

Identity, Nationalism, and the Pursuit of Statehood  
in Kurdistan and Armenia

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## **Introduction**

What qualifications must be met for a minority to gain its own state? For social groups that define themselves through a sense of collective identity, yet remain bound by the governments that do not recognize this identity as legitimate, this question is all-important. The quest for independence can wax or wane in importance as minority groups attempt to assimilate into the countries they inhabit, but often the goal of sovereignty remains ever in societal consciousness, waiting to be realized. Lacking defined borders to separate them from surrounding social groups, these minorities must unite themselves less tangibly through a common ethnicity, religion, and language.

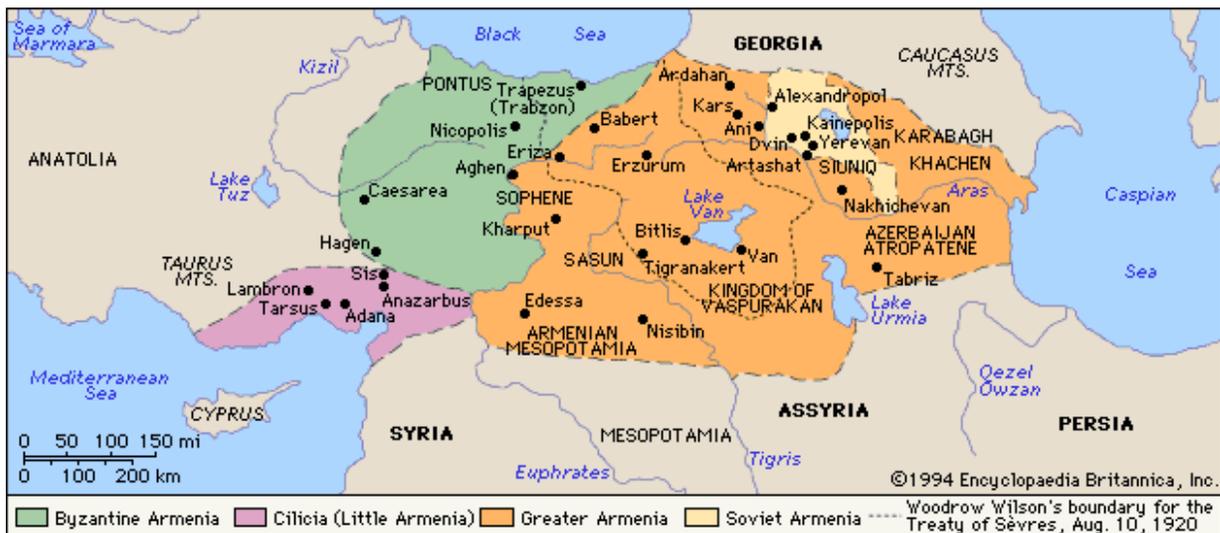
The Kurds and Armenians are two notable groups who have undergone this struggle. While the Armenians achieved independence in 1991, the Kurds remain a stateless ethnic minority, concentrated mainly in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The attitude of various governments toward both groups has vacillated, and while both the Kurds and Armenians have at times enjoyed autonomy, they have also often been treated with hostility. At best, their political aspirations have been viewed with suspicion in both regions, incurring mistrust that has often resulted in the denial of basic rights. As such, they have been not only denied the independence associated with having their own countries, but also disenfranchised within the countries in which they live.

That both Kurds and Armenians have remained discrete groups without the aid of borders is a testament to the strength of their identification as members of an ethnic group over an identification as members of the countries they inhabit, and also a testament to the difficulty of assimilating into another society while preserving this identity. This paper will discuss the sources of this identity and the resulting pursuit of autonomy among the Kurdish and Armenian peoples.

## Maps



Kurdistan.<sup>1</sup>



Armenia.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Kurdistan*. [Map/Still]. Retrieved December 1, 2007, from Encyclopædia Britannica Online: <http://www.britannica.com/eb/art-6304>.

<sup>2</sup> *Armenia: historical divisions of Armenia*. [Map/Still]. Retrieved December 1, 2007, from Encyclopædia Britannica Online: <http://www.britannica.com/eb/art-3764>.

## Sources of Identity: The Kurds

While Kurdish identity is difficult to categorize because of the variations among Kurds in various parts of Kurdistan, the Kurds tend to think of themselves as one distinct people, reflecting a shared self-concept which allows Kurdish individuals to classify themselves together in one social group despite the separation of national boundaries. Although the Kurdish community is in some ways highly fractured because of the individual challenges faced by Kurds in the countries in which their communities have evolved, their perception of themselves as a discrete people is a testament to the salience of Kurdish identity. However, before the concept of Kurdish identity can be discussed in any detail, the more general concept of minority identity must be discussed.

Minorities are generally defined “as a group of people – differentiated from others in the same society by race, nationality, religion, or language – who both think of themselves as a differentiated group and are thought of by the others as a differentiated group with negative connotations.”<sup>3</sup> In this definition, one finds mention of not only concrete differences, namely race, nationality, religion, and language, but also of the conception of the minority group both in its own collective consciousness and in the collective consciousness of the dominant group as separate from other individuals in the shared society. This conception carries equal if not more weight than the tangible differences upon which it is based because of the connotations located within it. As this definition indicates, an attitude of negativity usually exists between the dominant group and the minority group, normatively contextualizing the divide between them. It is important not only that there are fundamental differences, but also that these differences hold significance for both groups. Speaking two different languages or following two

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<sup>3</sup> Arnold Rose, “Minorities,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 10, 1968, 365.

different religions is not inherently a source of conflict; however, it becomes a source of conflict if a society has established that one religion is good and the other is bad, or that speakers of one language are more likely to be intelligent than speakers of the other. By assigning normative judgments to these facts, social groups widen the gaps between them, each emphasizing its own “positive” aspects and the “negative” aspects of the other, retreating into and reinforcing their own identities and perpetuating intergroup conflict.

Identity is therefore broken down into two main components: a tangible component, made up of such obvious differences as ethnicity, religion, and language, and an intangible component, made up of both internal and external perceptions of the group. In other words, there are both intrinsic and reactionary components of identity, and Kurdish identity cannot be understood properly without giving attention to both.

The first and perhaps most easily identifiable factor of Kurdish identity is the Kurdish ethnicity. The strength of the bonds formed through shared ethnicity can scarcely be overstated. As explained by George De Vos, “Growing up together in a social unit... allows men to develop mutually understood accommodations, which radically diminish situations of possible confrontation and conflict.”<sup>4</sup> De Vos goes on to define an ethnic group as “a self-perceived group of people who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by the others with whom they are in contact,” and to note that “members of an ethnic group cling to a sense of having been an independent people... whatever [their role] in a pluralistic society.”<sup>5</sup> These excerpts call attention to both the unifying and exclusionary properties of a common ethnicity. While bringing those within

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<sup>4</sup> George De Vos, “Ethnic Pluralism: Conflict and Accommodation,” *Ethnic Identity: Cultural Continuities and Change*, ed. George De Vos and Lola Romanucci-Ross, Mayfield, 1975, 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

the ethnic group closer together, the consciousness of their shared ethnicity tends to alienate them from the rest of society.

Historically, the Kurds have seen the ethnic difference between themselves and others in the nations they occupy as cause for separation. Shaykh ‘Ubayd Allah, a nationalist and religious figure of the late nineteenth century, submitted “the racial, cultural, and linguistic similarity of the Kurdish people, which mark[s] them off as a separate nationality” in defining his reasons for pursuing independence for Kurdistan.<sup>6</sup> After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, “one important change... was the shift from religion to ethnicity in the categorization of group identity.”<sup>7</sup> As group identity became more salient, larger groups such as the Arabs, Persians, and Turks began to make exclusions based on ethnic categories. This was especially the case in Turkey, where Atatürk’s reforms denied the salience of Kurdish identity and upheld Turkish identity above all else. In the wake of Atatürk’s Turkification, Kurdish leaders would seek independence as a means of preserving their own ethnic identity, leading to repeated rebellions against the Turkish government in defense of their self-definition.

Denise Natali explains the increasing emphasis on Kurdish ethnicity by arguing for “a direct relationship between ethnicized political boundaries and Kurdish ethno-nationalism... [A]s political space becomes ethnicized, so too does [Kurdish identity].”<sup>8</sup> As the increasing emphasis placed on ethnicity after the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire encouraged the development of a strong ethnic identity, societies became increasingly exclusionary on the basis of these identities, drawing politicized lines

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<sup>6</sup> Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development*, Syracuse University Press, 2006, 81.

<sup>7</sup> Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran*, Syracuse University Press, 2005, 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

between Kurds, Turks, Arabs, and Persians. While the other three ethnic identities could be openly expressed in the countries in which they were dominant, Kurdish identity had no such country; the Kurds remained a stateless minority, subject to governments that were so closely affiliated with their dominant ethnic groups that they regarded the Kurds as citizens of lesser legitimacy. In response, the Kurds focused on their own ethnicity in order to distance themselves from the nations from which they found themselves disenfranchised.

A second factor in Kurdish identity is religion. Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, and Islam has been an important part of the Kurdish heritage. After the overthrow of Kurdish princes by the Ottoman Empire, Kurdistan was dominated by “lawlessness and disorder,” owing to a lack of administration and authority.<sup>9</sup> Having removed the Kurdish leadership, the Ottoman Empire was unable to assert new leadership to fill the void. The need for authority evoked the desire for a leader who would step in and overcome the turmoil while giving them a national symbol around which to rally. Furthermore, the government’s inability to ameliorate the suffering that followed the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 left the population convinced that help would have to come from within. Ultimately, the lack of strong secular Kurdish leaders gave rise to strong religious Kurdish leaders with the coming of Shaykh ‘Ubayd Allah.<sup>10</sup> The shaykh saw himself not only as the protector of the Kurdish people but also as a purifier of the Islamic faith, and it was perhaps inevitable that in rallying behind a leader who symbolized both Kurdish and Muslim identity, the Kurds would allow the two to become intertwined.

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<sup>9</sup> Jwaideh, 75.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 76.

The juxtaposition of Islam and Kurdish identity demonstrated by the shaykh's citation of religion as a reason behind the desire to separate from the empire. Of the reasons he gave for the necessity of separation and independence, one was the distinctiveness of Kurdish religion. However, as Wadie Jwaideh points out, at this point the religious differences were not so significant as the shaykh's words might lead one to believe. In fact, the Turks and Persians, from whom the shaykh wanted to separate, were also Muslims; furthermore, while the Persians were Shiite, the Turks were Sunnis like the Kurds, although the Turks came from the Hanafi sect and the Kurds from the Shaf'i sect. To argue that the Kurds possessed a unique religion, particularly as compared with the Turks, was to "magnif[y] denominational differences" profoundly, and the shaykh's attempt at doing so indicated "indicates the extent to which nationalism depends on exclusiveness and difference."<sup>11</sup> By building a nationalist argument based on religion, the shaykh was able to paint the Kurds as a people removed from the surrounding population and therefore in need of a separate space, adeptly using the religious identity of the masses as a tool for promoting a nationalist agenda.

Religious identity would also play a significant part in breaking the bonds between the Kurds and the Turks after the turn of the century. After the breakdown of cooperation between the Young Turks and non-Turkish Ottoman nationalists, some of whom were Kurds, the Young Turks set in motion a "program of forcible Turkification," sending other nationalists underground.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the Young Turks' secular tendencies drew the ire of devout Muslims. While secularization also provoked the anger of religious Turks, it was a double blow to Kurds, who now found themselves at odds

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 104.

with the government not only because they were Kurds and not Turks, but also because they were Muslims. In this period, the support of the shaykhs, who were religious characters in Kurdish society, gave nationalist ideals resonance within the Kurdish population as alternatives to secularization. The shaykhs stood “by both training and conviction... for the traditional Islamic state as opposed to the modern secular state envisaged by the Young Turks.”<sup>13</sup> By throwing their support to the nationalists, they provided the linchpin around which both religious and nationalist sentiments could revolve.

The same juxtaposition of religion and nationalism would be seen in the Kurdish rebellion of 1925. In the wake of Atatürk’s reforms, the Kurds had to contend with both secularization and Turkification. While Turkification was an emotional issue for all Kurds, secularization was also of concern to the masses. Jwaideh captures the reaction of the Kurdish population:

In the eyes of devout Kurds, the suppression of the caliphate and the Shari‘a law by the leaders of the new Turkey severed the ancient and deeply cherished bond of Islamic brotherhood between themselves and the Turks. They felt that they no longer had anything in common with the authors of these impious innovations, who by their own actions had cut themselves off from the rest of the faithful... Thus it was that a strong Islamic sentiment came to be an important ingredient of Kurdish nationalism.<sup>14</sup>

Today there is a great deal of religious variation among Kurds. In her study on Kurdish identity in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, Denise Natali discusses some of the religious differences between the Kurdish communities in the three states. In Turkey, some Kurds

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 210.

have “reconfigured Kurdish liberation in the context of Islam as a way of countering the state’s Islamic policies... [One leader] declared the PK more Islamic than the Islamists..., redefining the Kurdish struggle as a jihad against the Turkish state.”<sup>15</sup> In Iran, Kurdish communities became increasingly secularized in response to the repressive tactics of the Shi‘a Islamic state.<sup>16</sup> In Iraq, most Kurds tended to observe Islam loosely, in a manner that one scholar termed “lackadaisical”<sup>17</sup> while another characterized it as “relatively tolerant.”<sup>18</sup> However, Nisan points out that the recent emergence of Islam “as a commanding political force” has led some Kurds, such as Masoud Barzani, to “declare... their community to be practicing Muslims.”<sup>19</sup> In short, the fragmented nature of religion among the Kurdish populations in different localities complicates the discussion of “Kurdish religion.” While a majority of Kurds characterize themselves as Sunni, the level to which this impacts their daily lives varies by community.

The third component of Kurdish identity is language. Most Kurds speak Kurdish, “an Indo-European language from the northwestern Iranian family,” closely related to Farsi but unrelated to Turkish or Arabic.<sup>20</sup> The language can be broken down into two main dialects. The Kurmanji dialect is spoken in the Turkish and Syrian regions of Kurdistan, the northern parts of Iranian Kurdistan, and the western parts of Iraqi Kurdistan; the Sorani dialect “is spoken in the central parts of Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan.”<sup>21</sup> While there are also smaller varieties, these are the two main dialects of the

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<sup>15</sup> Natali, 115.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>17</sup> Mordechai Nisan, *Minorities in the Middle East: A History of Struggle and Self-Expression*, McFarland, 2002, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Vanessa Acker, “Religion Among the Kurds: Internal Tolerance, External Conflict,” *Kennedy School Review*, vol. 5, 102.

<sup>19</sup> Nisan, 53.

<sup>20</sup> Amir Hassanpour, Tove Skutnabb-Kagnas, and Michael Chyet, “The Non-Education of Kurds: A Kurdish Perspective,” *International Review of Education*, vol. 42, no. 4, 1996, 368.

<sup>21</sup> Kevin McKiernan, *The Kurds: A People in Search of Their Homeland*, St. Martin’s Press, 368.

Kurdish language. According to a 1996 report on the linguistic situation of the Kurds, the Kurdish language is the fortieth most widely spoken language in the world.<sup>22</sup> However, continues the report, “this numerical strength is... undermined by the forcible division of Kurdistan among five neighboring states which deny the Kurds national, linguistic and educational rights.” Because the Kurds are not concentrated in one independent nation but rather spread out in separate nations with their own official languages, Kurdish lacks the linguistic power one would expect from such a widely spoken language. In Syria and Iran, teaching Kurdish is illegal; until recently, it was also prohibited in Turkey, but in 2004 it was legalized on a limited basis for private schools.<sup>23</sup> In Iraqi Kurdistan, however, Kurdish is now the official language.

Regarding the importance of language to identity, Kevin McKiernan’s description of his encounter with a Kurdish postdoctoral student is telling. McKiernan recounts the man’s pride in his “comprehensive Kurdish-English dictionary, a drawn-out endeavor that would become his life’s work.”<sup>24</sup> Justifying the time he had invested in his dictionary, which contained over 60,000 entries, the student stated, “The Kurdish language makes us who we are... They can confiscate your land and they can take your cattle away, too... but as long as you have your language, you are a people.” This profound correlation between identity and language may have been one of the motivations behind Atatürk’s decision to ban non-Turkish languages when he assumed power. The language of a social group is a clear signifier of the community to which it belongs; by forcing the Kurds to adopt the Turkish language, Atatürk was forcing them to appear Turkish and thereby denying the salience of their identity. Similarly, the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 368.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 16.

restrictions placed on the Kurdish language, including its absence from schools, work to restrict the expression of Kurdish identity by putting speakers at odds with the government simply by virtue of their language. The 1996 report previously mentioned went so far as to accuse governments of “linguistic and cultural genocide” in attempting to suppress the language,<sup>25</sup> terming the denial of Kurdish-language education “a means of destroying the Kurds as... a people.”<sup>26</sup>

Despite all attempts to suppress Kurdish identity, it remains salient, uniting Kurds in their shared heritage despite the national lines drawn between them. Drawing from their commonalities, Kurds have been able to maintain the strong identity necessary to link one people spread across many borders, continuing an historic struggle for a land in which this identity could be celebrated rather than repressed by external forces.

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<sup>25</sup> Hassanpour, Skutnabb-Kagnas, and Chyet, 367.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

## Sources of Identity: The Armenians

Like the Kurds, the Armenians are one of the ethnic minorities of the Middle East whose minority identity that has survived statelessness and rule by other nationalities. Unified by a common ethnicity, a common language, and a common religious tradition, the Armenian community has endured despite attempts to destroy it in the early twentieth century. Near the end of that same century, its members at last gained the independent state they have been pursuing since the dawn of Armenian nationalism.

The area known as historic Armenia, not to be confused with the modern state of Armenia, lay “between the Mediterranean and Black seas..., lodged between central Anatolia and Azerbaijan almost to the Caspian Sea and Persia.”<sup>27</sup> Its people spoke an Indo-European language known, fittingly, as Armenian, and tended to be characterized by their ethnicity, which “always differentiated this people from all others about them,” and their religion, a branch of Christianity that “stamped the people with their most recognizable feature.”<sup>28</sup>

These sources of identity separated the Armenians from the surrounding populations even before the “awakening stage” of Armenian identity that came about in the nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup> Prior to this awakening, while the Armenians in Turkey had never truly assimilated, the Armenians in Russia had sought to become “Russified,” largely “uninterested in their own ethnicity.”<sup>30</sup> After this awakening, however, the strength of identification within the Armenian community became increasingly important. In the words of one scholar writing before the formation of the Armenian

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<sup>27</sup> Nisan, 159.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>30</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *Armenia in the Twentieth Century*, Scholars Press: 1983, 10.

state, “the feeling of primary loyalty to [the Armenian] ethnic group is equivalent to virtue, and those... who question this dedication to the ‘cause’ are suspect as true Armenians.”<sup>31</sup> This evolution of Armenian identity was complicated by the divergences that evolved between Armenians in the Caucasus and in Turkey, and between Armenians in different social classes within both countries. However, as time has proven, the strength and salience of this identity have enabled it to survive despite the considerable trials of its people.

The first source of identity for the Armenian people, and the source that served as the most easily recognized feature of the community for years, is their religion. The Armenians adopted Christianity as the official religion in 301 A.D., thereby becoming “the first people in history collectively and officially to adopt Christianity as their national religion.”<sup>32</sup> Razmik Panossian classifies this adoption as “the most important event in terms of maintaining a separate identity.”<sup>33</sup> According to Panossian, it was the Armenian’s method of “defiantly turn[ing] their backs on Persia and its attempts to culturally and politically absorb Armenia,” as typified by its pressuring of the Armenians to accept the Zoroastrian religion. Furthermore, this decision came at an historical point at which religion was central to social identity, and as such, the collective decision to adopt a religion “so different from that of their neighbors already indicates a sense of distinctiveness that Armenians sought to maintain.”<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, even as Christianity separated Armenians from their non-Christian neighbors, it did not closely bind them to other Christian communities. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. illuminated the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>32</sup> Nisan, 157.

<sup>33</sup> Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars*, Columbia University: 2006, 42.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 43.

differences between the traditions of Christianity practiced in Armenia and elsewhere, resulting in an Armenian rejection of its decision and an ensuing schism between the Armenian church and the other branches of Christianity. Fifty years later, the Armenian church “fully broke with Constantinople, the official home of the Eastern church.”<sup>35</sup>

Out of this “spiritual seclusion,” the Armenians “cultivated a native Christian myth that extolled martyrdom as the path of Jesus elevated to a historical national fate.”<sup>36</sup> They tended to adopt the stance of “a small, isolated nation, suffering and being martyred for Christ,” joining “a wider movement of pan-Christian defense” only in the Crusades. Having been the first nation to endorse Christianity as the official religion, the Armenians laid claim to a “chosen people” status, born of the argument that they were “the first Christian people who originally received the word of God directly from the apostles,” namely Bartholomew and Thaddeus, who traveled to Armenia in the first century A.D.<sup>37</sup> That this delivery of the gospels directly from the hands of the apostles had culminated in the widespread acceptance of Christianity and its official character within the Armenian nation was enough of a basis for many Armenians to see themselves as members of a special, distinctive community handpicked by God. As a result, from its initial embrace of Christianity, religion created an ideological divide between the Armenians and the surrounding nationalities.

Because the basis of early Armenian identity was rooted primarily in religion, it follows that “premodern Armenians conceived of themselves primarily as a religious community, and much of what we take to be nationality today was contained in religious identification in earlier times.”<sup>38</sup> When the Ottomans assumed control of the Armenian

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<sup>35</sup> Nisan, 158.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>37</sup> Panossian, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History*, Indiana University: 1993, 9.

region, they imposed the millet system, which grouped subjects of the empire together according to their religious identification. In this way the Armenians were characterized not as an ethnic but rather as a religious group. In the late nineteenth century, the *amira* class, or the upper-class elite of the Armenian people, were content with “the definition of Armenians as a religious community represented by a state-imposed church hierarchy,” leading to the belief that “there was no solution [for the Armenian people] outside the Armenian Church.”<sup>39</sup> One proponent of this belief expressed it as follows:

...It is undeniable that our people do not have, politically speaking, a national [institution]... but we do have an alternative through which our people will survive. The governments ruling over us have been protectors of this [alternative] institution and nucleus of union; to preserve our ethnic identity we do not need a political one. This link is the unity of religion through which all Armenians are related regardless of their place of residence or of the state of which they are subjects.<sup>40</sup>

This conception of Armenians as purely a religious minority began to lose its salience with the failure of the millet system. Although the Armenians were theoretically subjects of the Ottoman empire and therefore entitled to its protection, in the mid-nineteenth century it became increasingly obvious that some other mechanism was necessary to protect their interests, as shown by the failure of the millet mechanism “to resolve the social and economic crisis of the Armenian provinces,” resulting in the evolution of “a political consciousness... among the rural and small town Armenians [as] many became aware of the political implication of social and economic stratification.”<sup>41</sup>

While Armenians of the higher classes continued to see religion as the only necessary

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<sup>39</sup> Gerard J. Libaridian, *Modern Armenia: People, Nation, State*, Transaction Publishers: 2004, 52.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>41</sup> Libaridian, 51.

bond and the solution to all Armenian problems, Armenians of the lower classes, who lived with the reality of their day-to-day hardships, began to dream of realizing a future in which they would have a government mindful of Armenian interests rather than a government to which Armenian interests were secondary. While the upper class could afford to talk vaguely of theological unity and the grace of God, the villagers and peasants wanted concrete progress toward an improved quality of life.

The answer to the frustration of the villagers came in the form of a nationalism that redefined the Armenians as an ethnic minority rather than only a religious one. This process was furthered as Armenians came into contact with Western ideas of secular nationalism, and as Armenians from different walks of life came in contact with one another. Thus, the ethnicity of the Armenian people came to be a primary source of identity. In *Armenia in the Twentieth Century*, Ronald Grigor Suny discusses the three steps in the evolution of ethnic minorities.<sup>42</sup> In the first, he argues, identifying as one semi-cohesive people requires “the dissolution of prior tribal and kinship alliances and the linking of these smaller groups together in an identity.” In the second, “the ethnic group becomes ethnically conscious [and] aware of its own importance.” At this point, the bonds between members of the minority group increase in strength and importance, and the group as a whole begins to guard against outside forces perceived to be threats. Finally, the group pursues “the formation of a nation or perhaps a nation-state” as nationalism takes hold of the political consciousness.

All three of these steps can be clearly seen in Armenian history, beginning with the gradual breakdown of non-ethnic classifications and the reinforcement of Armenian identification. In the early nineteenth century, the isolation of the two regions of

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<sup>42</sup> Suny, *Armenia in the Twentieth Century*, 2-3.

Armenia prevented the formation of a cohesive Armenian identity. Instead of solidifying into one community, the Armenians remained “a people divided in two major ways: geographically and by social class.”<sup>43</sup> Although it served as a theoretical source of unity, religion had proved a force inadequate to link the upper and lower classes together, and the wide differences inherent in the lives of the peasants and the *amira* class prevented them from identifying as members of the same community. At the same time, the division between the regions in control of the Persian and Turkish empires was further fractured by the coming of the Russians.

As a result, the Armenian regions, affected more by the peoples surrounding them than by fellow Armenians from whom they were geographically separated, developed at different rates. While the Armenians in Turkey tended, at large, to be “poorer, less well-educated, less urbanized, [and] less aware of the outside world,” Armenians in Russia, who benefited from the greater social mobility they enjoyed as well as their relatively greater exposure to European culture, had more access to Western developments. Meanwhile, due to the stratified nature of both societies, the educated, urban elite and the rural villagers had little in common. Although some members of the Armenian bourgeoisie gained power and respect in their own communities, they did not identify with or feel responsible for fellow Armenians with less favorable circumstances. Instead, they chose to “attach [their] fortunes to the fate of the imperial powers.”<sup>44</sup> These emerging class differences reinforced the separation of the two communities and served as a formidable obstacle to ethnic unity.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 6.

However, with the development of new forms of transportation and communication and the cultural exposure associated with increased trade, this isolation began to break down. Suny describes the gradual emergence of ethnic identification as follows:

Armenians who might never have had any contact with middlemen from the towns now became involved with the flow of urban life. Contact with Armenians of other classes increased, and the differences between peoples of various ethnicities became ever more apparent. Understandably, the ease of communication with people who spoke your own language led to a feeling of kinship and a hope for protection, though class distinctions limited the degree of intimacy.<sup>45</sup>

Ronald Suny observes that this evolving sense of membership in an ethnic community was not so intense as to bind the fortunes of urban and rural Armenians together. Instead, the “physical, social, and psychological distance” between the two classes would be bridged by a “small, radical intelligentsia that emerged from the middle and lower class” in the late nineteenth century.<sup>46</sup> This intelligentsia would express itself through involvement in revolutionary parties seeking to forcibly effect change. Revolutionary activity, grown out of the desire to reject “the sullen acceptance of a degenerated existence,” which had classified the Armenian attitude under the Ottomans,<sup>47</sup> and the failure of the empire to provide peaceful ways for Armenians to express dissent and work for the improvement of their status, characterized such parties as the Social Democratic Hnchakian Party and later the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. These early nationalists, who came not from the upper but from the lower strata of Armenian

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>46</sup> Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat*, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Libaridian, 77.

life, challenged the familiar model of “bourgeoisie nationalism.”<sup>48</sup> In fact, upper class Armenians were often “threaten[ed] with terrorism in order to raise financial contributions to the cause,” rather than voluntarily choosing to express a sense of solidarity with their downtrodden brethren.

It is interesting to note that for the Armenian nationalist movement, religion served not as a source of nationalism but as an obstacle to it. Libaridian notes that “many Armenians continued to believe that any opposition to the existing order would constitute an act of insubordination against God’s preordained scheme for the world,” continuing to prefer operating within the institution of the church to rebelling against the political order.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the church tended officially to maintain its distance from the movement. The resulting friction between nationalists and proponents of religion as a solution to Armenian hardships led to the “definite anticlerical streak” of the nationalist movement.<sup>50</sup> One such intellectual vilified his Armenian forefathers by declaring, “Had you built fortresses, instead of [the] monasteries with which our country is full... our country would have been more fortunate than she is today,”<sup>51</sup> while another went further by declaring, “Each hood of a [priest] hides a devil!”<sup>52</sup> and still another urged Armenians to “rally around the concept of nation rather than religion.”<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, nationalists were eventually able to overcome “the impediments of religion by supplanting the God of submission and patience preached by most clergymen with the God of justice and retribution.”<sup>54</sup> This enabled them to “elevat[e] the task of liberation of the homeland to

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<sup>48</sup> Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Libaridian, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Suny, *Armenia in the Twentieth Century*, 23.

<sup>51</sup> Panossian, 195.

<sup>52</sup> Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat*, 10.

<sup>53</sup> Panossian, 195.

<sup>54</sup> Libaridian, 18.

the level of a religion,” thereby drawing guerilla fighters from traditionally devout families.<sup>55</sup> In doing so, they were able to manipulate religion using the same method practiced by some Kurdish nationalists, by claiming religious justification for nationalist aims.

In addition to an internal awakening to the importance of ethnicity, external forces began to push the Armenian community to identify as an ethnic minority. The rise of the Young Turks posed a significant threat to the welfare of Armenians in Turkey. While these Armenians had historically had a tumultuous relationship at best with the Ottoman empire, the Young Turks proved even more hostile. As “Turkish or Pan-Turanian doctrines began to supplant religion as the Ottoman state ideology,” Armenians, like the Kurds, found that by virtue of their ethnicity, they had no place in the emerging social structure.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, the collapse of the Ottoman empire ushered in the same policies glorifying Turkish ethnicity at the expense of all others that had profound effects on the status of the Kurds. Meanwhile, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in the Caucasus, Russia began to adopt policies that “compelled [Armenians] to see themselves as different and to organize resistance against their own destruction.”<sup>57</sup> One Russian intellectual “called for ‘smoothing away as much as possible the mixed character which exists in the borderlands of Russia, installing uniformity in the extreme... in every possible way: in institutions, in language, in the church, in speech, in costume, in food.’”<sup>58</sup> Policies favoring Russian ethnicity came to dominate society, hindering Armenians from assuming positions of respect and ultimately leading to the seizure of Armenian church property in 1903. These steps made it difficult for even the most “Russified” Armenians

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>57</sup> Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 26.

to see themselves as true members of Russian society, forcing them to identify with each other by preventing them from identifying with anyone else.

A third source of identity that should not be overlooked is language. Its importance in unifying a culture cannot be overstated. In the fifth century, shortly after the adoption of Christianity, the Armenians developed and embraced a new alphabet to emphasize their cultural distinctiveness. Unlike that of most other languages, the Armenian alphabet did not evolve naturally, but was instead artificially devised. Panossian analyzes the effect of this alphabet on early Armenian culture:

The alphabet gave the Armenians a unique textual-literary basis for their language and linguistic identity. Greek, Latin, Aramaic or Syriac scripts were no longer needed for written communication. This further isolated Armenians from external cultural influences as it made their written language even more inaccessible to people outside the community...<sup>59</sup>

This property of language was again recognized by Armenian intellectuals in the eighteenth century with their debate over dominance of the classical Armenian language versus the modern vernacular.<sup>60</sup> Despite the emergence of different vernacular dialects among Armenians in the Caucasus and Armenians in Turkey, “it now became possible for them all to understand each other’s writing without much effort,” thereby providing the tools to bridge the gap between intellectuals in both regions.<sup>61</sup> As Suny points out, the “ease of communication” provided by a common language between Armenians would be a central factor in the evolution of Armenian ethnic identity.<sup>62</sup> When trade connected the two regions of Armenia in the early nineteenth century, the difficulties inherent in

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<sup>59</sup> Panossian, 45.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>61</sup> Libaridian, 14.

<sup>62</sup> Suny, *Armenia in the Twentieth Century*, 19.

conversations with speakers of other languages and therefore with other ethnic groups stood in stark contrast to the simplicity of communicating with fellow Armenians.

Implicit recognition of the importance of linguistic identity was also demonstrated by the suppression of the Armenian language in both Turkey and the Caucasus. In the Caucasus of the late nineteenth century, the previously mentioned cry for “uniformity in the extreme... in every possible way” included the suppression of the Armenian language.<sup>63</sup> Even in the late twentieth century, this attitude persisted, and “educational and community institutions were subject to severe local pressures” regarding their use of the Armenian language.<sup>64</sup> In Turkey, the policy of Turkification obviously led to severe restrictions on the Armenian tongue. Officials discouraged use of the language in public and even went so far as to “persuade Armenians who wished recognition and advancement in business and professional circles to adjust their family name endings to Turkish patterns.”<sup>65</sup> While the Armenians formerly under Russian control have achieved independence and can therefore speak Armenian publicly, the Armenians in Turkey continue to endure heavy discrimination as “a cultural group that can ill afford to acknowledge its own history,” as symbolized by their inability to communicate in their own language.<sup>66</sup>

Despite efforts by both the Russian and Turkish empires to stamp out Armenian culture, the salience of Armenian identity has persisted among its people, and the last few decades have even seen the formation of an independent Armenian state, albeit one that does not encompass the majority of historical Armenia. Drawing their shared identity

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<sup>63</sup> Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat*, 26.

<sup>64</sup> Libaridian, 27.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

from such sources as religion, ethnicity, and culture, the Armenians have survived numerous attacks against their culture and continue to thrive today.

## **The Pursuit of Independence: The Kurds**

That the Kurds have desired independence for years is a well-established fact. Historically, they have been unable to attain this goal, sometimes achieving autonomy but generally remaining repressed in the states which they inhabit. Recent developments in post-2003 Iraq indicate that Iraqi Kurds may be on the verge of true autonomy. However, there are still numerous obstacles to be faced before an independent Kurdistan can become a possibility.

Before discussing Kurdish self-government over the past few centuries, a distinction must be drawn between independence and autonomy. Although the Kurds have at times obtained autonomy, or the ability to govern themselves with relatively little interference, they have never been able to formally achieve complete independence from ruling nations. While the Kurds may have periods of freedom from other governments, their chief goal is to form their own government in their own state; they would therefore be subject only to their own laws, and their own culture would be predominant, rather than marginalized in favor of the culture of the dominant ethnic group. Furthermore, it would ensure that they were no longer dependent on the vicissitudes of non-Kurdish rulers, a prospect of particular importance since the Kurds have repeatedly seen governments turn their backs on agreements that would have granted them autonomy. Having been subject to the whims of these frequently changed attitudes, the Kurds crave the control over their own affairs which independence would afford them.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the fractures in the Ottoman Empire had prevented a centralized government that would hold the various groups under it firmly in control from arising. The authority of the Kurdish tribes, not the empire, tended

to rule Kurdish families. The Kurds considered themselves subjects of their own tribal chieftains, secular leaders, and their shaykhs, religious leaders. Both forms of leadership were important; as Wadie Jwaideh puts it, although Kurdish tribesmen were reported to “display toward their chieftains a blind and unquestioning obedience,”<sup>67</sup> it is also true that “even a cursory glance at Kurdish history reveals that shaykh leadership has been the most consistently successful type of leadership among the Kurds for more than one hundred years...”<sup>68</sup> The Kurds, under their chieftains and shaykhs, enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy, as the imperial rulers tended to leave the Kurdish minority alone.

Furthermore, the fact that the Ottoman Empire grouped its subjects along religious and not ethnic lines hindered the evolution of a nationalist consciousness. To accomplish this, the empire used the millet system, which “recognized all groups as Ottomans, [while] differentiat[ing] populations according to religious affiliation.”<sup>69</sup> As a result, the different ethnic groups within the empire could be bound by their Ottoman citizenship while enjoying relative autonomy for their own cultures.

This is not to say that the Kurdish-Ottoman dynamic was entirely without conflict, however. Perhaps the most notable instance of such conflict came with the rise of Sultan Mahmud II. Intending to “resuscitate the empire and raise it to its former greatness,” the sultan targeted “the semiautonomous hereditary regimes in Kurdistan... [in] a determined attempt to reconquer these territories and to bring them under direct Ottoman control.”<sup>70</sup> By effectively ending Kurdish autonomy and bringing the Kurds firmly under the reign of the Ottoman Empire, the sultan could not only consolidate the

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<sup>67</sup> Jwaideh, 33.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>69</sup> Natali, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Jwaideh, 54.

power of his empire but also send a powerful message to any other recalcitrant minorities in his territory. This action set the stage for future conflicts with the government, creating an us versus them dynamic that continues to prevail in the minds of both Kurds and their governments today.

In the wake of this consolidation, “lawlessness and disorder” prevailed throughout Kurdistan.<sup>71</sup> The empire had managed to break down the old power structure but had proved incapable of effectively administering the Kurdish territories under its rule. Deprived of the authorities to whom they had given their allegiance, and having no new authorities with whom to replace them, the Kurds found themselves rudderless, leading to the rise of Shaykh ‘Ubayd Allah discussed in chapter one. In 1877, the shaykh became the commander of the Kurdish tribal forces in the Russo-Turkish War, thereby attaining a role both as a Kurdish figure and an Islamic one, “a role no other person had assumed since the great Saladin of Crusades fame.”<sup>72</sup> His swift rise to fame among the Kurds was based in no small part upon his ambitions of securing a Kurdish state. The shaykh, upon whom “the need to unite the Kurds appears to have urged itself... with the force and persistence of an obsession,” was resolved on procuring a state in which the Kurds could rule themselves, pointing to differences between themselves and the surrounding ethnic groups as justification for this need.<sup>73</sup> The shaykh’s dream of an independent Kurdistan remained in the public consciousness even after his exile in 1883.

Three decades later, it looked as though the prospect of a Kurdish state might wane in importance, as the necessity for reform in the Ottoman empire became apparent. Two of the four founding members of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 81.

organization that intended to undertake these reforms, were Kurds, and Kurdish members “occupied positions of great importance” after the Young Turk Revolution; furthermore, after this revolution, “Turks, Albanians, Arabs, Armenians, and Kurds pledged themselves to forget past differences and work together for the common good and well-being of the Ottoman fatherland.”<sup>74</sup> However, this cooperation was to be short-lived. Worried by the separatist and nationalist tendencies of non-Turkish ethnic groups, the Young Turks, empowered in the aftermath of the counterrevolution of 1909, “resolved to stamp out all opposition... ruthlessly silenc[ing] and eliminate[ing]” any who disagreed with them.<sup>75</sup> The fervor of Kurdish nationalists increased as it became apparent that they had less to lose than they might have, had they had legitimate opportunities to effect change within the new social structure of the post-revolution empire.

As the salience of nationalism increased in the Kurdish community, it also gained greater importance in the Middle East at large. After Atatürk rose to power in Turkey, his Turkification reforms solidified the identity of that ethnic group as well as its control over the state while outlawing the activities of other nationalist groups. Meanwhile, in the Arab world, pan-Arab nationalism took hold, leading to the denial of Kurdish ethnicity in Iraq,<sup>76</sup> while in Iran, “the Kurds became part of the Other because they were not Persians ethnically.”<sup>77</sup> This consciousness of difference on the part of both Kurds and the surrounding ethnicities led to the suppression of these nationalist tendencies. In Atatürk’s Turkey, because of the shift to a Turkish nationalism based on race, Kurds were treated as “bandits,” subject to arrests, deportations, and executions.<sup>78</sup> His policies of

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>76</sup> Natali, 35.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 79.

rapid secularization also marginalized religious Kurds. In response to the concerns of Muslims, including Kurds, he declared, “Gentlemen and those of the nation: all of you should know that the Turkish nation cannot become a nation of shaykhs, dervishes, religious fanatics, and charlatans.”

These hostile relations continue to characterize the relationship between Turkey and the Kurds today. Turkey remains hostile towards its Kurdish minority, silencing any discussion of Kurdish autonomy by referencing the violence done by the PKK in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The Kurdish community remains plagued by “endemic underdevelopment, lack of services, and widespread illiteracy,” and even Kurds who are politically active “are unable to be effective advocates for their group’s aspirations.”<sup>79</sup> Despite minor improvements, such as the loosening of some restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language in response to pressure from the European Union, the situation remains unfavorable for Kurds in Turkey.<sup>80</sup>

In Iran, policies developed that, while “less repressive against Kurds as a distinct ethnic group than [they were] in Iraq and Turkey,”<sup>81</sup> followed the general trend of subjugating the Kurds to the favored ethnic group. Reza Khan, who became the shah of Iran in 1925, “tried to unify the fragmented country by creating an official state nationalism based on an ethnicized, modernized, and secular notion of Iranian identity.”<sup>82</sup>

Denise Natali describes the resulting situation of the Kurdish minority:

Reza Shah militarily coerced and repressed non-Persian ethnic communities into the state-defined Persian culture and arrested some Kurdish communities for

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<sup>79</sup> Nisan, 49.

<sup>80</sup> Shane Donovan, “Kurdistan: The Elusive Quest for Sovereignty,” *Harvard International Review* (Fall 2006), vol. 28, no. 3, 1.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

speaking the Kurdish language... His militarily repressive and centralization policies destroyed essential socioeconomic structures and political organization in Kurdistan. In doing so he prevented the Kurdish tribal stratum from any potential role it could have played as a nationalist elite, just as had been done in Turkey...<sup>83</sup>

Kurds who were disenfranchised by these reforms saw a chance to improve their status under Ayatollah Khomeini, who seized power in the late 1970s. By reaching out to Kurds, he intended to expand his power base, as he recognized was necessary for the looming 1979 referendum. Because he viewed the world in religious rather than ethnic terms, he saw adherence to Islam as a more important factor of Iranian identity than ethnicity; as such, he was temporarily able to group both Kurds and Persians together under the umbrella of religion. However, a “clear emphasis on Shi‘a Isla as the dominant identity marker in the state” gradually emerged, resulting in the favoring of Shi‘a Muslim groups above Sunnis; unfortunately, most Kurds are Sunni. As such, many Kurds were excluded from the new political order. Furthermore, after the 1979 referendum, he promptly “terminated negotiations with Kurdish leaders, banned discussions of Kurdish autonomy, and removed Kurds from their political posts.”<sup>84</sup> Today, Kurdish freedoms in Iran remain restricted, but often along religious rather than ethnic lines; for example, the laws that govern running for public office are discriminatory against Sunnis, and therefore affect most Kurds.<sup>85</sup>

In Iraq, the Kurds, angry that the British had incorporated Kurdish land into the newly formed Iraqi state, reacted violently. Shaykh Mahmoud Berzenji, considered the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>85</sup> Donovan, 1.

father of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq, led an armed resistance against the new government until 1926, and the British political officer in Baghdad reported that “four out of five people [in southern Kurdistan] support[ed] Sheikh Mahmoud’s plans for an independent Kurdistan.”<sup>86</sup> This set the stage for the lengthy conflict that would emerge between Kurds and the Iraqi government. The British, more eager to see the historically fragile region become stable than to satisfy the nationalist aspirations of the Kurds, attempted to play the Kurdish tribes against each other, “instigating land disputes and encouraging internal hostilities,” preventing them from effectively organizing.<sup>87</sup>

Both the British and the Iraqi government made statements that recognized, at least theoretically, the rights of the Kurds. The British “recognized the Kurds as a unique ethnic group and acknowledged their nationalist claims,” and one British major even “spoke directly to the Kurds about their rights to self-determination.”<sup>88</sup> Similarly, they created a provisional Iraqi Constitution in 1921 that described the Iraqi state as being composed of two ethnic groups, Arabs and Kurds, and gave the Kurdish language “equal status with Arabic.” However, these actions were undercut by the British appointment of Arab nationalists to key positions in the Iraqi government, including Faysal I as the first Iraqi king, hamstringing any serious attempts to secure autonomy for the Kurds. This pattern of asserting the legitimacy of Kurdish rights but failing to deliver any concrete guarantees that these rights would be respected was perhaps best typified by the “Anglo-Iraqi Joint Declaration to the Council of the League of Nations,” which stated,

His Britannic Majesty’s Government and the Government of Iraq recognize the right of the Kurds living within the boundaries of Iraq to set up a Kurdish

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<sup>86</sup> Hadi Elis, “The Kurdish Demand for Statehood and the Future of Iraq,” *Journal of Social, Political, & Economic Studies* (Summer 2004), vol. 29, no. 2, 195.

<sup>87</sup> Natali, 29.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

government within those boundaries and hope that the different Kurdish elements will, as soon as possible, arrive at an agreement between themselves as to the form which they wish that Government should take and the boundaries within which they wish it to extend...<sup>89</sup>

On its face this declaration seemed to guarantee the Kurdish people autonomy; however, the British High Commissioner Percy Cox quickly assured the Iraqi king that it “in no way implied separation politically or economically of Kurdistan from Iraq.”

As Iraq transitioned away from its colonial roots, Arabization continued to dominate political thought. ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim, who became president after the revolution of 1958, enacted repressive policies including closing down Kurdish organizations, arresting leading Kurdish nationalists, and bombing rural areas, and further angered Kurds by calling Iraq “one nation rather than a collection of peoples.”<sup>90</sup> After the Ba’thist regime seized control in 1968, they “tried to give the impression of political tolerance,” urging Iraqis to consider themselves members of the Iraqi state first and members of any particular ethnicity second; however, their desire to establish control over oil-rich territories in Kurdistan outweighed their desire to be seen as a politically diverse state.<sup>91</sup> By surrounding Kirkuk with an “Arab Circle” of homes, using the army to forcibly control the Kurds, massacring Kurds during the 1987-1988 Anfal campaign, and attacking the Kurdish community in Halabja with chemical weapons, the Ba’thist regime ensured that “the gap between the discourse and reality had become so large that government efforts to create a sense of Iraqiness [for the Kurds] lost all meaning and credibility.”<sup>92</sup> Nowhere was this more evident than in the post-Gulf War Iraq, when

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<sup>89</sup> Elis, 196.

<sup>90</sup> Natali, 52.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 59.

Saddam Hussein attempted to “Islamize the Iraqi identity... [by] portray[ing] himself as a devout Muslim... [and] reframe[ing] the Kurdish-Arab partnership as a Muslim fellowship,” all the while continuing to “bomb Kurdish regions [and] sponsor radical Islamic groups to destabilize the North,” among other actions.<sup>93</sup>

The U.S.-enforced no-fly zones created after the Gulf War provided Kurds with some protection from Saddam Hussein’s regime. Backed by U.S., British, and French air patrols, these zones were established to prevent the Iraqi government from persecuting Kurds at the northern and southern ends of the country. In the north, above the thirty-sixth parallel, support from the United Nations and the United States “turned this patch of Kurdistan into an example of minority self-determination and proto-statehood for the historically oppressed Kurdish people.”<sup>94</sup>

In post-Saddam Iraq, the Kurdish region is essentially autonomous, having “assumed a territorial identity apart from central and southern Iraq” which has been reinforced by “the coexistence of different political systems, economies, security contexts, ethnicities, and languages.”<sup>95</sup> One journalist calls the situation of Kurds in Iraq an “independence in all but name,” marked by such important changes as the absence of Iraqi flags and the predominance of the Kurdish language.<sup>96</sup> The degree of autonomy currently enjoyed by the Kurds is historically unparalleled; they “have demonstrated that they are capable of functioning as an independent state even under harsh circumstances, and the effective occupation of the Kurdish territory by a Kurdish government affirms possession and gives sovereignty rights to the territory.”<sup>97</sup> It seems that in Iraqi

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>94</sup> Nisan, 51.

<sup>95</sup> Natali, 66.

<sup>96</sup> McKiernan, 361.

<sup>97</sup> Elis, 208.

Kurdistan, the Kurds are at last on the threshold of the opportunity of independence for which they have been waiting for centuries.

Nonetheless, an independent Kurdish state would require the intervention of other countries, a prospect that is extremely unlikely. Moreover, even continued autonomy is by no means guaranteed, as the Kurds could easily lose the gains that they have made while the new Iraqi government evolves. As Hadi Elis points out, “Although [a 2004 UN resolution] promised Kurds a degree of control over their own natural resources and political process, there was no reference... to the interim constitution that guaranteed Kurdish autonomy.”<sup>98</sup> Denise Natali is also quick to point out that Iraqi Kurds do not enjoy “unconditional backing” from the United States, the UN, or the government in Baghdad; therefore, although they have been “accorded political autonomy, [they] have no assurance that the future Iraqi government will respect the principles of federalism at a national level,” and it is still possible, given the unstable situation in Iraq, that future leaders for whom national unity is a priority could become antagonistic toward the independence-seeking Kurds.<sup>99</sup>

Already, the potential for conflict can be clearly seen, since “many Iraqi Kurds do not trust their own representatives in the National Assembly and accuse them of corruption and of ignoring the pursuit of Kurdish autonomy and compensation for generations of persecution.”<sup>100</sup> If the Kurds do not feel that they have a legitimate political method of effecting change and guarding their own interests – as they do not in Turkey, for example – it is likely that they will pursue these objects through illegitimate

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<sup>98</sup> Elis, 209.

<sup>99</sup> Natali, 67.

<sup>100</sup> Donovan, 1.

and violent means, thereby creating problems not only for themselves but also for the nascent government in Iraq.

Finally, the fact that Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey share a border is a problematic issue for all parties involved. The hostility between the Kurds and Turks has led groups such as the PKK to use this border to their advantage. A recent attack by the PKK on Turkish troops at the Iraqi border, carried out in October of this year, was termed “the bloodiest day of fighting in years between the Turkish military and the Kurdish rebels” by one news organization.<sup>101</sup> Already Turkey is calling for the United States and Iraqi Kurds to “take immediate measures” against the organization. If resistance groups like the PKK continue to engage in these activities without consequences, it will be difficult for Iraqi Kurdistan to maintain any legitimacy in international opinion, and the Kurds might once again find themselves stripped of their autonomy.

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<sup>101</sup> Ivan Watson, “Kurdish rebels attack Turkish force at border,” *NPR*, October 22, 2007.

## **The Pursuit of Independence: The Armenians**

The Armenians have been ruled by several foreign powers over the course of their history. Before finally achieving independence in 1991, they were subject to the moods of these rulers, vacillating between relative autonomy and extreme oppression. The inability of the Armenian community to control its own destiny led it to rely on the intervention of foreign powers, anticipating outside help even when such expectations were unrealistic. Although the Armenians now have their own state, this mindset still characterizes Armenian affairs, preventing this people from taking advantage of the opportunities that independence has presented them.

In 1639, the Ottoman and Safavid Persian empires agreed to a treaty that ended their struggle for supremacy in Mesopotamia and Transcaucasia. The Armenian people were divided up between the two empires, a fact they resented because both employed “a harsh system of taxation and an oppressive social structure that discriminated against the non-Muslims.”<sup>102</sup> As a historically Christian people, the Armenians wanted to be ruled by an empire that would share their religious views, if they had to come under foreign domination at all. Therefore, they looked toward the tsar of Russia, the “Christian King of the North,” as an alternative to their Muslim rulers. In 1828, Russia annexed Persian Armenia, and the Armenian people were once again split, this time between the Russians in the east and the Ottomans in the west. While both communities initially thrived, competition between the two empires, as well as the nascent forces of nationalism in both regions, would fundamentally alter Armenian fortunes.

For most of their time under the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians were afforded a degree of control over their own affairs through the millet system. Under this system, “a

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<sup>102</sup> Libaridian, 13.

community was distinguished by its religion, no matter where its members lived in the empire.”<sup>103</sup> Because ethnicity and religion “completely overlapped” among the Armenian people, this put the church in “*the* leadership position of the community in both religious and secular matters [emphasis in original],”<sup>104</sup> uniting all Armenians in the Ottoman Empire around the central point of their common religion. Furthermore, the sultan’s recognition of the authority of the church provided them with a legitimate method of resisting assimilation into the surrounding groups. While this system ensured their status as a weak minority in a primarily Muslim empire, it also provided them with a means “through which their collective identity as a religious *ethnie* [ethnic group] could be maintained”<sup>105</sup> and through which the traditional Armenian social structure could be preserved.

A similar system developed in the Russian empire. An 1836 statute granted Armenians a “nominal degree of self-government” by recognizing the authority of the church.<sup>106</sup> In addition, the church also received “control over religious/community education, [freedom] from taxation, and... ownership of land for income.” While the tsar retained the ultimate authority, as did the sultan in the Ottoman Empire, this allowed Armenians to retain autonomy over local affairs.

The Armenians had many accomplishments under both Russian and Ottoman rule. In the east, a middle class emerged with successful traders, financiers, and industrialists, while in the west, the Armenian community was characterized by high standards of education and impressive economic advancements, with some achieving success in the silk-trade industry while others thrived in the banking business and still

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<sup>103</sup> Panossian, 69.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

others “predominated” in the jewelry business. One description of the Armenians under Ottoman rule characterized them as follows:

Throughout the Empire they are a sober, thrifty and intelligent people. Wherever they exist they are noted for their industry, their aptitude for business, and a certain obstinacy of character... In modern times they have been the pioneers of commerce and industry in the near East.<sup>107</sup>

It is easy to understand, then, how “being an Armenian [came to be] equated with performing better than others.”<sup>108</sup> This was reflected in the considerable number of Armenian appointments to important positions and in the wealth of the Armenian upper class, or the *amira* class. Although the *amiras* were “decidedly self-centered,”<sup>109</sup> they did finance Armenian schools, and an Armenian college appeared in Constantinople in 1871. Despite the many successes of the Armenians, however, it is important to note that the community as a whole “lacked real political power in [the] host states and were at the mercy of non-Armenian rulers.”<sup>110</sup> Panossian succinctly summarized the state of the *amiras* in Constantinople:

[They] had a complex and vital *function* in the financial and economic administration of the Ottoman Empire, but lacked any real *power* in that sphere [emphasis in original]. They were in a precarious position. Because of their different ethnicity/religion they could not translate their economic power into political power outside the Armenian community and therefore could very easily fall out of favour with the political masters... and be persecuted, losing their wealth and status. As a consequence their influence was limited on state policy

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<sup>107</sup> Nisan, 159.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>110</sup> Panossian, 98.

and rarely would they oppose the Sultan... if the latter was persecuting Armenians (in the provinces or elsewhere).<sup>111</sup>

The reluctance of the *amiras* to defy the sultan would soon be proven. In 1876, Sultan Abdul Hamid II took the throne of the Ottoman Empire. Initially, it did not appear that he would be a great threat to the Armenian people; in fact, he set up a liberal constitution for the realm that “included the promise of autonomy for the non-Muslim provinces” the same year that he came to power.<sup>112</sup> However, this constitution proved extremely short-lived. A year later, the sultan abolished it and sent the Kurds to slaughter the Armenians in the east, fearing that the awakening Armenian nationalism would lead his subjects to collude with the Russian Army to seize “the very birthplace of the Ottoman Empire,” Anatolia.<sup>113</sup> Anxious to prevent this from happening, the sultan took decisive action to cripple any Armenian aspirations of removing Anatolia from his control.

This competition between the Ottoman and Russian empires, combined with the sultan’s fear of Armenian collaboration with Russia, boded badly for the Armenians under Ottoman rule. The Armenians pinned their hopes on the Russians, because “just as the Russians helped liberate the Greeks in 1829 and were indispensable in liberating the Bulgarians in 1877, it seemed reasonable for Armenians to expect to be the next fortunate beneficiaries of Russian military intervention against the Ottomans.”<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, Armenians within the Russian empire “strongly supported Russian advances into Ottoman territories as a means of freeing the West Armenians,”<sup>115</sup> and it was hoped that

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>112</sup> Nisan, 163.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>115</sup> Libaridian, 15.

they could convince their government to intervene on behalf of their fellow Armenians in Ottoman territories.

The sultan viewed this link between Armenians in the east and west with mistrust, fearing that it would provide the Russians a foothold from which to attack. This perception was no doubt strengthened by the treaty of San Stefano, signed at the conclusion of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, which “stipulated that Russian withdrawal from occupied Ottoman territories was conditional on reforms carried out... in order to protect the Armenian population.”<sup>116</sup> Although the treaty made no mention of Armenian autonomy it did make Russia “the guarantor of Armenian security,” creating a mechanism by which the sultan could be held accountable for his treatment of his own subjects.

This section of the treaty excited Armenians who dreamed of better treatment under the sultan, and “hopes for autonomy, perhaps as a step toward ultimate independence, were... openly discussed.”<sup>117</sup> However, these hopes were stymied in 1878 when the Treaty of Berlin, which superseded that of San Stefano, failed to grant the Armenians any significant gains. The treaty included “nothing in the spirit of Armenian autonomy or self-government,” possibly because of the British desire to keep the empire “intact as a barrier to further Russian expansionism.”<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, it broadly entrusted the distant European powers with the security of the Armenian people. Unlike Russia, which could have made use of its position as a guarantor, the European powers did not have the wherewithal to make a concerted effort in favor of the Armenians under Ottoman rule. As such, “the Berlin treaty relegated the issue to discussion [forums],

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<sup>116</sup> Panossian, 170.

<sup>117</sup> Nisan, 164.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

diplomatic protests and ineffectual pronouncements or pledges. As the Duke of Argyll subsequently put it, ‘What was everyone’s business was nobody’s business.’”<sup>119</sup>

Realizing that outside help would not be forthcoming, well-to-do Armenians affixed their fortunes to those of the Ottoman Empire, “willing to accept the sultan’s occasional paternalistic favors to chosen individuals as a proof that his rule was benevolent and his society harmonious.”<sup>120</sup> By the time it became apparent that the Ottoman Empire was not willing to carry out promised reforms that would have ameliorated the situation of the Armenians, their leadership, including the church, had already withdrawn from the active participation of the past, choosing to protect themselves rather than attempting to protect their people. With Ottoman constitutional reform proven a failure, the Armenians turned to a revolutionary activity “organized primarily by elements from the lower classes and by the radicalized segments of the intelligentsia.”<sup>121</sup> For the first time in Armenian history, “the needs of the masses” rose to the forefront of political consciousness. The parties “proposed to struggle against the political despotism, economic stagnation, and social inequality of the Ottoman system.” Such parties included the ARF (the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, or the Dashnaktsutiune), the SDHP (Social Democratic Hnchakian Party), and the Armenakan Party. The latter, in particular, “called explicitly for revolution, began weapons training, killed some Turks, and established branches in other parts of Turkey and beyond.”<sup>122</sup>

However, adopting these “confrontational tactics toward the Ottoman regime [and] generating military ventures without adequate preparation, could not fail but induce

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<sup>119</sup> Panossian, 171.

<sup>120</sup> Libaridian, 15.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>122</sup> Nisan, 165.

fatal reprisals.”<sup>123</sup> The dawn of revolutionary activity solidified the sultan’s feelings toward the Armenians. One observer summarized his feelings by saying, “He had come to hate the very name of Armenia”<sup>124</sup>; another stated that Armenia had become “the one issue that obsessed [him] more than any other.”<sup>125</sup> This was, to say the least, an unfortunate development for the Armenians under his rule. From 1894-1896, he adopted what one scholar termed a “policy of wholesale massacre” by responding with mass murders that left approximately 300,000 Armenians dead.<sup>126</sup>

Although some Armenians participated in the Committee for Union and Progress and in the revolution of 1908, they would soon find, like the Kurds, that their fortunes had worsened with the arrival of the Young Turks. While they had succeeded in ousting the sultan, they found themselves with new and equally determined enemies. In the words of Mordecai Nisan, “Abdul Hamid was gone, but hatred of the ‘infidels’ was as visceral as ever.”<sup>127</sup> The days of even nominal autonomy were rapidly drawing to a close, bringing the Armenians to the dark period of history now known as the first genocide of the twentieth century.

There are several explanations for what took place in 1915. One is that the Young Turks viewed the Armenians as supporters, or potential supporters of Russia; another is that they were simply unwilling to tolerate the presence of another ethnicity demanding autonomy and resisting Turkification.<sup>128</sup> Analyzing the causes of the genocide would go far beyond the limits of this paper, but it must be noted that “by 1923, when the modern

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>125</sup> Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America’s Response*, HarperCollins: 2003, 35.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>127</sup> Nisan, 166.

<sup>128</sup> Panossian, 234.

Turkish republic was declared, there were hardly any Armenians left” in what had formerly been the Armenian provinces of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>129</sup> While 70,000 Armenians remained in Turkey, concentrated primarily in Istanbul, the rest of the population of historic Armenia had been deported or killed.

It appeared as though the catastrophic events of the genocide would rouse the Allied powers to support an Armenian state. President Woodrow Wilson, in particular, was sympathetic to the plight of those who had survived. He deployed the King-Crane Commission on a fact-finding mission in 1919; the commission returned with descriptions of “great and lasting wrongs in Turkey which must be set right” and advised that an autonomous state be established in historic Armenia.<sup>130</sup> The Harbord Mission, which he sent out a few months later, went so far as to call for an American-administered Armenian mandate. In this environment, the devastated Armenians began to dream once again of autonomy or even statehood. An Armenian Republic was established, ushering in a period of independence that lasted two years, spanning the time “between the end of World War I and the coming of the Red Army” in 1920.<sup>131</sup> With Russia “engaged in a fight for its life against the White armies and foreign interventionists” and Turkey “unable to resist the plans of the Allies to divide up her empire and detach Armenia from it,” Armenia could briefly pursue her ambitions of sovereignty without interference.

Unfortunately, the Allied powers refused “one by one... to take on the principal responsibility for the Armenians,” delegating the burden to the United States, where the Armenian mandate proposal was defeated in the U.S. Senate.<sup>132</sup> Armenia was once again exposed. Matters worsened when the Russian Bolsheviks and Turkish Kemalists united,

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>130</sup> Balakian, 351.

<sup>131</sup> Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat*, 126.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 129.

seeing themselves as allies in the struggle against imperialism. Moscow rebuffed entreaties for support from the short-lived Republic of Armenia, making it clear that “Soviet Russia would not back Armenian claims... and was more interested in solidifying an alliance with the Turkish Nationalists than shoring up an Armenian state.”<sup>133</sup> On August 10, 1920, the Armenians made the fatal mistake of seizing Turkish-held coal mines at Olti, provoking a war that quickly ended Armenian independence and resulted in Soviet administration.

Soviet rule over the Armenian people began to break down in the late 1980s, although the USSR survived until 1991. On February 20, 1988, the Armenian-populated region of Nagorno Karabakh, which lay within Azerbaijan, formally requested that Moscow “adjust the borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan to make Karabakh part of Armenia.”<sup>134</sup> This request was accompanied by “massive rallies and demonstrations in Yerevan... [which] received worldwide attention.” Azerbaijan reacted immediately and violently, and Armenians in the Azerbaijani town of Sumgait were the victims of pogroms. It quickly became clear that the Soviet government could not effectively resolve the conflict, despite attempting to do so through large population transfers between the two regions. The Armenian National Movement took control after the 1988 earthquake, becoming the Government of Soviet Armenia in August of 1990, and Armenia effectively became a *de facto* sovereign state.<sup>135</sup> In 1991, Soviet army units reacted to the developments in Armenia by beginning “the ethnic cleansing of Armenian populated villages” in the north of Karabakh, reasserting their power over the region. Only five months later, however, the Supreme Soviet authorized a referendum on

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>134</sup> Libaridian, 206.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 208.

independence, for which an overwhelming majority voted. In September 1991, Armenia formally became independent, and by the end of the year the USSR collapsed.

Independence has presented new challenges for the Armenians. With no access to any sea, rail lines that have been blocked off by the continuing conflict with Azerbaijan over Karabakh, few natural resources, and little foreign investment, “it is difficult to argue that Armenia is part of the globalization process in any way that gives it strategic significance for its neighbors or anyone else.”<sup>136</sup> Despite finally achieving its long-pursued independence, Armenia has remained an unimportant player in the global arena. Gerard Libaridian argues that years of waiting for outside intervention and resigning themselves to the results of foreign decisions has left the Armenians predisposed toward isolation and withdrawal, rather than equipped with the force of will necessary for an evolving country. Instead, by allowing Russia to control their energy sector, major industrial concerns, and arms supply,<sup>137</sup> the Armenians are once more becoming dependent on a foreign power, and avoiding the responsibilities inherent in administering their own country. While Armenian identity provided the necessary impetus to pursue and secure statehood, it remains to be seen whether these gains can be translated into the development of a healthy Armenian nation.

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 292.

## **Conclusion**

As stateless minorities in a turbulent region, the Kurds and Armenians have survived rule by hostile empires and maintained the discreteness of their own identities in the face of considerable pressure to assimilate. In both cases, they have unified themselves by emphasizing their shared ethnicity, religion, and language. As other ethnic groups have succeeded in establishing states, as did the Persians in Iran, the Turks in Turkey, and the Arabs in countries throughout the Middle East, the Kurds and Armenians have also been stirred by the fire of nationalism to seek their own countries.

While this quest has by no means been any easy one, both the Kurds and the Armenians made significant gains in the last two decades; Armenia is now an independent state, and Kurds enjoy considerable autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan. However, both groups face considerable challenges in the twenty-first century. The Kurds must secure international support to protect their status in Iraq, and therefore must prove their ability to govern themselves responsibly by addressing the activities of cross-border resistance groups, while the Armenians must become more active in global society in order to take advantage of the opportunities of independence. The strides that both have made toward their nationalist goals are impressive, but their futures are by no means assured.

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