

The Kurds and Middle Eastern “State of Violence”: the 1980s and 2010s¹

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Abstract

Though a macro-level analysis this article examines the evolution of the Kurdish issue since the occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian crisis in 2011, underlining the necessity of a comparison between the current period and past situations, namely that of the 1980s. Kurdish actors participated from a rather weak position in the Middle-East wide conflicts during the 1980s; alliances with regional states that gave access to political and military resources ensured their durability, but a high price was paid for their transformation into subordinated players of a broader “state of violence”. Since 2011, the trans-border Kurdish space finds itself once again in the heart of a “system of transaction” based on violence, but Kurdish organisations face the new region-wide conflicts in a position of empowerment in Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

Keywords: Kurdish movements; state of violence; Iraq; Syria; Turkey.

Kurd û Rewşa Tund ya Rojhilata Navîn: 1980yan û 2010an

Ev gotar, bi rêka helsegeka asta-makro, vedikole li pereşina pîrşgirêka Kurdî ji dema dagirbûna Iraqê di 2003yê da û qeyrana Sûriyeyê di 2011ê da û bi taybetî beldikîşîna ser pêwîstiya berhevdaneka di navbera serdema niha û rewşa borî, anku rewşa salên 80yan. Di salên 80yan da hêzên Kurd pitir ji pozisyoneka qels û lawaz beşdarî dijberî û aloziyên Rojhilata Navîn bûn; hevalbendiyên li gel dewletên li herêmê rê da bikaranîna çavkaniyên siyasî û leşkerî bo misogerkirina berdewamiya hêzên Kurd; lê van dewletan, bi hewldanên giranbuha, hişt ku kurd biminin weki aktorên bindest di nav rewşa tund ya herêmê da. Ji 2011ê ve, tevgera kurd ya dersên careka din xwe di navenda pergaleka tund da dibîne; lê wê carê rêkxistinên kurd yên li Iraq, Sûriye û Tirkiyeyê ji pozisyoneka bihêz rûberî wê dijberiya berfireh ya heremî ne.

كورد و "بارى توندوتیژی" ی رۆژهه‌لاتی ناوهراسه: 1980کان و 2010هه‌کان

هه‌نگه‌ر چه‌ ئه‌م گوتاره شیکردنه‌یه‌یه‌ له‌ پله‌یه‌کی با‌لادا، له‌ گه‌شه‌مکردنی پرسه‌ کورد ورد ده‌بینه‌یه‌ له‌ داگیرکردنی عیراقه‌وه‌ ساله‌ی 2003 و له‌ قه‌یرانی سووریاوه‌ ساله‌ی 2011، نه‌ویش چه‌خت ده‌کات که پێویشه‌ به‌راورد بکرنه‌ت له‌نه‌وان قوناغی نه‌ستا و هه‌لومه‌رچه‌ رابوردوودا، واته‌ هه‌لومه‌رچه‌ی 1980کان. نه‌خشگیزانی کورد له‌ هه‌لوێسته‌یه‌کی تا راده‌یه‌ک لاوازه‌ به‌شداریه‌یان له‌ ناکوکییه‌ فراوانه‌کانی رۆژه‌ه‌لاتی ناوهراسه‌ی 1980کاندا کرد؛ هه‌لوێسته‌یه‌کی له‌گه‌ڵ ده‌وله‌تانی ناوچه‌یه‌دا که ده‌یوه‌ هه‌ی ده‌سته‌کوتنه‌ی سه‌رچاوه‌ی سیاسی و عه‌سکهری، مانه‌وێیه‌ی دا‌بین ده‌کرد، به‌لام ده‌یوه‌ نرخیکی زۆریش به‌ده‌ن بۆ نه‌وه‌ی بینه‌ یاریکه‌ری لاوه‌کی له‌ "باری توندوتیژی"یه‌کی به‌ر‌بلا‌ودا. له‌ ساله‌ی 2011 به‌ دواوه‌، روو‌پۆله‌ی کوردیه‌ی نه‌سه‌یه‌ و نه‌وێیه‌ی سنوورمه‌کان جاریکی دیکه‌ خۆی له‌ ناوچه‌رگه‌ی "سه‌سته‌یه‌کی بده‌ و به‌ستنه‌"دا ده‌بینه‌یه‌وه‌ که له‌ سه‌مه‌ر توندوتیژی هه‌لچنراوه‌، به‌لام ریکخراوه‌ کوردیه‌یه‌کان که روو‌په‌رووی ناکوکییه‌ به‌ر‌بلا‌وه‌کانی ناوچه‌که‌ ده‌بینه‌وه‌، له‌ پله‌یه‌کی تونه‌ستان له‌ عیراق، سووریا و توورکیا.

The Middle East of the 1980s

The aim of this article, which deliberately adopts a macro-level analysis, is to suggest that in order to understand the evolution of the Kurdish issue since the occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian crisis in 2011, one needs to take into account the dynamics of a middle-term historical period going back to

¹ Some aspects of this article feature in my forthcoming contribution “The Kurdish Issue in Turkey of 2010’s” (*Orient*, 2014).

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1979, as well as a broader spatial scale, including other parts of the Middle East.

The choice of the year 1979 is in no one way arbitrary. Through its long-lasting follow-ups and by-products, this date, together with those of 1918/19 and 1948, became the third most important year in the very formation of the Middle East (Lesch, 2001; Bozarслан, 2012). Following the recognition of Israel by Egypt, the Iranian Revolution and the occupation of Afghanistan by the Red Army, all in this same year, the Middle East broadly speaking entered a new historical cycle determined by the extreme weakening of left-wing movements and an almost hegemonic domination of Islamism. In the following decade, while the heavily authoritarian regimes consolidated their grip in Iraq and Syria, the Iran-Iraq War, the war in Afghanistan and the intensification of the Lebanese Civil War cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Throughout the 1980s, inter-state borders, which Anthony Giddens defines as “power containers” (Giddens, 1987: 120), were transformed into intensely violent zones, where frontiers separating state and non-state actors became blurred and a wide-scale military transhumance propelled tens of thousands young men, including the future leaders of al-Qaida such as Bin Laden and al-Zawahari, from the Arab world to Pakistan and Afghanistan. While no external power could play the role of an arbiter or a regulator in the resolution of these conflicts, major regional states and non-state actors found themselves drawn into a “system of transaction” based on violence (Pécaut, 1997). This violence, which cannot be understood without taking into account the power relations at the macro, mezzo and micro-levels, thus appeared as a resource allowing the grand and small regional forces to ensure their durability.

Following the French philosopher Frédéric Gros, one can define this long decade as the decade of a “state of violence” (Gros, 2006). By this Gros means the “end of discontinuities” between war and peace, periods of mobilisation and demobilisation, domestic law-keeping and external war making operations. Beyond this *ad minima* definition, which Gros proposed mainly to understand the evolution of the Western democracies in the 1990s and 2000s, one can also define a “state of violence” as the end of discontinuities between war and ordinary forms of violence, states and non-state agents, state-making and consolidation processes and those of violent contests targeting the states’ authorities. In such a configuration, violence does not only affect the peripheries of a given state, but also its very heart, the “centre” itself being transformed into a producer of a social, political and communitarian violence through the systemic use of non-state actors and/or means. Such a “state of violence” challenges, both theoretically and empirically, Eliasian or Weberian sociology, which present the state building process as the process of pacification of a delineated space and the state itself as an organ monopolising successfully the instruments of coercion.

The state of violence of the 2010s

To some extent, the historical cycle which started with the dramatic events of 1979 lasted until the Arab revolutionary contests of 2011. Less than three years after the fall of Ben Ali, Mubarak and al-Ghaddafi, with the beginning of mass-contests in Bahrain, Yemen and Syria, the Middle East broadly speaking appears, once again, to be gripped by the turmoil of a new state of violence. Notwithstanding the important transformations of the very political landscape of the region, one is in fact struck by the parallels between the situation of today and that of the 1980s. Many parts of the broader Middle East, including Afghanistan and Pakistan, Yemen, Syria (Iraq and Lebanon are also heavily affected by the Syrian conflict), Sinai and Gaza, Libya and the vast neighbouring zones in Africa, experience a massive phenomenon of violence. Not only has the internal territorial fragmentation gained a paroxysmal feature in all these spaces, the sectarian dynamics have become much stronger than in the 1980s, re-drawing the entire map of the “narrow” Middle East (Egypt, the “Fertile Crescent”, Gulf countries, Iran and Turkey, Pakistan) along sectarian borders. While the frontiers between state and non-state actors are once again blurred and many trans-border or supra-territorial armed militants are active throughout the region, many parts of the so-called national territories are controlled by an increasing number of intra or supra-state militias. No external power, be it Russia or a Western country, can impose itself as an arbiter or as an “international” Leviathan able to resolve these regional conflicts. As the main world powers have little capacity of intervention or arbitration, the macro-level *status quo* remains unchanged, but as in the 1980s, no state or non-state actor can itself refrain from the use of violence as a survival safeguard.

As in the 1980s, in the 2010s Middle Eastern minorities² find themselves, either geographically or politically, in the interstices of these regional conflicts. There is no doubt that they pay a heavy price for these wars, which are, in no way, related to their cause, but they are also obliged to adapt themselves to the constraints of this new situation, or even to try to survive thanks to the resources and new opportunities that they can engender. In fact, one of the decisive features of the on-going state of violence (as in the 1980s) is that, the regional powers have deeply contradictory long-term interests and yet, they are condemned to producing almost exclusively day-to-day policies. This uncertainty, which obliges them to favour tactical steps instead of developing coherent long-term strategies, prohibits the formation of a regional system of security, and creates some room for manoeuvre for non-state actors, among them the trans-border or supra-territorial minorities, including Kurds. The relations that the states establish with non-state actors in the course of this process do not have any transformative effect on the region-wide power equi-

² The term “minority” is understood here not in a demographic sense, but in the sense of the communities that have been reduced to “minorities” as a consequence of relations of domination and subordination of a given political space and through a series of mechanisms of exclusion and denial.

librium, nor on the long term status of the minorities; still, they clearly show the limits of the Westphalian model of state, as it was imposed throughout the 20th Century, through forced divisions (Kurdistan, mandatory Arab world of the 1920s), or constraint unifications (Libya, Yemen), to Middle Eastern societies.

The Kurds in the 1980s, the Kurds in the 2010s

The Kurds were among the major victims, but minor actors of state of violence during the 1980s. More than 200,000 Kurds were killed between 1979 and 1991 as a consequence of state coercion in Iran, Iraq and Turkey; thousands of villages have also been destroyed in these two latter countries. Moreover, ethnic cleansing of the Kurds took a dramatic shape in Iraq, with tens of thousands of Kurdish families being expelled from the Kirkuk region (Randal, 1997). One should also mention that through the assassination of Abdurrahman Qasimlo, the leader of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (*Partiya Demokratîk a Kurdistanê*, PDKI) in 1989 in Vienna, the Iranian government managed to decapitate the Kurdish leadership within Iran.

Conversely, as we shall see later, during this decade Iraqi Kurdish organisations found some shelter in Iran as well as in Syria, while Iraq hosted Iranian Kurdish organisations (van Bruinessen, 1988). The Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkeşên Kurdistan*, PKK), which gradually became the hegemon Kurdish actor in Turkey, was able to establish an alliance with Syria and to reorganise its combatants in Lebanon during the civil war before launching its long-lasting guerrilla warfare in Turkish Kurdistan in 1984. In sum, *no lens volens* the Kurdish organisations took part, although in a subordinated position, to the regional system of violence as well as to the region-wide military mobility.

As the 2013 fighting between the Party of Democratic Unity (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD) and Jabhat al-Nusra (*Front of Victory*, affiliated to al-Qaida) in Syria show, Kurdistan is also one of the main theatres of the state of violence of the 2010s. However, compared to that of the 1980s, Kurdish society, politics and politicians present an entirely new shape (Ahmed and Gunter, 2013). The dynamism of the Kurdish diaspora, formed in the wake of the arrival of tens of thousands of militants, intellectuals and young men and women who fled wars and repression in Kurdistan and sought shelter in Europe in the 1980s (Eliassi, 2013; Başer, 2013), and the vivacity of the Kurdish studies, arts and literature both in Europe and in the Middle East, suffice to understand the sharp contrasts between the two periods (Scalbert-Yücel, 2014). Among the most important differences between the two periods, however, has been the emergence of a Kurdish federal entity in Iraq which, in spite of its domestic problems such as wide-spread corruption and lack of integration of younger generations, represents one of the most dynamic, politically pluralistic and peaceful spaces in the Middle East. For the first time in the 20th Century, an entire generation has been formed under “Kurdish rule”, and, notwithstanding the political clientelism, viable institutions, including parliamen-

tary ones, have been established (Lawrence, 2008). The weak post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi state has obviously no means to envision, at least for the foreseeable future, a policy based on a military option against its Kurds as its predecessors did (Ahmed and Gunter, 2005).

The second major –and still uncertain– evolution concerns the constitution of a *de facto* autonomous Kurdish region in Syria. After a long decade of repression against any Kurdish civil or political initiative (Tejel, 2009), Bashar al-Assad decided to retire his forces from the Kurdish regions in the summer of 2012 in order to consolidate power in his strategic strongholds. Although the formation of this new entity was a result of the al-Assad regime’s incapacity to control the entire Syrian territory, as well as its intense conflict with Turkey (which openly armed the Syrian opposition), it has radically changed the very shape of the Kurdish issue in the Middle East.

Finally, in Turkey, where the military has for the moment been politically subordinated, the government of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) decided to improve its relations with the Iraqi Kurdish authorities. While Ankara’s commercial interests and its will to ease an almost exclusive energy dependency on Iran and Russia push it towards a rapprochement with Iraqi Kurdistan (Idiz, 2013),³ its limited room for manoeuvre obliges it to accept the existence of a Kurdish entity in Syria (Çandar, 2013). The aid it has given to Jabhat-al Nusra in the summer of 2013 and the building of a wall militarising the intra-Kurdish borders separating Syria and Turkey, show however that it has not abandoned its policy of “containment” vis-à-vis the Syrian Kurds.

There is no doubt that Turkey’s domestic and region-wide Kurdish policy aim at the transformation of the Kurdish movement into a subordinated actor of AKP’s policies inside Turkey; whatever Ankara’s short and long-terms aims might be, however, its Kurdish “overture” has largely legitimised the PKK and the legal Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP), and consolidated their social basis (Ekmekçi and Kaya, 2013). The formation of a real hegemonic bloc around the PKK-BDP in Kurdistan in Turkey (more than 30 deputies, around 100 municipalities, among them those of seven important large cities) (Watts, 2010), should be mentioned not because it is a new phenomenon, but because it has become such a substantial and durable one. The end of the Kurdish taboo in Turkey (Gunes and Zeydanlıoğlu, 2014) does not mean that one should exclude the possibility of a return to extremely repressive policies, such as Erdoğan’s government followed in 2011-2012; but after 30 years of internal war, Ankara seems finally to be aware that “coercion” cannot be its *exclusive* political line. Thus, bar a new military coup or an electoral victory of the Turkish ultra-nationalist parties, a return to a policy of simple denial of the Kurdish issue, which marked the 1980s and 1990s, would be most unlikely.

³ See also: “New Kurdistan Oil Pipeline Boosts Kurds in Stand-off with Baghdad”. (2013, 17 October). *Reuters*.

Given the changes observed in these three countries, it would be possible to say it is only in Iran that the main determinants of the Kurdish question have remained almost untouched over the past decade. However, if it is true that the extremely timid “overtures” of the Muhammed Khatami period (1997-2005) did not survive the repressive presidency of Mahmud Ahmadinejad (Elling, 2013), it is also important to underline that, after a decade of heavy fighting between the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê*, PJAK) and the *pasdarans* (*Revolutionary Guards*), Tehran, for tactical reasons, agreed to negotiate a cease-fire with PJAK in 2011. Although it would be illusory to expect radical changes in the Iranian domestic and militia-based foreign policy in the short term, the presidency of Hassan Rohani, which started in 2013, may take some steps to reduce the massive Kurdish discontent that marked the 2000s. The intellectual and social vivacity of the Iranian Kurdish society, which has largely boycotted post-Khatami elections, is a clear sign that in the event of a deep political crisis, the Kurdish question will be at the top of the political agenda in this country.

These developments, which would have seemed unbelievable even to the most optimistic observer only two decades ago, naturally do not mark the end of the process of subordination of the Kurds in the Middle East. However, they provide the Kurds with an important capacity of “empowerment” and resistance, that no Kurdish movement could have had during the previous periods of military contest (1920s and 1930s, 1946, 1961-1975), or between 1979 and 1991. They also go hand-in-hand with profound changes that one observes in Kurdish society, including in the very formulation of “Kurdish politics”. During the last decades, Kurdish society in Iraq and Turkey has become a predominantly urban society, where thousands of villages were systematically destroyed during the 1980s and 1990s, and in Iran and Syria, where developments gave way to the emergence of a middle classes, distinct from the former urban notabilities or craftsmen. The emergence of this class metamorphosed the Kurdish urban landscape and gave birth to a new *habitus*, new ways of consuming, living, socialising, thinking and struggling. An intellectual “class”, distinct from the politicised intelligentsia of the 1950s and 1960s, also appeared and became the agent of new forms of socialisation, political mobilisations, as well as cultural production. In the 1970s and 1980s, but also in the 1990s, being a “Kurdish militant” primarily meant being a member or sympathiser of a political party; in contrast, the intellectuals of the 2010s develop non-partisan forms of being, behaving, and struggling. Both the middle classes and this intellectual stratum are widely integrated across Kurdistan and entertain close relations with the outside world.

Kurdistan in a conflicting regional system

During the last decade, the strategic positions of states in the region-wide power relations, as well as their policies concerning the Kurdish question have, broadly speaking, changed drastically. In the wake of the internal break-

up of Syria, which in the 1980s was one of the most important independent players in the Middle East, has largely become a client state, whose regime depends for its survival on Iranian aid as well as military strategies decided by the *pasdarans* and Lebanese Hezbollah. Similarly, Iraq, a major independent player and a regional “patron” throughout the 1980s, is today essentially a broken-up client state. While Iraq’s fragmentation explains its incapacity to effectively control its own Sunni areas, not to mention the Kurdish ones, Iraq’s internal paralysis and clientelisation by Iran explains its inability to resist the policies dictated by Teheran.

The absence of Syria and Iraq, two traditional regional players on the regional scene, leaves space for the Gulf countries (which are not under consideration in this article), and two non-Arab countries, Turkey and Iran. Turkey, which in the 1980s was opposed to any Kurdish activism anywhere in the Middle East (but probably hosted non-Kurdish anti-Iranian activities on its soil), is henceforth able to develop complex strategies, seeking an alliance with Iraqi Kurdistan and trying to “co-opt” the Middle-East wide Kurdish political class. Moreover, Turkey is much more exposed to the domestic impacts of regional conflicts today than in the 1980s, making it even more pressing to seek “regional allies”, including those among the non-state actors.

As the on-going instability along the Turkish-Syrian borders and the Gezi Park protests in the summer of 2013 show, the sectarian orientations of Turkish domestic and regional politics under Erdoğan transformed the Syrian conflict into an intra-Turkish conflict and outraged Turkey’s Alawite and Alevi communities. As a paradoxical and largely unpleasant outcome of this evolution, Turkey also feels “obliged” to defend the Sunni communities throughout the region, among them, Iraqi Kurds. It is true that this “generosity” has not been extended to Syrian Kurds, who are almost exclusively Sunni, but after months of hesitation, Ankara recognised the dangers of its policy of supporting Jihadist movements and was obliged to invite the PYD’s co-chair Salih Muslim to Turkey in order to establish a link with this pro-PKK organisation. Concerning Iran, one should note that it remains a major force in the trans-border Kurdish space, and, by the very “green-light” that it has indirectly given to the pro-PKK PYD in Syria, it exerts a great impact on the Kurdish movement within. Similarly, by holding PJAK, close ally of the PKK, in a position of political hostage through the agreement of a long-lasting cease-fire, Tehran also exerts an undeniable pressure on the PKK itself and encourages it to resume its armed struggle against Turkey.

The Kurdish movement in the 2010s: unity or division?

As mentioned earlier, the trans-border Kurdish movement of the 1980s was, by and large, divided; but strange as it might appear, it could also find some parcels of power in its own divisions, which were dictated by the constrained alliances that it had to negotiate with Iran, Iraq or Syria. These divisions, which caused a series of internal conflicts, have further aggravated the dark

subjectivities of this decade. The alliances of Kurdish movements with the states which had extremely repressive policies vis-à-vis their own Kurds provoked heavy intra-Kurdish tensions and fratricide and created a real malaise among Kurdish public opinion. This was, to some extent, the price that Kurds, but also other Middle Eastern non-state actors, including the Palestinians, had to pay in order to access resources, to ensure their physical durability.

Compared to this past situation, the Kurdish “political class” of today seems to be much less vulnerable. It is of course difficult to comment on its future ability to preserve such unity in the context of a major regional conflict, for example a deeper “cold war” between Iran and Turkey, or a further aggravation of the Syrian state of violence, but one should also admit that it was successful enough to keep peaceful and fluid internal relations throughout the 2000s. To some extent, the Kurdish region-wide political landscape has also become more clear-cut during this decade: after the crisis it went through in the wake of Öcalan’s arrest in 1999, the PKK imposed itself almost as the sole reference actor in Turkish Kurdistan. It has also become, at once, the inspirer, organiser and protector of the PYD in Syria and the PJAK in Iran, two political parties which are directly linked to the Syrian and Iranian Kurdish society’s internal dynamics, but which are often regarded as the PKK’s local branches.

There is no doubt that Öcalan’s party is unchallenged in Turkey itself. In contrast, and in spite of its willingness to establish its total hegemony, the PYD in Syria is obliged to accept a high degree of intra-Kurdish plurality in what is henceforth known as Kurdistan’s *Rojava* (*Western Kurdistan*) region. It is obviously difficult to predict the future evolution of Iranian Kurdistan, where any Kurdish political activity remains underground; but in the context of a future political change, the PJAK will probably also be tempted to impose its hegemony and, at the same time, be forced to accept an asymmetric plurality with other Kurdish actors such as the PDKI, Komala and their dissident branches. One could thus consider the PKK as a major actor with a trans-Kurdish implantation, and therefore, as a structural pillar of the Kurdish political sphere well beyond Turkey.

As far as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Partîya Demokrata Kurdistan*, KDP) of Massoud Barzani is concerned, it occupies a dominant (but not a hegemonic) position Iraqi Kurdistan; but it imposes itself as a model and protector of the other Kurdish political formations in Iran and Syria, such as the PDKI and the Kurdish National Council (*Encûmena Nîştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê*, KNC). It is naturally obliged to accept Iraqi Kurdistan’s internal plurality, and the challenge posed by the strong opposition of the Goran (*Change*) movement, now the second major political force in Iraqi Kurdistan; but thanks to important symbolic and material resources at its disposal, it can be considered as the second structuring pillar of the Kurdish political scene.

A constrained coexistence

This evolution does not only illustrate a highly fascinating model of construction of a trans-border political space, but also obliges Kurdish organisations, among them the two major players the PKK and the KDP, to establish a mutual understanding, to fix the rules of coexistence, including those regulating their respective autonomies and interdependence, and to delineate their individual margins of action. It also means that they have to accept that no one can deny the other the possibility of “contracting” tactical alliances with a state, but at the same time, both of them have to agree that these alliances must not threaten a given Kurdish actor and the Kurdish cause broadly speaking, as was the case in the 1980s. It is, however, obvious that given regional constraints, as well as policies of blackmail used by Turkey and Iran on their own Kurds, this political system can only evolve on a knife edge.

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