898, the first Kurdish journal, *Kurdistan*, began publication. Significantly it was not in Kurdistan or even Istanbul, the political and cultural

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<sup>8</sup> The text of the law and a critical analysis are given in: İsmail Beşikçi, *Kürtlerin 'mecburi iskan'ı* (Ankara: Komal, 1977); see also: Martin van Bruinessen, "Genocide in Kurdistan? The suppression of the Dersim rebellion in Turkey (1937-38) and the chemical war against the Iraqi Kurds (1988)", in: George J. Andreopoulos (ed), *Conceptual and historical dimensions of genocide*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994, pp. 141-170.



centre of the Ottoman Empire, that the first issues were printed but in Cairo, which was out of reach of the sultan's censorship and where a number of opposition journals were also published. There was only a very small Kurdish community in Cairo then, and when the editor, Abdurrahman Bedirkhan, left Cairo after the first five issues, he handed the journal over to his brother Süreyya, who lived in Geneva. After fourteen issues published in Switzerland, the journal briefly returned to Cairo, from where it moved on to London. In spite of these peregrinations and the sultan's censorship, copies of the journal reached Kurdistan by devious routes. From readers' letters published in the journal we know that it found an avid readership in different parts of Kurdistan, apparently unhindered by the great variety of Kurdish dialects. There may have been a few readers in foreign exile too, but the audience that *Kurdistan* targeted consisted of the educated Kurdish elite in Kurdistan and Istanbul. It had the aim of spreading enlightened ideas and knowledge of the wider world among the Kurds — and this appeared to be only possible from foreign exile.

For a few years following the Young Turk coup d'état of 1908, and briefly again in the aftermath of the First World War, Kurdish journals could appear in Istanbul.<sup>9</sup> Republican Turkey and Iran under the Pahlavi shahs banned the Kurdish press again and only Iraq allowed a number of Kurdish journals and magazines to appear. For most of the twentieth century the Kurdish press was largely a press in exile. The most famous Kurdish journal ever, *Hawar*, was published in Syria in the 1930s and early 1940s, when this country was ruled by the French.<sup>10</sup> In the 1960s, Kurdish publishing shifted to Europe again, where the number of Kurdish students at European universities was gradually increasing. The first Kurdish journals in Europe were produced by and for students, but gradually the students turned to the much larger community of immigrant workers. With the emergence of an ethnic awareness among the latter, and especially with the arrival of large numbers of Kurdish political refugees in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a growing audience for a Kurdish press in Europe itself.

<sup>9</sup> Very few copies of these journals have survived. It was again Kurdish intellectuals living in European exile who published facsimile editions of some of the major journals of that period, at last making them available to a larger Kurdish audience. Mehmet Emin Bozarslan deserves especial mention in this connection for his useful annotated re-editions of *Kurdistan*, *Kurd Te'avün ve Terakki Gazetesi* and *Jin*. For a discourse analysis of the Istanbul-based journals of this period, see: Janet Klein, *Claiming the nation: the origins and nature of Kurdish nationalist discourse, a study of the Kurdish press in the Ottoman Empire* (M.A. thesis, Princeton University, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> *Hawar* too, as well as the less famous Kurdish journals *Roja Nû* and *Ronahî*, that the French mandate authorities allowed to appear during the Second World War, only found a large readership after being reprinted in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.



## *Kurdish Students in Europe*

The first Kurdish student union in Europe, KSSE, was established in Wiesbaden (West Germany) in 1956. It initially had only eighteen members who hailed from different parts of Kurdistan (but mostly from the Iraqi and Syrian parts) and who studied in different European countries. In two decades, their number increased to almost three thousand, on both sides of the iron curtain.<sup>11</sup> Iraqi and Syrian students still dominated the organisation, and it remained primarily concerned with the events in Iraqi Kurdistan, where Mulla Mustafa Barzani had since 1961 led an armed struggle for autonomy. Following the final collapse of Barzani's rebellion in 1975, the first groups of (Iraqi) Kurdish political refugees came to Europe. They strengthened the ranks of the students' movement and further politicised it. The divisions in the Kurdish movement in Iraq were reflected in divisions in the student movement. A rival union to KSSE, named AKSA, was established, so that the rival parties in Iraq, KDP and PUK, each had their parallel students' organisation in Europe.

Earlier, in the mid-1960s, a number of Kurdish students from Turkey had established a separate organisation that more closely followed the developments in Turkish Kurdistan, where an important part of the Kurdish movement was allied with the political left. (Other Kurdish students from Turkey, however, joined the KSSE and oriented themselves towards Barzani's movement in Iraq). This association was also the first Kurdish organisation that attempted to reach out to the Kurdish migrant workers who were arriving in Western Europe from Turkey. It was students and former students who, in the 1970s, established the first Kurdish workers' association, KOMKAR, which in the course of time grew into a federation of dozens of local organisations, at first in Germany only but later also in the Netherlands, France and other countries.

## *Kurdish Migrant Workers in Europe*

In the 1960s, when the economies of north-western Europe were rapidly growing and there was a shortage of labour, workers were recruited from the Mediterranean region: Italy, Spain and Greece first, but then increasingly Morocco and Turkey. In 1973 active recruitment was stopped but the stream of newcomers continued. Few of the earlier migrants returned to their home countries. Most had come single at first but after a number of years brought their spouses and children. Other relatives and acquaintances came as "tourists" in the hope of finding work through informal channels. The large men's dormitories of the early years gave way to family-based immigrant communities, that began

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<sup>11</sup> Zinar Soran, "Komeleya Xwendevanên Kurd li Ewrûpa", *Çira* 9 (1997), 19-27.

building their own institutions: shops, cafés, mosques, sports clubs and various types of associations.

The first labour migrants from Turkey were recruited from the western and central parts of the country, and the Kurds were therefore under-represented among them. The balance changed in the course of the 1970s, when the proportion of migrants from eastern Turkey increased. Most of these migrants thought of themselves primarily as Turks in Europa, however, even if they belonged to such ethnic or religious minority groups in Turkey as the Kurds or the Alevis. Many of them had internalised, or were reluctant to challenge, Turkey's official doctrine that every citizen of Turkey is a Turk. Only gradually did these immigrants in Europe "rediscover" or dare to emphasise their Kurdish identity. This process of rediscovery, which owes much to the activities of Kurdish students, and later of political refugees, is still going on. The so-called second generation, consisting of immigrant workers' children who have grown up in Europe, tend to be much more interested in Kurdish identity and Kurdish politics than their parents were. Many parents returned to their Kurdish roots under the influence of their children.

KOMKAR, the first federation of Kurdish workers' associations, was politically affiliated with one of the political movements that had emerged in Turkey in the early 1970s, the *Özgürlük Yolu* group.<sup>12</sup> Unlike many of the later Kurdish associations in Europe, however, it deliberately decided to concentrate all its efforts on activities directly relevant to the interests of Kurdish workers in Europe, not on the national struggle in Kurdistan and Turkey. It was only due to the influx of large numbers of refugees during the 1980s that the focus of interest of all associations shifted ever more to the country and region of origin. The activities in Europe came increasingly to be geared to the needs of the political and military struggle for Kurdistan.

### *Political Refugees*

The violent suppression of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq, Iran and Turkey caused large population movements. Tens of thousands of Kurds ended up as displaced persons and refugees in the 1970s, hundreds of thousands in the 1980s, millions in the 1990s. Only a tiny fraction of them ever reached Europe, but they made a much larger impact there than the much more numerous Kurdish immigrant workers.

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<sup>12</sup> Thus named after the monthly journal it published, *Özgürlük Yolu* ("The road to freedom"). Later the group became better known by the name of the clandestine political party that constituted its nucleus, the Socialist Party of Kurdistan in Turkey.



In 1975 the movement of Mulla Mustafa Barzani, who had been fighting for autonomy within Iraq, collapsed. Barzani had been receiving Iranian, Israeli and covert American support and had for a year governed a large part of Iraqi Kurdistan as "liberated areas". When the shah could make a favourable deal with Saddam Hussein, he sacrificed his Kurdish allies in exchange for a few boundary concessions. He allowed refugees to enter his country, however. Some fifty thousand Kurdish guerrilla fighters, peasants and townspeople, fearing Saddam's revenge, fled to Iran. Some of these refugees applied for asylum in European countries, and a number of them, generally the most highly educated, were admitted to Europe. The Netherlands, for instance, granted asylum to several dozens of them. They were the first Kurdish political prisoners there, and also the first educated Kurds, who could express themselves clearly in English. They thereby became spokespersons not only for the Iraqi Kurds but for the Kurds in general.

The next waves of refugees were the result of the military coup d'état in Turkey in 1980 and of the Iraq-Iran war (1980-88). Turkey's military put the members of all Kurdish associations as well as independent writers and journalists behind prison bars. Those who escaped arrest or were later released fled to neighbouring countries first, and part of them later managed to reach western Europe. Individual Kurdish intellectuals or activists had in fact been fleeing to Europe since the mid-1970s. Due to the heavy repression by the military regime, almost all Kurdish intellectuals from Turkey in the end sought asylum in Europe, where especially Sweden provided a more favourable environment for the conservation and development of Kurdish culture.

Iran's Kurds had, during the first years after the Islamic revolution, enjoyed a degree of *de facto* self-rule, exercised by Kurdish political parties. When the central government brought all of the Kurdish districts under its control again, all people who were too closely associated with these Kurdish parties had to flee the country. Neither Iraq nor Turkey proved safe to them, and many of them also ended up in Europe. The Iranian regime carried its struggle against the Kurdish movement to European soil too, assassinating Kurdish leaders in Vienna, Cyprus and Berlin.

In the course of the war, Iraq destroyed a large part of the Kurdish countryside, especially after the (Iraqi) Kurdish political parties started co-operating militarily with Iran. At the end of the war, it carried out a genocidal military campaign (nicknamed *Anfal*) against all regions that had been under Kurdish control. Poison gas was used in the first attacks; the surviving villagers were deported and their villages completely destroyed. More than a hundred thousand men "disappeared" in this campaign; as was discovered only years later,

most of them had been summarily executed and buried in mass graves.<sup>13</sup> The last phase of the *Anfal* campaign took place near the Turkish border, and some 70,000 Kurds managed to escape into Turkey. The Turkish government refused to recognise them as refugees and sent many of them back to Iraq. Through international channels, small numbers were accepted as refugees in Europe.

The mass flight from Iraqi Kurdistan was repeated, on a much larger scale, in the wake of the war over Kuwait. Responding to President Bush' call and believing Saddam's military power destroyed, the Kurds had massively rebelled. When Iraqi troops brutally suppressed this uprising, well over a million Kurds fled for their lives towards the Iranian and Turkish borders. Western powers intervened and established a "safe haven" in northern Iraq, in part to relieve Turkey from the threat of hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Few people felt really safe in the "safe haven", however, and over the past eight years tens of thousands have left it in the hope of finding a safer refuge elsewhere.

In the 1990s, Turkey repeated on a slightly more modest scale Iraq's counter-insurgency measures of the 1980s. Thousands of villages were destroyed and the inhabitants forced to leave, in order to deny the PKK guerrilla fighters civilian support.<sup>14</sup> Death squads killed thousands of Kurdish politicians, lawyers, journalists and community leaders.<sup>15</sup> Millions were uprooted, leaving their villages for towns and cities in the region, and the Kurdish region for western Turkey. Tens of thousands of them attempted to reach Western Europe and find political asylum there. Political refugees have come to constitute an important part of the Kurdish communities in Europe.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Galbraith, "Chemical weapons use in Kurdistan: Iraq's final offensive", Staff report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988); Human Rights Watch /Middle East, *Iraq's crime of genocide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> The only detailed study of forced village evacuations and village destruction was published by the Netherlands Kurdistan Society: *Forced evictions and destruction of villages in Dersim (Tunceli) and western Bingöl, September-November 1994* (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederland-Koerdistan, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> See: Martin van Bruinessen, "Turkey's death squads", *Middle East Report* #199 (Spring 1996), 20-23.

<sup>16</sup> For a study of Kurdish refugees in Finland and Britain, see: Östen Wahlbeck, *Kurdish diasporas: a comparative study of Kurdish refugee communities* (London: MacMillan, 1999).



## Exile and Kurdish Culture

### *Newroz*

*Newroz*, the Kurdish New Year that is celebrated on the 21st of March, was first adopted by Iraq's Kurds as their own national holiday in the 1950s. In imitation of the Kurdish movement in Iraq, the Kurdish students' unions in Europe began organising *Newroz* parties, with music and dance and speeches. Through the first *Newroz* parties, the students also attempted to reach out to Kurdish workers and to make them more aware of their Kurdish identity. In my own country, the Netherlands, *Newroz* celebrations began after the arrival of the first group of Iraqi Kurdish refugees in 1975. Initially they involved just the Iraqi Kurds and their Dutch friends and other guests, with only a few Turkish Kurds participating, but each year the number of Kurds from Turkey increased. In the 1980s, the *Newroz* parties came to be dominated by Kurds from Turkey, because ever more migrant workers were mobilised and many educated people fled from Turkey to Europe. Among the refugees there were, moreover, Kurdish singers, musicians and actors, who made a significant impact. *Newroz* became more and more politicised, however. Each political party or organisation held its own *Newroz* celebrations, which assumed the character of political rallies instead of just occasions for listening to music and song, dancing and dining together. Those organised by the PKK distinguished themselves, especially in the first years, i.e. the early 1980s, by their obsession with physical oppression by the state and their calls for violent struggle for liberation. *Newroz* celebrations became the major social events where the Kurdish communities visibly manifested themselves. Whereas in the 1970s a typical *Newroz* party might be attended by several hundred people, those of the 1990s drew up to several tens of thousands of participants of all ages. In spite of their political character, they were family events, attended by people of all ages.

### *Language and Literature in Exile*

Students and refugees also made efforts to cultivate the Kurdish language and to use it as a focus around which to mobilise Kurdish national awareness. This was especially important for the Kurds from Turkey, where Kurdish was banned. In the late 1970s, the first Kurdish literacy courses were organised in various European countries. Many Kurds have for the first time learnt to read and write Kurdish in Europe. The discovery of Kurdish as a written language with a written literature placed it on the same level as Turkish and did much for Kurdish self-esteem.<sup>17</sup> As another consciousness-raiser, KOMKAR began a campaign for the

<sup>17</sup> Although this "discovery" was to some extent also an "invention of tradition", as is common for national symbols deliberately embraced by nationalists (as argued by Hobsbawm and Ranger), Kurdish literature does have a venerable history, that goes back at least three and



right of Kurdish immigrant children to learn Kurdish instead of Turkish as their “mother tongue” in school. (Thus far, mother tongue education had always been education in the official language of the state of origin). Only Sweden and Denmark granted that right, but the campaign succeeded in convincing many Kurds of the importance of their language.

In the 1960s several new Kurdish journals and some booklets were published by the students’ unions in Europe. They did not have a wide distribution but were important because they contained work by the major Kurdish poets and authors (who could not publish in Turkey or Syria).<sup>18</sup> The first journals directed at the larger audience of Kurdish immigrant workers, published in the 1970s, used Turkish rather than Kurdish because of the general low literacy in Kurdish. It took another decade and a half for Kurdish to become increasingly used and understood in written communications.

There was a sudden upsurge of publishing in Kurdish in the second half of the 1980s. This was directly related to the Turkish military coup of 1980, which caused numerous Kurdish artists and intellectuals to leave the country and seek asylum in Europe. A whole generation of young Kurdish intellectuals and politicians — most of the people of whom I am speaking were born between 1945 and 1960 and most of them had had leading roles in political organisations in Turkey in the 1970s — was transplanted to Europe. Whereas in Turkey they had been obliged to express themselves in Turkish,<sup>19</sup> once they lived in Europe they were no longer subjected to the ban on Kurdish. In several countries, and especially in Sweden, it was even possible to find subsidies for publications in Kurdish (as well as other minority languages).

There was yet another factor that contributed to the sudden flourishing of Kurdish writing and publishing in the late 1980s, namely the impact of resumed

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a half centuries. A major landmark is the elegant epic romance *Mem û Zîn* by Ehmedê Xanî, completed in 169\*, which was recognised by the first generations of Kurdish nationalists (as well as the Turkish authorities) as a forceful expression of Kurdish national awareness. It was first printed in Istanbul in 19\*\* and almost at once banned and all copies destroyed. A new edition, with a Turkish translation by Mehmet Emin Bozarslan, was published in 1968 and made a major impact before being banned again.

<sup>18</sup> There were also a few attempts to publish Kurdish-oriented cultural journals in Turkey in the early 1960s, but the journals were closed down almost at once although, apart from an occasional folk poem, all contributions were in Turkish. These journals only found a wider readership after they were reprinted in Europe in the 1990s.

<sup>19</sup> Towards the end of the 1970s, several cultural journals in Turkey in fact published a few articles or poems in Kurdish besides Turkish contributions; one short-lived journal, *Jina Nu*, in fact was entirely in Kurdish and Zaza. These journals were banned, and their editors ultimately ended up in western Europe in the 1980s.

contacts with the Soviet Kurds. The latter, especially those of Armenia, could boast a well-established literary production. Since the end of Stalinism, the Kurds of Armenia (who constituted a relatively small nationality there, numbering only approximately 50,000) enjoyed more cultural rights than the Kurds elsewhere in the region, and publishing in Kurdish was actually encouraged.<sup>20</sup> The Kurdish spoken and written in Armenia is, moreover, a form of Kurmanci, which is also spoken by most Kurds of Turkey (unlike those of Iraq and Iran, most of whom speak southern Sorani dialects). There were two major barriers to communication, however: the Iron Curtain itself and the Cyrillic script that was obligatory for Kurdish in the Soviet Union and that made Kurdish books and newspapers unintelligible for non-Soviet Kurds. It had apparently been Kurdish studying in Europe who established the first contacts. The Özgürlük Yolu group, which had some contacts with the Soviet authorities, was the first to publish literary work of Soviet Kurdish authors in a latinised transcription. Translations into Turkish of historical studies by Soviet kurdologists followed. By the end of the 1980s, due to Glasnost, Soviet Kurdish authors found it easier to travel to the West, making a more intensive interaction with Kurdish authors originating from Turkey possible. More work by Soviet Kurds was republished in Sweden or Germany, where it exercised a stimulating influence on the revival of Kurdish language and literature among the refugees from Turkey.

Presently, some 40 to 50 books in Kurdish are published each year in Sweden alone, about half of them in the northern dialect (Kurmanci) spoken in Turkey.<sup>21</sup> The number of periodicals is even more impressive. By the latest count, between the years 1956 and 1998, no less than 98 journals and bulletins in Kurdish (and another 25 journals addressing Kurdish audiences in other languages) were published in Sweden.<sup>22</sup> France, Germany and England are also home to a number of Kurdish journals each.<sup>23</sup> The best dictionary of northern

<sup>20</sup> See the relevant sections of: Ismet Chériff Vanly, "The Kurds in the Soviet Union", in: Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl (eds.), *The Kurds, a contemporary overview* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 193-218, and: Amir Hassanpour, "The creation of Kurdish media culture", in: Philip Kreyenbroek & Christine Allison, eds., *Kurdish culture and identity* (London: Zed Books, 1996), pp. 48-84.

<sup>21</sup> M. Tayfun, *Kurdiskt författarskap och Kurdisk bokutgivning: bakgrund, villkor, betydelse* (Stockholm: Apec, 1998). The number of books in Kurmanci published in Sweden since 1974 is given as 268 by Laleş Qaso (in the Kurdish weekly *Ronahi*, 7-13 September 1996, 10).

<sup>22</sup> Mahmüd Lewendî, "Di 100 salîya rojnamegerîya Kurdî de rojname û kovarên ku li Swêdê derketine", *Çira* 15-16 (1998), 103-6.

<sup>23</sup> On Kurdish literature produced in Germany (with an emphasis on Kurds of Iraqi origin), see: Mahmood Hama Tschawisch, *Die kurdische Exilliteratur in Deutschland von den 70er Jahren bis heute* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 1996).



Kurdish (Kurmanci) that so far exists was compiled and first printed in Holland.<sup>24</sup>

It is true that these publications did not have very large circulation, for their reading public constituted only a small fraction of the Kurds in Europe.<sup>25</sup> But their readership and contributing authors constituted enough of a critical mass for the development of a modern written language. Returning labour migrants smuggled books and journals into Turkey, where they initially cannot have reached much larger audiences than in Europe. This changed, however, when in 1991 the law on publications in other languages than Turkish was withdrawn, and books and journals in Turkish could be published inside Turkey again. Books that had earlier appeared in Europe were reprinted in Turkey, and several Kurdish journals suspended publication in Europe in order to continue in Turkey. With one or two short-lived exceptions, however, Kurdish publishing in Turkey does not take place in Kurdistan but in Istanbul or Ankara, and under often precarious conditions. Many publications were banned and confiscated, numerous authors and publishers sentenced to prison terms. And even publications that are freely sold in Istanbul are considered as forbidden material in Kurdistan. Kurdish literature and Kurdish cultural life in general flourishes in an interaction between the three different types of diaspora, western Turkey, the former Soviet Union and western Europe. It is quite common to find contributions by authors from the three different situations in a single journal issue or book.

The revival of Kurmanci as a language actually used (and not just as an identity symbol of little use value) is remarkable when compared with the situation of other minority languages. Among the Irish, Gaelic has never regained the same degree of currency, in spite of at first sight more favourable circumstances. The number of Kurmanci speakers has perceptibly increased over the past decades. Language courses that were organised throughout Europe taught this gradually developing standard language to those who opted for Kurdish identity but had Turkish, Zaza or a non-standard Kurmanci dialect as their first languages. Both in writing and, as far as I can judge, in oral discourse, Kurdish was increasingly often used.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> This is: D. Îzolî, *Ferheng: Kurdî-Tirkî, Türkçe-Kürtçe* (The Hague: Komeley Xwendikarani Kurd li Ewrûpa, 1987). A revised edition was published in Istanbul in 1992, when publishing in Kurdish had become legally possible there.

<sup>25</sup> Most of the journals published in Sweden have had a circulation of less than 1000. For a detailed study of Kurdish publishing in Sweden, see Tayfun, *Kurdisk författarskap*.

<sup>26</sup> The PKK initially was the one Kurdish organisation that appeared not to care much for the development of the Kurdish language; all of its publications were in Turkish. More recently it has also been giving Kurdish more attention, sponsoring language congresses and, most influentially, the Kurdish-medium MED-TV broadcasts. It was often said about Öcalan that he

## *The New Media: Satellite Television and the Internet*

The Kurdish print media and Kurdish language courses that can operate in western Europe outside the control of the Turkish state have provided the Kurdish movement with instruments of nation building comparable to those normally used by states. In 1995 a powerful instrument was added to this arsenal, the satellite television station MED-TV, which beamed programs to the Middle East but could also be received in western Europe and a large part of Asia. Video cassettes of its programs were circulated among Kurdish communities elsewhere. The station's weekly fare included news broadcasts, lessons in standard Kurmanci Kurdish, old Turkish movies now spoken in Kurdish, and, most importantly, live studio discussions with callers-in (by telephone) from various parts of the globe.<sup>27</sup> One regular caller-in was PKK chief Abdullah Öcalan, but there were also more spontaneous calls from such places as Diyarbakir or Mahabad, Stockholm or Munich. MED-TV had its major studios near Brussels and auxiliary facilities in Köln and Stockholm; mobile crews made interviews and filmed events throughout Europe. Most of the staff were Kurds from Turkey (Kurmanci and Zaza speakers) but there were also several Kurds from the other parts of Kurdistan, who took care of the Sorani programs.

The initiative for this television station came from the PKK, but it made efforts to present a more pluralistic image, if only to comply with the regulations of the (British) Independent Television Commission, which gave the station access to a satellite and which monitored the transmissions. Kurds of all persuasions were quick to perceive the revolutionary potential of such a station and enthusiastically endorsed it. Kurds of diverse backgrounds have been able to voice opinions that clearly differed from the PKK party line, without being censored. The station soon became very popular in Turkey and Kurdistan itself, and in spite of Turkish attempts at jamming and regular police raids on parabolic antennas pointing to MED-TV's satellite it made a great impact. Whereas the revival of Kurdish writing affected only a thin layer of educated committed to their own culture, MED-TV reached millions, and it became a major source of alternative information to those who distrusted Turkey's

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spoke no or a very poor Kurdish, but he now also delivers speeches in flawless Kurdish.

<sup>27</sup> The first analysis of MED-TV's programs and their impact that I am aware of is by Toronto-based communications scholar Amir Hassanpour (himself a Kurd from Iran). See his "MED-TV, Grossbritannien und der türkische Staat: Die Suche einer staatenlosen Nation nach Souveränität im Äther", in: Carsten Borck et al. (ed.), *Ethnizität, Nationalismus, Religion und Politik in Kurdistan* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1997), 239-278; and "Satellite footprints as national borders: MED-TV and the extraterritoriality of state sovereignty", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* vol 18 no. 1 (1998), 53-72.



official media.

Understandably, the Turkish authorities were extremely displeased with the existence of this independent station, and they used all means available to get it from the air. It had to change satellite several times, as Turkey persuaded other governments to deny MED-TV access to the facilities they controlled. The Belgian police, acting on information from Turkey, searched the studios and confiscated all computers, video equipment and documentation, expecting to find proof of illegal financial transactions, drug smuggling and child kidnapping. (No proof that would stand up in court was found).<sup>28</sup> Turkey attempted to convince the Independent Television Commission that MED-TV was a PKK propaganda outfit and that it incited to terrorist violence. In the wake of Öcalan's arrest and imprisonment in Turkey in February 1999, emotional studio guests did in fact make unambiguous calls for violence. This was sufficient reason for the Independent Television Commission to suspend and then to definitively withdraw MED-TV's licence.

This was not the end of Kurdish satellite television. Meanwhile Iraq's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which was engaged in a military and propaganda struggle with the PKK, had established its own satellite station KTV, which began broadcasting a few hours a day in early 1999. A few months later a successor to MED-TV, named CTV, was in the air with non-political programs. Most recently, CTV was replaced by a new station, Medya-TV. Satellite television is likely to remain a favourite medium for the Kurds to continue the struggle for their cultural and political rights, and the number of Kurdish stations may further increase, contributing to the (re)integration of the Kurdish diasporas and the homeland.

Television is not the only of the new media in which the Kurds have invested much effort and money. The most spectacular development has perhaps been in the use of the internet. The number of Kurdish websites has grown very rapidly over the past few years, and the range of information communicated by them is extremely broad, from journalistic and scholarly articles to digitalised Kurdish music, from information about events to historical photographs, from political propaganda to late medieval Kurdish poetry, from daily news to the text of banned books. A growing corpus of modern written

<sup>28</sup> Accusations of this nature are repeated by a French criminologist in a Swiss scholarly journal: François Haut, "Guerrilla et narcotrafic: le Parti des Travailleurs du Kurdistan, une entité hybride, terroriste et criminelle", *Revue internationale de criminologie et de police technique* 50 (1997), 233-240. Haut describes the police operation against MED-TV and other Kurdish institutions in Belgium as if this by itself constitutes proof of the PKK's criminal involvement, but he does not offer any concrete piece of evidence.



Kurdish is becoming available online, and the web is likely to play a crucial part in the effort to develop a modern standard language. The major political movements have their own homepages, and so do the more important institutes as well as numerous individuals.<sup>29</sup>

## Politics In exile

The Kurdish students' unions of the 1960s were, of course, political associations but they were small and their impact on the Kurdish workers in Europe was marginal. The arrival of refugees, from Iraq first and then increasingly from Turkey, had a much greater effect on the politicisation of the wider Kurdish community. They also made a more systematic effort at lobbying on behalf of the Kurdish cause, establishing contacts with European political parties, churches and various non-governmental organisations.

The wave of political refugees who came from Turkey after the 1980 coup constituted in many ways a watershed. Most of the Kurdish parties and organisations in Turkey were practically destroyed there. The leaders and cadres who took asylum in Europe reorganised their parties here and recruited new members among the Kurds resident in Europe. There was by now a large "second generation" of young Kurds in their teens and early twenties, who had grown up in Europe but who were much more sensitive to appeals to their Kurdish ethnic awareness than their parents had been. The party that ultimately was most successful in recruiting this young generation was the PKK, which established a dense network of students' and workers' unions, information offices and publishing houses all over Europe. It never was much interested in the situation of Kurds in Europe; all of its activities were geared to support for the struggle in Kurdistan. Other organisations, most notably KOMKAR, on the other hand, continued to focus primarily on the needs and rights of Kurdish workers in Europe. Even these organisations, however, experienced the shift in orientation that all Turkish organisations in Europe experienced during the 1980s, and became more responsive to developments in Turkey than those in Europe. This reorientation was partly due to the large influx of political refugees and other

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<sup>29</sup> Some interesting Kurdish websites, with links to numerous other ones, are:

The Paris Kurdish Institute: <http://www.institutkurde.org/home.htm>

Kurdistan Web: <http://kurdweb.humanrights.de/>

Öcalan's lawyers' site: <http://www.asrinhukuk.com/>

Arif Zêrevan's site (with poetry, music, art): [www.nefel.nu/](http://www.nefel.nu/)

The Washington Kurdish Institute has a useful annotated list of links to other Kurdish sites at: <http://www.clark.net/kurd/kurdlinks.html>

party workers,<sup>30</sup> partly a consequence of such technological developments as direct telephone and fax links and, especially, satellite television, which brought friends and relatives in Turkey or whatever part of Kurdistan nearer than one's closest German neighbours.

### *Institutions*

The Kurdish Institute of Paris, founded in 1983 by Kurdish intellectuals living in various European countries, with the support of France's then socialist government, is the first major Kurdish institution in Europe. It is at once a cultural and social centre for the Kurdish community in Paris, a study and documentation centre with a large research library, and a modest diplomatic mission. It is not affiliated with any specific Kurdish party or association but it has facilitated meetings of Kurdish politicians of various parties with European officials and politicians. It publishes a number of journals and bulletins, and it has pioneered attempts to develop a standard for northern Kurdish (Kurmanci) through a series of conferences attended by many Kurdish authors and through a journal in which the agreed upon standard terms are published. Later, Kurdish institutes were also founded in Brussels (1989), Berlin (1994), Moscow (1996) and Washington DC (1996), as well as a well-endowed Kurdish library in Stockholm (1997). Each of these institutes differs from the others in constituency and types of activity, but all of them have contributed to the consolidation and strengthening of Kurdish language and culture. The Washington Kurdish Institute, because of its location, has begun playing an important role in political lobbying on behalf of the Kurds.

Besides these institutes, two Kurdish human rights organisations, established in important European capitals, have worked very effectively in the European political arena. Both the Bonn-based International Association for Human Rights in Kurdistan (close to the Özgürlük Yolu group) and the London-based Kurdistan Human Rights Project (independent, but perceived to be close to the PKK) have been effective lobbyists at various European institutions. They have also, among other things, initiated or supported a growing number of court cases against Turkey before the European Court of

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<sup>30</sup> Parallel developments took place within almost all Turkish and Kurdish organisations that had been active in Europe since before 1980. Their founders were in most cases ideologically affiliated with parent parties or organisations in Turkey but defined their objectives within the European context. The arrival as refugees of high-ranking members of the parent organisations led inevitably to conflicts of authority and disagreements over policy. The refugees understandably saw their futures not in Europe but in Turkey or Kurdistan and wished to mobilise the European branches of their organisations for the political struggle in the home country.



Human Rights, consistently leading to condemnations of Turkey.

*The Kurdish Parliament in Exile and the Kurdish National Congress*

The Kurdish Parliament in Exile, which was established in 1995 and held its first session in the Netherlands, played a significant part in placing the Kurdish question on the European political agendas. It acts as a Kurdish diplomatic representation and has established contact with numerous parties and personalities in Europe. Some of its core members had represented the pro-Kurdish party HEP in Turkey's parliament and asked for asylum in Europe when their immunities were lifted and they were threatened with imprisonment for "separatism". Other members represented various Kurdish associations and constituencies, most of them close to the PKK. This parliament is transnational in more than one respect. Most obviously, it is itself part of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. It is "trans-state" in that, although established by Kurds from Turkey, it includes at least one member from Iraqi Kurdistan and attempts to strengthen the representation of the other parts. Finally it is transnational in that its members have political asylum in different European states and that, although it has permanent offices in Brussels, it has held its plenary sessions each time in a different European country, including the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Russia and Italy. In the last-named two countries it could convene in the national parliament buildings and was addressed by members of various political parties in the host country.

The Kurdish Parliament in Exile never lost the stigma of being a PKK front, however, and it never seriously deviated from the PKK party line. For this reason it did not succeed in bridging the gap with other Kurdish political currents, and its diplomatic successes also remained limited. In 1998 the PKK started negotiations with other parties and organisations about the establishment of a more broadly representative platform, a Kurdish National Congress (modelled, it would appear, on the Palestinian National Congress). When Öcalan was forced to leave Syria and temporarily ended up in Italy in November 1998, the preparations for the constitutive meeting of this congress were speeded up. Öcalan met with a surprising range of Kurdish personalities, including political opponents, and for a brief period it seemed that the PKK was renouncing on its claim to be the sole representative of the Kurds' national will and Öcalan would have to accept other leaders beside himself.

Many of the smaller parties and organisations indicated their willingness to take part in the planned National Congress, but the two large Iraqi Kurdish parties, PUK and KDP, which could not do without good working relations with the Turkish authorities, remained non-committal or rejected the invitation to

join,<sup>31</sup> and the Iranian KDP-I and the Socialist Party of (Turkish) Kurdistan, the most important of the PKK's rivals, also showed little enthusiasm. Öcalan's unexpected departure from Italy in January and his ultimate capture in February put the PKK in disarray and thwarted further plans for inter-party co-operation. At the same time, however, Öcalan's capture by Turkey unleashed strong emotions among Kurds of all political persuasions and a sense of unity that had rarely been experienced before. This may have been the reason that the National Congress, when it finally held its inaugurating session in Amsterdam on May 24, 1999, appeared to be remarkably pluralistic. Both Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan were strongly represented by prominent and influential personalities. In spite of the abstention of the major parties as such, personalities known to be close to them did attend. Although the congress was unmistakably engineered by the PKK, this time a large proportion of the participants were men and women without previous links with this party, including experienced politicians, academics, and religious leaders of considerable charisma.<sup>32</sup> The National Congress may prove to represent a major step in Kurdish nation-building that would not have been possible in Kurdistan itself but only in the diaspora.

## The Contributions of the Diaspora to Kurdish Culture and Politics

The Kurdish diaspora is no longer marginal to what happens in Kurdistan but plays an increasingly central role. The history of the Kurdish diaspora illustrates, even more clearly than developments in Kurdistan itself, the process of resurgence of Kurdish identity after a period of gradual incorporation into the Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian would-be nation-states. A large part of it, after all, started out as a Turkish diaspora, having come as "Turkish guest-workers" and establishing its first diaspora networks in the form of Turkish mosques, Turkish cafés, Turkish workers' associations, Turkish newspapers and journals, Turkey-oriented businesses, etc. Significant Kurdish networks did not emerge before the mid-1970s, and in fact many people kept a foot in the Turkish as well as the Kurdish diasporas, which were never completely separated from one another. As long as Kurdish students and refugees were few in number, Kurds from Iraq,

<sup>31</sup> In the case of the KDP there were even more pressing reasons to reject all forms of co-operation. The PKK had for several years been fighting the KDP in northern Iraq, and the war continued even as the PKK called for the reunion of all Kurds.

<sup>32</sup> The Parliament in Exile had also a few religious personalities among its members, carefully selected to represent the Sunni, Alevi and Yezidi communities as well as the Christian minorities of Kurdistan, but these persons owed their reputation as religious authorities to their being treated as such by the PKK rather than to independent qualities of their own. Among the delegates to the National Congress, however, there were personalities such as Shaykh Ezzeddin Huseyni, who at the time of the Iranian revolution had been the most popular and charismatic Kurdish leader and who is widely respected throughout Kurdistan.



Turkey, Syria and Iran associated together but when the numbers kept increasing, all went their own ways. Each group established their own networks, which overlapped but little with those of the Kurds from their neighbour countries. It was only a relatively small number of individuals who made serious efforts to bridge the gap and integrate the Kurds into one single diaspora network. It should be admitted that the PKK, although clearly Turkey-oriented, has been more successful than earlier Kurdish parties in drawing Kurds from the other states into its orbit, as can be easily observed at its cultural manifestations. The strong response among Iraqi and Iranian Kurds to Öcalan's arrest and the broad participation in the first session of the Kurdish National Congress may be indications of a gradual integration of the Kurdish diasporas.

Not only has the Kurdish diaspora in the past two decades become increasingly oriented towards the situation and the struggle in the countries of origin, it has also come to make increasingly effective contributions to developments there. The role of the diaspora has been significant in the strengthening of Kurdish culture, in organising relief efforts for Iraqi Kurdistan, and in supporting the military as well the political struggles in Turkey. The revival of Kurdish writing, at a time when the Kurdish language was banned in Turkey, could only have taken place in exile. Without the repression that forced Kurdish intellectuals out of Turkey, Kurmanci literature would probably not have experienced its present renaissance. Meanwhile, Turkey has, under European pressure, relaxed its laws and Kurdish books and journals can be published there, though within narrow limits. Thus books that were first published in Europe could be reprinted in Turkey, and debates from the diaspora were carried back to Turkey and Kurdistan. Satellite television (MED-TV and its successors) has been an even more effective medium for bringing uncensored (or at least not state-censored) news and opinions to the Kurdish public in Turkey and neighbour countries. This again would have been unthinkable without the Kurdish diaspora.

### *Financial and Other Contributions by the Kurdish Diaspora*

MED-TV illustrates yet another aspect of the Kurdish diaspora: its capacity of raising large sums of money. The operating costs alone may have amounted to some DM 50 million per year, which apparently was largely raised in the form of contributions by the Kurdish diaspora.<sup>33</sup> Although MED-TV must have been by

<sup>33</sup> Öcalan mentioned this amount to his Turkish interrogators and vehemently denied that MED-TV was financed with drugs money (as has been the standard Turkish claim). See the transcript of Öcalan's interrogation by three public prosecutors of Ankara's State Security Court in: Ünal İnanç & Can Polat, eds., *İmralı'da neler oluyor? Apo, PKK ve saklanan gerçekler: iddialar, itiraflar, savunma, uyuşturucu* (Ankara: Güvenlik ve Yargı Mühürleri Derneği, 1999), p. 23-4. An earlier anti-PKK source gives, apparently on the basis of police



far the most costly of the various PKK activities in Europe, it appears safe to say that the total amount collected from the Kurdish community in Europe each year far exceeds the above sum. It is likely that a considerable part of the cost of the guerrilla war has also been borne by the diaspora. German official sources estimate the number of (Turkish) Kurds in Germany at around 400,000 to 450,000, of whom the PKK can mobilise up to 50,000 for its manifestations. A conservative estimate of the number of Kurds from Turkey in all of Europe may be 600,000, of whom at least 60,000 may be PKK sympathisers.<sup>34</sup> A simple calculation shows that the average sympathiser has raised several thousand German marks per year for the organisation — a high, but by no means impossible sum. The contributions have not always been voluntary; there have been numerous cases of outright extortion but the degree of pressure exerted has varied much from case to case. The PKK saw itself in the past years as a proto-state and claimed the right to tax its “subjects” and even to impose “military service” on them. In practice it has rarely been able to exert the necessary degree of coercion; many of the contributions appear to have been more or less voluntary.

### *Drugs Traffic, the State and the PKK*

It is necessary at this point to say a few things about the drugs trade, if only because it has often been claimed that this has been the PKK’s major source of finance.<sup>35</sup> (And what clearer example could there be of transnational networks deluding and subverting the nation-state but this traffic?) There is no doubt that drugs smugglers have financed much of the PKK’s activities as well as part of Turkey’s non-conventional warfare against the PKK, but the PKK has always denied running its own smuggling operation.<sup>36</sup> Since the onset of the guerrilla war, the smuggling of opium derivatives has become a major source of income in Turkey’s south-eastern provinces of Van and Hakkari, and the leading entrepreneurs have had to share their profits with both the PKK and police and military officials. Kurds have also been well-represented in the networks smuggling heroin from Turkey to the profitable European markets, and these have

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sources, a much lower figure. During the first four months of its operation in 1995, \$ 3.2 million was spent, and the police found an amount of \$ 11 million in a bank account. Haut, “Guerrilla et narcotrafic”, p. 237.

<sup>34</sup> Higher estimates of the number of Kurds in Europe are quite current. The Paris Kurdish Institute believes there are altogether 850,000, of whom 500,000-600,000 in Germany, 100,000-120,000 in France, 70,000-80,000 in the Netherlands, etc. (These estimates include the less numerous Iraqi and Iranian Kurds).

<sup>35</sup> See for instance Haut, “Guerrilla et narcotrafic”.

<sup>36</sup> See Öcalan’s answers to his interrogators in: İnanç & Polat, *İmralı’da neler oluyor?*, p. 24, and the documents that the Turkish authorities claim prove the PKK’s direct involvement in the trade, in the same book, pp. 238-304.

also been “taxed” by the PKK. The relationship of the drugs trade with the Kurdish conflict in Turkey is a complicated one, however. The armed conflict, and the resulting special privileges granted to the counter-insurgency forces, made an untrammelled growth of the drugs trade through eastern Turkey possible and enabled criminal networks to gain control over parts of the Turkish state apparatus. Some of the biggest smugglers were at once well-connected in the highest political circles in Turkey and financed various (non-military) PKK activities, notably a series of pro-Kurdish newspapers published in Istanbul.<sup>37</sup>

The most interesting case is perhaps that of Hüseyin Baybaşı, the godfather of a large smuggling network who is presently held prisoner in the Netherlands. By his own public confession, well before his latest arrest, Baybaşı worked himself up from a small street trader in Istanbul to one of Turkey’s most successful businessmen, associating himself on the way with police officials of ever higher levels and finally becoming intimate with many members of Turkey’s political elite. He was recruited by one of the security services, received training for covert action, and was, so he claims, sent to Belgium and Britain to set up a marketing network for heroin brought into Belgium by a Turkish officer at NATO headquarters. He was arrested in Britain and spent five years in jail there. Upon his return to Turkey, he was told to infiltrate into PKK circles by financing a newspaper. As he later was to tell, this is how he discovered his Kurdish identity, which until then had not meant much to him. After several of his colleagues had fallen victim to death squad assassinations, apparently in retaliation for their support of the PKK, he fled to Europe, where he gave a series of interviews to the Turkish and Kurdish press about the involvement of Turkish officials and politicians in organised crime. His claims appeared so outrageous that most people disbelieved them, until they were unexpectedly confirmed, at least in part, by a series of revelations on the state-mafia nexus in the Turkish press following a traffic accident in late 1996, in which the most notorious right-wing murderer and gangster, a top police official and the chief of the largest anti-PKK militia appeared to be travelling together.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> On this nexus of organised crime, politics, counter-insurgency and the Kurdish movement, see: Hamit Bozarslan, “Network-building, ethnicity and violence in Turkey” (occasional paper, Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 1999).

<sup>38</sup> Interviews with Baybaşı, most of them very fragmentary, appeared in various media in Turkey and Europe. Two good attempts to present his story more systematically (on the basis of a number of interviews) are: Semih Hiçyılmaz, *Susurluk ve kontrgerilla gerçeği* (Istanbul: Evrensel Basım Yayın, 1997), pp. 158-181, and: Frank Bovenkerk & Yücel Yeşilgöz, *De maffia van Turkije* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff/Kritak, 1998), pp. 257-293. On the Susurluk accident and the state-mafia nexus, see Bozarslan, “Network-building”; Bovenkerk & Yeşilgöz, *Maffia*, pp. 212-256.



Baybaşın's network was one among many similar smuggling networks spreading into various European countries (although probably one of the largest). Both the PKK and various factions within Turkey's police, intelligence and security forces as well as the political establishment have indirectly profited from the trade by skimming the smugglers' profits. The transit trade through Turkey as well as the emergence of a lively processing industry in certain parts of eastern Turkey was much facilitated by the guerrilla and counter-insurgency operations; they should be considered as unforeseen side effects of the Kurdish conflict, which however have changed the parameters of the conflict. The street value of the total volume of drugs passing through Turkey is, according to some estimates, in the same order of magnitude as Turkey's entire annual government budget. It is therefore readily understood that efforts to reach a final solution to the conflict may find powerful interests ranged against them.

### *Recruitment of Guerrilla Fighters and Party Workers*

The European diaspora has also been a fruitful field of recruitment, both of guerrilla fighters and of all sort of technical and administrative staff members for the PKK and its front organisations. One would expect young people who have grown up in Europe not to be particularly fit as mountain warriors (and given the high death toll, this may be a correct expectation), but the fact is that quite a few did in fact join the armed struggle. Many Kurdish families in Europe proudly mourn a son or daughter, or even more than one, who died as a *şehid*, a martyr for the Kurdish cause, in eastern Turkey. As it did in Kurdistan itself, the PKK has attempted to persuade the Kurdish diaspora that military service in its ranks was a national duty that at least one member per family should fulfil.

More important than the recruitment of fighters, however, was the recruitment of skilled personnel. In the first years of the war, the PKK had little need for anything but fighters and it even urged young Kurds to drop out of the (Turkish) schools, which it considered as nothing but centres of colonial brainwashing. Its very military successes of the late 1980s and its growing popularity among the population transformed the organisation, giving rise to a large "civilian" wing, oriented towards political rather than military forms of struggle. It was only by recruiting numerous educated young people, many of them second generation immigrants in Europe, that the organisation could establish its dense network of information centres, workers', students' and women's associations, publish books and journals in many different languages, staff the Parliament in Exile, set up MED-TV and its successors, etc. The diaspora has not only provided the PKK with a large pool of marginalised second-generation youth, for whom participation in the struggle gives meaning to their lives and is a source of self-respect. There is also a — much smaller, but



significant — pool of highly educated and successful young Kurds in Europe, whose skills have made a difference to the situation of the Kurds in Turkey and Iraq. From the mastery of foreign languages and international legal expertise to know-how about European institutions and technical facility with the new media, the diaspora has significantly enriched the Kurds' repertory of skills for representing their common interests.

## The Kurdish Question, a European Question

The politicisation of the Kurdish diaspora as well as increasing efforts by the Turkish authorities to maintain or regain their control of their Turkish and Kurdish subjects abroad have gradually made clear that the Kurdish question in not just an Iraqi, an Iranian, a Syrian or a Turkish problem but that it has also become a problem of European politics. At the most obvious, superficial level this is so because of violent protest actions by Kurds and the ever-present danger of clashes between nationalist Kurds and nationalist Kurds in European cities. The PKK — or, to be more precise, a secret organisation within the PKK — was responsible for a number of killings in Europe and numerous violent assaults on Turkish consulates, travel agencies, cafés and union buildings. Kurdish activities were from time to time violently countered by ultra-nationalist Turks ("Grey Wolves"), and there are strong indications that the Turkish hit-squads that were originally established to fight Armenian terrorism in the early 1980s have also been active against Kurdish targets in Europe.<sup>39</sup> The "dirty war" carried on in Turkey has had its extensions in Europe.

A ban of the PKK in Germany and France has not seriously impeded this organisation's capacity for organising mass action or violent assaults on, for instance, consulates or Turkish travel agencies. It was only after visits to Öcalan by high-level German officials and government advisors that the PKK could be persuaded to renounce on violence on German soil.<sup>40</sup> Understandably, the German government did not wish to jeopardise the quiet thus gained by requesting Öcalan's extradition from Italy once he had been arrested there. The

<sup>39</sup> See the report prepared for the Yılmaz government on the covert activities of these right-wing hit men, who were recruited by the security services, in: Yeter Savaş, ed., *Bandenrepublik Türkei? Der Susurlukbericht des Ministerialinspektors Kutlu Savaş* (Bonn: Internationaler Verein für Menschenrechte der Kurden, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Since 1995 Öcalan met, on different occasions, with the chief of the Verfassungsschutz (the German internal intelligence service) and with the maverick right-wing CDU politician Lummer (both reputedly close to chancellor Kohl), with the director of the German Orient-Institut, Udo Steinbach, with a group of university professors and with various other semi-official personalities.

German refusal to do so caused considerable unease with its European partners, showing that the Kurdish question may even affect European inter-government relations.

The events surrounding Öcalan's brief stay in Italy, his peregrinations in search for asylum and his ultimate extradition to Turkey have driven home the fact that the Kurdish conflict in Turkey is also a matter of European concern, and this not only from a law-and-order point of view. It was after all Italian members of parliament who had invited Öcalan to Italy, thereby provoking the crisis. A few months later, the Basque regional parliament's determination to invite the Kurdish Parliament in Exile led to a conflict with the Spanish government, which was equally determined not to provoke Turkey by letting the controversial Kurdish representatives in. The presence of increasingly effective Kurdish legal and political representation in Europe, the Kurds' use of European civil liberties and Turkey's efforts to limit these (by demanding a ban of MED-TV and attempting to outlaw the Kurdish Parliament in Exile, for instance), force European politicians to take a stand on the Kurdish issue. And a political stand on the Kurdish issue is ultimately also a stand on regionalism and minority rights in Europe itself, as many regionalists are very much aware.

Turkey is not a European country in the sense of being a member or even a candidate member of the European Union. But it is a member of the Council of Europe (CE) and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and it is party to a number of relevant international treaties. This makes the Kurdish question almost by definition a matter of concern for various European bodies. The OSCE, for instance, has accepted a number of far-reaching recommendations on the linguistic and educational rights of national minorities, which, if applied in Turkey, would go quite some way towards reducing the urgency of the present Kurdish question.<sup>41</sup> Turkey's present failure to live up to these standards is embarrassing to both Turkey and the OSCE, which so far has not yet taken Turkey to task but ultimately will have to do so. There are a number of reasons why many Europeans are quite unwilling to admit Turkey as a member of the European Union. The fear of being overrun by Turkey's large and mobile labour force is one, anti-Muslim sentiment another. The more noble motives put forward, however, concern Turkey's depressing human rights record and especially its handling of the Kurdish issue. This too has indirectly given the Kurdish question a central position in Turkish-European relations.

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<sup>41</sup> See the OSCE booklets "The Hague recommendations regarding the education rights of national minorities & explanatory note" (The Hague: The Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations, 1996), and "The Oslo recommendations regarding the linguistic rights of national minorities & explanatory note" (The Hague: The Foundation on Inter-Ethnic relations, 1998).



## Conclusion

The communications revolution and the emergence of an organised Kurdish diaspora have changed the nature of the Kurdish question. It is no longer a conflict that only involves the Kurds themselves and the states of the region but it has imposed itself on the political agendas of European countries and the USA as well. The end of the nation state, prophesied by some globalisation theorists, is not in sight yet but nation states are no longer the only significant actors in international politics and they have to acquiesce in limitations of their sovereignty. Although the Kurds are not united and certainly do not speak with a single voice, the international community has begun to recognise them, perhaps not as a separate nation yet but as Kurds and no longer just as citizens of Turkey, Iran, Iraq or Syria. Various persons and bodies representing Kurds — Kurdish institutes, party representatives, the Kurdish Parliament in Exile — have had high-level meetings with officials and politicians in many different countries. Satellite television has given Kurdish nationalists access to a powerful means of nation-building that had until recently been available to states only. The complex of transnational networks discussed in this paper has made the Kurds into much more of a nation than they were two decades ago. The efforts by the Iraqi and Turkish governments to suppress Kurdish nationalism by brutal military force have paradoxically contributed considerably to this process. Thousands of Kurdish villages were destroyed and millions of Kurds were forced to leave Kurdistan, but this has precisely had the effect of making Kurds from different regional backgrounds overcome their differences and of integrating many of them into more inclusive, non-territorial Kurdish networks. The re-emergence of the Kurds as an actor in the international political arena, after a period in which they appeared to be gradually integrated into the Turkish, Iranian and Iraqi nation states, may turn out to be a greater challenge to these states than the guerrilla struggles that they have fought in the past decades.

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