



Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales
Grado en Relaciones Internacionales

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Ethnic identity as the Key Driver to the Construction of a Nation State: The Kurdish Case

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Madrid, abril de 2019

ABSTRACT

The Kurds' enquiries for an independent nation-state have gained momentum since the Arab Spring, posing a threat to the current geopolitical status quo in the Middle East. Throughout this study, I propose an analysis of the relationship between ethnicity and the political origins of the Kurdistan project. After covering the topic of the identity of the Kurds, their historical context and cultural imaginary, I will look into the accomplished steps towards independence that have been taken since 2011, in order to address the key matter of this paper: understanding how their ethnic identity becomes the main criteria to construct their own Kurdish Nation State.

Keywords: cultural imaginary, ethnicity, Kurds, Middle East, Nation State, nationalism.

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LIST OF SHORTENINGS

AKP: Justice and Development Party
CIA: Central Intelligence Agency
DPKS: Democratic Party of Kurds in Syria
HDP: People's Democratic Party (*of Turkey*)
IS: Islamic State
KCK: Kurdistan Communities Union
KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party (*of Iraq*)
KDPI: Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan
KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government (*of Iraq*)
NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PCDK: Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (*of Iraq*)
PJAK: Kurdistan Free-Life Party (*of Iran*)
PKK: Kurdistan's Workers Party (*of Turkey*)
PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (*of Iraq*)
PYD: Democratic Union Party (*of Syria*)
US: United States of America
USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
YPG: Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Unit

INTRODUCTION

1. Relevance

Ever since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011, the Kurds have played an increasingly important role in the geopolitics of the Middle East. After becoming the main heroes in key milestones in the fight against the terrorist group IS, such as Kobanî or Raqa, their popularity gained momentum around the whole world. On top of that, the weakening of the Syrian and Iraqi central governments has allowed the Kurds to achieve a higher degree of autonomy in certain regions, thus coming closer to their project of a greater Kurdistan.

This dream of an independent Kurdistan would affect the border of four important states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Not only is this a matter of national sovereignty, but it also profoundly alters the geopolitics of the Middle East, one of the most convulsive regions that the world has known during the last two centuries. Since the territories that are claimed by the Kurds are very rich in oil, the permissiveness of these four countries towards an independent Kurdistan shrinks at an exponential rate.

Therefore, while the world becomes more conscious of the lack of statehood of the Kurds, this ethnic community fights to achieve a prosperity level consistent with its strategic location and resources endowment. What will finally happen in the Middle East will not only affect its millions of citizens, but will also bring consequences to the rest of the globe.

2. Objectives and methodology

The main objective of this paper is to analyse how the ethnic identity of the Kurds becomes the primary argument for the creation of their nation-state. I will study how their project is not only a political one, but starts before as a social project, through the creation of a national consciousness.

Accordingly, I will study and analyse the relationship between three main variables:

- 1) Ethnic identity in the context of the Middle East,
- 2) The Kurdish people as a well-defined ethnic group, and
- 3) How the discourse and the practice of ethnicity is utilized and put into practice in the construction of the notion of a contemporary nation-state.

This main objective can be split into several minor objectives:

- To analyse the recent history of the Kurdish people, from ancient times up to the moment in which they were separated by the post World War I borders, and until nowadays.
- To investigate how objective components of their ethnicity differ from their claimed cultural imaginary.
- To study how their purpose of creating a nation-state has increased since the Arab Spring (i.e., post 2011) and what steps have been taken towards this goal.
- To determine what are the main arguments that support their wish to become independent and what evidence supports their claim.
- To understand the correlation between their ethnic identity and the construction of a nation-state.

The last point is the most relevant, since I shall investigate if there is any kind of causality between these two variables: ethnic identity and nation-state. Is the identity of a people like the Kurds the main cause of the construction of the nation, or is it rather the national consciousness that is the cause of their strong ethnic consciousness? In short: does ethnic identity create the imaginary of a nation, or is the nation as a political-ideological project the cause of the creation of ethnic identity?

Therefore, from the data that is extracted from the Kurdish modern and contemporary history, and adding the background knowledge provided by specialized literature about the Kurds in different fields of knowledge, I propose the following hypothesis: For the case of the Kurdish people of Western Asia, the imaginary of a shared ethnic identity functions as the main causal variable in the construction of the notion of a Kurdish nation-state.

In order to pursue the acceptance or denial of this hypothesis, the main methodology that will be employed throughout this project is qualitative research. Within this research category, I will deploy literature revision, not only of published articles and books, but as well of recent press and journalistic publications.

It is important to take into account that there is not as much available literature about the Kurds as it would be desirable, since they have not been considered as a potential nation in formal terms for many years. Furthermore, the majority of the literature that can be found is written in languages such as Persian, Arabic or Turkish and has not been translated into any Romance languages.

STATE OF ART AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. State of Art

On the one hand, Kurds have not been the subject of abundant Western literature, mainly because their ethnicity was forcefully hidden for many years as an attempt to consolidate the nationality of the four countries created after World War I in the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). Nevertheless, we can find key authors that have brought these people to light to Occidental countries through their investigations and English publications, such as Fredrik Barth (*Principles of Social Organization in Southern Kurdistan*, 1953), Gerard Chaliand (*A people without a country: Kurds and Kurdistan*, 1980), Phillip Kreyenbroek (*The Kurds: A contemporary overview*, 1992), David McDowall (*A Modern History of the Kurds*, 1996) or Martin van Bruinissen (*The Kurds and Islam*, 1998), among others.

On the other hand, ethnicity and the nation-state have had an important space in anthropological literature, especially during the 20th century. Regarding ethnic literature, Fredrik Barth must be highlighted (*Ethnic groups and boundaries. The social organization of culture difference*, 1969). As well, in terms of the nation-state, some of the most remarkable authors are Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner (*Nations and Nationalism*, 1983) and Eric Hobsbawm (*Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 1990).

2. Theoretical Framework

In this subsection, a detailed explanation of the key concepts that have conducted this paper will be provided. These are the following: the “Kurdish people”; ethnicity; and nation-state.

As for the Kurds, the definition given by the Encyclopaedia Britannica is the following: “Kurd, member of an ethnic and linguistic group living in the Taurus Mountains of

eastern Anatolia, the Zagros Mountains of western Iran, portions of northern Iraq, Syria, and Armenia, and other adjacent areas”¹.

As for ethnicity, there are four main approaches to understand its concept.

1. Primordialist approach: While it is the most classic approach and the predominant one up until the 70s, it views ethnic identity as a series of fixed cultural, territorial and biological aspects that result in different tribes or ethnic groups. This approach suggests that a ‘clash of cultures’ is inevitably promoted by these permanent features (Adlparvar & Tadros, 2016).

2. Instrumentalist approach: Its main spokesperson, Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1928-2016) –whose explanation of ethnic identity is the one adopted throughout this essay–, presented this new concept of ethnicity as a challenge to the Primordialist approach. According to Barth, ethnicity arises as a flexible method of organizing cultural differences, which appear as the result of interaction between different groups. Ethnicity can be understood as a social organization phenomenon (i.e., an institutional project), but also as a cultural differentiation process (i.e., a set of values and beliefs). Therefore, ethnic groups are not only defined by their socio-cultural features, but as well by the way through which these individuals define their boundaries, limits, self-representation and self-concept. Ethnic identity becomes thus a process both of self-subscription to a group and of recognition granted by the rest of the group (Barth, 1969).

3. Materialist approach: Marxist authors such as Michael Hechter (born 1943) have defended that ethnicity is the inevitable result of class relations and conflicts. Henceforce, these theories point that any type of inter-ethnic violence is the result of economic and political inequalities. Therefore, it is the social and economic factors that determine ideological configurations such as ethnicity (Hechter, 1974).

¹ The definition can be found on the official website of the Encyclopaedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kurd>

4. Constructionist approach: This new focus perceives that ethnicity is constructed through social interaction, whose main agents are both individuals and discursive formations. The former consists of ordinary people, who act in a certain way to perceive themselves as a part of that ethnic group; while the latter refers to the way in which cultural systems have the ability to create ethnic difference and predispose individuals to picture members of other groups as enemies (Adlparvar & Tadros, 2016).

In this work I will take a category of nation-State given by British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012). In his book "*Nations and Nationalism since 1780*", he explains that nationalism goes before nation, since states and nationalism are necessary structures to build nations. Furthermore, a nation is not a permanent social entity, but rather an invented tradition of a state which, when successful, automatically turns itself into a nation-state (Hobsbawm, 1998).

In summary, in this essay I will understand that a nation is simply a group of people who accept the same social organization –that is, the same institutional structure of division of status and roles– within a more or less homogeneous code of values and beliefs that is called "nation" or "nation-state". Therefore, if the Kurds are really a nation or even a nation-state, they should share a common institutional system, and a common set of values and beliefs, as initial minimum points.

ANALYSIS

1. Identity

1.1. Objective Kurdish Identity

It is of vital importance to have a clear understanding of what defines the Kurds as an independent ethnic group. An ethnic group is defined by Raoul Naroll (1973) as a community that:

- a) biologically self-perpetuates itself;
- b) shares fundamental cultural values that are revealed through specific cultural features;
- c) integrates a sole communication area;
- d) constitutes a distinguishable category from others.

The features hereby explained conform to what Kurds actually are, as opposed to what they claim to be, studied in the “Cultural Imaginary” subsection. Thereupon, I will condense in a few paragraphs the main aspects of their geography, demography, languages and women role. Their “Historical and Geopolitical Context” will be explained in the following homonymous subsection. Of particular importance here is an explanatory table of the main Kurdish political parties that has been attached in the Appendixes section: *Appendix I. Main Kurdish parties*.

1.1.1. Geography and Demography

It is important to note that the territory of Kurdistan is roughly defined, given that the concentration of Kurdish population varies strongly between region, as can be appreciated in Picture I. Accordingly, the total extension of Kurdistan differs depending on the source. As defined in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, its total squared kilometers amount to 190.000, which is bigger than many European countries such as Greece and Bulgaria, and approximately the same size as Belarus.

Across the whole region, stockbreeding has traditionally been very important, providing meat to Anatolia, Syria and Mesopotamia. At the same time, Kurdistan has been one of the main producers of cereal in the region, as well as being very competitive in cotton and tobacco. Nonetheless, it is their oil and water resources that have made these territories of key importance for the governments of the four countries. Iraq, the fifth country with the largest reserves of oil in the world, has the biggest part of its petroleum industry in Kurdish territory, being Kirkuk and Khaniqin its most important oilfields. As well, Turkey is highly dependent on its oil fields of Batman and Silvan; and Syria on Rmelan –all of them belonging to Kurdish soil (McDowall, 2004).

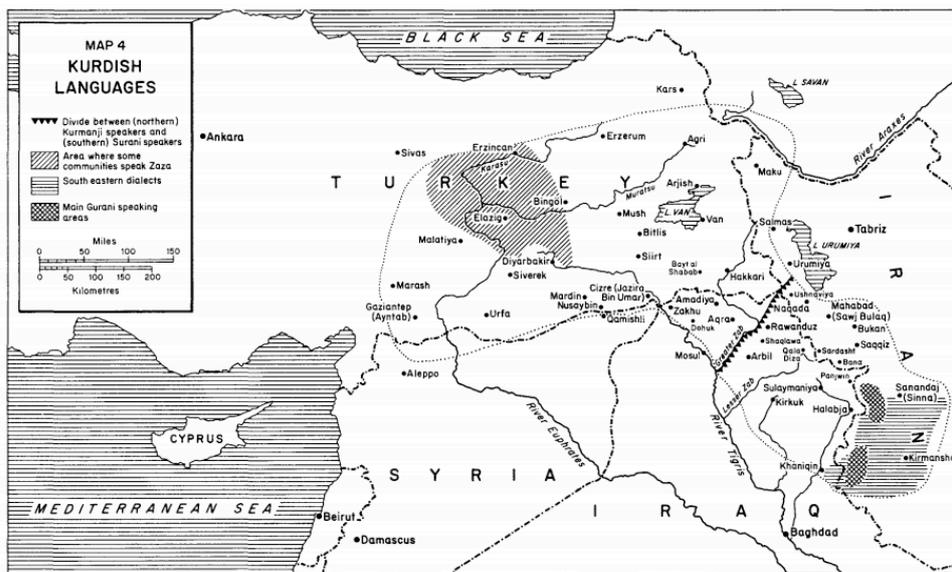
1.1.2. Languages

Kurdish is the largest language in number of speakers, followed by Turkish, Arab and Persian (Bruinessen, 1999). Kurdish belongs to the Iranian language family and encloses three main dialects: Kurmanji, Sorani and Palewani. Firstly, Kurmanji –also known as Northern Kurdish– is the most common dialect among Kurds, spoken by an estimated 20 million of people across the four countries, although mainly in Turkey. Secondly, Sorani –Central Kurdish– is the most typical dialect in Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan, spoken by an approximate of seven million Kurds. Sorani is, in fact, one of the two official languages in Iraq, although it is simply referred to as *Kurdish*. Thirdly, Palewani –Southern Kurdish– is the least common dialect, spoken by three million Kurds in the Kermanshah and Elam provinces of Iran (Ludwig, 2008).

Even though these are normally classified as dialects, some intellectuals such as Phillip Kreyenbroek claim that “from a linguistic or at least a grammatical point of view, however, Kurmanji and Sorani differ as much from each other as English and German, and it would seem appropriate to refer to them as languages” (Kreyenbroek, 1992). In fact, while Kurmanji is normally written with Latin script, Sorani and Palewani are written using the Persian alphabet.

There are other languages spoken by several millions of Kurds, such as the Zaza and Gorani languages. Both languages belong to the Iranian language family –same grouping as Kurdish–, and are considered as part of the same dialect group. However,

while Gorani –also known as Hawrami– has certain similarities with Central Kurdish and is spoken in the provinces of the border between Iraq and Iran, Zaza is normally not understandable by Gorani speakers and is spoken in the northernmost parts of Kurdistan –eastern Turkey (Kreyenbroek, 1992). All of this implies that although the Kurds are a more or less stable ethnic group, in cultural terms we can say that they are a conglomerate of multiple human sub-groups with different languages, grouped within the same socio-cultural matrix.



Picture II: Kurdish Languages

Source: *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 2004

1.1.3. Religion and Women Role

The Kurdish society is identified as very tolerant towards religious diversity. As an example, we can take the example of how the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government refused in 2012 to accept religion teachers from the Iraqi Central Government, since they wanted Kurdish schools to be religiously neutral. When investigating about the religions practiced by the Kurds, a broad variety is nowadays found. However, Islam arrived to Kurdish lands at an early stage of its expansion in the 7th century, so this religion has inevitably had a big impact on all the Kurdish society, not only on religious aspects (Bruinessen, 1999). Whilst the majority of Kurds follow Sunni Islam –an

approximate of $\frac{3}{4}$, around 10% of Kurds follow Shii Islam –the majority of the ones living in Iranian Kurdistan.

Nonetheless, there are other popular beliefs among the Kurdish population. When we look back at Kurdistan before the appearance of Islam, the vast majority of Kurds were Yazidis, and nowadays the vast majority of Yazidis are Kurds (McDowall, 2004). Two other significant religions among the Kurds are Alevi and Ahl-i Haqq. Alevi is especially popular among Zaza speakers –mostly Turkish Kurds– and Ahl-i Haqq is common in the Iraqi-Irani Kurdish border. These three religions are similar in terms of belief and rituals, since they all hold traditions that can only be conducted by “religious specialists from sacred lineages that claim descent from saints associated with the founding myths of these religions” (Bruinessen, 1999).

As well, Christianity and Judaism have been historically present in these Kurdish territories. Christian tradition dates back to the 9th century and was further boosted in the 19th century with the arrival of Western missionaries. Notwithstanding, an increasing hostility between Muslims and Christians led to the Armenian massacres of 1915, which meant the cleansing of the vast majority of Christians off Kurdistan. Conversely, Kurdistan was emptied of Jews following the establishment of Israel in 1948, since the majority of them moved to the newly founded State (Bruinessen, 1999).

These data allows us to consider that, just as in linguistic terms, the Kurdish religious beliefs indicate that this ethnic group conforms a set or conglomerate of multiple human sub-groups with different religious traditions, grouped within the same socio-cultural matrix, which implies high levels of social complexity. A single "nation", but divided into multiple and different religious, ideological and linguistic groups and sub-groups, a kind of a "multiple identity" effect.

Women in Kurdistan have been the ultimate representatives of the Kurdish struggle for independence in the last decades. While Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey’s governments have never been acknowledged for being equality-friendly, Kurdish women have never ceased in their fight against patriarchy and have been engaged in armed resistance for decades. However, it has only been following the fight in Syria against the Islamic State

and the Al Assad regime that these women have been world widely recognized for their revolution (Dirik, 2014).

Nonetheless, gender equality is a long historical tradition for the Kurds. “For instance, in the late 19th century, Kara Fatma led a battalion of almost 700 men in the Ottoman Empire and managed to insert 43 women into the army ranks –very unusual for the period. In 1974, Leyla Qasim, at the age of 22, became the first woman to be executed by the Iraqi Baath party for her involvement in the Kurdish student movement” (Dirik, 2014).

If we analyse military figures, in 2014 35% of soldiers in the Syrian Kurdish forces were women. In Iraqi Kurdistan, the Peshmerga include a female-exclusive battalion. During the 70s and 80s armed resistance against Saddam Hussein, many women joined the Kurdish forces along with their husbands. In politics, more than half of the members of the Kurdistan’s Workers Party (PKK) are women. This party enforces gender equality quotas, that imply that each chair has to be shared by a man and a woman. Taking after this tradition, the vast majority of female politicians in Turkey’s parliament are Kurds (Dirik, 2014).

1.2. Historical and Geopolitical Context

In order to correctly explain the ethnic reasons for which many Kurds claim the creation of Kurdistan as an independent nation-state, it is necessary to have a general idea of the history surrounding Kurds before the 20th century, to analyse the key moment in history when they lost their opportunity to have their State organization, and to understand the treatment they have received ever since in the countries to which they were allocated.

Firstly, the first known origins of the Kurds and the path these people followed until the beginning of the 20th century will be explained.

Secondly, the events that surrounded the aftermath of the First World War will be explained.

Thirdly, I will summarize the role that the Kurds played in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran separately.

Arabs started to use the term 'Kurd' in the 7th century, to make reference to the nomadic tribes living in the northern Zagros mountains, after they were converted into Islam.

The Abbasid Caliphate ruled the region until the 19th century, and after that a series of Kurdish chiefs established self-rule, such as the Shaddadids (951 to 1174) in modern Armenia or the Hasanwayhids (959 to 1095) in modern western Iran. The Turkish Seljuk Empire began in the 11th century and became the dominant authority in the eastern Islamic world until the 13th century, when a series of Mongol invasions ended with this dynasty, leading to two centuries of instability in the region.

In the 16th century, Kurdistan is divided conquered and divided by two main powers: The Ottoman Empire and Persia. During the long-lasting conflict between the Ottomans and the Persian Safavids, the Ottoman Kurdish territories were allowed to maintain the Principality of Bitlis and had a large autonomy. In the 18th century, the Safavid dynasty is overthrown and the Ottoman Empire takes control of all Kurdish tribes (Kurdistan Memory Programme, 2019).

During the 19th century, there is a centralist tendency, that leads to confrontation between the Ottoman administration and the Kurdish tribes, who see their traditional privileges attacked. In the 1880s, Sheikh Ubeydullah (died 1883) led a revolt against the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar dynasty, demanding an independent Kurdish state. The rebellion was suppressed and he was forced to exile. This moment is considered to be the starting point of modern Kurdish nationalism (Izady, 2015).

Looking back at the time when Sykes Picot (1916) was being decided, we can see how many of the Kurds tried to influence the regional and international arena so as to create their own State. However, not all regional and international actors were so interested in having an independent "Kurdistan", since many were more attracted by the pan-islamic ideology of bringing all the Muslims under one sole caliphate (Fondation Kurde de Paris). The British government tried to support a leader of the Kurds in order to study

the possibility of creating an independent Kurdish government under British rule. However, there were many other Nations that were not willing to give up some of their territories, starting by Turkey and Iran.

After long negotiations, the Treaty of Sevres (1920, between the Allied powers and Turkey) was signed to organise the territories of the defeated Ottoman Empire. At that time, the Ottoman authorities had already deported and assassinated hundreds of thousands of Armenians, in what was later called the Armenian genocide (1915-1923). As a consequence, the Allied powers established that the east of Anatolia would become Armenia. Other impositions of the Treaty included an independent Kurdistan; the establishment of the Greek and Italian forces in regions of West Anatolia (Smyrna y Antalya); the formation of the British rule in Palestine and Mesopotamia (Iraq); and a French mandate in Syria.

However, these new territorial divisions did not last very long, since the Turk government did not believe it was a fair repartition and did not desire to have Christian influence in these territories. Even though the Treaty was firstly accepted in Istanbul, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk was able to force the signing of a new treaty thanks to his victory over the Greeks and the support received from the USSR. Therefore, in 1923 the Treaty of Lausanne recognised a different division of the Middle East.

At this point, Turkey regained control of the Anatolian territories that had been under Greek and Italian rule, as well as Western Armenia. Moreover, the biggest portion of Kurdistan was integrated again into Turkey. Many of the Kurds supported this, since they were worried about ending under British or Armenian –and therefore Christian– rule (McDowell, 2004). The most Southern territories of Kurdistan, rich in petroleum, had an unclear future and were claimed by both the British and the Kurds. It was finally integrated into Iraq, which had been until that moment much less fortunate than Turkey in terms of natural resources (Fondation Institut Kurde de Paris).

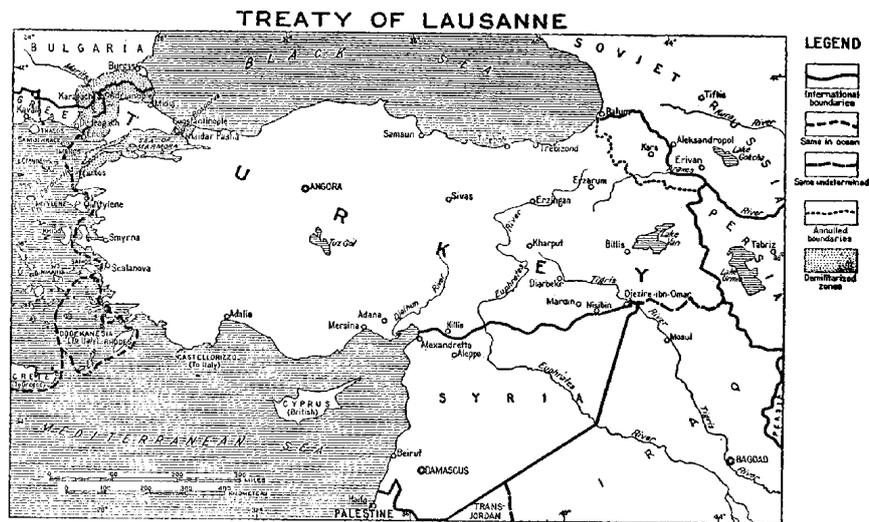


FIGURE 14 TURKEY IN 1923

Compiled by
Col. Lawrence Martin

Picture III: Borders established by the Treaty of Lausanne

Source: World War I Document Archive

It is important to point out the difficulty in explaining separately the 20th century history of Kurds in each of the four different countries where they live. Even if the central governments have each had their particular approaches towards the Kurds in different moments, some of the internal revolutions had international effects and created turmoil in the whole Kurdish region. Furthermore, the Kurdish nationalist parties of the different countries have also maintained strong relations between them.

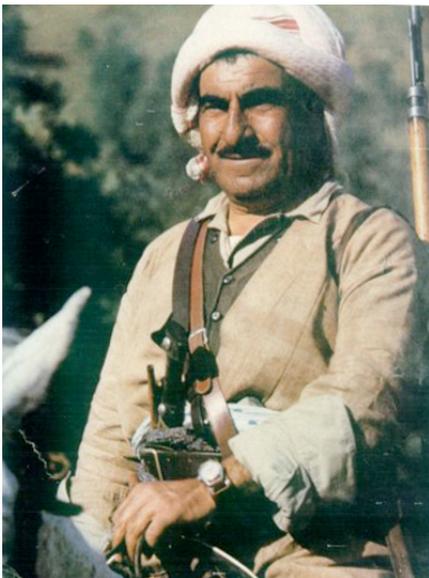
I will now proceed to explain the series of events that have characterized the Kurdish society in the different four countries in which they are located since 1925 (see below map). Each of the four countries –Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran– will be explained individually.

1.2.1. Iraq

Since the very beginning of the British mandate in Mesopotamia, the Kurds started revolting to achieve independence. In 1919, Sheykh Mahmud Barzanji seized the region and later on declared the ‘Kingdom of Kurdistan’ (1922-1924), although the British forces eventually reversed these efforts.

During the following decades, it was the Barzani clan that became vocal supporters of the rights for the Kurds in Iraq and formed the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Many uprisings were initiated, although none of them achieved any more rights. In 1961, Mustafa Barzani was able to return from exile to Iraq and initiated the first Iraqi-Kurdish war, which lasted until 1966 with a peace programme that granted a series of rights for the Kurds. Even if concise, the Kurdish Autonomous Region was finally established in 1970.

Nonetheless, Baghdad was not willing to allow the situation for much longer, and the government led a new offensive against the Barzani forces. Iran, that had been previously sending aid to the KDP, cut a deal with Iraq and the Kurds were left hopeless. The central Iraqi was able to take full control of the northern region (McDowell, 2004).



Picture IV: Mustafa Barzani

Source: The Foundation for the Kurdish Library and Museum

Years later, many Kurds sided with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, which led Saddam Hussein to initiate yet another campaign against the Kurds: under his rule they had to go through sufferings such as forced relocation, illegal detention, torture or death. Only in 1988 he managed to murder more than 50,000 Kurds and destroy thousands of towns in what was later named as the An-Anfal Genocide. Those Kurds who tried to fight back were smashed with chemical and aerial attacks (Hiltermann, 2014).

After the US and its allies won the first Gulf War (1990-1991), the Kurds took advantage of Iraq's defeat and rose against Hussein's forces. There was a quick

response from the Iraqi army, resulting in the detention and killing of several thousands of Kurds. At this point, over one and a half million Kurds fled to neighbour States, so the UN Security Council imposed the Resolution 688 and declared a no-fly zone in Iraq (McDowall, 2004). It was designed to avoid the intervention of Iraqi military forces north of the 36th parallel and support humanitarian efforts in the area (Gibbons, 2002). Thanks to the American surveillance, Iraqi Kurds were able to start their way to the facto-state.

In 1992 the first Kurdish Regional Government was established, but a civil war broke between the Kurds only two years later due to the differences between the two main parties, the KDP –led by Massoud Barzani– and the PUK –led by Jalal Talabani–, regarding the negotiations with Baghdad. They were not able to stop the war until 1998 (Jüde, 2017).

After the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Tabalani was appointed as the new president of Iraq, while Barzani became president of the Kurd Regional Government. However, both parties have not been able to unify their forces, since they are both highly personalised – ruled by the Talabani and Barzani families respectively– and have also kept their particular *peshmerga* (militias), instead of a single unified one. Regardless of their internal politics, it is true that nowadays “Baghdad has lost its authority there, and the Iraqi Kurds, empowered by their own government, parliament and administration, and their own armed forces, are autonomously pursuing their own policies, often against the will of their parent state” (Jüde, 2017). They even have foreign relations with several other states.

1.2.2. Syria

The Khoybun League appeared in Syria as an answer to the Kurdish repression in Turkey in the second half of the 20s. This group was allowed by the French authorities, since at first it did not seem as a threat to their Mandate. Years later, some revolts started in the province of Jazira –the least developed and controlled by the French–, though it was quickly suppressed. Nevertheless, the trust between the Assyrian and Kurd compatriots was becoming weaker, so when the Republic finally became independent in

the aftermath of the Second World War, the country was fragmented, especially between the Arab majority and other minorities (Schøtt, 2017).

Arab nationalism became very important in Syria after 1946, following a series of events such as the Arab-Israeli war in 1948 and the Suez War in 1956. Therefore, despite having two Kurd Presidents of Syria in the early years of independence, there was a clear effort to unify the Syrian society under Arab nationalism –for which minorities such as the Kurds represented a threat. For this reason, the creation of the Democratic Party of Kurds in Syria (DPKS) in 1957 was not seen with satisfaction in Damascus and their leaders were soon imprisoned. In the early 60s, the Baath party came to power in Syria, intensifying the Arabization. One fifth of the Syrian Kurds were dispossessed from their citizenship and right to property, especially in the North-Eastern region of Jazira, that had become very prosperous thanks to its agricultural development and recent discovery of oil. Damascus established a plan to repress the Kurds, including the ban of the Kurdish language and the omission of the Kurds from history books (Schøtt, 2017).

The arrival of the Al-Assad regime to Syria in 1971 meant a new age of oppression where the leader was considered the “father” of all Syrians: Kurds had no option but to play along with the new rules. At the same time, a series of internal ideological disagreements on how to deal with the central government and how to understand Marxism provoked the division of the Kurdish politics into many different parties. In 2012, there were 20 Syrian Kurdish parties (Schøtt, 2017).

After the death in 2000 of Hafez Al- Assad, his son Bashar became president of Syria. At the same time of the transition, the Damascus Spring was triggered, and led to many demonstrations of Kurds asking for equal rights. The catalyst was the 2004 Qamishlo football match revolt that ended with more than forty casualties and thousands of arrested. The control and repression of the Kurdish minority by the Al-Assad regime turned fiercer, provoking at the same time a larger sense of Kurdish identity among this minority and an increase of international awareness towards this group (Tejel, 2009).

Even if not recognised by the Syrian government or any international actor, an autonomous region was established in the North of the country in the aftermath of the

Arab Spring. Auto denominated “Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria” in September 2018, it is more commonly known as “Western Kurdistan” or “Rojava” – which means West in Kurdish.

1.2.3. Turkey

Before 1924, the central government of Turkey recognised the existence of multiple nations inside its borders, and accepted that, Kurds, among others, must have their own group rights. However, after the Treaty of Lausanne and the 1925 Shaykh Sa'id Insurrection, the picture changed completely for the Kurds. They were deported and spread across the country in order to end with their control of the Eastern lands of Anatolia (Yegen, 2009). Many Kurdish intellectuals living in Istanbul also had to flee, and left towards Syria and Iraq (Tejel, 2009).

From this moment onwards, the Kurds would be only seen by the government as Turkish citizens, regardless of their ethnicity. The process that was triggered at this moment is known as “ethnic assimilation” and has been widely studied in the International Relations arena, for there have been more cases throughout history in other States. This assimilation of the central culture is imposed to the ethnic minorities in a multidimensional manner, comprehending not only culture, language and religion, but also society structures –friends, marriage, organizations (Allen Williams & Ortega, 1990).

As Yegen (2009) explains, this process of “Turkification” of the Kurds took place during the following decades, through education, interethnic marriage, the ban of the Kurdish language and the dispersion the Kurdish population to Turkish towns, among many other measures. Furthermore, all references to Kurdistan and Kurdish characters were removed from History books, and the Kurdish towns' names were substituted with Turkish ones (Zeydanlioglu, 2008). As a consequence, the Turks had to face 17 rebellions from the Kurds between 1920 and 1938 (Heper, 2007). The most notable ones include the Dersim rebellion and massacres of 1937 and 1938, where thousands of Kurds were killed.

Founded in 1978, the Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK), became the leading force to fight in favour of the creation of an independent State including the Kurdish inhabitants spread across Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Based upon a Marxist ideology, the PKK advocated in favour of an armed conflict against the central government in the east and southeast of Turkey.

From 1984 to 1999, the Turkish government had thousands of their villages burnt or evacuated. The PKK's leader Abdullah Ocalan was captured in 1999 and sentenced to life imprisonment. Depending on the source, figures of the displaced Kurds oscillate from 300,000 to more than a million (Yegen, 2009). According to official Turkish sources, the conflict provoked more than 40,000 casualties since the beginning of the armed fight until 2015. The PKK is nowadays considered as a terrorist group by the Turkish government, the European Union, the US and NATO.

Even if there are many different definitions around the concept of "terrorist group", we can take the one given by Jones and Libicki (2008): "a collection of individuals belonging to a non-state entity that uses terrorism to achieve its objectives". Terrorism is at the same time defined as intentional violence to spread fear with a political motivation (Phillips, 2015).

1.2.4. Iran

Many leaders of Kurdish tribes took advantage of the chaotic situation at the end of World War I and rebelled against the Iranian government, although the government forces quickly defeated them in 1922. From that moment onwards, the Shah developed an aggressive anti-Kurdish policy, through which many Kurds –mainly intellectuals, leaders and chiefs– were imprisoned or forced to exile. Moreover, the Shah's policies included forced sedentarisation –Iranian Kurds have a strong tradition of nomadism–, absolute control of their internal politics and compulsory westernisation, which went against their traditional practices (Gresh, 2009).

During the Second World War, even though Iran had not taken sides, the British forced the Reza Shah to abdicate (1941). During this turmoil, Kurdish Republic in Mahabad

was established in 1946, after the Iranian army collapsed and many imprisoned intellectual Kurds were liberated. Albeit the Soviet support, the Republic only lasted one year, and did not even contain the whole of the Kurdish territories, only a few cities.

Even though the Kurdish population was glad of the exile of a Shah –who had not favoured them– they soon found themselves at unease with the new revolutionary government of Ayatollah Khomeini. Their leaders were denied a seat in the writing of the new Constitution and Khomeini soon openly classified ethnic minorities as contrary to Islamic doctrines. This led to a new wave of confrontations during the summer of 1979. The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), born during the Republic of Mahabad, became the leading political and military force in Iranian Kurdistan to oppose the central revolutionary government.

After long negotiations, both sides failed to achieve an agreement. One year later, when Iraq invaded Iran, the KDPI offered Tehran a ceasefire in exchange to certain nationalist demands. Khomeini responded with a simultaneous attack to the invader and Kurdish forces (Van Bruinessen, 1986). Over ten thousand Iranian Kurds fled to Iraq after the Iran-Iraq war (Gresh, 2009).

Since the recognition of the Kurd Regional Government of Iraq in 2003, Iranian Kurds have started once more to promote nationalism and demand further recognition of their cultural rights. The Party for Freedom and Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) was born in 2004 as military opposition to Iranian forces, and confrontations between both factions became very usual –even causing hundreds of Iranian officials’ casualties (Gresh, 2009).

1.3. Cultural Imaginary

In this subsection, the Kurdish cultural imaginary will be explained. This is understood as the symbols, myth, history and leaders that have built their ethnic personality.

Firstly, according to Kurdish nationalists, their nation has existed for many centuries already, and this political statement is supported by various myths about their origins.

Many Kurds support the belief that Prophet Abraham's wife Sarah was a Kurd, while others believe that they are all descendants from King Solomon's girl slaves. Another myth explains that Kurds' ancestors are the children that hid in the mountains in order to escape from a monster called Zahhak (McDowall, 2004).

Secondly, Kurds celebrate their own holiday, called Newroz, on the Spring Equinox. Its origins come from the Zoroastrian tradition, and it triggers the Persian New Year. The celebration has local variations among the different regions of Kurdistan, but it normally includes bonfires, dancing, singing, and poetry recitals (The Kurdish Project, s.f.). The celebration dates many centuries ago, since it was already mentioned by Kurdish authors like Melaye Ciziri (1570-1640) at the beginning of the 17th century in his poem *Newroz û Sersal* (translated as Newroz and the New Year). However, it has become increasingly important during the last decades, as a way of claiming the Kurdish identity.

Thirdly, literature or historic leaders have also become an important tool for this purpose. Ahmad-I Khani's was a Kurdish poet, astronomer and philosopher from the 17th century, who wrote a love poem called *Mem and Zin* (1692), that has been quoted very often by posterior Kurdish historians to express the oppressed nature of these people.

Look, from the Arabs to the Georgians, the Kurds have become like towers. The Turks and Persians are surrounded by them. The Kurds are on all four corners. Both sides have made the Kurdish people targets for the arrows of fate. They are said to be keys to the borders. Each tribe forming a formidable bulwark. Whenever the Ottoman Sea [Ottomans] and Tajik Sea [persians] flow out and agitate, the Kurds get soaked in blood separating them [the Turks and Persians] like an isthmus.

(Khani, 1692; translated by Saadala, 2008)

At the same time, Kurdish nationalists have selected a series of national heroes that they constantly include in their cultural imaginary. The most well known is 12th century-sultan Saladin (1138-1193), who has been acknowledged to be Kurdish, and is still nowadays an admired leader for both Occident and the whole Islamic world. The last

Kurdish emir of the Bohtan Emirate, called Bedr Kahn Beg (1803-1868), has also been converted into a hero due to his defending of the Kurdish autonomy in a growingly centralist Ottoman Empire. Sheik Sayd (1865-1925) is also considered a hero by the Kurds because he led a rebellion against Ataturk's forces in 1925, and was condemned to death as a result (Kurdistan Memory Programme, 2018).

Nonetheless, not only have men become Kurdish heroes, but also women such as Kara Fatma (1888-1955), who fought in the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923) and commanded a unit of 700 men who liberated Izmir from the Greeks in 1922. As well, Leyla Qasim (1952-1974) became a Kurdish martyr after her torture and execution in Baghdad. She was involved in the Kurdish student movement and was accused of trying to assassinate Saddam Hussein (Dirik, 2014).

2. Nation State

2.1. Accomplished Steps

Throughout this subsection, the steps that have been taken by the Kurds to build a Nation will be explained. Firstly, I will explain why the Arab Spring is a key moment for Kurdish nationalism, for it is the moment when the nation-building process starts gaining scope. Secondly, the exact steps throughout this process during the last decade will be illustrated. Thirdly, I will briefly describe what the current situation is these days for the Kurds.

2.1.1. Starting Point

Ever since the Arab Spring, Kurdish nationalism has gained momentum, become more visible internationally and increased its leverage domestically and regionally. Arab Spring has been defined as “a new wave of democracy, with Arab countries attempting to overthrow their authoritarian regimes” (Meltz, 2016). These series of revolutions were triggered in Tunisia in 2010, and immediately spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria, among other countries. A complete definition of revolution would be Stephen Walt's, who identifies it as “the destruction of an independent state by members of its

own society and its replacement by a regime based on new political principles” (Walt, 1992).

The aftermath of a revolutionary movement is that the state collapses while tribes fight each other, with sub-state actors becoming increasingly relevant. In this case, the Islamic State and the regional Kurdish movement have seen the Arab Spring as an opportunity to expand their influence (Bacik, 2015). Hereby are the junctures thanks to which the Kurds have been able to increase their empowerment.

Firstly, Syrian and Iraqi Kurds achieved greater autonomy due to the state collapse of their countries, after the Arab Spring. Both Kurds and IS occupied new territories, built administrations and even attracted volunteer fighters from abroad. This ended in a war between IS and Kurdish entities, since they were all trying to get hold of the same oil resources, they had opposing ideologies and they both were trying to start a new political actor on top of the ruins of an old one (Bengio, 2017).

Secondly, this war against IS “enhanced trans-border nationalism, cooperation, and interdependence among all Kurds; forced the Iraqi and Syrian governments to join forces with them for tactical reasons” (Bengio, 2017). New patriotism and solidarity were stimulated among the people and leaders of all four Kurdish regions. Moreover, when Kobanî was in danger of ending under IS rule, the Turkish PKK organised mass protests across all of Turkey so that Erdogan’s government would permit the passage of the Iraqi Peshmerga through Turkey to fight along with the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Unit (YPG) fighters in Kobanî against IS. Hence, Turkish PKK was as well able to become transnational, because it became the leader of Syrian Kurdish groups and held the Syrian cantons of Kobanî, Afrin and Jazira, which at the same time increased its leverage against the Turkish government (Bacik, 2015).

Thirdly, IS gains and barbarities provoked an internationalization of the Kurdish cause. Not only did the global public opinion change after watching Kurdish victories against IS broadcast all around the world, but also some Western powers commenced to see the Kurds as a strategic partner in the fight against IS (Bacik, 2015). In order to achieve a better military joint strategy, the US signed a memorandum of military coordination with the KRG in July 2016 in Erbil.

Even some European politicians, such as Swedish foreign minister Margot Wallström and Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán defended the need for a deliberation about Kurdish independence (Bengio, 2017). Furthermore, the necessity for concessions to the Kurds has not only been recognised by Western powers, but as well in 2017 Russia suggested the creation of a culturally autonomous region in the North-East of Syria, which was obviously rejected by the Bashar al-Asad's government (Barkey, 2019).

2.1.2. Nation Building

This subsection will analyse the steps that have been taken both to achieve Kurdish-run governments and to reinforce Pan-Kurdish identity. Firstly, the political and diplomatic nation building process will be explained. Secondly, other features related to the strengthening of their identity will be illustrated. In the Appendixes, the reader will find two explanatory tables that are of key utility to this section: *Appendix II. Main Current Kurdish leaders*, and *Appendix III. Current political situation for the Kurds in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran*.

Syrian Kurds saw the Civil War and the arrival of the IS as a chance to get rid off the State repression that they had been suffering for decades. Their armed forces YPG started fighting against both Al Assad forces and IS during 2012. They firstly conquered the city of Kobani, which was immediately followed by the occupation of several other cities. A *de facto* autonomous region surged at that moment, which later on achieved a Constitution –in 2014–, although it has not yet been recognised by any international actor.

Additionally, in Iraq, the creation of the KRG in 1992 supposed an important motivation to all the Kurds in the Middle East, since it became a demonstration that Kurdish self-government is a real possibility with international recognition. Even though Ankara has habitually denied any claims for Kurdish autonomy, Erdoğan decided to build economic links with the KRG. In 2010, Turkey opened a consulate in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan's capital, and signed a deal to build an oil pipeline from KRG's territories to the Mediterranean. As of 2018, around 400,000 barrels per day were arriving to the Ceyhan port in Turkey (Barkey, 2019).

The KRG decided to hold a referendum on 25th September 2017, in order to fulfil Kurdish people's aspiration for independence. Despite warnings from the international community, the referendum was held and resulted in 92.73% support for independence. In spite of these results, the Kurdish leadership decided to aim for a friendly divorce from Iraq, instead of a unilateral independence declaration. Nonetheless, they were not able to bring Baghdad to negotiate, and for the first time in a long time, Turkey, Iraq and Iran lined up to tackle any form of Kurdish independence aspirations (Bengio, 2018). The Iraqi government invaded the Kurdish territories within its borders and reconquered around 40% of its territory, so the KRG lost as well a large part of its international leverage (Barkey, 2019).

After decades of the Turkish government demanding total surrender from the PKK, and an upscale of violence and deaths during the second half of the 2000s, the AKP announced a Kurdish Opening, also known as Kurdish or Democratic Initiative in 2009. However, this Kurdish Opening faced multiple problems and complications since the beginning and, by 2012, the number of casualties was higher than in any time during the 1990s. Moreover, the will of the Turkish government was very different from that of the PKK. While Erdogan was willing to lift the ban on Kurdish languages and traditions –in exchange of the complete PKK disarmament and the Kurdish “terrorist” fighters seeking asylum in other countries–, Kurds demanded an increase of their autonomy in order to achieve greater power (Gunter, 2013).

Nonetheless, Erdogan abandoned its Kurdish Opening in 2014, after the YPG achieved international support –thanks to its engagement in the fight against IS–, because the Turkish president feared another federal autonomous Kurdish State in Syria, apart from the already existing one in Iraq. Erdogan started a Kurdish-hostile policy, with strategies such as imprisoning candidates like Selahattin Demirtas, leader of the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in 2016. Furthermore, the influence of the Kurds in the Turkish parliament has diminished, due to the new presidential system that applies in Turkey since the 2017 referendum (Barkey, 2019).

All the same, as of 1st April 2019, in the last presidential elections, HDP won in eight provinces of East Turkey while Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost almost a fifth of their seats in Parliament (Pitel, 2019). On the other hand, Iranian Kurds

have not been able to experience self-rule so far, and Tehran has repressed and punished any attempt of Kurdish activism.

However, even if this Kurdish self-government has not been so successful, it has had an important impact on the expansion of Kurdish culture and language. Ever since the appearance of KRG, the majority of institutions in this territory function with Kurdish languages, either Kurmanji or Sorani. Moreover, Kurdish newspapers, radio, cinema, television series, or webpages seem to have proliferated. At the same time, in Syria, the government of Rojava has imposed education in Kurdish languages. During the Kurdish Opening, Kurdish languages were tolerated in private schools and newspapers, even if this transfer of linguistic rights was withdrawn only a couple years later. In Iran, since 2015, some Kurdish-language classes are allowed in Kurdish regions (Barkey, 2019).

This Kurdish language resurgence has had a notable impact on the diaspora communities, especially on European ones. Kurds in Western countries have promoted public consciousness and created Kurdish institutions, such as The Kurdish Project, the Washington Kurdish Institute or the *Fondation Institut Kurde de Paris*, whose objective is to “maintain in the Kurdish community a knowledge of its language, its history and its cultural heritage, to contribute to the integration of Kurdish immigrants to Europe into their host societies and to make the Kurds, their culture, their country and their present situation known to the general public”².

The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK for its Kurdish name) is an alliance of Kurdish entities or groups who follow Abdullah Ocalan’s ideology of ‘Democratic Confederalism’, which suggests that local communities in Kurdistan should have a notable amount of autonomy. The main parties belonging to the KCK are the Turkish PKK, the Syrian PYD (Syria), the Irani Kurdistan Free-Life Party, or the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PCDK), among others. “The goal of KCK is to create a society in Kurdistan based on the principles of radical democracy” (Istegun, 2011), without a State and where the people set up their own social system.

² Available on the official website of the Kurdish Institute of Paris
<https://www.institutkurde.org/en/institute/>

There has also been a process named ‘Kurdification’, where non-ethnic Kurds end up becoming Kurdish. These policies have been openly imposed by the Iraqi KRG since the defeat of Saddam Hussein, on the grounds that the article 140 of the Iraqi constitution –approved in 2005– ensured that the situation previous to Hussein’s Arabization process and genocide had to return. This was interpreted by the KRG as a way to expel many Arabs from the Kurdish Autonomous Region. Years later, those remaining Arabs that had had to flee Kurdish territories –escaping IS– were not allowed to come back after the defeat of the jihadist group, since the Kurds felt like those cities only belong to themselves. Furthermore, given how powerful the Kurds have become in the last years in Iraq, many tribes have felt pressure to work with them and assimilate their traditions and culture (Collard, 2014).

There are many feminist Kurdish organizations, whose importance has increased since the appearance of IS. The largest one is Kurdish Women’s Movement, whose leader is Asia Abdullah, that explained, “Isis would like to reduce women to slaves and body parts. We show them they’re wrong. We can do anything” (McKernan, 2017). Women have always been a vital part for Kurds, which has been proven in the administration bodies of Rojava, where for every position at every level of the government, there has to be a female equivalent to every male (Çiçek, 2015).

3. Hypothesis

Taking into account all the studied data and analysing each of the four described cases (Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria), I conclude that the cultural imaginary of the Kurdish ethnic identity is a constant variable: in each of the four cases it is used as the main justification for the construction of the nation-state.

The current Kurdish political leaders are aware of the fact that their ethnic identity is a necessary tool for the building of the consciousness of a modern nation-state. Therefore, they have made the effort of including this cultural imaginary in their speeches, statements, and practices. Different examples of this have been identified in order to prove our hypothesis that the ethnic identity is used as the base for the construction of a Kurdish nation-state.

Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, constantly denounces that the four hegemonic powers denied the Kurds their existence as an ethnic group, since they saw them as a threat that could lead to insurgencies and nationalist movements. As a consequence, while in Turkey, “all indications of the existence of a culture other than the Turkish were to be exterminated. They even banned the use of the Kurdish language” (Ocalan, 2009), in Iran the Pahlavi dynasty crushed any kind of emancipation struggle in blood and so did Iraq and Syria (Ocalan, 2009).

Masoud Barzani also named the long Kurdish struggle with the central Iraqi government in the recent speech delivered in 2017 after holding the referendum for the independence, making a reference to “the destruction to the 4500 Kurdish villages, (...) the disappearing of the 182,000 people in the Anfal campaign of 1988 and its chemical attack”³.

Furthermore, Ocalan mentions Newroz festivities in several occasions, invoking again how this Kurdish festival was banned for many Kurds throughout many years, especially for those living in Turkey and Syria. It was only allowed in Turkey in 2000, when it was adopted as a ‘Turkish spring fest’, under the condition that it was called ‘Nevruz’ instead of the Kurdish ‘Newroz’. At the same time, in Syria, this celebration has ended in mass arrests as well as casualties for many years⁴. For this reason, Ocalan delivered a speech from the prison of Imrali on 21st March 2013, when he congratulated Newroz starting with the following words:

“Let all the oppressed have a free and happy Newroz! Greetings to all peoples of Middle East and Central Asia who celebrate newroz, the day of revival and rejoice, with the greatest participation in the world... Greetings to all other peoples of the world who celebrate newroz, the landmark of a new era and sunshine, with enthusiasm and a democratic tolerance. Greetings to all who take democratic right, freedom and equality as their guides...”

³ Available in the Youtube video “Barzani speech on Kurdistan referendum” in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_VzNtB-aaY

⁴ According to Reuters article “Police kill three Kurds in northeast Syria”, available in <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL21565217>

(Ocalan, 2013)

In this same speech, Ocalan makes a reference to the ancient roots of the Kurdish people, defining them as:

“a folk that mothered one of the most ancient rural and urban civilizations at the lands of Mesopotamia and Anatolia from Zagros and Taurus Mountains to Tigris and Euphrates Rivers... (...) who coexisted peacefully and co-created this civilization with other peoples from different racial, religious, ethnic backgrounds”

(Ocalan, 2013)⁵

In Turkey, during the last years, the pro-Kurdish parties have been using public spaces in Eastern towns to represent Kurdish identity: including sculptures of Kurdish heroes such as Sheik Said, leader of the 1925 rebellion against Ataturk forces, and monuments that memorial state oppression and violence (Güvenç, 2011).

At the same time, Leyla Zana is a Kurdish politician who was awarded with the 1995 Sajarov Prize by the European Parliament but was not able to pick it up since she imprisoned in a Turkish jail. Years later, she pronounced a speech at the 4th International Conference on EU in Brussels (2007), where she stated that:

“My identity is what makes me unique and unlike any other. Killing a person’s identity is a murder that is graver than killing him. Every identity that is killed is in fact a loss for humanity. We should therefore capture the pluralism that will nurture those differences. It should be known that every identity that is murdered is our own murder regardless of what our language, religion or identity might be”.

(Zana, 2007)⁶

⁵ Available at Euronews <https://www.euronews.com/2013/03/22/web-full-transcript-of-abdullah-ocalans-ceasefire-call-kurdish-pkk>

In these examples we can see clearly that for the main political and cultural leaders of the Kurdish people the concept of ethnic identity is usually the main variable in the construction of the concepts of state, nation, and political community.

As a result of this strong sentiment of the Kurdish ethnic identity, these leaders feel a responsibility and duty of fighting for independence. To this end, Kurdish leaders use motives that allude to their cultural imaginary with the purpose of creating a sense of belonging to a group, so that the Kurds can reaffirm themselves in their own ethnicity. Through references to those common elements that bind together the citizens of Kurdish ancestry, such as noble deeds of Kurdish fighters against oppressing powers or repressed traditional Kurdish customs, these leaders mobilize their followers and convince them that it is their task to demand self-determination. Moreover, it is not only about bringing together all those who already identify as Kurds, but as well to open the eyes and convince those who have forgotten their Kurdish backgrounds due to ethnic assimilation processes.

In spite of Iraqi and Syrian Kurds having a larger independence level, or Iran having a feeblar Kurdish mobilization, these leaders share a similar discourse in the four countries, since self-determination and independence present the same ultimate goal for all of them: the creation of Kurdistan, a Nation-State that will integrate all these territories, just like the Treaty of Sevres promised almost a hundred years ago.

⁶ Available at Kurd Daily

<https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2007/12/turkeykurdistan1569.htm>

CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, I have investigated the relationship between ethnicity and the creation of a Nation-State in the Kurdish community, aiming at discovering which of these two different categories plays the main role in this particular Middle-Eastern case. Following this purpose, I have studied some of the most relevant ethnicity theories that can be applied to this case, analyzed the Kurdish identity from both objective and subjective points of view, and evaluated the most recent accomplishments that have taken place since the Arab Spring.

As a result, I can confirm the hypothesis presented at the beginning of the study: that ethnic identity is the main ideological engine for the construction of a nation-state imaginary among the Kurdish community. As analysed in the hypothesis analysis, throughout all the Kurdish territories in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, Kurdish leaders have constantly made use of this cultural imaginary to provoke the necessity of constituting a Nation-State for the Kurds. This does not mean, however, that the relation between ethnicity and nationalism must always present this particular pattern, since many other states have been abruptly created without a previous ethnic identity formation.

Nonetheless, looking ahead, some obstacles can be found in the way to the unification of Kurds under a sole State.

Firstly, there are linguistic and political divisions among the Kurds, fueled by the governments of Iran and Turkey, who are directly opposed to the proliferation of any type of pan-Kurdism.

Secondly, Kurdish internal political matters have become very complex, resulting in corruption and monopoly of power. While the KRG is bound to create a petro-state due to the corruption and heavy power of the Barzanis and Talabanis, Syria's PYD is the only party existing and Turkey's HDP has a decreasing power in the national parliament (Barkey, 2019). International Kurdish politics are not less convoluted, since KDP and

PKK are maintaining a long struggle for power and have divergent points of view regarding their political project for the future of Kurdistan: while Iraqi Kurds aim for a Kurdish state, Turkish Kurds' ambition is closer to achieving an autonomous regime (Bengio O, 2017).

Thirdly, the war against IS has resulted very costly for Syrian and Iraqi's Kurdish entities, since they have suffered many casualties, apart from an economic crisis that appeared due to many reasons such as the refugees, military expenses, or a stagnation of the oil prices.

Nonetheless, it is fair to state that Kurdish ethnic identity has proved to be stronger than many international actors expected, resulting in a large self-determination movement that presents a challenge for the near future of the Middle East.

Summarizing, I conclude that these types of Nation-State building processes are challengingly difficult to stop, since they are rooted in the necessity of individuals to restate their own personality and determine their own politics, linked to their particular culture and ethnicity. In this event, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey ought to assume this troublesome situation and understand that Kurdish petitions can not be further ignored. Even if a Kurdish Nation-State is not built in the following years to come, the four countries will have to establish a mechanism to effectively grant fundamental rights to this ethnic group and recognize them as an independent cultural group within or outside their borders.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix I. Main Kurdish parties

Party	Country	Leader(s)	Ideology and Political Position
Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK)	Turkey	Abdullah Öcalan	Democratic confederalism ⁷ , communalism, anti-capitalism, left-wing. Affiliated to KCK.
People's Democratic Party (HDP)	Turkey	Pervin Buldan and Sezai Temelli	Democratic socialism, minority rights, regionalism, feminism, left-wing.
Democratic Party of Kurds in Syria (DPKS)	Syria	Saud Malla	Liberal democracy, traditionalism, centre.
Democratic Union Party (PYD)	Syria	Shahoz Hasan and Salid Muslim	Eco-socialism, democratic confederalism, communalism, left-wing. Affiliated to KCK.
Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)	Iraq	Masoud Barzani	Conservatism, centre-right.
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)	Iraq	Kosrat Rasul Ali	Social democracy, left-wing.
Kurdistan Free-Life Party (PJAK)	Iran	Siamand Moini and Zîlan Vejîn	Democratic socialism, left-wing. Affiliated to KCK.
Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI)	Iran	Mustafa Hijri	Socialism, secularism, anti-imperialism, centre-left.

⁷ Defined as “a system of popularly elected administrative councils, allowing local communities to exercise autonomous control over their assets, while linking to other communities via a network of confederal councils” by Paul White in *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains*

Appendix II. Main current Kurdish leaders

Name	Born	Ideology	Current situation
Abdullah Öcalan “Apo”	Ömerli, Turkey (1949)	Democratic Confederalism	Leader of the PKK and imprisoned since 1999 in the island of Imrali.
Riad Darar	Deir ez-Zor, Syria (1954)	Human rights activist, in favour of federalism and democracy in Syria	Co-leader of the Syrian Democratic Council with Îlham Ehmed. One of the most relevant members of the Syrian opposition since 2011.
Salid Muslim Muhammad	Kobanî, Syria (1951)	Socialism and Democratic Confederalism	Former co-chairman of PYD. Most important figure of Syrian opposition during the Syrian Civil War.
Masoud Barzani	Mahabad, Iran (1946), son of Mustafa Barzani	Self-determination, centre-right	Leader of KDP. President of Iraqi Kurdistan (2005-2017), the position is currently vacant.
Mustafa Hijri	West Azarbaijan Province, Iran (1945)	Socialism, federalism, secularism, left-wing	General Secretary of KDPI.

Appendix III. Current political situation for the Kurds in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran

Country	Ruling Institutions	Level of Autonomy / Status
Iraq	Kurdistan Region of Iraq, governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government. Follows a parliamentary system.	Declared “Federal Autonomous Region” by Iraqi constitution.
Syria	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, also known as Rojava, governed by the Syrian Democratic Council.	De facto autonomous region. Federal system of government. Autonomy was declared on March 2016, even though the Syrian government has not yet recognised its autonomy.
Turkey	Kurdish provinces are governed by the democratic Turkish government, that follows a parliamentary system. Kurdish nationalist parties are banned by the Constitutional Court of Turkey.	No administrative identity or autonomy.
Iran	Kurdish provinces are governed by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, led by the Supreme Leader.	No administrative identity or autonomy.